

Asia: A Geopolitical Reconfiguration

By Barry Buzan

Abstract: The Asian “supercomplex” has taken shape: this is evident within the cross-membership model to Asian intergovernmental organizations and through the appearance of political counterweights to China, particularly in India. The United States’ engagements in East and South Asia are also part of this supercomplex. The hardening of Beijing since 2008 has helped maintain US influence in Asia, despite Washington’s decline on the international stage.

Almost one decade ago Ole Wæver and I wrote *Regions and Powers (RaP)*. Its core concept was the *regional security complex (RSC)*, defined as a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another. *Securitization* is understood as the discursive process through which an understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat.

At the time we treated East Asia and South Asia as separate RSCs with distinct histories and dynamics. We saw Southeast and Northeast Asia as having merged during the 1990s to make a single East Asian RSC whose relations were partly conflict formation and partly security regime, mediated by a shared commitment to a degree of economic liberalism and joint development. East Asia was unusual both in containing two great powers, and in having institutions led by the smaller powers because both great powers had legitimacy problems as leaders. The US played a strong and durable intervening role in this RSC. In South Asia we saw an RSC more purely in conflict formation mode, with a deep and ongoing antagonism between India and Pakistan, and a steady drift towards unipolarity as India’s economic and military weight increased and Pakistan remained mired in deepening political instability. There was little economic linkage among the South Asian states, and India seemed more interested in its standing outside South Asia than within it. The US also played a role in South Asia, but this was neither as consistent nor as deep as

its role in East Asia. We noted significant connections between the South and East Asian RSCs in terms of longstanding Sino-Indian border disputes, China's support for Pakistan, particularly in helping to make Pakistan a nuclear weapon state, and rivalry for influence in Burma.

We argued that the ongoing rise of China might be beginning to create a tripolar *supercomplex* linking South and East Asia, but that this was at best emergent rather than existing (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 101-3). A supercomplex is understood as a set of RSCs within which the presence of one or more great powers generates relatively high and consistent levels of interregional security dynamics. India was operating more on an all-Asia scale in a context increasingly defined by the rise of China. It felt less threatened by its neighbors, and more able to pursue its 'Look East' policy by becoming active economically and strategically in East Asia (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 118-22). There were early signs of India-Japan strategic links (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 175). In this context, Burma was judged still to be an insulator, but 'looks increasingly like succumbing to the dynamics of the Asian supercomplex' (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 486). All Asian states were having to position themselves in relation to an emergent rivalry between the US and China. The general pattern in this game was to avoid becoming too entangled with either against the other, and to try to reap individual advantage by playing both against each other. This pattern was increasingly shaping the external penetration by the US into both the individual RSCs in Asia, and the Asian supercomplex as a whole (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 180-82).

It is this emergent supercomplex that I want to take up in this article. I argue that reactions to the ongoing rise of China have now generated a weak but definite Asian supercomplex. This trend is being reinforced both by China's turn to a harder line policy since 2008, and by increased US linkage of its role as an intervening external power in South and East Asia.

In thinking about the geopolitical reconstruction of Asia there are five key trends defining the past decade: the ongoing rise of China and India, the weakening of the US, the ongoing contest over defining an Asian regional identity, and the emergence of balancing against China. I will discuss the three big powers in this section, and the other two trends in their own sections.

China, India and the US

The statistics on the material rise of China are well known and I will not rehearse them here. The rise of China's material capability is obvious and impressive, and so is the justified pride that most Chinese feel about their accomplishment. That pride, however, seems to be feeding two contradictory sentiments. On the one hand, there is a rising internationalism and sense of positive engagement

with the rest of the world. On the other hand, there is a narrow, power-political strand of nationalism, which is very vocal about wanting China to use its new power to assert its status and territorial claims, and takes an exploitative attitude towards its economic engagements. So there is one rising China that seems to want to join the existing international society and work within to reform it, and another that seems much less comfortable with the existing international society, and has a rather old-fashioned and self-fulfilling realist view of how great powers should behave. This split personality generates radically different assessments of the nature of China's rise, from quite benign (Beeson and Li, 2012) to quite threatening (Rozman, 2011).

The question is how the two strands now evident in China's society and politics will play out both within China and in its relations with Asian and global international society. China's divided self is all too apparent to outside observers of its behavior. There is much on the positive side. China has done a good job of integrating itself with the ASEAN-led East Asian regional institutions. It has taken leading roles in other regional level institutions, most notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Six Party Talks. It has pursued free trade arrangements with its Southeast Asian neighbors, and is generally viewed as having behaved responsibly in financial matters during and after the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s. It has moved its difficult relationship with Taiwan to a more peaceful footing. Globally it has developed a significant role in peacekeeping operations, played a role in anti-piracy operations off Somalia, and joined the World Trade Organization. China's trade and investment is welcomed in many places, and like Japan before it, China has done a stabilizing deal with the US by buying US treasuries in exchange for access to the US market for its exports.

But there is also much on the negative side. It has flaunted its rising military capabilities, and taken a harsh line internally against any perceived challenges, whether from liberal elements in Chinese society, or from non-Han peoples in Tibet and Xinjiang. China's relationship with Japan remains bad, with the history problem still festering between them, anti-Japanese sentiments prominent in Chinese society, and minor territorial and boundary disputes cultivated as ongoing irritants (Buzan, 2010: 26-9; Moon, 2011). China's aggressive pursuit of territorial claims in the East and South China Seas and against India also triggers alarm, as does its nuclear aid to Pakistan. At the global level China has conspicuously prevented Japan and others from gaining status commensurate with their power in the UN Security Council (Ladwig, 2009: 99; Ren, 2009: 313, 319). On some global issues, perhaps most notably global warming, China has followed the US in taking a narrowly self-interested position and refusing either to lead or to accept the leadership of others. It is as yet unclear how the current global economic crisis will affect China's position in the world economy, but the government's ongoing support for state-owned organizations in

the commanding heights of the economy suggests a worrying strengthening of economic nationalism.

These negative behaviors have a corrosive effect on claims about peaceful rise, or harmonious relations, or being a *status quo* power, making them look like bland propaganda at best, or intent to deceive at worst. This effect is amplified by the seeming correlation between a more aggressive turn in rising China's behavior on the one hand, and the palpable weakening of the US and Western position since 2008 on the other. This correlation fits perfectly with the realist prediction about rising powers becoming more assertive and aggressive in relation to the *status quo* as they gain in relative strength. And since realist thinking is influential within many countries, not only in academic circles but also policy-making ones, this all adds to fear and uncertainty about the rise of China. If China's assertiveness is indeed about taking advantage of a weakened US, and if the reality of US decline is accepted, then China's neighbors face difficult choices. To the extent that a more bullying China frightens its many neighbors, it will be harder for India to avoid entanglement in the game of balance against China, with or without the US.

I have argued that while China's peaceful rise could succeed, it would not be easy: China would need to conduct a very careful and self-restrained foreign policy towards its neighbors (Buzan, 2010). The necessary level of care and restraint does not appear to be happening, and the current pattern could all too easily take on a momentum of its own that would vindicate the realist prediction regardless of the reason. If peaceful rise fails, this failure will play strongly into the now linked development of the Asian supercomplex and the unfolding of US-China relations.

India's rise is so far less spectacular and less advanced than China's, but the consistency of its economic growth has been sufficient to register as a key trend. India increasingly looks beyond South Asia to define its role and status. Since India is a democracy, its rise has not triggered the same Western concerns as China's, though that said, the Indian giant is perceived as threatening by some of its immediate neighbors, most obviously Pakistan. India's desire to be accepted as a great power at the global level has made substantial advances on the basis of closer ties to the US. Its status as a nuclear weapon state has been substantially resolved by its nuclear deal with the US, and this has reinforced its claim to recognition as a great power (Pant, 2009: 276). To the extent that India is able to back up its claim to be the dominant local power in the Indian Ocean this would also reinforce its global great power claims as a state that has sustained and significant economic, political and military influence in more than one region. China is sensitive to India's naval development, and has begun to accord India great power status (Saalman, 2011: 90, 99. For a more skeptical view of India as a great power see Narlikar, 2011). At the very least, and so long as India is able to sustain robust economic growth, it should be able to trade to

advantage, as China has done for a long time, on expectations about its future prospects.

While China and India are part of the 'rise of the rest' (Zakaria, 2009), the US story is part of the decline of the West. Declinism is a periodically fashionable story about the US, with notable rounds in the early 1970s and the late 1980s. The present round hinges on the economic crisis starting in 2008, and the accompanying collapse in the legitimacy of the Washington consensus. Before that the Bush administration's unilateralist preferences, and its behavior in the global war on terror, weakened its legitimacy as a leader in international society. It also left the sole superpower mired in and preoccupied by long, costly and arguably largely counterproductive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But while the global standing of the US was in decline, its role in both East and South Asia as external ring-holder became stronger. In Asia, China's rise, and its more bullying attitude towards most of its neighbors, served to bolster the US's position. The US continued the strengthening of its ties with India begun during the late 1990s (Paul 2010: 17-18), and its alliances with Japan and Australia grew firmer.

The Contest over Asian Regionalism

An interesting indicator of both the rising linkage between South and East Asia, and the troubled question of Asia's regional identity, can be observed in the patterns of cross memberships of various Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs). This is especially so since the boom in such institutions that began during the 1990s. As Pempel (2010: 211) observes, East Asia differs from other regions in having multiple, discrete IGOs rather than one more or less dominant one. There is no regional IGO that contains all the states of 'geographical' East Asia. As Goh and Acharya (2007:7) note, this distinctive East Asian format embodies what they call 'institution-racing', in which struggles over who is to be a member of which IGO or group express competing views about both what the region should be and how it should relate to Western-global international society.

ASEAN-plus-3 (APT) and its various associated bodies come closest to expressing East Asia, but exclude North Korea and Taiwan. ASEAN originally differentiated Southeast from Northeast Asia, but since the 1990s has been busily knitting them together. Northeast Asia was always notable for its lack of any regional IGO, although since 2008 a China, Japan, South Korea summit meeting independent of APT has emerged (Pempel, 2010: 229). As of the fourth summit in 2011, however, this arrangement had accomplished little other than its own continuance, having been pushed to the margins by deteriorating relations between China and both South Korea and Japan (Rozman, 2011: 308-11).

The East Asian Summit (EAS) was intended by China to have an East Asian integrating focus, but after lobbying by Japan, ended up with a membership expanding well beyond East Asia (Goh, forthcoming; see also Ren, 2009: 313, 319 on China's opposition to inclusion of non-East Asian members in EAS). There has been quite fierce rivalry between Beijing and Tokyo to influence both the creation and membership of regional IGOs advantageous to their view of both what the region should be and how it should relate to the Western-global international society (Goh, forthcoming).

At the risk of some oversimplification, it might be argued that China generally prefers narrower East Asian regional IGOs in which it can more easily bring its preponderance to bear. Chinese policy could be read as an extension of the typical great power preference for bilateralism: wanting China to be the big player in a variety of individual regional IGOs while keeping them separate from each other. China is fully aware of the need to moderate its threat image amongst its neighbors, and also of the dangers of a too intense leadership rivalry with Japan. But while it serves these goals by accepting ASEAN leadership it still prefers a core East Asia region, supplemented by 'open regionalism' such as EAS and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Ren, 2009: 317-19). India and Japan can help each other in the IGO membership games both regionally, and globally regarding their shared desire for seats on the UN Security Council. Japan, and also many in ASEAN, want to bring India and others in, both to dilute Chinese influence and to create stronger links to the Western-global core.

The lack of any inclusive core IGO for East Asia, and the formula of partial and overlapping IGOs seen there, sets the pattern for the remarkable array of IGOs that both surround East Asia and link its various states to different parts of a much wider neighborhood. In many cases these IGOs link East Asian states to specific neighboring regions. In some they link East Asian states to the Western-global level of international society. A quick survey suggests not only how widely this pattern extends, but also how extensive are the linkages across regions that it creates.

Stretching north are the Six Party Talks (SPT) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SPT comprises the US, Russia, Japan, North Korea, South Korea and China, and grew out of the attempt to contain North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Although SPT is centred on a Northeast Asian problem, it ties in both Russia and the US as key members. The SCO members are China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Mongolia and Turkmenistan are observers (Pempel, 2010: 227-8). SCO excludes the US, but again brings in Russia, and links China to Central Asia. The observers create cross links to South Asia and the Middle East.

Stretching east and south across the Pacific is the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) linking most of the East Asian states to North America, Australasia and parts of Latin America. This pattern is complemented by various triangle bodies extending US bilateral security arrangements: the US, Japan and South Korea Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG); something similar among the US, Australia and Japan (Pempel, 2010: 223-24); and more recently a China, Japan, US summit meeting (Pempel, 2010: 230). This again ties the US into the region, and raises questions about whether Australasia should be seen as part of East Asia or an outpost of the Western-global core. A recent addition to this pacific panoply is The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), linking Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the US and Vietnam, possibly with the addition of Canada, Japan, and Mexico, in pursuit of a free trade pact. If this grouping can actually achieve a deep free-trade agreement it would become quite significant, but as yet it is too early to tell how things will develop. If it continues to exclude China it could become part of US-led balancing arrangements against the rise of China. If it eventually includes China it would still work against China's attempts to construct a narrower East Asian region that it could dominate more easily. Or it could become another hollow multilateral arrangement of little significance.

Stretching south and west into the Indian Ocean is a counterpoint to India and Pakistan being observers in SCO: China, Japan, South Korea, Burma and Australia are observers in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which comprises all of the states in South Asia (Bailes, 2007: 3, 10).

Linking more or less to the global level, while at the same time reinforcing the inter-regional linkages already noted, are the ARF and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The ARF links most of the East Asian states to South Asia, Australasia, North America, Russia and the EU. The EAS likewise includes Australia, New Zealand, India, Russia and the US.

The picture that emerges from all of this is a far-reaching array of overlapping circles linking East and South Asia both to each other and to Russia and the West. Increasingly, South Asian states participate in East Asian IGOs and *vice versa*, with many of these IGOs also being open to non-Asian states. In the end, these widespread and extensive cross linkages tend to dilute or even dissolve the significance of the regional level. The idea of an 'Indo-Pacific region' sometimes mooted by the Obama administration, is so vast as to make a nonsense of the concept of 'region'. As I have argued elsewhere, this fits with a longstanding and very clever anti-regional diplomatic tactic of the US (Buzan, 1998: 84-5). By defining itself as part of various super-regions (the Atlantic, Asia-Pacific, the Americas) the US both legitimizes its intrusions into them and gives itself leverage against the formation of regional groups that exclude it (respectively Europe, East Asia, Latin America). This pattern is

repeated if one looks more narrowly at strategic balancing behavior, the two being related aspects of the Asian supercomplex.

The Emergence of Balancing

To the pleasure of hawks in Washington, several of China's neighbors are beginning to fear that China's recent shift to a more bullying posture on territorial disputes and its own domestic politics is a harbinger of worse to come. Japan and India's fear of a rising, aggressive China, as well as that of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Australia, strengthens US alliances and makes Washington's political position in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean much easier to manage. India and several Southeast Asian states increasingly look more to each other and Japan, as well as to the US, to balance the threat they see from China. This diplomatic and strategic gift from China's hardliners to the US greatly facilitated the recent US policy shift of 'returning to Asia' as a core focus for US security policy.

The key to greater strategic interaction between South and East Asia is how the rise of India and China play both into each other and into the existing set of US alliances and engagements in Asia. There is now quite a lot of evidence for the building up of a definite, if still quite low key, strategic interaction (rivals rather than enemies) between India and China. This is played out both directly, across their shared (and still hotly disputed) border and river systems (IISS, 2010: 311-13), and indirectly in the competing engagements of both in each other's home regions. Rehman (2009) and Scott (2008), see a game of containment and counter-containment and security dilemma spirals, between them. Realists in India and China worry about each other generally as rising powers headed for inevitable rivalry, and feed this with particulars about border disputes, nuclear weapons, naval rivalry, economic relations and international status. China has become more active in South Asia in Pakistan, Burma and Sri Lanka (Paul 2010: 17-18), distracting India by giving support to its neighbors. China tries to lock India out of East Asian IGOs and the UNSC (Ladwig 2009: 99; Ren, 2009: 313, 319). It also aims to project its military presence into the Indian Ocean, not least by building port and transportation infrastructure in Pakistan, Burma and Sri Lanka which are overtly for economic trade and development, but which could also have military implications in supporting China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean (Ladwig, 2009: 88-90). Sino-Indian trade has increased substantially, but the implications of this are unclear. Nayar (2010: 108) argues that growing Sino-Indian trade reduces China's incentive to foster anti-Indian hostility in South Asia. But it is difficult to see this impact in China's ongoing behavior towards India (the heating up of border disputes) and other South Asian states (the selling of nuclear reactors to Pakistan). Like the US, India remains cautious about the penetration of Chinese capital into

sensitive industries such as power and communication (IISS, 2010: 313).

India's main counter-balance against China is the creation of a closer relationship with the US since 2000, one fruit of which has been recognition of India's nuclear status (Pant, 2009). But in playing the US card, India wants to avoid entrapment in the US-China rivalry. India also has ambitious, if slow moving, plans to build armed forces, including a three carrier blue-water navy, to back up its presence as the major local power in the Indian Ocean (Ladwig, 2009: 90-93; IISS, 2009). India's 'Look East' policy was at first mainly about engaging with the economic dynamism of East Asia, but it has evolved into more full-spectrum engagement. India competes with China for influence in Burma, and cultivates a close (and longstanding) friendship with Vietnam, hoping to parallel China's influence in Pakistan (Rehman, 2009: 132-3). In Southeast Asia India also cultivates good relations with Singapore and Indonesia. The Indian navy is a regular visitor to Southeast Asian waters and conducts joint exercises with its friends there, who quietly welcome India's engagement with Southeast Asia as helping to balance the Chinese presence (Ladwig, 2009: 93-8). India seems also to be becoming a player in seabed resource extraction in the South China Sea in areas that are contested between China and the other littoral states of that Sea.

From around 2000, India has improved its relationship with Japan, culminating in a joint 'Security Declaration' in 2008. This unprecedented relationship is mainly political, quite vague, and is not backed up by either military commitments or by a strong economic relationship (Brewster, 2010: 98-105, 114-5). That said, the Indian navy has extended its reach north from the South China Sea to make visits to Japan and South Korea, both fellow Asian democracies (Ladwig, 2009: 98-101). India is keen to get access to the technologies for defence against ballistic missiles (BMD), and Japan (as well as the US) is a possible source for this (Brewster, 2010: 111-13; Scott 2008: 255). Both India and Japan are hedging between the US and China. By 2007 there were clear enough signs of a democratic axis in Asia among the US, India, Japan and Australia to irk the Chinese (Rehman 2009: 134-6; Brewster 2010: 95-8). By quietly playing its democracy card in the greater Asia region India can associate itself with the US alliance system there without accepting binding entanglements.

It is these increasing political, military and to a lesser extent economic linkages between South and East Asia that underpin the new Asian supercomplex. Russia is on the edges of it and since the implosion of the Soviet Union is too weak to make much impact on the main dynamics. Its marginality is likely to increase as the more successfully capitalist Asian states outpace it in growth and development. Some long-standing time-bombs remain, most obviously the unresolved situations between China and Taiwan, and between the two Koreas, and the endless hostility between India and

Pakistan. China has for long played into the India-Pakistan game, and that is one of the links defining the supercomplex. India has wisely showed no sign of getting involved in either the Korean or China-Taiwan issues, and will probably continue to steer clear of them. Either of these two could flare up, but they don't play strongly into the supercomplex dynamics that are the focus of this article.

Conclusions

All of this certainly seems sufficient to make the case that a thin but significant Asian supercomplex is now in operation, rather than as in *RaP* merely being emergent. East and South Asia are increasingly tied together in political and security terms, and India and China are clearly in a sustained and conscious strategic interaction. China is stronger than India, and feels less threatened by India than the other way around (Scott 2008: 248-9). It has a longer-standing and deeper-rooted position in South Asia than India has in East Asia. But India has the advantage of the US as a friend, while China, for all its rising strength, has no great power friends. And just as India's neighbors welcome China into South Asia, the Southeast Asian states, Japan and South Korea softly encourage India's engagement in China's home region, as, no doubt, does Washington. Nearly all the states in South and East Asia are hedging against the rise of China, and a US-backed coalition stretching from Japan to India by way of Vietnam and Australia is already visible in shadow form.

If China's rise continues in its post-2008 track, then this coalition will become more visible and palpable. China's Asian neighbors will seek to hedge against Chinese pressure both by increasing their own military strength and cooperation, and by seeking backing from Washington. Any threat of general regional war will be kept low by fears of nuclear weapons, by the presence of the US, and by the need acknowledged by all to keep the regional and global economy going for the sake of their own development. In East Asia, economic interdependence is a well-established constraint on letting political disputes get out of hand, and unless there are some very dramatic changes of policy this seems likely to remain the case. The economic moderator is still much less present in South Asia, and weak between South Asia and East Asia.

Yet on present trends, military competition and balancing could become quite active. China legitimately wants to maintain and acquire the symbols of great power status such as nuclear weapons, space capability, and a blue-water navy. But as it does so it cannot expect its neighbors to remain passive. Japan, Southeast Asia and India are also important audiences for China's military power, and to the extent that they feel either threatened by China, or uncertain about it, they will respond to such developments in kind. In the case of China, the pursuit of great power symbols will not just play into

China-US great power relations, as they largely did between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but also into China's relations with its many neighbors. Unless China returns to a much more careful managed commitment to peaceful rise, what is in the offing is not a classical security dilemma spiralling to war, but a cold armed peace.

The geopolitical reconstruction of Asia is therefore taking the form of an Asian supercomplex. This new structure not only merges the security dynamics of East and South Asia, but also blends into that merger the longstanding role of the US as a heavily present outside power. So far, the security dynamics linking South and East Asia are stronger than the economic ones, and how this (im)balance develops is one of the key variable to watch. The strong US presence blends Asian regional security dynamics with the global level ones between India and China. Because of this blending of security across the regional and global levels, the other states in Asia have to play a tricky game of multiple hedging: against a rising and possibly threatening China; against abandonment by a weakening US; and against entanglement in a new cold war between the US and China that is not in their national or regional interest. The driving force behind all this is not just the material one of China's rise, but the social one of uncertainty about what China will become and how it will use its new power. At the moment, China is doing too little to convince others that its rise is indeed peaceful, and too much to raise the fears of its neighbors. This stance is extremely helpful to a declining US in maintaining, and even strengthening, its position in Asia. Ironically, the biggest challenge China could put to the US is being nicer to its Asian neighbors.

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