



**PATRICIA SABGA:** Imagine this: It's 2035 and the power to shape the intellectual and cultural agenda globally has rebalanced to put Asia's influence on near-equal footing with the West. Neeraj, how did we land here?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** Patricia, Asia is truly at an inflection point. Asia historically has had resource and talent advantage, and now that is getting complemented by a leapfrog mindset and easy availability of capital and Asians who have truly become global natives. That combination is absolutely powerful and important. That's what's causing this.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** That's Neeraj Aggarwal, BCG managing director and senior partner. And I'm Patricia Sabga. Welcome to *Imagine This...*, where we take a trip into the future we hope will challenge the way you think and act today.

For over a century, Western technology, media, and cultural exports have wielded outsized influence around the globe. You can find Western or Western-inspired fast-food joints in nearly every major city on the planet, movie theaters playing Hollywood blockbusters, or iPhones in the hands of the affluent and aspirational. But over the past decade, Asian entrepreneurs and artists have started to give their Western counterparts a run for their money.

Millions of American teenagers use TikTok, whose parent company, ByteDance, is based in China. And just in case you don't have a young person in your house, KPop Demon Hunters is now the most-watched Netflix film of all time. Today, we're going to explore how Asia's influence over culture, media, and technology could evolve over the next decade to rival the West, and how companies can strategically position themselves now for this great global rebalancing. But first, let's bring on my AI cohost, GENE. GENE, please introduce yourself to our listeners.

**GENE:** Hello, everyone. I'm GENE, your digital provocateur and occasional reality check. Think of me as the voice that pokes at easy answers and asks the questions you didn't see coming. Let's get into it.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** Okay, Neeraj, let's start with where we are today. You have been actively working with companies across Asia-Pacific for many, many years. What forces are converging to extend the global reach, and crucially, resonance of content and technology originating in Asia?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** I think it's coming of age of a variety of factors, to my mind. One is, there's a consumer affluence which is happening in Asia. Consumers are getting richer, and that creates huge avenues for companies to experiment. There is two things happening: They're getting richer, and there are more digitally native consumers in Asia than in other parts of the world.

So if you take the top of the pyramid, there are now more richer consumers in Asia. You can think Shanghai, you can think Mumbai, you can think Jakarta. You can pick any city, and you'll start seeing them. But equally, at the bottom of the pyramid, almost all Asian consumers are digitally native, so it encourages companies to be bolder in their attempt to go after them.

So that's certainly happening. Also, I think more and more people are getting more educated both within Asia, but also globally, and bringing back that learning to their parts of the world.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** What about capital and the environment, especially for creatives and entrepreneurs?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** I think capital has now seen the potential, and capital always chases opportunity, right? I think this capital senses the potential. Historically, capital deployed in Asia has been a fraction of the total capital deployed in the world. I talk to any leading capital provider, they feel, as they think about the decade and more ahead, they want to rebalance that.

They want to rebalance that more towards Asia because they sense the opportunity in that market. Everybody you talk to, they almost always say, "If I have a good idea, to make capital is not a hurdle." Capital is the last thing they worry about anymore. That was not the case earlier.



**PATRICIA SABGA:** What are the areas where this great rebalancing is most evident right now, and which areas are poised to see much greater acceleration in the years ahead?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** So let's take the intellectual side. There are multiple places where this is happening, and oftentimes necessity is the mother of invention. So the places where the Asian shoe pinches the most is one place. So let's pick some of those up. There's been a lot of innovation on the energy side.

Many parts of Asia has been energy deficient, energy importers for a while. So renewables has been a big push in Asia. Solar, electric vehicles are things we all know about. I think as manufacturing moves to Asia and as services move to Asia over a period of time, I think there's been more capability built in the newer age industries like that.

So as AI and digital becomes main fold, the intersection of AI with physical world resulting in the possibilities of robotics, or AI in services world with software getting reimagined, all of those things are increasingly much more a place where Asia is competing at a roughly equal level with the rest of the world.

I talked about necessity, so going back to that, climate change is a very important issue all across the world, but Asia has had more polluted cities than other parts of the world. So that makes it more necessary for the Asian economies to think about that challenge.

The one other thing I'll highlight, which has been already played out the game, is financial services.

Fintech as an industry started in US, but very quickly it made its way to Asia. To the point I talked about almost all Asians are digitally native consumers, you could see that play out in Asians embracing that in any part of Asia. You could see this in China, you could see this in Philippines, in Singapore, Indonesia, India. You can go all across the Asian countries, and you'll see that. Now, the scale is momentous, and that allows many possibilities.

I feel something similar will play out in the health care industry. Health care industry globally is going to be a very important industry for us in the decades ahead. People are getting more and more conscious about longevity, about quality of health, but it's also a reasonably inefficient industry. It's well known.

And I think there is no easy answers to that. There's a lot of legacy and entrenchment in that industry. What I expect is, as Asian countries get wealthier, as Asian countries focus more on this, their need to fix it, to think beyond the box is going to start increasing.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** This is a good place to bring in GENE. Go ahead, GENE.

**GENE:** Asia's risk-takers have little patience. They move fast, because why not? With cash confidence and digital native populations, barriers look like speed bumps, not roadblocks. Will entrenched legacy thinking slow the West more than regulation or geopolitics?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** Excellent question, GENE. You are truly a provocateur. So I think its entrenched mental models can be a hurdle according to me, because what happened, what worked well in the past may not be exactly the way of the future. So what worked well in the past was, you could design a model in the Western world and take it to all parts of the world, and other people adapted to the product or to the service.

I think, increasingly, as there are more options available, people will expect more bespoke models. So if you are a great consumer company, people drink coffee differently. What tea means to them is different. What food means to them is different. So you will need to adapt that. If you're making personal hygiene products, they can be different, or entertainment. All of those things, you need to be more adaptive rather than say, "I will make it, and the other part will just embrace it." I think you need to reflect that in your thinking.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** So let's stick with GENE because this naturally gravitates to the question



of AI. GENE, how is AI altering the cultural and technological balance between East and West? Where are Asian countries catching up with the West in terms of innovation, or even poised to overtake it?

**GENE:** AI acts as an accelerant. In Asia, digital native populations power mass adoption, often skipping legacy steps. Innovation happens at scale and speed. That's why catching up starts to look more like leapfrogging.

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** Oftentimes, Asian companies haven't had some parts of the staircase built up. So they don't need to go to the next level, they can just leapfrog and go beyond. Sometimes having less infrastructure and poorer starting point is actually a superior thing rather than inferior thing, because you're not worried about the past almost works. You can just leapfrog and embrace something totally new. I brought up the example of health care.

I think West has a reasonably good health care but in a very expensive fashion and with a lot of legacy. Undoing that legacy will be harder for the Western countries. Many Asian countries have poor health care or limited health care. For them, and as they don't want to imagine it, they have not much to fear about the legacy. They can embrace the new things. They can embrace new drug discovery techniques. They can embrace new health care delivery techniques where AI becomes truly a force multiplier and is not trying to take away something.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** One thing that we definitely need to acknowledge as well is that as Asia's influence has grown around the globe, so too has the Asian diaspora. To what degree is this very sizable diaspora driving the rebalancing trend?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** Excellent question. Asian diaspora is now sizable. If I roughly remember my numbers, if you take just US itself, there are about 25 million people who are of Asian origin who now live in US. That's about 7% or 8% of US population. Still not very significant, but sizable enough. And many of them have actually been quite successful.

So they're reasonably influential, and they want to consume like global natives. They are equally adept at consuming what is made available in the West and what is made available in Asia. So they are also a ready-made market beyond the local Asian market of consuming content.

And I think they are often the first port of innovation, because now when you think about your consumer base, they are sometimes pushing you to push the boundaries. Let's take an example. If you're a movie maker, just as an example, or a music maker, if you could appeal to both the local sensibilities and some other sensibilities to these people.

What that does is, as these people at the diaspora then goes to their office spaces or their workplaces, they talk to ten more friends about it, and suddenly it's not just restricted to the diaspora, it starts becoming a global phenomenon. So they are also a transmission mechanism.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** So not only transmission, but we also have global natives who are entrepreneurs, who think globally from the start rather than starting with a local audience or consumer base, and building from there. What role are those global native entrepreneurs likely to play in this great rebalancing?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** Their role can be pivotal in this rebalancing because they are comfortable with a larger part of the world. And that's actually one of the key messages I do have, that it is important to not have one-size-fits-all model for the world. It is more important to have the ability to adapt to the world which is somewhat heterogeneous, to a world which has very different economic drivers often in different parts.

So some of these natives, having spent a reasonable part of their life in another part of the world, can embrace both sides. I remember talking to the Uber CEO when he had taken over. He said, "Making Uber successful in America is one thing, but making Uber successful in India is very different thing because the economics are very different, very challenging. If I can crack both, Uber will be an incredibly successful company,



because that stretches the fabric of the continuum as much as possible." So you can take that example and roll it in many different places.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** It's very interesting because we have this phenomenon of global natives both in terms of producing content and consuming content, and also the same with technology. This is happening as the world is actually fracturing. We're seeing the world fracture along this multipolar configuration. Does that work for or against global natives? Because it seems like we have two forces that are really in tension.

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** You're right. I think that the world is fracturing in some parts with the geopolitics, but equally, I think technology is a great equalizer. Take streaming services. Streaming services allow me to sit in any part of the world and view content from any part of the world. I know my father-in-law is equally at home watching Turkish serials or Korean serials as much as he's watching Hindi serials, right? I mean, so he will choose the content which catches his attention the best.

And you can pick any consumer in any part of the world. If I look at my friends who have music tastes, they will have a wide variety of music tastes. I do feel technology will always stay ahead of regulation or this fracturing. And if fracturing becomes too sharp, then there will be a, I don't know, a secondary market which will always embrace it, because people have been exposed to what the whole world looks like, what is out there, and they want it. Once the genie is out of the bottle, it's very hard to put it back in.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** OK, hold that thought because we're going to take a quick break. When we come back, we will explore what Neeraj just raised, and we'll also take a look at what the rebalancing between East and West means for companies in the US and Europe.

**BILL MOORE:** Hi, I'm Bill Moore. I'm part of the team that created GENE. Stick around after the end of the episode where GENE and I will explore how AI can help a global media company create the next big K-pop movie.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** Welcome back to Imagine This. I'm Patricia Sabga. Let's return to our conversation with BCG's Neeraj Aggarwal. Neeraj, let's talk about talent for a second, because the US has long been a very attractive destination to best-in-class, both tech and creative talent from around the world. Do you see this changing in the years ahead? Will we see a rebalancing there? Will we see Western talent going East more often or Eastern talent not going West as often?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** I think it's a tough question to answer. I'll tell you, firstly, what US has built in terms of educational institutions, in terms of giving meritocratic freedom to talent is incredible. So many people over many decades have partaken of that. I myself went to grad school in the US. I mean, I've seen it personally. I've seen it with so, so many people. And that's what is also a superpower of US.

But more recently, I think a few walls are getting built up around this, right? I mean, there's been a lot of talk about, should we have so many international students coming in? Is the jobs going to be that easy after even if you get the education? Now, I don't know whether how much of it'll translate into reality versus just a statement being made, and it's anybody's guess, but even that very act of speaking does put a doubt in people's mind. So that's one aspect of the problem.

The second is, there's a lot of opportunities in the Asian countries themselves to solve problems. The gap which was there in opportunity space between what US provided and the Asian countries provided was very sizable. That's narrowing in terms of opportunity spaces. So if I'm top talent and I'm looking at all this, I think I'm going to do two things. One is, I would also evaluate where beyond US I would like to study, for example.

It could be other countries and many other countries. You can see Canada, UK, parts of Europe are all opening up—exciting. I see a lot of invitations of PhD program than others from all of those places. So there may be some more competition coming. The second is, the talent may also say, "Where is the best ROI, return on



investment, for myself?" And capital is available, opportunity is available. So they may want to go back to their own home countries to make those opportunities come alive. So I think those are real, but it's hard to net out where will this land up. But I do feel those are the factors one needs to consider.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** I want to get back to the idea that we discussed earlier where we have global natives, both in terms of a rising consumer class and entrepreneurial class, and they are this rising class against this backdrop of a fracturing world, which implies that there's two different kinds of thinking afoot.

A global native would obviously think that a rising tide raises all boats, whereas a fracturing world suggests there's some zero-sum thinking afoot. With that in mind, what are the implications for US and European companies of this global rebalancing? Does it necessarily translate into a loss of dominance? Or are there scenarios in which they thrive in this rebalanced world?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** To my mind, there will be, you'll divide the world into different kind of companies. There'll be some which will have a footprint which is just proportionately loaded to one side of the world. So you can be, your 90%+ revenues come from the Western economies or your 90%+ revenues come from the Asian economies. There are many companies of that kind, right? You could have a fairly fantastic outcome with that kind of a company.

You serve your customers well. You have great return on investment, and there's a lot of growth possibilities. But there's some companies which have a unique footprint which is 60/40, 70/30, some such ratio between the two parts of the world. I think they're both uniquely advantaged and also somewhat, if I may, going to feel challenged in this world.

They're advantaged, because, if they can embrace the innovation and the cultural changes that are happening and have a mindset of a headquarters of the West and a headquarters of the East, they can bring the best of both worlds together. And that can be a great enabler for future success.

If they feel they have to, against this difficult world, choose sides or be more centric to one side of the world, I think that will be an impediment for future success. What I mean by that is, you make the products in one part of the world and you throw it across the wall in some sense, if I can use that metaphor, and see if it sticks or it doesn't. I think that phenomenon, which historically probably worked okay, is not going to be as much of a success enabler in the future, because you need to adapt.

As I said, there are lots of great innovation happening which are native to that part of the world. You need to be close to that innovation, if you are not, and that primacy that innovation has a very different flavor than innovation in the other part of the world, because the starting points are different, the infrastructure challenges, the different economic challenges are different. Hence, you need to build a flywheel which is two engines rather than one engine, if I may say it that way.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** Now, I want to return to a point that you raised right before the break. And it had to do with what happens if the content cannot cross the borders that easily, because governments don't always want another nation's cultural exports landing on their shores. Of course, remember when everyone thought the internet would usher in this brave new world of free-flowing information, and instead we've seen governments build firewalls and use censorship to keep out what they see as undesirable content? Are we likely to see more of that in the years ahead as this rebalancing takes shape?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** I think both phenomena will compete with each other. You will see, from what everyone can see around the world happening right now, there is certainly a segment of leaders who are trying towards more of that. Now, it's hard to predict whether those segment of leaders will win in those political contests or whatever, but you can see a segment of leaders trying to push towards more censorship.

But the consumers have a completely different mindset. The consumers in general are looking for what floats their boat, and it could be from any



part of the world. So I think these two phenomena will compete with each other. So if I had to wager, put a wager on this, I would feel the cultural influence of the consumers will prevail, over the political push to build some boundaries, is my take.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** So are we likely to see a lot more pirated content then?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** Assuming in that the walls will be so high that content will not be allowed to flow seamlessly, I think people may divide that into some content they consider acceptable, and some, they may not. And if there is a divide of that nature, we are now in the realm of complete speculation or imagination, yes, I think pirated, other means of distribution will find their way.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** We've talked about culture, but what about technology? Because we're already seeing AI ecosystems emerge.

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** That I think is a deeper and a harder question. I think technology is so important to nations' long-term competitive advantage, so important to defense and other things that I feel nations are going to think long and hard about who do they trust on technology and where do they not build trust. And I think AI is becoming such a major force in the world that you have to think deeply about what it means to trust somebody else with the technology versus build your own.

At the same time, to build really high-quality AI, needs you to throw a lot of resources, both capital and human talent at it, some of the best human talent at it. So nations will have to make choices about, is it really possible to be at the cutting edge, and who can they trust? And I think that those two variables will decide. If you can be at the cutting edge, at your own will, you'd probably like to go solo, versus if you feel no, that is not possible. Or if you have high level of trusted relationships, maybe you'll feel this is something you could join hands on.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** So this actually loops back to what we were discussing earlier, which is the fracturing world that's happening. The backdrop

that we have against all of these global natives are rising within a fractured world. So is it possible that if AI ecosystems become more and more siloed, does that influence the great rebalancing across cultural exports, media exports?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** So I think we need to deaverage between cultural and media exports versus other abstract innovation. So if AI ecosystems become siloed, you could have a different set of applications which may be siloed as well because the applications may ride on top of what are the biggest problems you're solving. Your need for shopping, your need for travel, your need for health, I think they may become potentially siloed or they may interconnect.

So AI is like a bottom-of-the-stack technology, and a lot of technology happens up stack, on top of that. Because it's so defining, I'm calling it bottom of the stack in some sense, right? I mean, it's like infrastructure. So up-stack innovation in some cases may be siloed. I think media and content, I feel, has huge global appeal. I think we are missing also that this technology allows many, many small artists to come to the fore as well. The middle will be missing. There'll be some really big players which will be global, and there's some really niche players which could also be global, but will be appreciated by a very small audience.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** So GENE loves to throw cold water on our conversation. GENE, what could upend this march toward a future where global cultural influence is more evenly balanced between East and West?

**GENE:** Easy answer: prolonged digital censorship, hard national borders, or sudden economic shocks. Also, fragmentation of trust. If audiences lose faith in what crosses the border, even great content stalls. Momentum fades fast when walls go up or when people just tune out.

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** I think that's very cold water to be throwing on this from GENE. There is a scenario where you can, I mean, we are in the realm of scenarios. There is a scenario where the walls are very hard and very tall. So when they're





very hard, it means they nonpermeable, and they're so tall that it's almost impossible to scale.

You can imagine the world like that. The odds of that are hopefully small, and it'll not be a fun world for anybody, I feel. But it's not beyond the realm of possibility, I would say. My feeling is, there are enough contravening forces which will hopefully not let that world happen.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** So if we do move more and more toward the world of this great rebalancing, what is one no-regret move that CEOs can make now to prepare their companies to really thrive in the great rebalancing?

**NEERAJ AGGARWAL:** I think the ideas can come from everywhere. Products should be designed with a mindset. I heard this story from a leader at Philips and she mentioned to me that they created this razor which didn't need shaving foam, which you can do while you're on the go in a train or in a car. Why did this come? This idea came from Asia because people had long commutes, they wanted to shave while going to work. That product became a bit of a global necessity or a global sensation in some sense.

That's a small example, but it just shows that ideas can come from everywhere. Hence, CEOs need to make sure that the listening, and the teams are structured such that their innovation units, their idea units, their product units have both a mindset of a Western mindset and an Asian or a Eastern mindset, if I may call it that.

As long as you can ensure that, and they have an equal seat at the table, and they're sitting with each other and shaping each other's views, I think that'll be a far richer world, that'll be a far more successful company. And I think that's a winning formula according to me.

**PATRICIA SABGA:** That's Neeraj Aggarwal, BCG managing director and senior partner.

Ever dream of pitching your own K-pop movie to a streaming service? Stick around, our AI handler, Bill Moore, will work with GENE to figure out what studio executives might be looking for in the next blockbuster.

**BILL MOORE:** Hi, my name's Bill Moore. I'm part of the team that created GENE. Today I'm stepping into the role of CEO of a global entertainment company. We're developing a new K-pop movie—not just a film, but a full media franchise: music, streaming content, fan experiences. The big question is, how do we make it resonate not only in Korea, but around the world? So GENE, let's start with a story that will cater to current global trends.

**GENE:** All right, picture this. The film is titled One Beat: Together We Rise. The story follows a rookie K-pop group, six members, wild mix of backgrounds teamed up by a global label for a risky East meets West debut. First act is a Seoul boot camp: rival crews, brutal dance-offs, viral fails. Then, plot twist: they jet to New York for a surprise world-stage showdown. Language barriers, tiny apartments, sabotage from internet trolls, edge of disaster. But the crew goes rogue. Leaks a story-driven music video about belonging. Online chaos. Fans in Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, Jakarta, go off. Live dance battle challenge turns into a tour-worthy movement.

**BILL MOORE:** Okay, GENE, that sounds good. So what does the media campaign look like for this project, the marketing campaign?

**GENE:** Right. Full court press. Start wild. Debut a drop-in dance challenge. Synced movie teaser. Pushed by global influencers. Billboard takeovers in Seoul, LA, Jakarta. Roll out daily cast live streams. Bio unboxings, real-time fan chats, soundtrack exclusive to first viewers.

**BILL MOORE:** OK, GENE, that sounds pretty good, but what about merchandising? What should we do for that?

**GENE:** Here's what I'd launch. Split merch by vibe and market. For the US: limited hoodies, artist figures, and yes, lunchboxes. Asia gets designer notebooks, snack box tie-ins, and idol branded light sticks. New character with each tour stop. Digital drops, skins, and badges tie fans worldwide. Mix, remix, regional spin.



**BILL MOORE:** Sounds good, GENE. Looking forward to the premiere. This is Bill Moore signing off.

**GENE:** This episode was made possible by Neeraj Aggarwal generously sharing his insights with us, and also by BCG's AI whisperer Bill Moore and BCG's pod squad, producer Michael May, composer Kenny Kusiak, and sound engineer George Drabing Hicks. Please subscribe and leave a rating wherever you found us.