

By Invitation

Eurasia: Indo-Pacific's continental cousin

As great power dynamics change, so too the way we define geographic regions of the world



C. Raja Mohan

For *The Straits Times*

Geography needs a rethink as the post-war global order breaks down. Renewed great power rivalry is focusing attention on how we define geographic regions and come to terms with the consequences of unfolding power shifts in the world.

Consider, for example, Asean's trouble with the term Indo-Pacific. The concept, initially developed by Japan, has been embraced by Australia and India. If the debate on Indo-Pacific was tentative and unfinished in the Obama administration, President Donald Trump's advisers have made Indo-Pacific an integral part of Washington's new vocabulary.

Not everyone in Asia is pleased with Indo-Pacific replacing Asia-Pacific. For many, including in Beijing, the Indo-Pacific is about countering China and, therefore, deeply discomfiting. For some in Asean, the concept has unwelcome implications for the centrality of the South-east Asian regional forum. Whatever might be the reservations in Asean, the organisation has come around to constructing its own narrative on Indo-Pacific at the just concluded Asean Summit in Bangkok.

But Indo-Pacific is not the only idea that is challenging the traditional conceptions of political geography. Beijing, which along with Moscow, opposes the Indo-Pacific, actively supports the idea of "Eurasia". Much in the manner of Indo-Pacific, Eurasia, too, is a controversial notion. If the Indo-Pacific is about balancing China, Eurasia is about countering the West. If the conception of Indo-Pacific promotes an alliance of maritime powers, Eurasia generates fears of a continental condominium.

OLD IDEAS REVIVED

The idea of Eurasia is certainly not new. It approximates to the conception of the world's geopolitical "heartland" that was articulated by Halford Mackinder

at the turn of the 20th century. Mackinder, an English political geographer, had argued that the power that controls the heartland will dominate the world.

For the German geopolitical thinker Karl Haushofer, who was hugely influential in the inter-war period, Eurasia was about limiting the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon powers, which controlled the seas, through a grand coalition of mainly land powers in Europe and Asia. Having served in the German embassy in Tokyo, Haushofer also saw the rise of Japan and its critical role in shaping world politics.

Haushofer was also among the first to articulate the notion of Indo-Pacific. He saw the strategic unity of a vast region stretching from the Indus flowing into the Indian Ocean to the Amur that empties out in the northern Pacific as a coherent geopolitical space.

The early geopolitical thinkers recognised that the industrial revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries were dramatically enhancing the capabilities of the modern state and shrinking global spaces. If the emergence of Japan triggered exciting geopolitical imagination in the early 20th century, China's rise does it today.

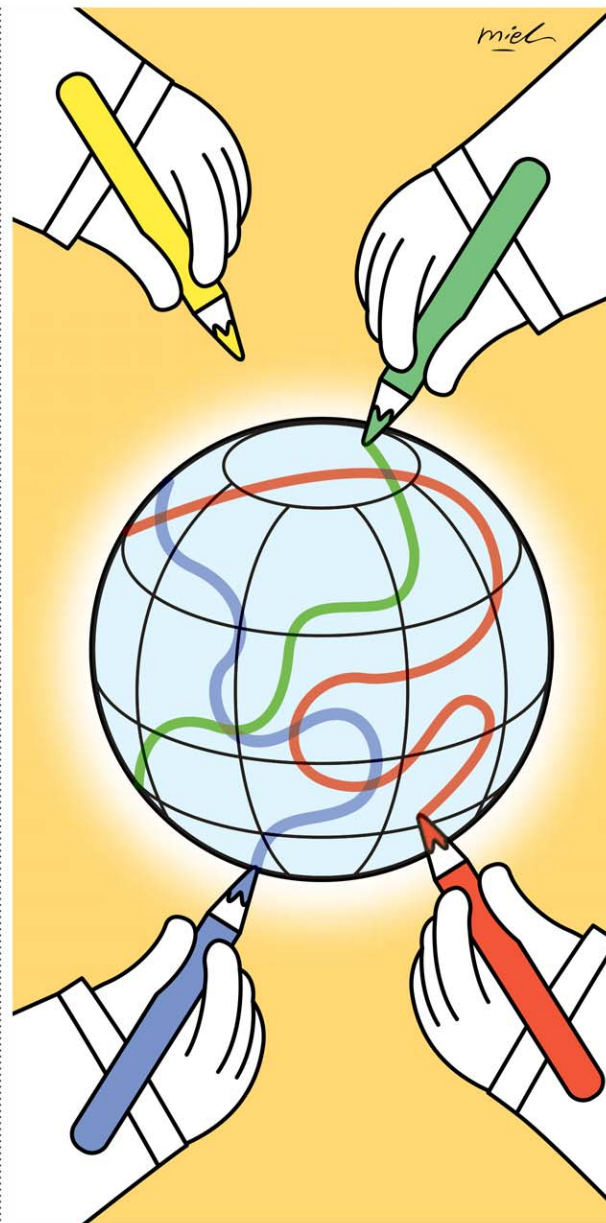
The simultaneous growth of many parts of Asia, including Indonesia and India, adds to the unprecedented geopolitical transformation and reconstruction of the vocabulary of Indo-Pacific and Eurasia.

XI'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Nothing captures the two conceptions better than President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The silk road economic "belt" is about connecting China overland – from the far corners of inner Asia to western Europe. In Mr Xi's vision, the "21st-century Maritime Silk Road" runs from China's Pacific coast to the Indian Ocean through the waters of South-east Asia.

The surprise and resistance that greet the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia are rooted in the kind of geographic notions that had taken root in the second half of the 20th century. The prevailing tendency has been to see Europe and Asia as separate continents and the Indian and Pacific oceans as different bodies of water. These conceptions are fairly new.

After all, inspiration for Mr Xi is the ancient overland silk route that connected China to the Mediterranean littoral. Buddhism had travelled over both land and sea from the Indian subcontinent to East Asia. Sun Yat Sen, who helped found the Republic of China, dreamt big about railways connecting China to different parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. (His communist successors have turned that into a reality).



On the security side, the Indo-Pacific is not very different from the maritime realm of Britain's Indian Ocean empire that stretched from the Suez to Hong Kong and from the Cape of Good Hope to Sydney. When imperial Japan challenged British hegemony over the eastern Indian Ocean during World War II, Britain's decisive reversal of the Japanese offensive began in the so-called Burma-China-India (BCI) theatre that is now at the heart of the Indo-Pacific. The BCI theatre saw collaboration between the forces of British India and nationalist China and US support for them.

China's current port construction in countries ranging from those in

the South Pacific to the East African coast, and the acquisition of a military base in Djibouti are simply repeating a pattern set by earlier great powers in the Indian Ocean, such as Britain, France, the Netherlands and Portugal.

If the Indo-Pacific is the story of China's maritime rise and the US pushback, the story of Eurasia is China's deepening continental partnership with Russia. During the Soviet years, Moscow was animated by a transcendental socialist internationalism. For President Vladimir Putin and the Russian nationalists, Eurasian consolidation is at the very heart of a project to resurrect Russia's historic role as a great power.

SINO-RUSSIA PARTNERSHIPS

Put simply, Eurasia is the reconstitution of the former Soviet space – not as a single sovereign entity but as a broad Russian-led region. Beyond the geography of the former Soviet Union, Russia would like to develop a Greater Eurasian region jointly with China. On the economic front, the two would like to hook up Russia's connectivity initiatives under the Eurasian Economic Union with China's BRI.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), set up by Moscow and Beijing nearly two decades ago, serves as the multilateral political and security forum for this vast region. The SCO has also drawn the former Central Asian republics, and India and Pakistan into its ambit as members. Bilateral strategic coordination in Greater Eurasia serves the interests of both Moscow and Beijing. Russia, which is locked in renewed conflicts with Western Europe and the US, sees alignment with China as a critical element of balancing against the West. For China, there is great value in working with Russia to keep its vast inner Asian frontiers calm. That should provide a secure rear amid the escalating confrontation with the US.

Even as Moscow and Beijing bolster each other in their separate contestation with the US, Washington has tended to dismiss the prospects for a credible continental coalition between Russia and China. American officials point to the many obstacles to a sustainable Sino-Russian alliance. These include growing power asymmetry between the two continental powers – the Chinese economy today is nearly eight times larger than that of Russia.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, when Stalin's Russia and Mao's China became allies, Moscow was the senior partner. Many US analysts believe Russian resentments at playing second fiddle to China today will eventually prevail over Moscow's urge to align with Beijing against Washington.

Observers also point to the fact that Beijing's salience is growing at Moscow's expense in Central Asia, a region that was once part of Soviet space, and in Central Europe that was in the Soviet sphere of influence during the Cold War.

Notwithstanding this scepticism, there has been dramatic expansion of the scale and scope of the strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing. In the wake of President Xi's visit earlier this month to Moscow for bilateral meetings with Mr Putin and to St Petersburg to attend a business forum, official Chinese media has trumpeted the arrival of a "golden age" in their bilateral relations.

There is no doubt that Russia and China have arrived at a new phase of stability and deep mutual trust. The "red alliance" between Stalin and Mao established in 1950 had broken down by the end of the decade. The Sino-Soviet confrontation of the 1960s and 1970s yielded to detente in the 1990s.

Today, as the Eurasian partnership becomes a force to reckon with, there are signs of some rethinking in Washington – the US intelligence assessment of worldwide threats issued in January underlined that "China

and Russia will present a wide variety of economic, political, counter-intelligence, military and diplomatic challenges to the US and its allies. We anticipate that they will collaborate to counter US objectives, taking advantage of rising doubts in some places about the liberal democratic model".

Nothing has pushed China and Russia closer than the US' simultaneous confrontation with both. Although Mr Trump has often talked of doing separate deals with Russia and China, the US defence and foreign policy establishment has characterised both Moscow and Beijing as great power rivals.

Some in Washington have urged Mr Trump to play the Russia card against China, much in the manner that president Richard Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger turned to Beijing against Moscow in the 1970s. Realists rightly believe any effort to balance Chinese power in the East must involve either Russian support or neutrality. But there are no signs in Washington of a big outreach to Moscow; nor is Moscow ready to abandon its budding partnership with Beijing.

FORCES RESHAPING THE NEW ARENAS

Where does this leave the rest of the world? For one, the current dynamic must be seen to be a part of an inevitable rearrangement of the global order amid China's rise, Russia's reassertion and the US' uncertain trajectory. After all, Mr Trump is not only confronting Russia and China, but also challenging, simultaneously, US allies in Europe and Asia. While the strategy defies common sense, there is no denying the US' power to unilaterally disrupt current international structures.

Second, the profound uncertainties about the nature of this rearrangement are driven by the turbulence in American domestic politics. For three-quarters of a century, American military presence in Western Europe and North-east Asia and its dominance over the Pacific and Indian oceans defined the geopolitical order. This was reinforced by a liberal trading system underwritten by the US. Mr Trump is channelling, in his own strange way, the domestic anxieties in the US over the costs and benefits of this extraordinary and extended strategic and economic role.

The American chaos is visible and in-your-face, but one will have to be bold in assuming that the internal dynamics in China and Russia would remain stable.

Third, the revived geographic categories – the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia – are here to stay. They are also interconnected and reflect the changes in the power structures that are reshaping geography.

The regions they represent are likely to see prolonged contestation among the great powers, the realignment and dealignment of key regional actors, the return of neutrality and non-alignment as attractive options for some, and the quest for new multilateral and collective security arrangements.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

C. Raja Mohan is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.