Few debates today are of as much interest or consequence as that over the probability of an “Asian century” that manifests itself in the emergence of an Asia-Pacific or East Asian Community, perhaps along the lines of the European Union. Notwithstanding its novelty — it has grown intense only in the last few years — the debate appears to have evolved from a back-and-forth over whether or not that scenario will materialize into a discourse on how and when it will do so. Although the speed with which this discussion has shifted has prompted growing numbers of rebuttals, these contrarian views remain minority ones.

One who sets forth the case for an Asian century that is anchored in an Asian Community needs to establish that Asia will come to exercise disproportionate geopolitical influence compared to the world’s other power centers, and that it will be able to use that influence to establish a uniquely Asian brand of regional and global governance.

Contention 1: Disproportionate Influence

The first contention belies current trends, which suggest not that America’s (relative) decline is terminal and Asia’s ascendance is unstoppable, but rather, that each trajectory will plateau.

Beyond the well-known and oft-discussed internal challenges that Asia confronts — ranging from climate change to poor infrastructure — there are high-level difficulties in envisioning its rise to global leadership and the emergence of an Asian Community.

For starters, it is unclear how “Asia” is defined. Most predictions of an “Asian century” are, in effect, predictions of a “Chinese century” or a “Chindian century,” or even an “Indian” century. Ironically, the prediction that seems to command the least traction within this subset is that of an inclusive Asian century, whereby Asia as a whole — not just China and India — rises. Perhaps such is the case because these two countries, along with Japan, account for the lion’s share of Asia’s influence — a reality that continually irks members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and undermines the idea of an Asian Community.

The definition of “Asian century” is similarly ambiguous. Even those who adopt its most powerful interpretation — that Asia will exercise global leadership — do not argue that Western influence will become irrelevant. Indeed, they contend that the West will remain crucially important.

Compounding these difficulties are the historical suspicions and rivalries among Asian countries — particularly China, India, Japan, and South Korea. Although recent years have produced some degree of cooperation — principally economic in nature, and often opportunistic — they have also revived old tensions and created new ones. Such realities stand in the way of an Asian Community.

At least one other point readily comes to mind. Asian countries have exhibited little desire to establish an order of their own, in no small part because they have risen within, and profited immensely from, the postwar, Western-created order.

Contention 2: Asian Governance

At least for now, the second contention seems less plausible than the idea that Asia will exercise disproportionate influence over global affairs in this...
It is true that the global financial crisis has substantially eroded faith in democratic capitalism, particularly the high-risk, low-regulation variant that is associated with the United States. It has not, however, imbued the “China model” — namely, authoritarian capitalism — with corresponding legitimacy. American consumption at a time when American consumers are likely to behave more frugally. It will, accordingly, be even more imperative for China to boost household consumption, both by developing an adequate social services system and giving greater weight to labor-intensive industries — hardly trivial undertakings.

Much has also been made of China’s advocating special drawing rights (SDRs) as a substitute for the dollar as an international reserve currency. Although it understandably received greater attention than, say, Russia or Brazil, for backing such a proposal, the argument for SDRs finds favor with emerging countries as a whole, rather than just China.

To offer one further illustration, China’s call for a multi-polar world is essentially a reflection of current geopolitical trends, not an indication of a uniquely Chinese idea or Chinese leadership.

The point of these examples is to demonstrate that the accumulation of economic — and increasingly geopolitical — influence does not automatically translate into the ability to lead. Although this proposition may seem self-evident, its neglect is a major source of the hyperbole over China’s rise. Compelling ideas and broad legitimacy are among the bedrocks of leadership.

It is difficult to imagine, for example, how China, in either a regional or global position of leadership, could reconcile its foreign-policy disposition to the reality that few major challenges can be addressed without intervening in the affairs of other countries, even if only indirectly. Its insistence on noninterference would limit its ability to address humanitarian crises and mediate longstanding disputes throughout the region and world.

Furthermore, China’s growing influence has caused uneasiness, particularly in Asia. As recently as a few years ago, many Asian countries saw its rise as benign, even beneficial. Today, however, although many of them embrace the economic opportunities that result from its growth, numerous polls demonstrate a level of distress at the prospect of China assuming regional — let alone global — leadership.

Lastly, China’s rightful agitation for greater representation within international institutions
has not, thus far, coincided with a willingness to assume global responsibilities that is proportional to its influence. It has said that it can best contribute to global economic recovery by getting its own house in order. That statement may well be correct empirically given the size of China’s economy and its degree of integration into the international system. However, it reflects China’s wariness to bite off more than it can chew. The high priority that its leadership places on maintaining internal stability seems incongruous with a China that actively champions global public goods and services.

There are at least two other points that merit attention, both involving China’s self-perception. First, its influence has grown considerably faster than the sobriety with which it addresses threats, real and perceived. Consider its ongoing effort to stigmatize countries that host the Dalai Lama or, more recently, the pressure that it placed on Australia not to air a documentary about Rebiya Kedeer, the Uighur activist, at one of its film festivals. The irony of these attempts is that Tibetans and Uighurs have made little appreciable progress in their movements for autonomous governance, and, if anything, face bleaker prospects. In fairness, every country takes steps — often excessive — to present a sanitized version of itself to the world. However, China is noteworthy among emerging powers for the lengths to which it goes to prevent its image from being tarnished. Given the defensiveness that it presently displays, one wonders how it would handle the exponentially greater scrutiny that it would confront as a regional or global leader.

Second, China’s growing assertiveness conceals deep uncertainty within the leadership over its proper global role. Bonnie Glaser and Lyle Morris observed in a recent essay that there is a lively debate in China about whether the international system is undergoing a fundamental shift that heralds the decline of US power. As evidenced by the wide range of opinions, experts are far from reaching agreement on the core question of whether the United States is in decline. The vast majority maintains that the prevailing international structure of power will not last; it eventually will give way to a multi-polar era in which China and other emerging economies have an increasing say about issues of global importance. conspicuously absent from the debate is discussion of how a multi-polar system would operate and what role China would play in the new world order.

**Tempered Skepticism**

Despite my skepticism over the prospect of an Asian Community and the emergence of an Asian century, I offer at least three disclaimers. First, one who expresses these doubts should not be regarded as unappreciative of how dramatic or inspiring Asia’s rise has been. Indeed, some features of that rise — for example, the elevation of 400 million Chinese out of poverty between 1981 and 2004 — are sufficiently remarkable that simply characterizing them factually can appear to be an exaggeration.

Second, the above discussion may be premature. It may be unrealistic, not to mention unfair, to expect Asia or an Asian Community — particularly its two de facto emissaries to the world, China and India — to fulfill great-power responsibilities in the nascent phase of their foray onto the world stage. And, of course, it is impossible to rule out that this century will belong to Asia. Based on current trends, however, it seems equally problematic to discuss that possibility as though it were inevitable. I focus almost exclusively here on the more skeptical view in the interest of balance, since the more confident assessment has received, and continues to receive, great attention.

Finally, such skepticism does not, and need not, imply a belief in the endurance of American dominance. One should hope, instead, that the 21st century belongs as much to the East as it does to the West.

Ali Wyne is a research assistant at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University.