

Policy Horizons Canada

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Scenarios: Four Plausible Futures for Asia in 2030

NOTE: Hyperlinks

All links were valid as of date of publication.

The *Horizons Foresight Method* uses scenarios to visualize how the system under study could evolve under different drivers and assumptions. In this study, four analytical scenarios were developed that examine how economic, social, energy and geostrategic factors may interact with each other and anticipated technological changes. The scenarios are not attempts to predict the future; instead, they provide an opportunity to consider how the future might emerge. They also allow the user to test current assumptions and propose policy approaches that are robust against a range of plausible futures.

Horizons uses four archetypal scenario logics that are particularly relevant for public policy. “Muddling Through” (see Digital Asia) explores a world where things do not get dramatically better or worse, but that looks quite different from today. “Incremental Decline” (see Asia in Decline) explores a world where things are generally worse than today, while “Incremental Progress” (see Regional Asia Rising) explores a world in which things are getting better. “Transformation” (see Green Asia) assumes crises that precipitate transformational change. The logic of each archetype provides the scaffolding for further developing each scenario. As you read the scenarios, try to immerse yourself in these futures. Imagine how the insights you have read in the last section might play out, what this world would be like and what it would mean in your areas of interest and responsibility.

Digital Asia



Scenario

Asia is at the forefront of a rapid and disruptive transition to a global digital economy characterized by virtual project work across borders, digital value chains, renewable energy to meet the rising demand for electricity, decentralized manufacturing, and falling global prices for many services. Asia makes the shift from manufacturing to digital services. Asian workers and institutions are affected by this rapid change, but benefit more than the West due to proactive government policy, a relatively high-skilled and low-wage workforce, and newly built digital infrastructure.

Indicators



ADVANCED
DIGITAL
INFRASTRUCTURE



DIGITAL
SERVICE
INDUSTRIES



DEMAND FOR
OIL AND GAS



PROACTIVE
GOVERNMENT
INVOLVEMENT

- Advanced digital infrastructure: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Digital service industries: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Demand for oil and gas: arrow pointed to 5 o'clock
- Proactive Government involvement: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock

News Headlines (2025-2030)

- "First ASEAN virtual work passport will facilitate calculation of virtual employment benefits."
- "America's favourite web content now mostly from Asia. "
- "Local café-style work-hubs booming as virtual workers seek to counter social isolation."

Questions

- What will be the impact of digital value chains on current international trade agreements?
- How could virtual work change immigration and urbanization patterns?
- Could virtual work platforms enforce a global equal pay for equal work policy?

Asia in decline



Scenario

The world enters a long-term recession, possibly triggered by falling wages and prices creating a deflationary spiral in which countries respond with counterproductive policies such as protectionism and competitive currency devaluation. Asia continues to grow, but only slowly. Deflation helps reduce the impact of falling incomes. High unemployment from automation, low wages for virtual workers and unmet aspirations result in social unrest that destabilizes several states with sporadic armed conflict, especially in fragile states. A number of states become increasingly authoritarian and use surveillance tools to understand and respond to some popular concerns.

Indicators



RECESSION



SHARING AND
OPEN SOURCE
ECONOMY



SOCIAL
STABILITY



ADAPTIVE
AUTHORITARIANISM

- Recession: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Sharing and open source economy: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Social stability: arrow pointed to 5 o'clock
- Adaptive authoritarianism: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock

News Headlines (2025-2030)

- "Factory workers in Dhaka vote for wage reduction to save jobs from automation."
- "Hong Kong's 'Anti-Inequality Movement' is gaining ground in poor areas across Asia."
- "No western troops or money for 'Arc of Instability' initiative led by India and China."

Questions

- Will virtual workers prefer virtual currencies (like Bitcoin) to avoid taxes, tariffs and currency devaluation?
- What impacts would a declining Asia have on Canada?
- What would be the global impacts of a growing number of open source and radically low-cost products from Asia?

Regional Asia



Scenario

Rival Asian states recognize their shared interest in meeting popular expectations for continued growth and therefore collaborate to build a more integrated regional economy and jointly tackle Asian security threats. Government policies help firms and workers use their low wages (relative to the West) to best advantage in the transition to a digital economy. An emergent cosmopolitan civil society and regionally integrated private sector also drive this integration. As a result, the Asian economy grows rapidly, becoming the new global economic hub sooner than expected and Asia uses this new economic weight to pursue shared diplomatic and trade goals.

Indicators



- Integrated regional economy: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Collaborative policy development: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- International digital trade: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock

- Asian global influence: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock

News Headlines (2025-2030)

- "Rapidly growing digital economy accounts for 70% of Asian GDP."
- "China, Japan and India hold historic first joint naval exercise in South China Sea."
- "Bilateral China-U.S. trade flows slip to third spot internationally driven by surging intra-Asia trade."

Questions

- How could the balance of power evolve, regionally and globally, if Asian governments collaborate? As domestic demand grows and intra-Asia trade climbs, how will the West leverage Asian action on international trade issues?
- What might Asian nations perceive as their primary security threats and how might those differ from the perceived threats in the West?
- Will existing intellectual property rules withstand surging digital trade and universal access to additive manufacturing?

Green Asia



Scenario

A number of key Asian countries suffer severe economic and environmental shocks and are forced to transform their economies and societies in order to meet citizen aspirations. New technologies, frugal innovation, the collaborative economy and low-cost renewable energy become key elements in this new development model. The collaborative platforms enable more economic and environmentally sustainable patterns of production and consumption. By establishing new metrics for national targets, privileging a holistic approach to growth and development, Asia becomes a leader in sustainable design and philosophy.

Indicators



- Environmental disasters: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Environmentally sustainable growth: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Frugal innovation: arrow pointed to 1 o'clock
- Consumption: arrow pointed to 5 o'clock

News Headlines (2025-2030)

- "China on track to meet Climate Change targets – relaxes 'one-flight' policy."
- "Slowing GDP growth offset by increases in National Happiness Index."
- "Bringing nature back into urban design helps coastal cities adapt to climate change."

Questions

- How might Green Asia shift global norms on energy consumption, pollution, and ecological degradation?
- How might Green Asia alter international institutions on trade, finance, and development assistance to strengthen and disseminate new environmental norms and expectations?
- How will countries reliant on traditional resource extraction industries adapt to Asia's green focus?

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