

Back on the World Map

One of the most important global developments since the early 1990s is the emergence of new, strong Asian economies. In the wake of the economic success of Japan, Taiwan and South Korea – all initially sponsored with US dollars – China and India are, without aid, rapidly developing an international market. Just as Japan in the 1980s transformed the tag Made in Japan from its association with inferior quality to that of “manufactured according superior standards”, so Made in China and Made in India today no longer carry a downbeat message.

Indeed, products sporting such labels are marching onto the world market with such vigour that Asia will soon be the world’s number one economy; the trade balance between China and nearly all its trading partners is in the red. Do western nations recognise this spectacular change in global economic coordinates? Yan, yes and no; the North Americas are much more aware of the vulnerability of their economic success. Just after the First World War the States took position behind Europe as the second global player. After the Second World War the US changed places with Europe, taking over the lead. That is just sixty years ago.

Lidar in China

Optech of Canada demonstrates the current active role of the North Americas in penetrating Asia’s geomatics market. This manufacturer of lidar-based systems recently sold the first airborne lidar system into China, as Joshua Kern reports in this issue of GIM International. The company continues to focus on system sales in the region. The markets of China and India are certainly of great interest to the geomatics industry; both countries are not only poorly mapped and fast developing economically, but together they accommodate nearly half the world’s population. Their need for accurate, detailed and timely geo-information for proper governance can only grow, and such growth will be exponential. In addition, both countries are highly technology-adapted. With seven Institutes of Technologies (IIT) of international standard and many excellent universities, India each year certifies nearly 200,000 highly qualified and motivated engineers. China certifies over 200,000. The knowledge base is there for the establishment of a strong geo-information industry.

Daydreaming

Europe’s view of Asia is, on the other hand, different. Europe has been a leading economy for at least three centuries. The longevity of such success may have given rise to a flawed faith in prosperity never ending. The “Lisbon statement” by Europe’s political leaders, in which the EU declares itself wishful of becoming the world’s most competitive economy by 2010, exemplifies some denial of reality. According to Gijs Graafland, economist with Planck Europe - an organisation dedicated to corporate and governmental strategy in a global economy - it is simply daydreaming. In an essay entitled The Future of Europe he warns that “Europe needs a wake-up call, just to get real and face facts, [and] the sooner the better. [and] Any delay will make the economic health gap between Europe and Asia even wider.”

Underestimation

Why is it that Europe’s view of Asia - and Africa - differs from that of the North Americas? According to Graafland, it is its colonial past that blurs Europe’s view; it still thinks in terms of balance of power, superiority and inferiority - at least, subconsciously. There remains a mismatch between mindset and reality, probably resulting from the childlike way in which colonised peoples responded to their conquerors. Although such pliant behaviour was actually no more than an act of defence, it unfortunately forged an image of the “naive native” in the collective European mindset. Tragically, this subconscious feeling of superiority is still alive today, so many years after decolonisation; Europe’s attitude to Asian and African countries is undeniably often one of adult to child. Accordingly, Europe seriously underestimates the strength of Asia’s economic expansion.

Knowledge Economy

Asian economies may be regarded either as places where goods are produced in a very cost-effective way, or as a marketplace for selling western goods. Both attitudes create challenges because its costing structure and tax system make producing goods within the EU expensive. One way to respond is by outsourcing: producing goods or services where labour is least expensive. The other is to make things better, so much better that consumers are willing to pay a higher price, as was once the case with German steel and Swiss watches. This is the path Europe aims to follow in aspiring to become a “knowledge economy” where superior products are designed and created, though not necessarily manufactured.

Back Again

Are these indeed just the daydreams and shaky hopes of an old and tired economy? Or will the vigour of mid-European and east-European economies blow a refreshing breeze through work-tired Europe? (Inactivity is not a natural European mindset, by the way, but more an unwelcome spin-off of a tax system that is socially honest but hostile to the labour-force.) For at least a millennium Asia hosted great civilisations, superior to the rest of the world in both the arts and sciences. But, somewhere around 1800, its leaders failed to recognise the opportunities presented by then emerging machine technology combined with the power of free thought and action. Now, after two centuries, the geomatics industry has to be prepared for Asia’s swift reappearance on the world map.