

The Impossible Asian Union

Interview with François Godement

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La Vie des idées: There is clearly an increase of trade within the region formed by South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, but we can't really talk about a common geopolitical theatre. For example, for an Indian, the issue of North Korea seems very far away and conversely for a Japanese, the tensions between Pakistan and India seem equally far away. In these conditions, can we really talk of regional integration, or should we talk quite simply of globalization?

François Godement: First of all, talking on that scale, we have to distinguish between Asia in general and the part of Asia that is the heart of the Asian economic dynamo – that is, East Asia and Northeast Asia – which continues to weigh in at 70-75% of the whole of Asia, and compared to which the rest is playing catch up, including in trade. For India and China, you can always cite statistics showing a staggering increase in commerce but this is increase starting at nothing; the same goes for Central Asia if you exclude the rise in energy costs that accounts for so much of it. In fact, there is the phenomenal East Asia and then some extensions of it. Secondly: actually, commercial integration does not necessarily make a region; the Eastern European countries before the Second World War had a very high level of mutual integration in terms of commerce. If today you take Japan, South Korea and China, the level of the integration of their commercial exchanges is higher than that of the EU countries. This is paradoxical, because they don't even have a free trade agreement, and because they are clearly not on the same wavelength politically and strategically. Still, we have to add that they do nevertheless constitute a common market. That is, the high level of integration of their trade is due to the fact that intermediate goods circulate, capital goods circulate, and this results in re-exports to the rest of the world. I have always defined Asian integration to the extent that it exists as the creation not of a single market but of a single workshop. Even today, it is not quite that, even with what Baghwati calls the “bowl of spaghetti,” bilateral free

trade agreements. The second point is that you can have a high level of trade and still go to war. This was what happened in Europe. In fact if you have a look today, that is what is most striking: they are not making war, but nowhere else on earth is there an arms race as big as Asia's, and it is not visibly slowing down. India is taking over from out-of-steam Japan in balancing China's military forces. China shows no signs of stopping, America is making a comeback, the Vietnamese are buying Russian submarines, and the Taiwanese could do the same if the need were to arise. We are in a region where people do not trust each other, and there are reasons why.

La Vie des idées: On that point, isn't China's intransigence especially on border issues actually playing into the hands of the United States? For example, with the change of government in Japan we've seen that there was some desire by Japan to rebalance trade between China and the United States, but since the heightening of tensions in the incidents connected with the Senkaku Islands, Japan seems to have changed its position and again wants to bind itself more firmly to the United States. So isn't China really playing into the hands of the United States?

François Godement: In the very short term, yes, because the territorial irredentism shown there is in a way going back to 1875, to cancel a hundred and thirty-five years of international losses, which were often based on international law that China was incapable of applying. The classic example is the Senkaku / Diaoyutai Islands, for which the Japanese legal case is better but the Chinese historical case is not half bad, if we leave out the legal agreements that China agreed to. But I think we have to look a lot farther ahead, and to realize that the difficult task before us is to discover the indicators and the limits of the rise of China, of its inevitable return into an area. The Chinese say to themselves: we are going to occupy all the historical space entrusted to us, and go backwards a century and a half, but we won't go an inch farther. So they don't think they're being aggressive. They see themselves as going back on the situation inherited from the Cold War. They do not see themselves as going back on the situation inherited not from the first western colonization but from the colonization by (among others) the Japanese, which came between. So they have a different outlook. Looking at China's dilemma today, I'm fascinated to see how much it resembles the English and American dilemma in taking in Japan's ascendance in the 1920s, in the Taishō Democracy era. At that time, Japan was a bit schizophrenic. It was internationalist – for the League of Nations, open, cosmopolitan, it wanted to recognize racial equality, it wanted to be the equal

of everyone else. And at the same time, in its own neighbourhood, it said: this is my area of influence, this is my sphere; I behave like you do. China is caught in that dilemma. You see that in its discussion of foreign policy today – minus the democracy, of course.

La Vie des idées: Could changes in the Chinese political regime have consequences for international relations in the region?

François Godement: I'm in a real quandary about accepting the realist axiom in international relations that posits that states just have interests, and that the nature of their regimes doesn't count for much. Because I think regimes do have some accelerating aspects. The fact that the regime's legitimacy and any conflicts or merely rivalries among political leaders can be mediated by an ideology making nationalist claims, the fact that there is a need to defend a certain amount of closure – they're always talking about opening up, but there is also closing down on the political and ideological level, on the level of liberty, and even on the level of the economic opening (there's the WTO opening but there's been no progress since, though China has greatly advanced) – there are some things that are bound up with the nature of the regime, things that perhaps means that they can't carry out certain changes. So they dream about consolidation even while keeping their sovereignty fully intact. In other words, from that vantage point, they are not thinking as if moving towards a stage of supranational integration; they are not accepting external interdependence. Of course they are obliged to see it in certain areas; for a start, it is convenient to leave their currency pegged to the dollar, thus paradoxically not to have full control of their monetary affairs. But they do not want to get into a situation of flux. I think that distinguishes them from many Asian countries that have indeed made that change. Having said that, in my view even Japan in the 1990s hesitated for too long to take a decisive leap and to bind itself to the region other than by political talk.

La Vie des idées: There's been a lot of talk about states and mechanisms, about diplomatic Meccano, but a regional integration also means a convergence of views, perhaps at the level of peoples, and yet there we have a paradox because in this region we see on the one hand that the consumer society means there is a kind of levelling of life styles, and on the other hand we still sense these tensions linked to different historical visions. How do you see this paradox?

François Godement: I'm going to be very, very cautious here. Let's just take Sino-Japanese relations as one isolated example among many. There have been phases of unanimity and

cultural convergence, almost a return to historical myths, in the Japanese, and even in the Chinese, if you look at the mid-1980s and the very strong trends alongside historical grievances. Historical grievances arose because neither country accepted the changes in the strategic position of the other. The Koizumi government of that period could not resign itself to the idea that Japan was strategically inferior. It had to demonstrate that it was still on an equal footing. The Chinese leaders did not want to deal with Japan on an equal footing. They preferred to wait and to clearly establish a form of soft hegemony, to Finlandize Japan. Of course that led to misunderstandings, to incomprehension. But I see many other trends. Let's take something mindless like demography, which nevertheless counts a lot: Japan, Korea and Taiwan converge completely and Singapore also, if you exclude immigration. China is getting nearer and will converge: there are significant data (education, leisure), and it really is following suit. Throughout the region there is an international, almost cosmopolitan interest shown by peoples who nevertheless have strong identities. So yes, there is a very important political-strategic obstacle, and yes, opinion polls are currently disastrous in the wake of a kind of manipulation of opinion that occurred regarding the Senkaku / Diaoyutai Islands, but that is not necessarily the end of the story.

La Vie des idées: So you think the region's economic progress is not just the result of ambitions – an addition of national ambitions – but that somewhere there is also a common vision?

François Godement: No, I think none of that exists on the political level. Japanese leaders are paralyzed by the decline of their influence and are incapable of designing public diplomacy; that would require a young and self-confident country, and they are not a young and self-confident country. As for the Chinese, it seems to me very clear that there is, perhaps not a desire for revenge in the strictly historical sense, but a sense of hierarchy that has been established and that therefore rules out a very strong entente. Strikingly, in Japan, perhaps not the current government but the last two governments, Fukuda as well as Hatoyama, were basically pretty close to an entente with China. Considering the personnel, if there had been an analysis of clans in China, it could have been said that here we have a government we can do business with. They didn't really try; they didn't really exploit this window of opportunity. They look to the longer term and again there is on the one hand the political divide, the distrust of democracy and its changes, and there is the confidence (which is at the same time an unspoken uneasiness that is sometimes legitimate), but confidence in the fact that

authoritarianism and duration bring benefits. All this does not help rapprochement. We focus here only on China and Japan, but if we were to talk about Korea, it would be a little different, a little less strong, but the same trends exist there too.

La Vie des idées: In fact we haven't talked yet about North Korea's action because it's clear that the region still somehow has one foot in the Cold War on account of the issue of North Korea....

François Godement: I think North Korea is not so much playing out the Cold War, it has an absolute need for its neighbours to be divided, and it plays that game brilliantly. It comes out of it very well; it has got a lot from South Korea in terms of political norms and "sunshine policy," and it has obtained international political aid. While binding itself to China, economically it obtains a lot from China and it has managed to keep its independence and its autonomy of action. I think its capacity to challenge China is incredible. I am not thinking so much of its nuclear tests, but of its creating extremely dangerous incidents with the South Korean Navy, who cannot complain to China insofar as they are bringing back joint manoeuvres with the Americans, South Koreans, and so on. The North Koreans have retained this ability but it is less a Cold War capacity than the brilliant use of a process of regional seesawing, and of the absence of a true concert of powers in Northeast Asia.

La Vie des idées: But the North Korean regime is not eternal. If one day there is a reunification of North and South Korea, do you see the balance of power changing very dramatically, for example with an alliance between Japan and the two Koreas to offset the size of China?

François Godement: I would say that if a reunification occurs, it will be because the international conditions allow that to happen: around the cradle of a unified Korea there will have been a semblance of a Japanese-American-Chinese-South Korean agreement. If there is not a semblance of an agreement, I am currently much more willing to bet on the survival of North Korea as an undeclared province of China, as in a quasi-federation with a strong economic dependence, serving residually as a buffer state for China, and allowing China to tuck away the uncertainties bound up with a reunification and a change of balance. I think that is why we cannot make predictions. In particular we cannot predict what will happen in socio-economic developments in North Korea, where they are after all courting economic and

nutritional disaster. But apart from this, and to the extent that China acquires influence, in my view it now has the hitherto absent capacity fully and straightforwardly to assume what I would call obviously suspect clients, whom it nevertheless takes back into the ecumene or the empire. North Korea is a totally striking example. The acceleration of relations between the two countries in the last year is incredible. The political bureau – the nine people on the parliamentary committee of the political bureau – received Kim Jong-II. No one has ever been received by the nine people on the parliamentary committee of the political bureau. That was a strong gesture. We in the West can always speculate about the dissatisfaction of the Chinese. The Chinese do not hide their contempt for North Korea's administrative style; they are so far beyond in terms of economy and humanity. But I also think that if they reason in a much more realistic way, they have no reason to end this situation.

La Vie des idées: One final point: are you optimistic or pessimistic about peace and stability in this region?

François Godement: I think we cannot be completely optimistic. There are some ominous trends and, to repeat, not enough confidence. Take an example apparently belonging to another domain. The whole basis of the region's integration has come about not on a common currency but on an external currency, the dollar. We are currently losing this common reference. It is clear that it is not going to last indefinitely. Therefore the question arises: what will be the yardstick and what forms of arbitrage will there be in Asia's commercial competition? Many countries complain about the revaluation of their currencies against the renminbi and therefore also the dollar. Japan is greatly affected by this. These are features of economic competition and lack of regional consensus that have not been seen for a very long time and are much more violent than they were during the period when there was an American enlightened despotism, which no longer operates in this area. Therefore there is a higher risk of tensions. Militarily, I take the view that China can engage almost insidiously, almost in the manner of Japan in the 1920s, in a kind of integration that it sees not as imperialism but simply as the assertion of its historical rights and the recovery of those rights, and that upsets and even terrorizes the strategic environment. In my dealings with Chinese experts, I often cite the example of German reunification and the attitude of Kohl. The first thing he did was to guarantee for eternity the Oder-Neisse line, in which very few Germans "believe" in their heart of hearts because it was imposed by the victory of 1945 and for them it is not the historical border of Germany. And yet, there can be no peace in Europe without

the acceptance of a treaty that is unequal, so to speak. The Chinese are not yet close to being there, again because of their problems of internal legitimacy. Because it's very dangerous for a governing group to take an initiative when it is not backed by the strength of electoral legitimacy; it is extremely dangerous for them to engage in compromise manoeuvres.

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