

## “Asian Geopolitics Today”

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What is geopolitics? It is essentially a political framework that enables the examination of international affairs in the context of culture, history, geography, and current political events. It is about the struggle for space and power. The concept had its origins (Granieri:2015) in the quest for understanding the “big picture” that the world during the period between 1880 and 1910 presented, in an age of new technologies that were shortening distances, where there was an intensifying competition for resources, where the Great Game was obsessing policy makers in London, Delhi and Moscow, for instance. It was a time when strategic thinkers like Alfred Thayer Mahan were arguing about the key to global dominance being control of the seas. Mahan’s treatise which appeared in 1890 appealed not only to the British and the Americans, but also the Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany who reportedly had a copy of Mahan’s book placed on board every ship in his navy to aid the search for his new *Weltpolitik*. In turn, his theory of sea power, triggered a counter-response from Harford Mackinder who presented a paper in 1904 before the Royal Geographical Society, entitled “The Geographical Pivot of History”. Mackinder’s thesis focused on land power and propagated that control of the Eurasian “Heartland” with its wealth of resources, would make any empire invincible. This was the “Wagnerian mentality” (Strausz-Hupe:1942) that appealed to the Germany of Adolf Hitler.

As it transpired, both Mahan’s and Mackinder’s theories had special appeal for the Germans in particular and the early articulations of what constituted *Geopolitik* emerged and inspired many among the circles close to Adolf Hitler, feeding into Nazism’s desire for world dominance. But early in the nineteen-forties, Robert Strausz-Hupe, an Austrian émigré in the United States, while warning of the downside of the German theory of *geopolitik*, spoke of how a world of power blocs was emerging, and how power would be determined by the control of space, in an “everlasting struggle” among competing nations. This struggle in his view, would be the new certainty in international relations. Geopolitics has now become one of the intellectual approaches applied to the study of international relations and towards understanding the subject.

What are the tools that geopolitics is to apply to the study of a given international situation? Is it just geography, history or culture? Is it to be realism at the sacrifice of principles that a nation state considers central to her identity as a country? Is there any permanence or inevitability in international relations? The answer can never be yes. Do nations think before they decide and decide before they act? Human folly is a constant in the affairs of men. For any assessment of a given situation in international relations to be complete, it has to take into account a slew of factors – based on history, the study of the past, and the compulsions of the present, the permanence of geography, the interplay with other regional actors, the force of nationalism, and the disparities and inequalities in strength, military and economic.

Let us then focus on our topic for today: Asian geopolitics. The first question is what is the idea of Asia? Is it an isolated concept? For, have not the histories of Asia and Europe been intertwined for centuries? When one surveys the Indian Ocean, is it not a reality that its history is a hybrid one, influenced by the traffic of the centuries, of people, ideas and commodities, new inventions and embedded traditions? Can we not turn shibboleths upside down – did Vasco da Gama discover India or, did India discover Vasco da Gama, as the title of a lecture by the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam proclaimed? The reality is however, that we apply concepts learnt from Europe to the study of Asia, the system of nation states, the definitions of sovereignty, the political ideologies, regional groupings, the definitions of freedom and political systems and much more. This despite the fact that Asia is very different from Europe, in terms of its heterogeneity, its different religions and ethnicities. There are many ideas of Asia. Pluralism is a defining characteristic. The cultures and history of Asia have contributed to European history, as much as European inroads in Asia over the last few centuries have influenced the course of events there.

Asia today is a matrix of many unbalanced networks of power, rising ambitions, contested borders and sovereignties, vital maritime lines of communication, the rising aspirations and expectations of young populations spread across the region, and evolving patterns of partnership. Across this map there are a number of fault lines. The challenge is whether a rationalization of these discontinuities, this substance without form, is possible, and how we are to create a concert of shared interests among the major Asian powers founded on the principles of beneficial, stable coexistence for all, and where no regional hegemon predominates.

Seen from space, the continent of Asia is segmented between the heartland and the ocean. The region of Northeast Asia with Japan, Mongolia, the two Koreas and China have shared historical experiences, cultures and ethnicities, a similar geographical environment. Southeast Asia, the traditional *suvarnabhoomi* of Indian history and legend, we are careful not to use the term 'Greater India' these days, encompasses the periphery of the South China Sea and the passageway to the Indian Ocean – it is the true Indo-Pacific – the linkway between the two oceans – the Indian and the Pacific. South Asia, with India at its heart, crowns the Indian Ocean and here the rimland of the Himalaya descends through the Indian geographical plate into the ocean in a merging of the geopolitics of Mackinder and Mahan. Further north, there is the heartland of Inner Asia, comprising the various 'stans', including Afghanistan, Chinese Xinjiang and Tibet. To the west, there is the near East, Iran and the Anatolian spaces, and the Arab states of the Gulf region. All in all, what we see is a cartographic juxtaposition of difference rather than any underlying unity. Asia is not really one. And there is one mammoth external player in all this, which is the United States of America, a dominant presence in the region since the early nineteen fifties.

Therefore, the geopolitics of Asia and the Indo-Pacific is a multi-layered *mandala* of concentric circles from the Gulf of Aden to the western shores of the Americas. And the nucleus of this space is the Eurasian continent, east of

the Urals, and that stretch of the Indo-Pacific from the Sea of Japan to the western Indian Ocean. But despite the distinct identities that exist in Asia, international relations theory as applied to the region, is governed by terminologies used in the west. Terms like realism, liberalism, constructivism are offered as perspectives. (Acharya:2008) The challenge is find a theory of Asian universalism as a counter to Western dominance as well as insular theories of Asian exceptionalism.

Let us first apply the theory of realism. Realism sees international relations as in a state of anarchy where states in a competition for power and influence, are guided only by self-gain rather than everybody gaining something. Hegemony is seen as an ultimate goal (Mearsheimer) in offensive realism, while defensive realism involves maintenance of the status quo and the balance of power (Jervis, Snyder). The late Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, a realist, ascribed Asian stability and economic growth to the overarching presence of the United States as the regional balancer. That was a view that was particularly relevant in the Cold War years. But what has happened since the end of bipolarity in international relations to the situation in Asia? Have not old conflicts decompressed, and who is filling the vacuum? In the words of one expert, the rise of China has become “the focal point of anxieties about Asian insecurity,” (Acharya:2008) The ensuing scenario, as extrapolated, foresaw a stiff competition for power and influence, anti-access and area denial, regional domination, between the United States and China. The rise of an expansionist China is likened to that of the United States in the gilded age of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mearsheimer) in its drive for regional hegemony and the enforcement of an Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine. Today, this extrapolation has been shaped into the visible contours of a regional power-play where China, a fully Asian country, is the ‘interloping’ presence that challenges the United States inspiring theories that a Thucydides Trap is being laid in the region – the analogy from classical Greece refers to the rise of Athens and the apprehension and distrust this generated in Sparta leading to a protracted war between the two where one sought to eliminate the other in order to be the undisputed purveyor of power and influence.

The theory of “liberalism” vests importance in the value of economic interdependence, in the existence of regional institutions of economic cooperation and security dialogue, it stresses the relevance of democratic political systems that never engage in conflict with each other and instead, yield “peace dividends”. In practice, the conclusion of free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships, the durability of ASEAN as a cooperative mechanism for regional dialogue which involves the bigger countries like the United States, China, Japan and India in its various dialogue forums, and the fact that strong and resilient democracies like India, Japan, Australia and Singapore have infused the process with greater strength and sustenance, should heighten the appeal of this theory. After all, it was a similar pattern though far stronger and more resilient, that created the structure for a united Europe pre- and post-Cold War.

A third theory, that of “constructivism” defines Asian interdependence as being founded on common values of cultural behavior, history, social norms

and civilizational ideas. The attempt to build an Asian system of state-to-state relations built on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence or Panchsheel, during the nineteen fifties and stressing the principles of non-interference, non-aggression, respect for sovereignty, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence was drawn from the matrix of traditional, consensual rules of behavior with Asian characteristics. These principles became the foundation of the non-aligned movement – a structural process that encountered great push-back from the Western powers. The idea of ASEAN also drew inspiration from the Asian ‘way’ – the concept of hierarchy and domination by one single power is rejected in this definition, although there are Chinese analysts (Kang) who have argued in favor of a regional hierarchy dominated by China with smaller states bandwagoning with the former, not unlike the “*tianxia*” concept in ancient Chinese thought (the concept of the unity of all tributary states under the rule of heaven, or under one dominant, powerful and all-encompassing force).

It is perhaps elements taken from these three theories of realism, liberalism and constructivism that can eclectically create a definition for IR theory for Asia today and for tackling the geopolitical challenges she faces. While the realists may see vindication that the sole binary in Asian geopolitics is the Sino-American one, in terms of a narrowing gap in overall comprehensive power and military strength, western liberalism also has its takers among those who stress interdependence, democratic governance, security multilateralism, economic regionalism rather than nationalism. Constructivism, the third theory, is attractive because it bases itself on stressing the shared histories, cultural complementarities, and social order that creates an inspirational idea of Asia and hence a structure for political, security and economic relations among Asian states. Today, elements from all these three schools of thought are discernible in pan-Asian inter-relations. Some say it is a theory of Asian “universalism” (Acharya) that is taking shape where ideas, norms and concepts from outside Asia are being embedded in traditional beliefs and cultural values, to create new definitions of international order for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Let us now turn to the brass-tacks of reality. This is the Asian century, or more topically termed, the Indo-Pacific century. Power and wealth are shifting eastwards, this is the era of Asian re-emergence. Hans Morgenthau called the aspiration for power the distinguishing element of international politics, an undeniable fact of experience. Today, we see a risen China in the East, and China is determined to mold the destinies of the smaller nations who cannot speak truth to its power. The saga of the Belt and the Road, or the One Belt One Road, is a living example. Through this signature project, China is enveloping nations like Sri Lanka and Pakistan for instance in what almost echo patron-client relationships of times past, except that these smaller nations are going deeper into debt to the Chinese, in arrangements that are mired in opacity and suggest a gradual attenuation of sovereignty over national resources. The Belt and Road initiative has been described as the world’s largest economic endeavor potentially encapsulating 60 nations and more than 4.4 billion people. Simply put, Mackinder’s and Mahan’s theories find perfect partnership in this project that bears the imprimatur of China’s

supreme leader, Xi Jinping. (Loy:2018) Projects subsumed under the initiative include gas and oil pipelines, railroads, economic corridors, and ports. The theatres of engagement include the Eurasian heartland as well as the Indian Ocean. This is China's road to superpower status and its imaging of manifest destiny.

Speaking at the Shangrila Dialogue in Singapore on 1<sup>st</sup> June, Prime Minister Modi spoke of how today we are seeing the assertion of power over recourse to international norms. Subtly hinting at the example of the Belt and Road, he said that these initiatives must be based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability and sustainability, empowering nations and not placing them under an impossible debt burden. The message was amplified further when United States Defense Secretary Mattis spoke the next day at the Shangrila Dialogue. The U.S. Defense Secretary spoke just a few days after the U.S. Navy's Pacific Command which is based in Hawaii, was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command. Mattis was unequivocal in his references to China, and in his critique of China's militarization of the resource-rich South China Sea, for "purposes of intimidation and coercion" as he termed it. The Chinese reaction was sharp. Mattis' comments were termed "irresponsible" and "unacceptable".

The Trump administration's "principled realism", in Mattis' words, takes a "clear-eyed view of the strategic environment" (in the Indo-Pacific), recognizing that "competition among nations not only persists in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, in some regard it is intensifying." (Mattis:2018) The American strategy to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific would focus, he said, on preserving the vitality of the maritime commons as a global good, by helping partners of the U.S build naval and law enforcement capabilities. Interoperability among a network of U.S. allies and partners would receive attention. Strengthening the rule of law, civil society and transparent governance would be the "sunlight that exposes the malign influence that threatens to stain all economic development" – this was obviously a missive aimed at the Chinese. The centrality of ASEAN in the regional security architecture would be supported and this architecture would be strengthened.

Calling out India for its role as a leader and "responsible steward" in the Indo-Pacific region, Mattis spoke of the natural partnership with India, based on the convergence of strategic interests, shared values, and respect for a rule-based international order.

It is clear that the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States has China at its core. For the first time in a century, the formidable power of the United States is being threatened by the phenomenon of China's rapidly growing economic and military reach and capability. And the Trump administration in its own words, is taking a clear-eyed view of this new competition and the potential it creates for intensifying tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Uncertain times are ahead.

The superpowers of our times in Asia are the United States and China. And the major powers, a rung below these first two, are Japan and India. These

are the findings of The Asia Power Index 2018 recently released by the Australian think tank, the Lowy Institute. The Index measures the overall power of a country according to economic resources, military capability, resilience and future trends, diplomatic influence, economic relationships, defense networks and cultural influence. In terms of overall power ranking, the United States and China are first and second on the list respectively, with Japan and India coming in third and fourth. Russia, once a superpower in the days of the Soviet Union, is below in the list. The overall power gap between China and India is considerably large and the lead is significant in economic resources, particularly. There is a 33-point gap in overall power scores between China and the next highest-ranked group – the major powers, Japan and India. The gap, as the report notes, is “as large as that between Japan and Bangladesh, ranked 18<sup>th</sup> in the Index as a minor power.” And, in terms of future trends, by 2030, China’s GDP is forecast to be almost twice the size of the United States.

The geopolitics of Asia today points to a U.S. -China binary. They are both circling each other, watching each other’s moves. The United States is looking to strengthen the coalition of her interests in the Indo-Pacific and also alliances and partnerships in this connection. India is seen as a natural partner in this context, a sister democracy, with shared values and commitments to a rules-based regional order. China is meanwhile, marching to the beat of her own drum, pursuing her agnostic version of regional influence-building, with a clear aim of ultimately out-performing the Americans.

So, quo vadis, India? Whither India? It was Jawaharlal Nehru who once said that India was the pivot of Asia. Nehru sought to outline a vision of Asian resurgence, of India and China being the prime determinants of a new Asian identity of countries liberated from colonialism and foreign domination. That vision evaporated after the debacle that India faced in the border conflict with China in 1962. Today, the unresolved question of the world’s longest disputed land border, and questions that arise out of Chinese activities in South Asia, including Pakistan, and in the Indian Ocean littoral states, continue to loom large over the bilateral relationship between the two countries. A tenuous peace is maintained it is true, but the Doklam crisis of 2017, where the territorial integrity of a third country, Bhutan, was critically involved, demonstrated the fast and furious manner in which relations could slide into recrimination and near-military-conflict. A ‘reset’ of India-and-China bilateral relations has now been launched following Prime Minister Modi’s ‘informal’ summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan in late April. But the way forward will not be easy. India is now dealing with a China that is vying for superpower status, that is speaking the language of aggressive nationalism, that is set to alter the status quo, and that has promised herself that she will never be subdued again.

India’s rapid economic growth, today the fastest in the world, and the rising aspirations of her population, the greater confidence and assertiveness in her foreign policy today, and the fact she clearly possesses the potential to be a front-ranking global power with the innate capacity to be a counterpoise to China, suggests that in realist terms, she will be China’s competitor, and

that the two will jostle each other for space and influence in the Indo-Pacific. China's overall power ranking is ahead of India's today, but she will have to increasingly contend with India's global and regional aspirations, and the partnerships that the latter is forging in the region in order to provide the checks and balances to China's rise.

It is obvious that India's partnership with the United States is a key factor in her foreign policy today. The geopolitics surrounding her suggests that a multi-faceted strategic relationship between the two countries can be a key balancer to China in the Indo-Pacific. But India is also conscious that she cannot dilute her strategic autonomy and independence in multi-layered decision-making as she calibrates her relations with China and, ensures that the channels of communication and interaction are open with countries like Russia and Iran, both key to her military and energy security, respectively.

What this entails is that India cannot rely on the ballast of a strong strategic partnership with the United States alone as she charts her future course in Asia. While in agreement with the United States on the central geopolitical point that China's gaining a hegemonic position in Asia will create critical imbalances in regional security, dispute settlement and the encouragement of non-democratic, even authoritarian political forces, she must be guided also by the realism of her 'place' in a troubled South Asian neighborhood, her unsettled border with China, and her internal development dynamic and needs and also the domestic challenges to her resilience. Her participation in the BRICS New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank both of which have strong Chinese linkages is an example of smart diplomacy. This is a flexible geometry rather than a fixed point-to-point trajectory. It is in a manner of speaking, India's interests are best served by an application of 'universalist' IR theory to create an imprint that incorporates realism of approach, liberal values of democratic governance and inclusiveness, emphasis on a rule-based order, with sensitivity to the logic of Asian cultural and civilizational values that emphasize dialogue and consensus-building as opposed to confrontation.

India's focus on South-east Asia and the ASEAN must intensify. The Act East policy has gained good momentum but the organic connectivities between India and this region must be leveraged more effectively. The northeastern states of India who are naturally linked to southeast Asia through ties of history, ethnicity, custom and tradition, as also geography and the Andaman and Nicobar islands should be key catalysts in this regard. The strategic importance of the latter needs leveraging to our advantage. We may recall the words of Sardar Panikkar who said in 1945: "The Gulf of Malacca is like the mouth of a crocodile, the Peninsula of Malaya being the upper, and the jutting end of Sumatra being the lower jaw. The entry of the Gulf (of Sumatra and hence the Malacca Straits) can be controlled by the Nicobar." India has to orient her strategic thinking more purposefully to focus on the defense of her coastline, which is both an asset and a vulnerability (if you remember your colonial history). Her vulnerabilities have to be transformed into assets through improvements in infrastructure, business-friendliness, speed in execution of projects, and strategic tie-ups with partners like Japan and

Singapore. Today, even more than her mountain frontiers, India's coastal installations and harbours are her frontline.

Let me conclude with a brief allusion to the import of the two terms, power and influence. India is well-poised to exert influence far exceeding the scope of her present power quotient. She has been over-cautious and rather hesitant about taking the steps in this direction. The Asia Power Index referred to earlier draws the distinction between the measures of power and the measures of influence. The challenge before India is how it converts its resources into more effective influence in Asia. A cue can be taken from Singapore that is a standout performer in this regard. Australia is another effective player in this category. India has significant diplomatic influence, after the United States, China and Japan, but its diplomatic influence must be energized through intelligent choices of non-allied defense partnerships, building networks of economic relationships which deliver in terms of process and execution, a more visionary, culturally sensitive and sophisticated projection of soft power and being a model for inclusive, rule-based and tolerant democratic good governance. That is a method, a viable one, to reduce the power gap with China and dispel the image of underachievement that is many a time attached to India. We have to be less of a country at odds with itself, as images of a quarreling, non-business-transacting Parliament indicate or the workings of Opposition politics would suggest.

Conflict is the antithesis of development. The Indian Ocean was in ancient times, the Mare Liberum of Hugo Grotius who said: "For do not the ocean navigable in every direction with which God encompassed the earth, and the regular and occasional winds which blow – offer sufficient proof that Nature has given to all peoples a right of access to all other peoples". The Indian Ocean, in which we are the junction between east and west, north and south, is a human sea. It has been so for centuries and today it is vital to our commercial and trade lifelines, and to our maritime security. Today, it is witnessing a new edition of the Great Game, a nexus as Kaplan called it, of world powers and possible conflict in years to come. Factors like democracy, energy security and religious freedom are all at play here. Our power and influence will not go untested in the future so we must be prepared. In particular focus will be national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy, military preparedness and the quality of government. This is how the weight and breadth of our actual power will be judged. And that is the prism through which we must view the Asian *geopolitik* of which we are a major constituent.

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