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The Idea of Asia

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

[32] asia policy The Idea of Asia Amitav Acharya “I want you to go away with [get rid of] the thought that Asia has to conquer the West.” — Mohandas K. Gandhi, speech to the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, 1947 What is Asia? There are two powerful myths about Asia that plague any debate over whether it exists as a region. One treats Asia as essentially an outsider’s invention. The other conflates it with the “rise of Asia.” Both are misleading or misguided, the latter even more so than the former. The term Asia was used by the Greek historian Herodotus to designate Anatolia, in modern Turkey, in the context of the Greek-Persian wars. But Asia in many ways was an invention of colonialism. Francois Gode mont, a French scholar of Asia, associates “Asia” (and “the East”) with “a fantasy seemingly woven from a Baudelaire poem, a melody by Ravel, a short story by Somerset Maugham and a James Ivory film.”¹ When the Economist launched a new weekly column called “Banyan” in April 2009, the magazine reminded readers that it had, as recently as 1987, written about Asia as “a geographic accident.” Though today there might be a growing “search for an Asian identity,” the “suspicion lingers on that Asia is a Western construct.”² Then there are those who speak

of the rise of Asia, and even of a growing Asian identity, but still predict a future of rivalry and strife. Consider a recent book on Asia by Bill Emmott, a former editor of the Economist.³ Emmott recognizes Asia's economic integration and an emerging sense of regional identity based on the overlapping interests of its principal powers—China, Japan, and India. But he nonetheless foresees rivalry rather than cooperation as the dominant trend. Hence the title of the book: *Rivals*.¹ Francois Godefont, *The New Asian Renaissance*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 4. 2 "In the Shade of the Banyan Tree," *Economist*, April 11, 2009, 43. 3 Bill Emmott, *Rivals: How the Power Struggle Between China, India and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade* (Orlando: Hartcourt, Inc., 2008).

amitavacharya is Professor of International Relations at American University in Washington, D.C. He is author of *Asia Rising: Who Is Leading?* (2007) and *Whose Ideas Matter: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (2009). He can be reached at . [33]

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To compound the problem, Asia also has had multiple names and identities. I can count at least thirteen different ways in which Asia has been described: (1) Asia, (2) Asia-Pacific, (3) Asia Pacific, (4) Asian Pacific, (5) Asia and the Pacific, (6) Asia/Pacific, (7) East Asia, (8) Eastern Asia, (9) Far East, (10) Greater East Asia, (11) Pacific, (12) Pacific Asia, and (13) Pacific Rim. Power, prosperity, and identity have determined which of these names are in vogue. Terms such as Far East, Greater East Asia, and the Pacific are associated with British, Japanese, and American power respectively. Hegemons are especially fond of naming regions after their own interests and spheres of influence. By contrast, Pacific Rim, Pacific Asia, Asia-Pacific (as in APEC), and Asia Pacific (a Canadian preference) are linked to rising economic interdependence and prosperity. Gareth Evans, a former Australian foreign minister, once distinguished the idea of "Asia Pacific" from the idea of the "Indian Ocean." Whereas the former connoted prosperity and progress, the latter was associated with poverty and underdevelopment. Cultural forces, such as ideas, identity, cultural exports, and social construction, have recently led to the popularity of regional concepts such as East Asia or Eastern Asia. Asia is, of course, not a given. It is constructed, as most regions tend to be. There are powerful forces working against the concept, with diversity (geographic, cultural, and political), rivalries, and the lack of European-style regional integration being chief among them. Yet to view Asia simply as a Western construct is misleading. In a wonderful little booklet called *Narratives of Asia*, Brij Tankha, a Japan specialist at Delhi University, and Sinologist Madhavi Thampi compare Indian, Chinese, and Japanese discourses about Asia to assert that "while 'Asia' is in many ways a colonial construction it is important to remember...

The Idea of Asia

Amitav Acharya

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— Mohandas K. Gandhi, speech to the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, 1947

What is Asia?

There are two powerful myths about Asia that plague any debate over whether it exists as a region. One treats Asia as essentially an outsider's invention. The other conflates it with the "rise of Asia." Both are misleading or misguided, the latter even more so than the former.

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¹ Francois Godemont, *The New Asian Renaissance*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

² "In the Shade of the Banyan Tree," *Economist*, April 11, 2009, 43.

³ Bill Emmott, *Rivals: How the Power Struggle Between China, India and Japan Will Shape Our Next Decade* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2008).





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Nehru, the sense of peace is quantitatively bound by the ideological subject of power.

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The Indian Face, India's Northeast, and The Idea of India, the return to stereotypes is determined by the quark

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