

# **“New” Major Power Relations and Dynamics in the Asia-Pacific**

**by**

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Several trends lead to reemergence of great power rivalry/cooperation in the 2010s.

First, the world is living through concurrent processes of decomposition of two world orders. The bipolar one is in final stages of withering away, though attempts are still being made to revive it: between Russia and NATO around Ukraine; and along the Eastern shore of China. The brief “unipolar moment” or Western dominance of 1990s-early 2000s is collapsing, too. This unipolar moment was probably the swansong of the 500 year Western dominance, which is also coming to an end. The battle for hopefully, common construction of the new world order has started. And it is clear that not TNCs, international organizations or NGOs, but rather states, especially major or great powers will play the decisive role in it. They are relatively few.

Second. Relative democratization of the international relations – increased role of sovereign states in global system due to the informational revolution and ensuing openness. But mainly – due to the structural role of the nuclear factor – a probability of escalation of major conflicts to nuclear level and to a global catastrophe decreases the possibility for major countries to impose their will by massive use of conventional forces U.S. had and still possesses a huge conventional superiority. But when it tried to use it in Afghanistan, Iraq, etc., it suffered political defeats.

The nuclear factor decreased its validity, when Russia temporarily weakened itself thus undermining its deterrent capacity. Thus it opened a Pandora Box of Western aggressions in Yugoslavia in 1999 – 78 days of bombing of a defenseless country, against Iraq, Libya, multiple attempts of regime changes all over the world in the name of democracy, but strangely proWestern.

By stopping in Ukraine expansion of NATO and other Western alliances and putting an end in Syria to series of regime changes, my own country, Russia, has achieved not only important political victories, but reinvigorated its role as the major balancer and “deterrent”, thus of one of the main security providers for the world.

But the above mentioned and other changes in the international landscape leading to multipolarity also bring about instability, open-ended rivalry among major and many regional powers and general chaos. Even a possibility of open major power conflict, if even by default, is widely discussed now.

At this juncture only three powers seem to qualify for a great power role – USA, China and Russia. Potentially India, if and when it decides on its strategic course and Japan, if it becomes a more comprehensive and sovereign power and decreases its rivalry with all neighbors. None of the European powers seem to qualify anymore at least in the near future.

Each of the three great powers have their strengths and weaknesses.

USA – is the most comprehensive power, neoisolationist, but suffer from overextension, overreaction to it and the deep division of the elites. It used to be, with all shortcomings, one of the main structural security providers in the world. But it became almost a wild card for the foreseeable future. It gears with ups and downs towards containment of China. And has bad relations with Russia with same limited prospect of relative normalization.

China – the likely superpower of the near future is predominantly an economic power, but gradually pumps up its political and military muscles. Has two problems. The larger – it is too big and too powerful for all its neighbors including member states of ASEAN, of course, but excluding Russia for the time being for global play. Indeed, close relations with Russia partly compensates relative military weakness of Beijing.

The smaller and secondary problem: the Middle Kingdom is not used to play globally after four millennia of dominating and a century and a half of suffering.

Russia is a first class military and geopolitical power with masterful diplomacy but suffers from a relatively small and stagnant for the time-being economic base. It

partially compensates this weakness by a belated turn to Asia and a *de facto* not *de jure* alliance with China.

The Russian-Chinese strategic and comprehensive partnership is a positive example of great power relationship, as leaders of both countries are happy to repeat.

China and the U.S. compete for leadership role. U.S – openly, China – by default. Russia is content to be the third, balancing player.

In Asia and the Pacific, the US-China rivalry is gaining steam and could become the major destabilizing factor.

In addition, other global problems tend to deteriorate – climate, water, shortages, migration, terrorism, cyberwarfare. The global governance is weakening, the global problems exacerbate.

The way out is unclear. The great powers have less capacity to positively influence this global picture if they are largely at rivalry with each other or even if elements of rivalry prevail in their relationship. But only through cooperation they have a theoretical possibility to lead the way for a new balanced and stable world order.

Two positive tracks are possible for them.

One is the creation of a strategic dialogue to regulate relationships between themselves and to provide leadership in solution of global problems, and especially on issues of international strategic stability. This new Concert of Nations, if it ever happens, could be viable if it is based on the acknowledgement that mutual deterrence is not an evil to overcome, but a public good to be enhanced at least for the foreseeable unstable future. Major powers could hardly dictate anymore, but could lead in resolution of global problems and defuse conflicts.

The second track could be the creation of a partnership of Greater Eurasia - a peace order for the most dynamic part of the world.

The idea of partnership of Greater Eurasia has been jointly supported by President Putin and Chairman Xi, but waits for concretization and implementation by all countries of the rising continent. This partnership or community could be based on an ever closer interaction between the continents' regional organizations and

institutions –Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN, Eurasian Economic Union, European Union, etc. Greater Eurasia is a conceptual framework for the future continental architecture aimed at stability, prosperity, connectivity, support for national sovereignty, cultural and political pluralism. It is also a framework for the “immersion” of the “excessive” power of China so it would be embraced by a web of relationships, institutions, balances and will not be seen as a potential dominating hegemon by its neighbors, which then would have been pushed to organize themselves against this even unwilling “hegemon”.

In this relatively benevolent international environment led but not dominated by big “troika” and supported by a build-up of a new economic, transportational and security Greater Eurasian order Malaysia or other ASEAN states could find a relatively secure and comfortable place.

Of course, that kind of order would presume a set of bilateral arrangements between countries of the region with each and every great power. Such relationships would provide more balance and stability for the Asia-Pacific and the world at large. The emerging Russia-ASEAN partnership and emerging set of Free Trade Agreements with its member countries is an example of such an approach. A separate but important issue is a concerted effort of countries of the “troika”, India and other Asian nations to calm down the long term instability in the Middle East.