

Is Asia ready for a bigger role?

BY ANN FLORINI
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ASIA has begun to claim a stronger voice in defining and managing global affairs. But it is still struggling to define the larger role that it wants to play.

In September, China won itself a (slightly) larger voice at the International Monetary Fund. Asia is also poised to take its turn at the United Nations, with the appointment of South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon as the next secretary-general. Japan and India continue to push for permanent seats on the UN Security Council.

Clearly, it is past time for Asia's growing global importance to be reflected in the world's governing institutions. But these minor steps will make little difference to the world or to Asia's role in steering globalisation. By focusing on such trivial adjustments, Asia's governments are missing out on what could be Asia's opportunity to reshape and improve how the world is run.

The world relies on a set of institutions that brings together the world's governments to respond to pressing global problems. But that system is disintegrating.

International agreements and organisations meant to control the spread of nuclear weapons are shuddering under the double whammy of the United States-India nuclear agreement and the North Korean nuclear test.

Despite the outcry over Sars and the avian flu, global public health remains the responsibility of an under-funded and poorly coordinated patchwork of national and international agencies, with only the private Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to pick up some of the slack. Essential institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the UN all suffer growing criticisms of their competence and concerns about their legitimacy.

It is not surprising that a system created in the very different conditions of the mid-20th century has trouble coping with the problems of the 21st. Its creators assumed that a handful of great powers would make most of the rules. They worked at a time when war between countries seemed the greatest threat to international well-being, when national economies engaged in trade but otherwise operated quite separately, when no one feared the prospect of world-sweeping diseases and when environmental concerns were a blip on the radar screen. And their work depended heavily on a single country – the United States – to bear the costs of establishing and maintaining the system.

Today's far more integrated world needs an expanded and re-

shaped set of institutions to address the increasingly complex suite of global issues. And no region needs them more than Asia does. Asia's extraordinary economic growth has depended on global trade arrangements that are now seriously threatened.

Sars also showed clearly the consequences for Asia if the flimsy global public health system fails to prevent a global epidemic. In so crucial an issue as energy policy, the most important international institution, the International Energy Agency, excludes major Asian powers as China and India from membership.

But so far no one is trying to revitalise the international system. The US is unlikely to play its hegemonic role again, even if the rest of the world would now accept such a role. It is mired in Iraq, riven by internal political divides and also lacks the overwhelming economic preponderance that enabled it to create the last generation of international institutions almost single-handedly. Europe will not fill the gap. It lacks the capacity to act as a single voice on the international stage as yet and is spending its political energies on its own regional integration in any case.

The resulting political vacuum presents Asia with a stark choice. Asians can continue to rely on the West to muddle through, and demand only minor tinkering at the international organisations to assuage Asian pride. Or, Asian thinkers and leaders can build on the energies unleashed by Asia's extraordinary rise to step into the breach with serious and far-reaching proposals about how to shape a more effective global system.

This will require them to decide what they wish to do with a larger voice in global institutions. Will China use its expanded voice at the IMF to propose specific changes in how that agency should focus its work? Will Japan and India use permanent seats on the UN Security Council to push for a more effective system of global security? Will Asian governments and civil society groups actively support Secretary-General Ban's promised efforts to bring about sweeping reforms at the United Nations?

Even fixing up existing institutions – hard as that would be to accomplish – is only a small part of the battle. Governments remain the most important actors in global governance, but they are not the only ones. The global economy is run by corporations, with their supply chains stretching across continents. Businesses help to write trade rules, set international product standards and enforce their own property rights. Almost every major global issue requires the business sector's active participation and willing collaboration.

Similarly, civil society groups frequently set the global agenda, badger governments into action and, increasingly, serve as implementers of government decisions.

But there are few rules to govern when and where business and civil society can legitimately participate in global decision-making. Corporations face immense pressure from civil society groups to exercise an ill-defined "corporate social responsibility" that goes beyond what governments require of them. This has been a haphazard, and heavily Western-dominated approach to determining the appropriate roles for businesses and civil society groups on global issues. Asia needs to be a far more effective part of this debate, proposing how governments, businesses and civil society groups can work together to meet the needs and desires of the world.

The need is great. So is the opportunity for Asia.

The writer is director of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC.