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Asia and Europe in Changing Geopolitics, Rising Powers, Peoples' Security

- Features -

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Most riven by nationalist tensions of various kinds, religious, ethnic or otherwise.

Uncertain implications of China's general rise even as no other country has so many neighbours (14) although border demarcations with most (12) have been agreed upon.

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Geopolitically, Domination of Eurasia is the Key to Greater Global Pre-eminence

The one and only power that has, since the end of World War II, sought to establish such military-political dominance is the US which militarily operates on both maritime flanks (from West Europe to East Asia) as well as on the Eurasian landmass through:

• an unmatched structure of foreign military bases (Over 800);

• external emplacement of nuclear weapons and delivery systems in other countries;

• the widest network of political and military alliances from NATO expanding eastwards to the 'Euro-Neighbourhood' of Russia, as well as in alliances in East/Southeast Asia to contain China;

• seeks to stabilize and maximise its control of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) because

- (i) geopolitically it is at the heart of Eurasia as well as being the site of most popular political upheaval and resistance to US control; and
- (ii) because control of its hydrocarbon wealth, provides leverage over Europe, India, China, Japan (who will for some considerable time be reliant on this) while also enabling the persistence of a 'petro-dollar' economy.

Developments and Challenges: Geo-economic and Geopolitical to the US

1. Belt Road Initiative (BRI/OBOR)

China's reasons for pushing this massive infrastructure and communications plan is that: -it is of great economic benefits for itself, domestically and geo-economically. Its links China's internal regions to the globalized economy. (China is one of the greatest supporters of globalization, followed by India).

'BRI' is a geopolitical strategy to counter US containment efforts.

'BRI' makes China a new economic hegemon. China is leveraging this for its geopolitical interests with strategic alliances with Russia, Pakistan and others.

However, for other countries that have joined the BRI, taken loans, made investments there are on the one hand, progressive possibilities, economic and political; but on the other hand there are the dangers of enduring and deepening indebtedness to China that are real and probably stronger. Recent cases of Sri Lanka and Djibouti's indebtedness to China are real and have enhanced threat perceptions (Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia, stepped back from several projects with China; Pakistan is seeking an IMF loan bailout and more aid from China).

2. There is a minor trend of a 'De-dollarization' process. Countries that face US sanctions like Russia, Iran, Venezuela, China have successfully traded in national currencies and are willing to accept China's currency as a medium of payment. There is a fillip to intra-Asian trade/investment with the rise of other currencies especially of the Renminbi possibly backed by gold. This kind of trade had been practised earlier between the Soviet Union and some Developing Countries like India (Rupee-Rouble trade). There are small attempts to encourage this trend by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB) and proposals to put in place its own SWIFT banking exchange system.

3. Expanding BRICS and SCO?

Regarding BRICS, this body has not proved to be a serious counter to Northern exploitation. Economically, politically and militarily, Brazil, India and South Africa are closer to the West than to each other or to BRICS. Indeed, India is 'balancing' whereby it can be part of the US containment strategy vis-a-vis China while at the same time it is dependent for oil from Iran and defence imports from Russia (Russia, India, Iran have planned a North-South trade and transport Corridor, the INSTC linking Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf via Iran. Within Iran it overlaps with the BRI). Even while BRICS has developed several institutions like New Development Bank (NDB), its capital base and operational principles are not any challenge to the IMF/WB/WTO which still lay down the principles and rules ensuring that global economic activity is governed along neoliberal lines.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) designed by China, Russia and the Central Asian Republics for regional security organization has grown to include new members and mandates. However, contradictions between

Iran, Pakistan and India, and the paradoxical nature of Russia-China relations have made it more of a declaratory forum as opposed to an active regional structure. Of interest were the steps taken to merge the Russian led Eurasian Economic Union with China's Belt and Roadway Initiative in 2015, and the recent Free Trade Agreement between Russia and China. The Russian narrative on the strategic partnership between Russia and China includes the narrative that US led sanctions are the driver for this uneven partnership. Russia has discomfort of China's increasing influence in Central Asia and economic domination. SCO does not have the enabling structures of other regional organizations.

Other regional organizations have been unable to push ahead because of disputes, security and economic differences. The South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation is mired in the India -Pakistan disputes. ASEAN, despite 50 years of attempting economic integration, has been unable to manage its diversity or address common issues of security and people's concerns like labour migration, rights, and climate change.

New Dilemmas in the international system

Iniquity of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS).

Migration and Human rights.

Climate Change.

Dangers of Nuclear Arms Race and War.

While the dilemmas listed as 2/3/4 are widely recognized, much less is known about UNCLOS.

UNCLOS is the accepted major international legal framework governing the open seas/oceans, but it is double-edged. Before this Convention came into existence in 1982, maritime countries only had sovereignty over 12 nautical miles from their coastlines. UNCLOS, in true neoliberal fashion, extended the privatisation of global waters through the establishment of 'exclusive economic zones' (EEZs) that extended maritime sovereignty to 200 nautical miles which means that some 40% of the world's waters are now privatized when these global waters should be defended as the 'common heritage of humankind'. The result is threefold.

(i) Disputes now arise where EEZs overlap.

(ii) Since uninhabited islands (not rocks) also have associated EEZs, five countries - in order the US, France, Australia, Russia, UK along with New Zealand " altogether control 54 million square kilometres based on their mainland and their overseas possessions. Without in any way defending Chinese claims over the seas, it should be noted that New Zealand with less than 5 million people has double the sq. kms of China with a 1.4 billion population.

(iii) Promotion of this privatized exploitation of marine resources will greatly worsen the global eco-system, reinforce economic injustices as well as creating avoidable political-military rivalries and conflicts.

Alternative Perspectives

On the Economic and Ecological Front

1. Regarding BRI/OBOR negotiations - To secure benefits for countries other than China the Southeast Asian countries should try and collectively bargain so as to get much better terms than China would otherwise give. In the absence of this, China's economic control (and therefore political influence) can grow to a damaging extent and therefore there is a strong case to be made for Southeast Asian countries to consider not going along with China's BRI plans.

2. Establish an Asian Clearing Union along the lines of Keynes' 'Bancor' scheme. This Asian 'Bancor' is not an alternative currency for trading but a common unit of account for all intra-Asian trading in a Clearing Union holding accounts for all member countries and which through this monitors the trade balances and the movement of compensating capital flows for the countries. This Union sets limits to the size of deficits and surpluses that are allowed and has rules and penalties for ensuring that these imbalances in trade and capital flows are not permanent but are corrected in favour of deficit countries and poorer nations.

3. De-privatization of atmosphere and seas/oceans

• declare them the 'common heritage of humankind'.

• end carbon trading and EEZs.

• regional cooperative mechanisms to set limits to fishing and NO to seabed mining.

Reject the Neoliberal model of economic growth in favour of equitable and ecologically sustainable development.

On the Political and Military Front

The Indian Ocean and South China Seas - declare these as 'Zones of Peace' with no foreign military bases.

Oppose US sanctions against North Korea, Iran and other countries.

BDS against Israel.

Regarding the Paris Agreement on carbon emission reductions:

- Intended Nationally Determined Contributions or INDCs to be seen as a 'floor' not as a 'ceiling'.

• move to a treaty with legally binding commitments and penalties.

Humane and sympathetic treatment of all 'distress' migrants everywhere.

Regarding Nuclear Weapons

:

(i) Call on all countries of Europe and Asia to sign and ratify the TPNW.

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(ii) Reject the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) under which the US selectively, hypocritically and self-servingly, forcibly boards merchant ships it suspects of having materials related to the production of weapons of mass destruction.

iii) Oppose Ballistic Missile Defences (BMDs) and Theatre Missile Defences (TMDs).

(iv) Call on US to normalize political relations and arrange a peace treaty with N. Korea without demanding that this be preceded by full denuclearization of North Korea.

(v) India and China should host an international conference with Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWSs) to call for other NWSs to declare a No first use (NFU) policy.

(vi) Call on India and Pakistan to accept Kashmir on both sides of the border as a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ).

The momentum towards fair and equitable cooperation, economically and politically, will be enhanced by a) practical successes on both fronts; b) stronger moves towards institutionalising sub-regional cooperation for specific purposes at e.g. South Asian level; c) pursuit of strategic autonomy and engagement, not alliances directed implicitly or otherwise against others.

A combination of social, climate, fair trade and peace movements should adopt these principles as their common goal for a just, ecologically sustainable and more equal world order.

November 5, 2018

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