



From Hegemony to Loose Bipolarity: The Evolving Geopolitics of the US, EU and China

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HOW will global politics evolve from the United State's seemingly slipping hegemony? Some observers believe that geopolitics is evolving into a system with three great powers – the US, China and the European Union (EU) -- over the next several decades, with Japan and India playing secondary roles. While relations between these countries will vary according to specific issues, we contend that the overall relationship will lean towards the formation of a broadly bipolar geopolitical structure with China and the EU on one side, and with the US, Japan, and India on the other.

Responding to China's rise

Although the mishandling of post-invasion Iraq has diminished the US' standing, its economic and military might remain dominant. However, China's rise may undercut US influence in certain areas, particularly within Asia. Unsurprisingly, the US is deeply concerned with containing China's hard and soft power influence in the region. Indeed, American foreign policy towards China, as well as its focus on terrorism, seems likely to guide the US' strategic role in Asia – and globally – for some time to come. Although these two countries are in a co-dependent trade relationship – which could be weakened as Chinese, Asian, and European consumers buy more and as Americans spend less – the US and China are clearly at odds over energy issues and security policy in Asia. Indeed, the US sees China as its main threat to global hegemony, and for this reason we view these countries as the two dominant powers driving the structure of geopolitics over the next several decades. The EU may become increasingly unified politically as a result of environmental, energy, and security issues; however, its political arrangements will undoubtedly remain too fragmented to permit decisive, unified foreign policy actions in the realm of hard power issues.

To curb China's creeping economic influence in Asia, and to circumscribe its military aspirations, the US is looking for partners. In this regard, Japan and India are obvious choices. Both seek to compete with China for economic influence regionally and globally – particularly with regard to access to scarce energy and natural resources. Both also have territorial disputes with China and seek to balance Beijing's increasing military power. While Japan and the US have remained close partners since the end of World War II, the US has recently made increasingly strong gestures of crafting a political-military partnership with India. This is best illustrated by the signing of a civilian nuclear-power accord with New Delhi in December, 2006, as well as offering, for the first time, to sell India advanced fighter jets and anti-ballistic missile defences.

The New European Wildcard

What about the EU? As a result of America's unilateralist foreign policies during the Bush

administration, Europe has grown increasingly disenchanted with its military dependence on and partnership with the US. Because America is likely to remain more focused on combating terrorism than is Europe, Europeans are likely to remain unsupportive of US foreign policies. Consequently, Europe has begun developing a common, independent security and defence policy, and has moved towards forming military capabilities that are less reliant on US support. This includes the establishment of a European Defence Agency (EDA) and the creation of a 60,000-soldier European Rapid Reaction Force. Additionally, the EU does not have any hard power aspirations in Asia or seek to project military influence in the region, nor does it share the US' concerns about curbing China's growing power projection capabilities. In particular, Washington has not been able to adequately convince the Europeans why and how China constitutes an actual or potential threat to Europe.

Not only does the EU *not* share the US's security priorities, it also seeks to form closer economic and political ties with China. According to current estimates, China is expected to eclipse the US as the EU's main trade partner by 2020; the EU, meanwhile, is already China's largest trade partner, and as the EU's security apparatus permits it to act more independently from the US, it will not wilt under US pressure regarding China. The EU, for example, is on track to abandon its embargo – implemented after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre – on selling arms to China, despite considerable objections from Washington.

Implications for Asia

Viewing the evolution of geopolitics in this light, what are the implications for Asia? Europe is unlikely to oppose China's growing influence in the region. An expanding Chinese military does not directly affect Europe or threaten European security. Taiwan is a small issue in the EU-Chinese relationship, and Europe is relatively unconcerned about increased Chinese military activities in such areas as the South China Sea or the Malacca Straits. And, of course, Europe is increasingly prepared to sell Beijing the weapons it needs to increase its hard power further.

At the same time, the US-Japan alliance has perhaps never been stronger, and Tokyo is more willing than ever to use this partnership as a means to normalize its international standing. Japan is in a process of revising and revamping its security and defence policy. By aligning closely with the US and engaging in cooperative military missions with Washington, Tokyo has been able to expand its military and security role in Asia. Not surprisingly, therefore, Japan has been the US' strongest ally in the Six-Party Talks on North Korean nuclear weapons and in constructing a missile-defence shield in northeast Asia. Tokyo also shares Washington's growing apprehensions over an increasingly expansionist China.

India's relationship with the US is not as deep as Japan's, but it is potentially no less critical as a partner. India and China still share considerable enmity over territorial disputes, and India's nuclear weapons are as much aimed at Beijing as they are at Islamabad. The US and India have recently embarked on a "new strategic dialogue" that includes missile defence and other types of military cooperation. The Indian Navy is an important complement to US forces operating in and around the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion: A New Geopolitical Cosmology

One can frame this emerging geopolitical structure with the EU and China increasingly in one camp, and with the US, Japan, and India increasingly in the other, with a "cosmological" metaphor. China and the EU can be seen as a binary star system in which both stars revolve around each other but effectively constitute a single sun. The US is the single star of a neighbouring solar system, with Japan in a closer orbit, and metaphorically in closer

cooperation with the US, than is India.

This new geopolitical cosmology has the potential to affect cooperation and conflict in Asia in many ways – trade, human rights, the environment, terrorism, and, of course, traditional security concerns. Indeed, this emerging system will likely be in play, in some form or another, in nearly every major issue affecting the region. Broadly speaking, both Beijing and Brussels share a common interest in multipolarity, whether they choose to call it that or not. Both wish to increase their influence in global governance, even though this naturally sets them up to clash with US unilateralism and hegemony. The consequences of this evolution in geopolitics will likely be felt most strongly in the Asia-Pacific, where China and the US (along with India and Japan) have their strongest friction points. The sooner the other Asian states recognize this and figure out their own role in this emerging international system, the better it will be for them.

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