

Allan Gyngell

And now for the good news

With accounts of terrorist plots, accusations of intelligence failures and bloody images of carnage in Iraq all over our newspapers and televisions, the feeling that Australia is heading into uniquely dangerous times seems to have taken a firm hold on the national psyche. The awful randomness of terrorism, the personalisation of a sense of imminent disaster so many people have felt since the 9/11 attacks, Bali and Madrid, helps drive this sense of uncertainty.

But our anxiety is in fact masking a steadily growing portfolio of good news for Australia. Take the four large Asian states that, more than any others in the region, will shape our future security and economic growth - Japan, China, India and Indonesia. Japan's economy is growing again and it is forging a new, more active, role in the world; China's strong economic growth is matched by effective regional diplomacy; India is shrugging off the dead hand of a highly regulated economy and dynastic politics; and, over the past few weeks, Indonesia has taken an important step towards building a healthy democracy. There hasn't been a time in the past fifty years when the collective news from the four regional power centres has looked better.

Changes to the Japanese political system in recent years are at last beginning to have an impact on the behaviour of its politicians. After more than a decade in the doldrums, Asia's largest economy, and Australia's biggest trading partner, is growing again. The Standard and Poors ratings agency has upgraded Japan's outlook to stable, the first move upwards since 1995, and the Nikkei stock exchange index has risen fifty percent since last May. Just as importantly, we have seen encouraging signs of a new willingness by Japan to pull its weight in the international community, to make a contribution to global security commensurate with its economic size. Even more interesting than Prime Minister Koizumi's decision to send Japanese troops to Iraq is the burgeoning public support for his policies.

In the first quarter of this year China grew by a sizzling 9.7 per cent over the same period a year earlier. That growth has been one of the things helping to re-start the Japanese economy and transform the global supply chain. But as with Japan, the changes in China go beyond economic growth. Economic reform and information technology are driving a new openness. The Communist Party of China has not handed over power, but its base has been broadened. You knew things were changing when capitalists were admitted to membership of the Communist Party. We have seen a peaceful transition of power from one generation of leaders to another: half the governing politburo members stepped down at the last Party Congress. And a better-educated population with more effective means of communications (278 million Chinese have mobile phones and 80 million access the internet) is forcing greater transparency on the government. The pressure to come clean on SARS was a recent example. From a situation just thirty years ago when China was a source of regional tension and instability, it is now making a serious contribution to international diplomacy.

It used to be a rule of thumb among Australian diplomats that every Australian government discovered India at least once in its term of office. But after an initial flurry of activity the interest would fade because after a polite official visit or two there was nothing to sustain it. The Indian economy was closed and inward-looking and its strategic objectives as a leader of the non-aligned movement were so different from Australia's. Those things are changing. India's economy is now growing at over eight per cent a year. The coalition government of Prime Minister Vajpayee has cut tariffs, opened the economy to foreign investment and sold off state-owned companies. India's post-Cold War security policy is more open to cooperation with the United States and its allies. Vajpayee's BJP party is sloughing off its earlier mantle of Hindu nationalism: in the current election campaign its aspirational slogan is "India Shining". For Australia this presents a unique opportunity to finally put some substance into the relationship.

And what about our nearest large Asian neighbour, Indonesia? Remember all those predictions a few years ago about its imminent fragmentation? That broken, balkansised state we were about to get on our doorstep as the Javanese empire crumbled? It didn't happen, because Indonesian nationalism was always stronger than the critics understood and because democracy is doing its job. The most recent parliamentary elections represented a watershed in post-New Order politics. The old parties lost ground to new ones like Susilo Bambang Yodhoyono's *Partai Demokrat* and the PKS, an Islamic party emphasising clean government, which addressed the real needs of Indonesians now. Problems remain – corruption and regional resentments among them - but the first direct election for the President in July is likely to give Indonesian voters a solid choice of policies for the first time.

I'm not suggesting that we should be complacent about terrorism. Nor am I arguing that long-standing security threats like North Korea's weapons proliferation or potential conflict in the Taiwan Straits are unimportant. And even the current successes will no doubt generate new rivalries and tension. But as the fog around the national security debate thickens over the next few months, it's going to be important to keep a sense of perspective. If you want a simple reality check in all this, you don't need to look far. Just think of the twentieth century: 100 million dead in its wars and the prospect of nuclear annihilation hovering over its second half. Even with Al-Qaida and Jemaah Islamiyah, the twenty-first century is not looking too bad.

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