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**THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY IN THE ASIA PACIFIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STABILITY**

*The Five Big Geopolitical Questions*

by

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## **The Five Big Geopolitical Questions**

**By Kishore Mahbubani<sup>1</sup>**

We live in a time of momentous geopolitical shifts. Last year, the Chinese economy became bigger than the American economy in PPP terms. Overall, the US remains number one. However, China will become number one in the next decade or so. Hence, we should be seeing rising tensions between US and China. Instead, we see an unnatural calm. Similarly, we see surprises in the China-India relationship and the Europe-Russia relationship. I have therefore decided to focus on the five key geopolitical questions of our time. They are as follows:

### **1. Why are US-China relations miraculously harmonious?**

The peaceful rise of China is a historical anomaly. Both Washington and Beijing deserve equal credit for this miracle. Some of this wisdom arose out of historical necessity. At the height of the Cold War, when America genuinely feared Soviet expansionism, it reached out to China to balance the Soviet Union. Indeed, America reached out to China when China had emerged out of one of its most brutal phases. Human rights was not a factor in American policy towards China then. This paved the way for Deng to use America as an example to persuade Chinese people to switch away from central planning to free market economies.

In the 1990s, official US-China relations went through a series of ups and downs. Despite the efforts of President George H.W. Bush to keep the relationship on an even keel, the Tiananmen Square episode on June 4, 1989 assaulted American sensibilities and constrained his ability to improve relations. Tiananmen could have

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derailed US-China relations. When President Clinton took office in January 1993, after having described the leaders of China as the “butchers of Beijing”, one could easily have predicted a far bumpier road. Fortunately, Bill Clinton reacted wisely. I was present at the first Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders meeting at Blake Island in November 1993 and saw with my own eyes how Bill Clinton and Jiang Zemin made an enormous effort to reach out to each other. By the end of the day, their mutual wariness was replaced by a significant degree of personal bonhomie. This episode demonstrated that the United States had been wise in welcoming China into the APEC in 1991. Such a move not only garnered the US diplomatic goodwill but also ensured that China adopted the membership of yet another international forum whose rules and regulations it agreed to abide by. Later, the US also worked with China in the East Asia Summit. In addition, the US and China collaborate daily in the UN Security Council to manage the “hot issues” of the day.

The tragedy of 9/11 further solidified US-China cooperation. Apprehensions about the rise of China were replaced by a focus on the War on Terror. East Asia stopped being a priority for the United States for several years. This allowed China to rise peacefully and for the two countries to avoid the “Thucydides trap”.

America made several wise decisions during this time. Firstly, America proceeded to admit China into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. Although the admission was made on the basis of stiff conditions, these conditions ironically benefited China and forced it to open up to world trade – leading to its current pre-eminent position as the largest economy in the world in PPP terms.

Another judicious call was to pay attention to China's sensitivities on Taiwan. China had always regarded Washington's policy towards Taiwan with suspicion, as they feared that the US could use the Taiwan issue as a means to destabilise China. Instead, America reacted wisely when in late 2003, the Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian suggested that a referendum be held to assess the views of the Taiwanese people on independence. In response, President George W. Bush made it clear that the United States did not approve of his move. He said: "The comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose." This was wise statesmanship, even if it was partly the result of Washington's dependence on Beijing's support for other more pressing issues, such as Iraq and North Korea.

Some of these wise policies emerged out of America's selfish interests, especially during the Cold War. However, it is possible that few Americans are actually aware how wise America has been. And even fewer Americans understand that it is in America's national interest to continue these wise policies towards China. For example, since Deng Xiaoping opened up China in 1978 American universities have educated hundreds of thousands of Chinese students. In the years 2005 to 2012 alone, 788,882 Chinese students studied in American universities. This number has risen steadily – in the 2013-2014 academic year, 275,000 Chinese students were enrolled at American universities . This is an enormous gift from America to China. Future historians will be puzzled by this massive act of generosity as many of these students then return to China to build up the Chinese economy and to create innovations in many different spheres of science and technology that propel China forward in areas ranging from space exploration to defence.

China has also contributed to the maintenance of friendly relations between the two countries. Firstly, China has “swallowed bitter humiliation” time and again and has reacted prudently to America’s mistakes. These mistakes included the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the downing of a US spy plane in Hainan Island in China in April 2001. The tact and restraint demonstrated by China in both situations averted military action between the two countries.

I have described these events in some detail as they help to explain a contemporary geopolitical miracle. Normally, when the world’s largest emerging power is about to pass the world’s greatest power, we should be seeing a rising level of tensions between the two (with the historical exception of one Anglo-Saxon power, the US, replacing another Anglo-Saxon power, the UK). It would therefore be perfectly normal to see rising tensions between the US and China today. Instead, we see the exact opposite: perfectly normal and calm relations between the US and China. This is a miracle.

We should not take this miracle for granted. It could easily be derailed by sudden new developments. We have just witnessed a dangerous new development. The US Navy decided to fly a reconnaissance plane over a part of the South China Sea where China is building artificial islands. To make matters worse, the US Navy invited a CNN crew to witness and broadcast angry exchanges between the US pilot and a Chinese radio operator.

In theory, the US is acting correctly under international law. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), states that, ““No State may validly purport to subject any part of the high seas to its sovereignty.”However, the US is asking China to abide by a convention that the US itself has not ratified.This means that the US has

refused to be legally bound by the provisions of UNCLOS (even though, in practice, it has respected the UNCLOS provisions).

All this is creating a dangerous new situation in the US-China relations. The ASEAN countries need to monitor this situation carefully.

## **2. Why does the India-China relationship keep hitting roadblocks?**

Just imagine that China and India were companies. The company of China has a land territory of 9.6 million sq km. The company of India has a land territory of 3.3 million sq km. If these companies were located side by side and discovered that they had a dispute over 7,770 sq km (or 0.08% of China's territory and 0.2% of India's territory), they would consider it absolutely irrational to allow a trivial piece of territory to interfere with the massive growth opportunities they could have. I am not saying that money is the most important value. If China and India cooperate and significantly enhance their economic growth, hundreds of millions of Chinese and Indians will be rescued from poverty. What is morally more important? Rescuing millions from poverty or quarrelling over bits of territory?

So why can't Asian nations compromise on territorial issues? The simple answer is that while Europeans have moved on from the notion of absolute "sovereignty" and indeed given up a significant amount of sovereignty to regional organisations, Asian countries have not followed suit. Indeed, the Europeans have reached a new peak of civilized behaviour by achieving "zero prospect" of war between any two EU states. No two Asian states have achieved a similar "zero prospect" of war. This is why Asians need to seriously ask why they remain mentally colonized by a European concept of "sovereignty".

If PM Modi and President Xi were company CEOs, they would both focus on the larger economic gains and push aside territorial disputes. Unfortunately, if they do so as heads of government, they would be immediately accused of being "traitors" who gave up "sovereign" territory. Sadly, the people making these accusations from their moral high horses would not be aware that their minds are trapped by a 17th century European concept which no longer makes sense in the small, dense, and interdependent world we have created.

Even more sadly, the ferocious defenders of "sovereignty" are not aware that they are the biggest obstacles to China and India seizing a century that belongs to these two countries.

The hard truth is that Asia's two biggest powers do see each other as a threat and, because they do, are trying hard to manage the rivalry. History has played a role in their perceptions of each other. During the Cold War, they pitched their tents in different camps: From 1971, China was America's quasi--ally while India was the Soviet Union's. By then, the two countries were also divided by a border quarrel, conflict over Pakistan, and mutual suspicions over Tibet. The result today is a trust deficit between the giants of Asia. International concern about the relationship is understandable: A "protracted contest" between China and India, to use Sinologist John Garver's description, would be disastrous for 40 percent of the world's population, the rest of Asia, and humanity at large.

Since the 1980s, the two sides have built a structure of cooperation on four pillars: regular summits and high--level meetings, military confidence--building, border negotiations, and increasing trade. As their economies rise and as their military capacities grow, their desire to shape the global commons will increase along with

demand for key resources (especially food, water, and energy). The four pillars, as a diplomatic substructure, will no longer suffice; a new China-India architecture will be required. This must be a deeply layered, multi-level, interlocking structure for mutual confidence, consultation, and coordination involving political leaders, legislators, officials, experts, businesses, policy institutes, academics, students, and other actors in the two societies -- like the ramified architecture of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It should aim to identify and strengthen common ground, manage conflict as it arises, and promote cooperation in bilateral as well as international affairs. To the extent that it succeeds in doing so, a new China-India diplomatic structure will be an investment in the well-being of nearly half the world's population, the neighboring regions of Asia, and the world at large.

### **3. Why are Europe and Russia on a rough road?**

Logically, Russia should have been drifting closer to Europe and the West to balance a rising China. Instead, the opposite has happened. The accident in Ukraine disrupted geopolitical logic.

The size of the EU's GDP is \$16.5 trillion while that of Russia is only \$2 trillion. Yet Russia remains the only military power with the capacity to destroy Europe. Sheer common sense would dictate that the EU should begin by offering a one-sided trade agreement (like China initially offered to ASEAN). Such a trade agreement would spur FDI into Russia, encourage the creation of a new manufacturing economy and a new Russian business class and middle class tied to Europe. This would be a long-term process of slow and careful seduction.



In the current poisonous post-Ukraine atmosphere, few Europeans believe that this could succeed. But sheer geopolitical logic will drive Russia away from China's embrace into a closer relationship with Europe. And if Europe cannot succeed even if the geopolitical forces are aligned in its favor, it will show that something has gone drastically wrong in European geopolitical management.

If Western leaders were as pragmatic as Asian leaders, they would have found a compromise. Instead, the West went back to its usual self-righteous tendencies and imposed sanctions on Russia. This geopolitical loss by the West has been a gain for Asia, as seen by the US\$400 billion (S\$520 billion) Russia-China energy deal.

#### **4. Is China becoming militarily more aggressive over territorial claims?**

Overall, China has been remarkably competent geopolitically, but it is not immune to mistakes, as it showed in 2010 and 2011. It completely mishandled an episode in which a Chinese fishing boat collided with Japanese Coast Guard patrols near the disputed Senkaku Islands on September 7, 2010, an error that could potentially set back Sino-Japanese relations for several decades.<sup>f</sup> It was unwise for China to demand an apology from Japan after having publicly humiliated Japan into releasing the fishing boat. This further angered Japan.

Similarly, China also mishandled the Korean crisis of 2010. In November 2010, North Korean artillery shelled the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong and killed two South Korean civilians as well as two South Korean Marines. North Korea has had a long track record of taking aggressive, reckless actions. The main restraining force on North Korea has been China, and, to be fair, China's overall record has not been bad. But after the artillery shelling, China did not condemn North Korea's actions.

One of the biggest diplomatic coups for China in recent decades was its ability to establish diplomatic relations in 1992 with South Korea, a defense ally of the US. Indeed, relations between China and South Korea have blossomed, with trade rising from US \$5 billion in 1992 to US \$186 billion in 2008. Against this backdrop, the South Koreans were clearly disappointed with China. To signal their displeasure, the South Korean government decided to send its ambassador in Oslo to attend the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony for Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in December 2010, even though the Chinese government had strongly lobbied the South Korean government not to do so.

To make matters worse, China began to make more aggressive statements and take more aggressive postures on the South China Sea in 2010 and 2011. China published a map of the South China Sea with dotted lines that seemed to show that China claimed around 80 percent of the sea (see Figure 4.1). When China submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf a map including the nine-dotted-lines territorial claim in the South China Sea on May 7, 2009, the Philippines lodged a diplomatic protest against China. Vietnam and Malaysia followed. Indonesia also registered a protest, although it had no claims on the South China Sea. In the face of this opposition, Chinese officials refused to back down. In March 2010, they told US officials that they considered the South China Sea to be a “core interest” on a par with Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. In July 2010, an editorial in the Global Times stated, “China will never waive its right to protect its core interest with military means.” The same month, a Chinese Ministry of Defense spokesman said that “China has indisputable sovereignty of the South Sea and China has sufficient historical and legal backing” to underpin its claims.

All these aggressive Chinese postures on the South China Sea created a geopolitical opportunity for America, to which China reacted angrily. This was understandable. But such immediate angry responses also had to be followed by more thoughtful reflections by China on where it had gone wrong. China will have to work very hard to keep its relations with the rest of the world on an even keel. And if it does not, it should not be surprised if its adversaries and competitors seize the advantages provided by China's mistakes in handling the impact of China's rise on the rest of the world.

### **5. Why is the Middle East in flames?**

North Korea excepted, there is a remarkably wide and deep consensus among regional leaders that they should focus on modernisation and pragmatic development. This explains why East Asia is functional while the Middle East remains dysfunctional.

Secondly, America has destabilized the Middle East by thoughtlessly pushing its agenda for democracy in a few Arab countries. Those behind the agenda were absolutely convinced that democracy would invariably leave these countries and their people better off, but the record so far shows the opposite. Lebanon experienced a disastrous civil war from 1975 to 1990. Beirut became a living symbol of hell. After the civil war ended, gradually Lebanon began to move back to normalcy (although it clearly remained under Syrian domination). The assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 triggered the Cedar Revolution, which the US encouraged and cheered. The Cedar Revolution proved to be a false dawn, upsetting the delicate political balance that had been achieved among the different political parties., and Lebanon is slowly but surely slipping back

into the political turmoil it had managed to extricate itself from before America intervened again.

An August 2006 article by Marwan Bishara in the International Herald Tribune illustrates how even when both sides seem to use the same language and concepts they speak at cross-purposes.

*Behind the fighting in Lebanon, as in Palestine and Iraq, there is a fundamental conflict of views. America sees each as a clash between freedom and terrorism, while the Arabs think in terms of freedom versus military occupation and unjust wars. Unless the two opposing approaches are reconciled politically and diplomatically, the Middle East will sink into perpetual war and chaos. The Bush administration charges Islamist fundamentalists and their sponsors in Tehran and Damascus with spreading an authoritarian ideology of hate against the will of the Arab majority. Washington believes that there is an American-style freedom-lover inside every Muslim, and that its mission is to drag it out by hook or crook. After all, the cause of liberty in America, according to the new Bush doctrine, is dependent on the cause of freedom abroad. The Arabs, for their part, blame U.S. and Israeli wars and occupations for turning citizens into freedom fighters and providing terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda with fresh recruits and ideological alibis. They hold America and Israel responsible for death, destruction and surging extremism, in pursuit of narrow geopolitical interests rather than of universal values.*

*These opposing sets of beliefs come with corresponding myths and images. The United States and its allies invoke 9/11, the Madrid bombings, the London Underground attacks and hundreds of terrorist acts in between, while the Arabs underline the invasions and occupations of 1967, 1982 and 2003; the Abu Ghraib, Kheyam and Guantánamo detention centers, as well as hundreds of massacres, from Der Yassin in 1948 to last month's Qana bombing.*

This gap in perception is not just documented by Arab commentators. It is equally well-documented by well-known American commentators. In April 2007 David Brooks, a conservative columnist with the New York Times, attended a meeting of Arab and American intellectuals in Amman, Jordan. Afterward he wrote the following:

*The problems between America and the Arab world have nothing to do with religious fundamentalism or ideological extremism, several Arab speakers argued. They have to do with American policies toward Israel, and the forces controlling those policies. As for problems in the Middle East itself, these speakers added, they have a common source, Israel. One elderly statesman noted that the four most pressing issues in the Middle East are the Arab-Israeli dispute, instability in Lebanon, chaos in Iraq and the confrontation with Iran. They are all interconnected, he said, and Israel is at the root of each of them.*

*We Americans tried to press our Arab friends to talk more about the Sunni-Shiite split, the Iraqi civil war and the rise of Iran, but they seemed uninterested. They mimicked a speech King Abdullah of Jordan recently*

*delivered before Congress, in which he scarcely mentioned the Iraqi chaos on his border. It was all Israel, all the time.”*