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What Is Asia? A Security Debate between Alfred Mahan and Barry Buzan

Is Asia best understood as a single, unified strategic space or a cluster of distinct regional security complexes? Sunil Dasgupta argues that while the latter view remains more accurate at present, Chinese and American security policies are making 'one Asia' a burgeoning reality.

By Sunil Dasgupta for ISN

Underlying the current American predicament in determining its Asia policy is the key question, what is Asia? Formally, Asia is the biggest landmass on earth—home to more than half its population—and a continent that is enormously varied in geography, culture, economics, and politics. Few observers have seen the continent as a single entity. Since the start of the Cold War, Washington has sliced and diced Giant Asia into five sub-regions: East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia, and the Middle East. But today, the basis of a new American view of Asia requires us to see the continent differently—as a unified strategic space. As the former Bush Administration official and Asia expert, Evan Feigenbaum, wrote in 2011,

“Asia is being reconnected at last. Chinese traders are again hawking their wares in Kyrgyz bazaars. Straits bankers are financing deals in India, with Singapore having become the second-largest source of India’s incoming foreign direct investment over the last decade (behind only Mauritius, which retains first place because of tax avoidance incentives). China lies at the core of industrial supply and production chains that stretch across Southeast Asia. And Chinese workers are building ports and infrastructure from Bangladesh to Pakistan to Sri Lanka. The governments of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have sold electricity southward, reconnecting their power grids to Afghanistan, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have signed an intergovernmental memorandum to sell electricity to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean money is flowing across Asia.”

Although this view remains at odds with the predominantly regional character of security concerns in Asia, if China continues to pursue hardline regional policies, the new American view could well become a reality.

Mahan vs. Buzan

One American who would have understood Feigenbaum’s sense of ‘one Asia’ is the great naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who died 100 years ago this December 1. Mahan was a great advocate of maritime capacity as both the source and protector of national power, and he defined

sea power as uniquely different from land power: on land, he saw the possibility of a balance of power; but at sea, he said, nations strove for command (i.e., complete control).

Mahan saw the oceans as a unified strategic space where nations sought to concentrate naval power, engage the enemy, and then assume command of seas. Command in this context was circumscribed not by the distance from national shores but by the ability to concentrate. In *Naval Strategy*, Mahan opposed dividing the United States Navy into the Atlantic and the Pacific fleets, for fear of sacrificing the ability to concentrate all of its forces. The United States, of course, established naval mastery in both oceans, which led it to assume the mantle of a great Asian—and a great Atlantic—power.

More specifically, in *"The Problem of Asia,"* Mahan wrote of the continent as a vast but continuous expanse from the Suez to Japan, and from Siberia to India. He saw internal political divisions in Asia as propitious for continued Western imperialism, and urged much greater American exploitation of the continent. Mahan thought poorly of the people of Asia, but saw the structural conditions of geography as those that really mattered, and certainly, in the hands of Western nations, Asia could become sources of national power. Apart from the untimely imperial impulse, this is a breathtaking view of Asia that has been absent for a century. A 1935 retrospective review of the book in *Foreign Affairs* found Mahan out of touch:

"[Mahan's] major premises were wrong and his facts were wrong. Europe was not static as to boundaries, economic conditions, or political institutions. Asia was not static internally, from either the political or economic point of view. Japan has replaced Russia as the aggressor in Asia. Germany is no factor in Asia at all. Japan and England, no longer with a community of interest against Russia, no longer allies, are commercial rivals around the world. England has again and again in the last thirty-five years gone on record as unwilling to use force to preserve her position in China. She teeters between coöperation with Japan, as in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and coöperation with the United States, as in the existing naval negotiations. The British have no policy, followed with general consistency year after year, sufficiently stable to become a basis for Anglo-American cooperation. Both England and the United States desire peace in Asia; but they are commercial rivals. As for the United States, the rich commercial rewards in Asia foreseen by Mahan have not materialized. The American people heeded Mahan's advice and built a navy even beyond any limit suggested by him in 1900, but that navy is not yet large enough to assure security for American interests in Asia. Its cost, thus far, is out of proportion to the value of any treasure it has to protect."

Despite the efforts of pan-Asianists, the continent remained divided roughly along the lines of old imperial control even after decolonization and independence. Cold War politics were decidedly regional, not continental, in Asia. The United States and the former Soviet Union picked opposing sides in practically every regional rivalry across Asia. So, for example, Washington supported Pakistan and Moscow supported India while the United States and India were unable to develop durable ties in the aftermath of India's defeat by China in the 1962 war. The South Asian regional rivalry was more politically significant than the continental one between China and India. As postwar Europe worked toward a dense network, first with NATO and then the European Community, international relations in Asia was described as "hub-and-spoke," with the United States at the center of a series of bilateral relationships with states and regions.

Highlighting this relational character of security, Barry Buzan, the influential Canadian and British scholar of international relations, proposed the idea of the security complex: "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another."

This was a fundamentally regional view of the world that Buzan applied first to the sub-regions of

Asia. Writing in the 1980s, Buzan argued, for example, that Iran and Pakistan belonged to separate regional security complexes even though they had plenty of common interests and conflicts between them. The pull of the security complex for Pakistan was to the east and for Iran, to the west.

For Buzan, Asia is not one but many and they are organized around regional political divisions and security concerns rather than the geographic expanse of the continent. Where Mahan saw geography overcoming politics, Buzan sees politics as superior.

One or many Asias?

As we look to the future, who will be right in Asia? Those who, like Mahan, believe in the immutability of geography see the rise of China—the only power that physically connects four of Asia's five regions—as leading to the rebirth of Asia as a singular strategic entity, returning the continent to the days before the Vasco da Gama epoch. On the one hand, Chinese economic growth has provided the overdrive for regional economic integration. On the other, antipathy toward China's growing political weight might lead Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, and India to turn to each other in order to achieve a balance of power. Indian naval strategists, for example, worry about China's 'string of pearls' strategy, which is aimed at developing allies and building deepwater ports from the China Seas to the Persian Gulf.

But Buzan's construct of many Asias remains resilient. From a theoretical point of view, the concept of balance of power requires a defined set of balancers, or a security complex. Without clear referents and limitations on who should be counted as part of the balance, there can be no game.

Asian states may want economic integration, but the common fear of China does not seem to be leading those states closer to a shared understanding of security threats with each other. The possibility that China's rise will finally force the rest of Asia to come closer together and form a singular strategic entity also misses the fundamental nature of Asian integration. For example, Japan-India trade is substantial but nowhere comparable to either China-Japan trade or India-China trade. Asian states have responded to the possible security threat of a rising China by moving closer to the United States, which is not the same thing as developing a common Asian view of security threats. Indeed, stronger bilateral ties between the United States and the continent's different powers reinforce both the existing hub-spoke pattern of Asian international relations and the division of Asia into its many regions. The putative grand balance of power in Asia is not between Asian states, but between China and United States.

Within Asia's regions, the primary security concerns remain regional. The continent's most distinct regional security complex remains the Middle East. Although India and China have a common interest to cooperate on counterterrorism, they have shown limited interest in pursuing terrorists beyond their borders let alone cooperating with each other on the issue. India worries about China, but is even more worried about Pakistan. India might want to aid Vietnam, but will be careful of triggering a new release of military technology from China to Pakistan. Japan and China may be raising the stakes in their rivalry, but they continue to have a common interest in managing North Korea.

Given these realities, both the Bush and the Obama Administrations have naturally failed to design a unified strategy toward Asia. American leaders may want a new Asian front to aid their own efforts to balance China, but treating Asia as a unified strategic space will also remove the option of low-cost offshore balancing that is viable within the limited contexts of the regional security complexes. Indeed, moving from Buzan's conception of many Asias to Mahan's vision of pan-Asia carries with it the risk of precipitating a new global conflict on the scale of the Cold War and the rise of Germany after 1870 that American leaders say they want to avoid. As the 1935 critique of Mahan

found, the cost of the effort might be out of proportion to the treasure that will need to be protected.

Much depends as well on the kind of power China becomes. In the last three decades, Beijing has vacillated between belligerence and accommodation in the region. After a decade of foreign investment in the 1980s, the repression of the Tiananmen Square rebellion established China's intentions as hostile. In the 1990s, this changed again as Beijing embarked on even more wide-ranging economic and political reforms until 1996 when it fired missiles over the Taiwan Strait. Thereafter, Beijing entered a phase of accommodation. Thomas Christensen, a Bush Administration official and a well-known East Asia expert, has written that America's aggressive security posture had compelled Beijing to accommodate its neighbors on regional disputes. The rise of Xi Jinping to the presidency is widely seen as signaling a return to more hardline regional policies. If China remains aggressive in the region for a long period, it might compel its many regional adversaries to come together, thereby precipitating Mahan's view of Asia. But if it continues to vacillate as it has in the past, Asian states will want to continue hedging on China, proving Buzan correct.

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