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## Asia's New Geopolitics<sup>1</sup>

*Asia's phenomenal economic success has resulted in shifts in the political and military balance of power. What do these mean for Asian geopolitics? Will Asia be able in the future to keep the security and peace that made Asia's economic transformation possible in the past?*

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We live in an uncertain world, marked by regional and local conflicts, terrorist attacks, great power rivalry and unpredictable leadership. This paper looks at the global arena through the window of Asia's 'new geopolitics'. This title calls for an explanation. Why 'geopolitics' and what is 'new' about it? And why do we speak of Asia, not Asia-Pacific, or today's fashionable Indo-Pacific? We try first to answer these questions and then to describe some features of the new era.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented as the inaugural ISAS Lecture Series titled 'Asia's New Geopolitics' on 18 December 2017. The lecture was organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

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## What is Geopolitics and has it Returned?

Purists will object that, strictly speaking, the term geopolitics means only the influence of geographical facts on international relations. This was the sense in which Sir Halford MacKinder<sup>3</sup> and Alfred Thayer Mahan<sup>4</sup> used the term – MacKinder to stress the importance of the Eurasian world island and Mahan of control of the oceans and the rimland. However, over time, the meaning of geopolitics has extended to “a study of the influence of such factors as geography, economics, and demography on the politics and especially the foreign policy of a state” according to the dictionary.<sup>5</sup> It is in that larger sense that that this paper uses the term.

Of course, when one hears people speaking of the return of geopolitics, it is quite possible that they are using a polysyllabic word even more loosely, as a synonym for power politics, or possibly just politics itself, in order to impress and dress up some fairly pedestrian ideas. For some of us, geopolitics and power politics never went away. It was a strange conceit that the fall of the Soviet Union meant the end of history or that what came immediately thereafter was now permanent, unlike everything that had come before. What is new today is, indeed, the fact that our politics and our international dealings seem to have changed again from the post-Cold War unipolar moment and the high tide of globalisation that lasted until the 2008 global economic crisis.

## Are we in a New Era?

Consider, first, whether we are in a new era. The signs, or four big trends, indicate this.

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Halford MacKinder, 1861-1947, English geographer, Director LSE, who submitted “The Geographical Pivot of History” in 1904 to the Royal Geographical Society. Later, in 1919, MacKinder summarised his theory as “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world”, MacKinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, 1840-1914, US naval officer and historian, who wrote the 1890 book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783*, stressed the importance of command of the sea and a powerful navy. His policies were adopted by most major European powers and led to the naval arms race before WWI.

<sup>5</sup> Merriam-Webster definition of geopolitics: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/geopolitics>.

## 1. The Shift in the Balance of Power between States

As a result of the high tide of globalisation, of which China and India were the greatest beneficiaries, economic power has shifted and is much more widely held than before in the world. The preponderant change is the rise of China, but other powers have also grown.

**Table 1: Share of Global GDP (PPP)**

Countries	1980 (in per cent)	2016 (in per cent)
Advanced Countries	64	42
Europe	30	16.7
China	2.3	17.8
India	3	7.34

Source: IMF World Economic Outlook and World Bank databases.

What has disoriented most people is the rapidity and the scale of the rise of China and other powers. By 2014, China and India together accounted for about half of Asia's total gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>6</sup> In purchasing power parity (PPP) GDP terms, they are the world's largest and third largest economies respectively. Most of this, of course, is accounted for by China. China is a manufacturing and trading superpower, determines commodity markets and prices globally, and has accounted for about 25 per cent of global GDP growth in recent years. India's and China's combined share of world GDP in 2016, of 17.67 per cent (in nominal terms) or 25.14 (in PPP terms)<sup>7</sup> is still well below their share of the world population of 37.5 per cent, but it represents a significant economic force today. How the locus of economic activity has shifted is apparent in the fact that, of the world's total nominal GDP of US\$74.1 trillion (\$99.7 trillion), Asia accounts for 33.84 per cent, North America for 27.95 per cent and Europe for 21.37 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

However, the change in the military balance has not been of the same order, which may be one reason why Asia has enjoyed such a long peace. There is a disconnect between economic

<sup>6</sup> IMF World Economic Outlook, April 2015, describes India and China as accounting for 52.77 per cent in PPP terms and 48.99 per cent in nominal terms of Asia's total GDP.

<sup>7</sup> IMF World Economic Outlook, October 2017 and World Bank data

<sup>8</sup> IMF World Economic Outlook and World Bank datasets.

multipolarity and the concentration of military power – a disconnect that, in normal times, would be settled politically and in dysfunctional times militarily.

The world is in an anomalous position after globalisation. Economic power is widely distributed and the world is multipolar in economic terms. On the other hand, military power is still overwhelmingly concentrated in the United States (US), and it is unlikely to lose that paramountcy in the foreseeable future. The world military balance is still largely unipolar with local variations and exceptions, particularly in north-east Asia. And this anomaly exists when waning Western political influence and the erratic US will to use her power thoroughly confuses the political calculus.

US President Donald Trump administration's transactional approach is resulting in the US effectively disengaging from the world, (witness the withdrawal from the Paris climate accord and Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement). An attempt at de-globalisation has begun, though one can argue that we are too interconnected for this to succeed except on the margins. US fatigue in maintaining the international order and providing global security and public goods opens political space for other countries like China to pursue their own interests and goals in the international system. At the very least, this has led to a fragmentation of international politics which is increasingly local and regional, and is no longer conducted within a broader international template such as the Cold War or, as immediately after the end of the Cold War, within the so-called rule-based liberal world order.

Added to this is the emergence of new domains such as cyber and outer space and their militarisation. Today, the commons in cyber and outer space, and the high seas are increasingly contested between the major powers, and traditional territorial and maritime disputes are back with a vengeance in the South China Sea and East China Sea.

It is, therefore, not surprising that states are reacting to the uncertainty caused by the new balance of power and political calculus by hedging, balancing and building up their own military and other capabilities.

## **2. Transformation of Domestic Politics around the World**

Among the consequences of the decades of globalisation have been the growing inequality within societies, fears of loss of identity and the diminishing capacity of the state or government to determine economic and social outcomes.

The diminishing capacity of the state to deliver high economic growth or to determine social outcomes, to manage new domains like cyber space or to set the political narrative has had a paradoxical result. In society after society since 2008, leaders have begun to promise more and more, presenting themselves as strong and capable of creating outcomes, claiming to be outsiders to the existing political establishment, and tapping into popular fears and xenophobia. In practice, they seek to centralise power, redefine globalisation to suit their own particular situations and rely on nationalism, sometimes, chauvinism, for their legitimacy. The popular pushback to globalisation includes a defence of identity and identity politics that enables the resort to a more aggressive nationalism.

Max Weber said that legitimacy comes from three sources: charisma, competence and the church, which for most of us today means religion or ideology. The new authoritarians rely on personal charisma for their legitimacy in politics. As a result, all these leaders also display an extreme sensitivity to criticism. None of them are institution builders since institutions could limit the personal nature of the power that they exercise. Since 2008, we have seen variations on this theme in Japan, China, India, Turkey, Russia and a host of states. Trump is only the latest example of the phenomenon of new authoritarian leaders.

Of course, not all new authoritarians are identical in their programmes. Both the Indian and Chinese leaderships support globalisation in a form which enables them to indulge their mercantilist instincts, protecting domestic industry while accessing world markets and commodities for their own transformation. The emerging economies have difficulties in agreeing on a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership among themselves in the Asia-Pacific while uniting against protectionism in the developed world in the World Trade Organization. Trump and some others in the West, on the other hand, would rather de-globalise the world economy and are doing so where they can.

Where the new authoritarians are all similar is in the centralisation of political power and the intrusive nature of the state apparatus that they are building. Given a choice between greater control and greater openness, all of them choose control. Stability and control are their domestic watchwords. China's President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign and controls on cyberspace, the media and academia resonate in India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's actions and controls in cyberspace, anti-corruption rhetoric and the slogan of a Congress-free India. Both are engaged in a search for global influence. One even suspects from recent actions a willingness to sacrifice some economic growth in the pursuit of political control and stability so long as the leader's direct link with and popularity among the masses is not affected. The populist base is strongly defended in every sphere, whether by internet trolls, fringe groups which now operate in the open with connivance, or by an obedient political party in the political and social space.

How does this affect international society? It does so in three ways. One, the capacity to negotiate, compromise, give and take and bargain that diplomacy requires is limited by the ultra-nationalist mantle these leaders assume. Secondly, foreign policy is used for domestic political purposes to a much greater extent, with foreign policy considerations playing second fiddle to how actions will appear to a domestic audience. Thirdly, the more the internal pressure, the harder the external line, and that dynamic seems to lead to the much more assertive China we have seen in recent years.

### **3. Revolutions in Technology, Energy and Economics**

The very nature of power and its exercise is changing due to technology. Human ingenuity is devising new uses for technology, and rapid revolutions in energy, artificial intelligence (AI), digital manufacturing, and information and communication technology (ICT) are transforming the landscape of politics.

This is most frequently analysed in the use of force by states. We have seen several revolutions in military affairs (RMA) proclaimed in the last 30 years. The actual course of combat has, however, deviated widely from what has been promised by these doctrines. What is common to many of these RMAs is the emphasis on asymmetric warfare and on the empowerment of small groups and individuals enabled by the new technologies. Interestingly, unlike the uses of nuclear energy and outer space which were the result of big science and, therefore, required

state support, the new ICT, AI and other technologies are largely held in private hands and are less the result of big science and large state investments than of individual innovation and enterprise facilitated by government effort. This makes regulating their use more complicated and guarantees that the technologies are available to most of those who wish to use them, irrespective of their good or bad intent.

The ICT revolution has seen the empowerment of small groups and individuals, giving them a reach and a voice and a new domain to use. The quickest to do so have been criminals and terrorists who find it useful for their communications, recruiting and propaganda, and as a domain in which to create damage whose psychological effect far outweighs any kinetic effect or consequence that they can produce. We have seen the use of social media as an effective recruiting tool by these groups, and an effective way to get their message out to society, while blurring the distinction between true and false in a virtual reality in the minds of their followers.

The most visible example in recent years of the growing capability and significance of non-state actors empowered by the new weapons and communications technologies is in west Asia in the rise of the Islamic State or ISIS/ Da'esh, with its claims to being a universal Caliphate. To the already volatile mix of weak state structures with oppressive autocratic regimes, Arab-Israeli disputes, the Palestinian question and unresolved internal political issues of identity and order, unrequited yearnings for democracy, the role of Islam in politics, and ethnic tension, the new technologies added disruptive enabling and force multiplying effects. Within a few years, the Muslim Brotherhood, which had spent years in the political wilderness, grasped political power in Egypt and Turkey, and was making determined bids in Syria and the Gulf states. That they were stymied by their traditional political foes, the military and Shia groups in Iraq, Syria and Egypt was to be expected. However, the attendant mayhem and serial political crises across the Maghreb and in West Asia were made possible and prolonged in part by the new communication and information technologies and the strength that they gave each group and even individuals to wreak damage, spread their message, recruit, communicate with followers, and to propagate their ideology. If we now see supporters of these extreme ideologies east of India as well, in Southeast Asia up to the Philippines, their message has been spread and amplified by the internet and social media.

Of course, the cyber domain is available to all groups. Political parties, states and governments have been quick to use cyber space for their own purposes. States have used the new

technologies as enablers to step up their contention in traditional domains and in the new domains as well. Apart from territorial and maritime disputes, we see contested commons in maritime and cyber space. However, in its overall effect, ICT has further limited the state's monopoly on violence, and has also reduced the state's influence on information and its ability to control the social and political narrative.

This is significant at a time when society and the economy have become much more complex and harder to manage, as individuals are untethered from traditional certainties by urbanisation and the pace of change. In society, ICT has moved the balance away from the authorities. Robert Gates, then-US Defence Secretary, was led to lament about Osama bin Laden, "How does one man in a cave out communicate us?"

The diminishing ability of the state to monopolise violence and control the social narrative is matched by a lesser ability to deliver economic outcomes in a post-globalisation world as states find traditional fiscal and other tools less and less effective. The limited utility to central bankers of interest rates to drive investment and savings since the 2008 crisis is only one example. The growth rates that an aspirational younger generation had grown to expect in the glory years of globalisation, with the jobs and prospects they brought, are now a thing of the past in all the major economies. It would be reasonable to expect a reversion to mean historical growth rates in the next decade or so in both the rapidly growing and re-emerging economies and in the traditional industrialised countries. That will only exacerbate the problem of expectations among the young.

In addition, the revolution in energy sources and availability that is presently underway, and the impact of AI and digital manufacturing on global supply and value-add chains will be considerable, overturning the present economics of manufacturing in basic ways, making it possible to produce much closer to market and further reducing the salience of labour, location and transport.

The energy revolution, particularly the use of shale oil and gas, and the increasing cost effectiveness of renewable energy are changing the geography of power. The US, having become a net exporter of energy, has less incentive to maintain political stability in West Asia and can now allow its perceived political interests, like preventing Iranian predominance in the region, to override its economic interest in the stability required to keep the oil flowing. Indeed,



as an energy exporter, the US has an interest in higher energy prices and the creation of a global gas market, so long as it can insulate domestic manufacturing from high global energy prices to stay competitive. China, on the other hand, having shifted to a net importer of crude oil and gas in the 1990s, has the opposite problem. As an energy importer, China has a growing interest in the political stability of West Asia and in low oil prices, but lacks the capacity to do much about it as a provider of security in the region other than to use its economic weight in global markets and build political influence with the region's regimes through arms sales and support in the United Nations. It would, therefore, not be surprising if we were to see China in the near future building capacity to intervene and secure its sources of energy while increasing its political and economic profile in the region. It has recently sent a small batch of troops to fight Uighur extremists in Syria.

The shifts in technology, energy and manufacturing, therefore, have political consequences within states and between them. We can no longer extrapolate the last 30 years of economic history to the future. Great changes will also open great opportunities for the quick and the ready, to leapfrog stages of development and to use the new technologies and situation. Whether this accelerates the present shift of economic power away from the West to Asia or arrests it is unclear. It certainly adds uncertainty to today's calculations, and adds an element of haste to the policies of those who see advantage in the present situation that might not be there tomorrow.

#### **4. New Security Agenda Issues**

As our world has become more interconnected, our security has also got more linked and our definition of security has expanded. The global supply, manufacturing and value chains that globalisation has produced also link our security across regions and the globe. Today, we have to worry about food, energy and water security, climate change and the environment, global pandemics, and other such threats which spread through the connectivity created by globalisation, have effects beyond national borders, and are beyond the capacity of any one state, no matter how powerful or isolated, to manage.

New technologies like ICT have created new domains. And we see contention in each of them – the maritime, cyber and outer space domains are all contested and increasingly militarised, not just by states but by non-state actors as well. The new technologies have made national

boundaries porous. The new security agenda issues like the environment or energy, counter-terrorism or pandemics, cyber and space security, all require cooperative and global solutions. None of them recognise national or sovereign boundaries, or sub-regional and continental borders. It, therefore, is useful think in larger continental terms when we consider how to deal with these challenges.

These are the reasons which suggest that we are in a new era, which is still nameless and looking for a name.

The third term in our topic is Asia – not ‘Asia-Pacific’ or ‘Indo-Pacific’ but Asia.

### **Why do we Speak of Asia when Western and Eastern Asia are so different?**

East and west of India, Asia seems to have two very different personalities. To the east are the fastest growing economies in the world, rapidly modernising, industrialising and urbanising, and strong Westphalian states. To the west, are economies that rely primarily on resource exploitation, mostly oil and gas, with fragmented traditional societies, fragile states under threat, and fractured politics. No western Asian economy figures in the top five Asian economies by GDP, in either nominal or PPP terms.

So different is the picture that when people outside India say Asia today, they no longer mean the whole continent.<sup>9</sup> In the US, ‘Asia’ used to mean east and south-eastern Asia, and now also includes India. In Southeast Asia as well, ‘Asia’ is often used to include eastern, south-eastern and, sometimes, southern Asia, without western Asia.

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<sup>9</sup> The irony is that pan-Asianism was killed not by foreigners seeking to divide and rule Asia but by Asians and their behaviour, using the banner of pan-Asianism to justify narrow national and imperialistic goals against their neighbours. However, that is another story.

This may have been a workable way of looking at things until recently. However, it is no longer so for several reasons. Asia, with 4.4 billion people (about 60 per cent of the world's population) in 49 states, increasingly drives global prosperity and affects global security:

- For one, globalisation has meant that the prosperity of eastern Asia is partly dependent upon and certainly can be threatened by western Asia.
- The spread of radical ideologies and terrorist groups, and their financing and inspiration from western Asia also affects the east today, as we see in the Philippines, southern Thailand, with the Rohingyas, and even in Indonesia and Malaysia.
- The new security issues, like climate change and the environment, energy, food and human security, pandemics, the disputed commons in cyber and outer space, and the high seas recognise no sub-regions like Asia-Pacific or western Asia. Indeed they demand and require collaborative global solutions, and, at least, consideration at the continental level.
- The Eurasian land-mass is being consolidated politically and economically in practice. China's plans for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will enhance that trend, strengthening connectivity, economic links and political ties across the sub-regions of Asia.

Let us consider western Asia and the Asia-Pacific in a little more detail.

### Western Asia

To India's west is a fragmented region where the politics of religion and identity are stronger than nationalism, where Westphalian state structures are often weaker than non-state or quasi-state actors, where politics have stymied the building of modern economies, and where ancient rivalries are played out with modern weapons, all with a very high level of involvement by outside powers.

Shia-Sunni rivalry is often over-stated as a driver of politics in the region since it offers outsiders a simple and easy explanation for what they do not understand and saves them the trouble of studying the complexities of local politics. It obscures the fact of alliances of

convenience between Sunni and Shia regimes and leaders throughout history, and the animosities within these categories that divide the faithful from their co-believers. However, there is a religious question at the heart of the politics of western Asia that other regions have either answered or finessed. That is whether religion takes precedence over reasons of state and, indeed, whether the state exists only to perform God's will, whatever that may be and by whomsoever defined. An Indian Muslim is an Indian first and is Muslim in his personal practice, not his citizenship. No western Asian state can make such an assertion or even give an unambiguous answer to these questions.

The issue goes beyond the use of religion as a source of legitimisation of leadership or state power. It is a question that has not been answered successfully in western Asia despite several different attempts to answer it, ranging from Ataturk's separation of Islam from the modern Turkish state (which lasted until a few years ago, longer than most such experiments) to the 1979 Iranian revolution's creation of a theological republic based on *velayat-e-faqih* (or guardianship of Islamic jurists), to the Saudi example of rule after conquest through alliance by a ruling family with Wahhabi clerics, and multiple variations in between.

None of these have provided a stable basis for political and economic progress. The one that has come closest has been the Iranian experiment which, within a shifted framework, came about relatively peacefully, and which, of all the political dispensations in western Asia, allows the greatest degree of freedom to women and the most say to the populace in the choice of leaders. The 1979 Iranian revolution posed a fundamental challenge to neighbouring autocratic Arab regimes which rule over large Shia populations and to continued Western control of the sources of oil. The Iranian republic has, therefore, been under sustained military attack or other forms of pressure throughout its existence. It would hardly be surprising if some Iranian leaders today were paranoid. Indeed, what is surprising is the fact that there are 'reformists' among Iran's leaders with a considerable popular following who are still willing to enter into agreements on their nuclear programme with the West and who look to the West rather than to Asia. To my mind that is proof of the fundamental pragmatism of Persian statecraft, a pragmatism honed by millennia of practice, and not much evident in the rest of the region.

Because the fundamental question of religion and politics is unresolved, states in western Asia are fragile and often weaker than non-state actors, particularly those that claim religious legitimacy like the Islamic State/Da'esh or Caliphate or groups that combine religious authority

with armed power like Al-Qaeda. The overlay of ancient rivalries and the patchwork of minorities who straddle state frontiers further weaken the authority of the state and add to the fractious nature of the region's politics. Take the Kurds, for instance, who straddle Iran, Turkey and Iraq; or Shia populations under Sunni rule in Iraq, Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia; or the absence of a clear majority in artificially created states like Lebanon.

This phenomenon is what provides a justification for the outsize political role of militaries in the state structures of western Asia – militaries that have also often been the main instrument used by outside powers to manage and interfere in the politics of the region.

The history of outside interference in the region's politics, has been prompted by its rich oil resources, its proximity to Europe, the former centre of gravity of world politics in the Cold War, and by great power rivalry ever since the Ottoman Empire began showing signs of weakness. Fractured internal politics gave outside powers proxies to work with, and this became even more pronounced after the creation of Israel. State boundaries were drawn arbitrarily by Western powers after World War One and these have remained the nominal boundaries because of the fragmented politics of the region. Baathists and Arab nationalists tried but failed to offer a secular alternative to these boundaries. Wahhabis, Muslim Brotherhood and other religious groups denounce and ignore them. In practice, these boundaries mean less and less since they reflect neither the distribution of power, of religion, of language, or ethnicities, nor any incipient sense of nationalism that has to compete with all these other claims on identity. Today, even the states produced by these boundaries violate them with impunity across the whole region as we see in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

This tradition of outside interference and the cocktail of fragilities can together explain most of what we see in the region today: the dismemberment of Syria; the dismantling of Libya; the consolidation of army rule in Egypt; the failed Turkish attempt to use the Muslim Brotherhood to extend its reach into the internal politics of the region; the rivalry between the larger regional successors to ancient empires, Turkey, Iran and Egypt; the Saudi attempt to organise a united Arab front against Iran and to fight it in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon; and so on.

With the elimination of Iraq from the regional geopolitical equation after the first Gulf War in 1990-91, Iran's natural pre-eminence began to assert itself in the region and was subsequently furthered by the US invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring. Today, Iran has influence in a belt

stretching across the region from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean and through the Persian Gulf, helped by the internal weakness of regimes that oppose it. Iran's Sunni Arab monarchist opponents rely on terrorist and extremist groups to do so in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere and upon an alliance with Israel, with US backing. What is presented as a Shia-Sunni conflict is simply an attempt, supported by the West, to prevent Iranian predominance from manifesting itself. For proof, one simply needs try a mental experiment comparing the strengths and statecraft of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the leader of the anti-Iranian coalition. Which would we rationally bet on?

For India, this situation generates a series of concerns. Its security has always been intimately linked to what occurs in western Asia, and even more so since the coming to Kozhikode in 1498 of Vasco da Gama, (1469-1524, d Kochi, India). That era is now ending after five centuries, and eastern Asia is, once again, more important to India's future prosperity than the west. However, India's security and defensive interests in western Asia remain. Over seven million Indians live and work in the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia, more than 63 per cent of India's crude oil imports come from the region, and we risk the spread of radical or political Islam to India from western Asia, which is already the major funder and inspiration for jihadi terrorist groups in India after Pakistan. India, therefore, has no option but to be engaged in the region and to work with all those who will cooperate against radicalism and terrorism, finding partners where it can. India has also begun to become a provider of security, particularly maritime security, as in the successful elimination of piracy off the Horn of Africa since 2007. India's economic and security interests demand that it works with all the powers in the region, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council, Iran and Turkey. As the West's ability to guarantee order and security diminishes, India will have to engage more in the region.

### Asia-Pacific

Looking east from India, one sees a region of economic dynamism and strong states, with whom India's ties have grown in the last 30 years since India's Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao announced the 'Look-East' policy in April 1992 in Japan, which has now morphed into the 'Act-East' policy.

And yet, the picture to India's east is not an unmixed one. On the one hand, the Asia-Pacific has seen the greatest and fastest improvement in human welfare, taking more people out of

poverty than ever before in history. Objectively speaking, a higher proportion of people in southern and eastern Asia are living longer, healthier and better lives than any generation before them. And yet, at the same time, their aspirations have grown, they make demands of their leaders that are higher than ever before, and their governments are less confident of the future than before. There is a mismatch between their individual lives and the geopolitics around them.

Despite their great economic progress, the behaviour of eastern Asian states displays all the signs of insecurity, or a perception that they are less secure and face uncertainty. That now imperils their future prosperity.

The last two decades have seen the world's and history's greatest arms race ever in the region, led by China's military modernisation and with other countries not far behind. This is clearest in the pattern of naval buildups through the Asia-Pacific, where offensive weapons such as submarines and missiles, and power projection instruments like aircraft carriers, are now platforms of choice for China, Vietnam, India, Japan and others.

Another sign is the return of traditional geopolitics in balancing behaviour by all the states in the region. Internal balancing is evident in the military buildups. Other steps to strengthen countries abound. New military and maritime doctrines have been announced by several countries in recent years. External balancing is clear from the increased frequency and scope of defence, intelligence and security exchanges between India, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Australia. The navies of India-Japan-US-Australia exercise together in the Indian Ocean and the seas near China.

Thirdly, disputes and flash-points are alive again from Korea to the East China Sea and the South China Sea. We are hearing threats about Taiwan again.

The consequence of such behaviour by states seeking to enhance their security is actually destabilising. Paradoxically, their individual search for security only increases uncertainty. In their search for security, they actually contribute to a sense of insecurity in other states and have created classical security dilemmas across the region. Security dilemmas now are evident between China and Japan, China and India, India and Pakistan, China and Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey and Israel, and other pairs, where actions taken by one party in what

it regards as legitimate self defence provokes the other to respond with matching or countervailing actions, setting up a cycle of escalation in which both sides feel increasingly insecure and forced to respond.

Asia is now a crowded geopolitical space that is changing at historically unprecedented rates in terms of speed and scale.

We had started by saying that the pictures to India's west and east look quite different but that, at the same time, today west and east are being linked in many ways. (In such contradictions lie the joys of real-life politics.) One of the ways in which western Asia will be further linked to eastern Asia is the consolidation of infrastructure, connectivity, trade and investment through central Asia that China's BRI seeks to build. China's order building activities – the BRI, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Renminbi internationalisation, leadership of globalisation with Chinese characteristics, and independent security commitments abroad – are consolidating the Eurasian landmass and building a new order from the bottom up. How regional powers react to China's attempt to consolidate the Eurasian landmass will bear watching, for this amounts to an attempt to organise their neighbourhood under new auspices. No previous attempt to organise western Asia has been entirely successful or smooth or without bloodshed. It would be remarkable if the BRI were to fare differently. In Eastern Europe as well, we now see a more activist Chinese engagement as in the '16 plus 1' meeting called by China to bring together 16 east and central European countries from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. The exclusion of Russia and Germany from the meeting itself tells a tale, for such activism runs up against the Russian and German self-image of their role in a region that has been critical to their security throughout history.

Western and eastern Asia are also being united in another way – by the spread of radical Islamic ideology from western Asia to south and southeast Asia. Radical political Islam is rising in southern Thailand, Indonesia and militant versions in the Philippines. Much of this had leapfrogged India, until the polarisation of politics in India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Kampuchea and elsewhere through the 'semiticisation' and radicalisation of political Hinduism and Buddhism. The Rohingyas pose this problem most directly to India and the region. The argument of which came first – radical Islam, radical Hinduism or radical Buddhism – will never be settled by the proponents of these cults.



## **The Search for Ideas and a New Order**

This look at eastern and western Asia suggests that the present so-called liberal international order has lost the capacity to deliver security and prosperity in Asia. Today neither the traditional dominance of the US' "hub-and-spokes" alliance system as a provider of security in the Asia-Pacific, nor a potential China-US understanding or G-2, can settle, calm or manage issues like the North Korea nuclear weapons programme, the consequences of the return of geopolitics, the arms buildup, territorial and maritime disputes and flash points like the south China sea, or the balancing behaviour that we see in the Asia-Pacific. In western Asia, we only have to list Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen to prove the same point. Equally in doubt is the order's ability to continue to provide global public goods such as freedom of navigation on the high seas from the western Pacific to the Mediterranean, to secure cyber and outer space, or to prevent the fragmentation of the world economy. The present order can no longer deliver security in Asia.

It is, therefore, not surprising that we are groping for concepts and ideas on how to cope with this situation. We are between orders, when the old order is broken but the new one is yet to be born.

This explains the currency of new terms like the 'Indo-Pacific' and the coming together of new groupings such as the 'Quad' (of the US, Japan, India and Australia, which has been revived this year after initial meetings in 2007-8). As a description of the security situation, the term Indo-Pacific is far from satisfactory. The western Pacific is a US lake, the seas near China are enclosed and contested, and the Indian Ocean is an open maritime region that no single power can dominate – even Britain at the height of pax Britannica never controlled all its choke-points simultaneously. So the concept is dangerously out of touch with reality if it suggests that there is a one-size-fits-all security solution for these contiguous expanses of water. But the concept could have its uses if we think of it differently. As we have seen, security is increasingly linked across a much broader region in Asia, and maritime security is certainly indivisible across the oceans girdling Asia. If the term Indo-Pacific is a means to signal consideration of the new security issues and a larger architecture in the region from India to the western Pacific, then it could be useful. Such a forum already exists, thanks to the foresight of the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in the East Asia Summit (EAS), a leaders' forum which needs to turn its mind to the security of our extended region.

It would seem logical that as China seeks to take centre stage and play a greater role in the region and the world, it should work with other powers who share a desire to improve the world order and to concentrate on the economic betterment of their own people. This would require not just the fact of bilateral economic cooperation but addressing the sources of the sense of insecurity in the Asia-Pacific.

Asia faces two possible geopolitical futures. One is of sub-regional orders centred on one power. The other is of an open, inclusive, multipolar concert of powers or security architecture. In western Asia, a monopolistic order could hypothetically be centred on the US or one of the three regional powers – Iran, Egypt or Turkey. In the Asia-Pacific, the obvious candidates are the US and China. However, an order centred on one power in either the Asia-Pacific or western Asia would be unstable and would not reflect the present or likely balance of power, and, history shows, has difficulties being rule-based or legitimated. On the other hand, multipolar orders in western Asia and Asia-Pacific, differently designed to deal with the different issues facing each sub-region, would be relatively stable. Asia's own past of coexisting multiverses and the history of the concert of Europe suggest that. Multipolar orders would reflect the economic multi-polarity of Asia that has emerged in the last 20 years. They would be a natural evolution from the US-led order that has enabled Asian security and prosperity in the recent past. In sum, they would reflect the existing balance of power in the sub-regions and their likely future evolution, and would, therefore, be more likely to succeed.

It will not be easy to build multipolar, open and inclusive security orders in Asia, given mutual suspicions and the ambitions of the great powers, even though it is clearly in their best interest. It requires recognition by the major powers that this is a desirable goal, and that the attempt to build it would have value in itself. The quest itself would be a significant confidence building measure, and would change the framing of several issues and hotspots from zero-sum to positive-sum. We, therefore, hope that is the path that we choose to take.

It is in helping us to do so that ASEAN can play a significant bridging role. It was ASEAN's initiative that set up the EAS and the forums that we have presently to discuss security issues like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum. ASEAN

could use her convening power to bring the Asia-Pacific states together, to discuss the security issues that we have mentioned, such as military doctrines and buildups, crisis management, maritime security, cyber security, and the new security agenda, possibly under the auspices of the EAS. As the present Chair of ASEAN, it would be Singapore, with her wealth of experience, who would guide the process.

## **Features of the New Era**

The description of a contradictory and uncertain world that we have seen so far must raise questions about where it is going. Unfortunately, any analysis of the present geopolitics of Asia can only be fragmented, inconsistent and inconclusive. That is because we are betwixt and between eras, when the old order no longer works and does not reflect the balance of power, but the new one is not yet evident except in bits.

Despite this underlying uncertainty, one can try and describe the features of the present, new era as they appear, in the knowledge that this too will pass in time.

We are watching a geopolitical decoupling or the fragmentation of the world system. During the Cold War, Europe was central to global affairs, and all crises were linked to or dealt with in the framework of bipolar rivalry, only differing in the degree of interest of the superpowers. Europe is now a regional side-show, having lost the geopolitical centrality it enjoyed in the Cold War. Today, a crisis in the Baltic, Ukraine or Crimea is important to Europe, the US and Russia, but is not a significant risk to the rest of the world, or to the emerging markets. Powers like India and China can sit quiet on Ukraine. A North Korean nuclear crisis, on the other hand, today involves major powers and affects the global balance and global risk. While the centre of gravity of world geopolitics has shifted to the Asia-Pacific, at the same time, the east has been effectively decoupled from the west, the Asia-Pacific from Europe in terms of geopolitics. The Trump administration is trying to decouple the US from the world. (With what success remains to be seen.)

The paradox is that this localisation and fragmentation of politics and security within and between states has occurred when science, technology and globalisation have linked economic

and social fates across regions, and when all the new challenges (environment and energy, terrorism and radicalism, cyber security, etc.) require cooperative solutions across national boundaries, regions and sectors.

In other words, the decoupling of politics and security works against the economic integration that globalisation has brought about, and against China's attempt to consolidate the Eurasian landmass.

We are between two orders, heading, I believe, for multi-polarity. We are possibly reverting to the historical norm in Asia, which is a set of multiverses, within which north-eastern Asia, the Indian Ocean Rim, Southeast Asia, America and Europe live separate political and regional security lives, while interacting intensely with each other economically, technologically and in culture and innovation. This may sound paradoxical but is possible, and has indeed been a familiar pattern through much of recorded Asian history. Politics and security are local, while economics, science and religion/culture/ideology are global. What that means for us, and our ability or inability to deal with the issues of the day, would require a doctoral thesis on its own.

## **Conclusion**

One can hold out little comfort to those who wish the world to return to the trajectory it was on before 2008. There is no going back and the future is uncertain. However, that does not mean that the future is without hope. We live in a time of challenges which, paradoxically, is also an amazing time. More people live better, longer, healthier, more prosperous lives than at any time in human history. Geopolitical problems are man-made and should not be beyond human ingenuity to solve. The same technologies whose effects challenge us provide the means to us to deal with those challenges. Mankind has always met previous challenges. One can only hope that will happen again.

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