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Narratives of Security in Asian Geopolitics[1]

By Rosita Dellios[2]

Abstract

From a global history perspective there is nothing inherently Western in the conceptual basis of Asian security. Despite structural resemblances to the pursuit of security in the contemporary international system, the agents within this order come from a diverse historical and philosophical setting. This article examines two such narratives of security in Asian geopolitics: those of Indic and Chinese origin, in view of their relevance to two of the prevailing rising powers. The Indic Mandala divides into (a) Buddhist-Hindu cosmological insights of security that are of ontological and psychological significance; and (b) the more strategically oriented 'statal circle' that has reverberated from antiquity to modern times. Here realist calculations are made in terms of the spatial-relational characteristics of the system. Following the Indic Mandala is the Chinese Paradox with its three representative narratives of (a) 'harmony in difference'; (b) 'actionless action'; and (c) 'the strong need the weak'. The Chinese Paradox receives more extensive treatment as it is China which has had the greatest impact on the changing strategic balance in the early 21st century. Each of the two major narratives of Asian security, though ancient, holds enduring lessons. These lessons are enhanced by what might be regarded as an emergent narrative of security, that of the Islamic transition, in which class, culture, race, and statehood are subsumed in a wider identity of a community of believers. While only used as a suggestive direction within this article, it remains operationally instructive as the unit of geopolitical analysis expands to a larger scale. The article concludes that the West's global projection of power is but a historical phase, albeit a singularly influential one. It came of age in the Columbian Epoch but is now undergoing decline and transformation to greater polycentricty and geocultural diversity. In creating the conditions of contemporary globalization the West must contend – and be changed by – the world beyond itself.

Keywords: Security, Narratives, Geopolitics, Geocultures, Asia, China, India, Mandala

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The Historical and Philosophical Setting

Long before Vasco da Gama's voyage of discovery to India in 1498, maritime commerce among the peoples of what are now termed Asia, Africa and the Middle East was well established. So, too, were political systems that were just as viable as any European one.

Often they came in the form of multi-ethnic empires, and one of them even created the conditions for the discovery of the Americas.

The Ottoman Empire's conquest of Christianity's Eastern capital, Constantinople, in 1453 disrupted the overland Silk Road to Asia and further promoted existing maritime explorations. For Christopher Columbus, who sailed too far West in his search for Asia, the discovery of the New World in 1492 was an accidental by-product. But it had changed the direction of global history; leading to what British geographer Halford J. Mackinder (1861-1947) called the Columbian Epoch.

It was an epoch which Mackinder believed lasted approximately 400 years, starting in 1492 and ending with the start of the 20th century. For some, the Columbian Epoch did not end until later. The end of empires and the freeing of their colonies was one grand indication that the politics of control were over, though the Cold War could be considered as the Columbian Epoch's final fling with "who controls the world"[3] via Heartland, Rimland, and Sea Power theories that characterize classical geopolitics (Mackinder 1904, 1919; Spykman 1944; Mahan 1890; Walton 2007).

This whole mindset was said to have come to an end with the Post-Columbian Epoch which has witnessed a more entrenched globalization and the time-space compression enabled by information technology. The rise of non-European powers within an international system of complex interdependence challenged the view of a Eurocentric world order and the politics of control. Moreover, threats to state security need not come from land power, sea power or the amphibious Rimland of Eurasia (depending on one's location) but from "problems without passports" (Annan 2009) that call for transnational and transcultural cooperation. These are non-traditional security (NTS) issues such as climate change, terrorism, pandemics, global financial crises; as well as from cyberspace and high technology methods of warfare.

However, back in the Columbian Epoch, security was indeed a matter of imperial control. Forays into the unknown were made possible not only by the demand for exotic spices, tea, silk and other products but also by early capitalism which, as it developed in conjunction with advances in industrial technology, produced an economic system that became its own justification for the scramble for colonies and resources. Such was the system that it enriched European empires and shaped the next half millennium. There emerged a European template of empire – one based on expropriation, as John Darwin (2009, 23) points out – as distinct from the "traditional agrarian empires that merely accumulated land and people." Eventually it left behind decolonized states that no longer resembled their former selves.

To this day, the European West remains the standard-bearer of an international system of political organization, with all its embedded values of political rights and the conceptual

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[3] "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the World" (Mackinder 1919). "Who rules the Rimland rules Eurasia Who rules Eurasia rules the World" (Spykman 1944). For Mahan (1890), sea power would determine American power.

foundations of what constitutes security. While a return to a pre-European past is beyond the realm of possibility or even desirability, the cultural dispositions of such a past are alive and well, even if practised or understood in modified form. Indeed, the transformative interludes of colonization, decolonization and nation-building render such societies potentially more resilient in that many still retain a galvanizing sense of their loss and accompanying ambition for recovery. (China's "century of humiliation" and its leader's "dream" of "national rejuvenation" is a recognizable example.) This sense of displacement the powerful nations of the West are themselves beginning to appreciate as the East expands its global presence. Notably, China's New Silk Road, which is part of the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been the source of angst in Europe and the United States. Pro-BRI Italy, for instance, has been denounced by its European Union neighbours as a "Trojan Horse" for Chinese economic expansion into Europe (*France 24* 2019). Besides the economic and strategic implications of BRI, China's geocultural power is also seen to be expanding (Winter 2019). As Reg Little ('Viewpoint' in this issue of *Culture Mandala*) expressed it, the "thought cultures of the Chinese and the West are fundamentally different, and this is driving the shift in global dynamics."

This is not the first time China has known the world beyond its shores. Nor were the Southeast Asian kingdoms mere repositories of spices and sandalwood. Ming China's "treasure ships" under the command of Admiral Zheng He dwarfed anything the Europeans could build at the time. Christopher Columbus' Santa Maria resembles a lifeboat when illustratively set against Zheng He's flagship. Meanwhile, maritime Southeast Asia through which the Ming fleets sailed was experiencing what Anthony Reid (1990) called an Age of Commerce. Empires and kingdoms prevailed in what the Indic political world understood as mandalas or statal circles. This is discussed in the next section. A sense of security was obtained by a mastery of relationships within a common spiritual milieu as much as by punitive expeditions to troublesome peripheries. The Old World empires may have ceased but in a newly emerging polycentric world (see Ferguson and Dellios 2017, ch. 3) their traditions of thought form comprehensive narratives of security. The following are relevant to Asian geopolitics and exhibit a strong philosophical or spiritual basis. As Babb (2018, 121) observes, "The metaphysical systems developed . . . [in the past] . . . linger in the underlying metaphysical assumptions of more recent thinkers, whether they deny it or not."

The Indic Mandala

The Sanskrit word *mandala* denotes a circle. In simple terms it is a diagram of relationships, representing an inter-relational whole. Commonly depicted in religious form, it is used in Hindu and Buddhist iconography and carries Indian cultural concepts. One of these is "causal interdependence" which applies not only to an understanding of human suffering but holds political significance in the conduct of state affairs. As all phenomena are interdependent, according to this teaching, they are empty of their own existence, pluralistic and contingent in nature. To express it in more immediate and personal terms: we are empty, as people and states, of our existence, and can only

understand it in terms of co-arising. There is no such thing as the pursuit of national interests without consideration of the interests of others, including that of the planet. Such is the existential condition of security. To many Western-educated minds this rendering of the meaning of security makes eminent sense. But within Indic Buddhist thought it is ontological and fundamental.

There is also a deeply strategic side to the Indic Mandala. The classical Indian strategist, Kautilya (4th century BCE), through the *Arthasastra* (*Book of the State*), conceptualized security as being a process based on relationships of power. The rajamandala system or circle of kingdoms – also rendered as statal circle – relies on a spiritually powerful centre (the ruler) for domestic security, which remains as important today as it was in the past, and a strategic mastery of diplomatic relations for external protection.

In terms of structure, a statal circle comprised about a dozen polities. With one of the 12 functioning as the orienting centre of strategic planning, it resembled a balance-of-power system based on calculations like "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Kautilya's system of inter-mandala relations provides a number of possible strategies. These include the pursuit of peace through treaty or alliances, a posture of neutrality, as well as war (Dellios 2003).

There was no clear division between the spiritual and secular properties of power, as this is a modern dichotomy, but represented an attempt to arrive at an efficacious conduct of *mandala* politics internally and externally. In Southeast Asia, where these Indic ideas of state took root and were grafted onto local belief systems, spiritually charismatic leadership – "men-of-prowess" (Wolters 1982) – became the aspiration among rulers. They sought to impress and retain followers, as well as lure another leader's population with their land, labour and military service. Within the prevailing Hindu-Buddhist religious culture it meant that such a ruler had "merit" and this could be increased through artistic and educational good works (such as the establishment of Buddhist universities), not only martial or economic power. In Hindu thinking, the ruler's educational merit was lifted by identification with the authority of Siva, "the guru of the universe" (Wolters 1999, 31). According to Reynolds (1995, 427): "From its root meaning of circle and its metaphoric meanings of totality and the perfection of Buddhahood, mandala has come to be a trope for the cluster of features that encode ancestor divinization, territory, and chiefly authority."

When divorced from its political and historical context, such charismatic chiefly authority can become a threat to a modern state's domestic security. The phenomenon of "informal sovereignties" in Southeast Asia is one in which strong local leaders supplement or carve out authority from the formal state, weakening (even challenging) its sovereignty. Religious and other militias, as well as crime organizations are noted as playing the modern "men-of-prowess" role (Barker 2016). Such non-traditional security threats to the state express what the Chinese would call the *yin* of mandala politics, while "causal interdependence" with its planetary consciousness represents the *yang* dimension.

Together they form a whole in which fragility, contingency and wider horizons of renewal are bound together.

The Chinese Paradox

To the modern state of the People's Republic of China the *yin* of "informal sovereignties" is a familiar story but under a different banner. Known as of the "three evils" they comprise "terrorism, separatism, and extremism" – the last of these referring to religious extremism. They represent the new age of NTS threats that, for Beijing at least, had overtaken traditional threats of border wars with its neighbors (as occurred with India in 1962, the Soviet Union in 1969 and China's last war, Vietnam, in 1979). Budget allocations in the current decade show that domestic security spending has outstripped external defence allocations by about 20 percent for "several years" according to Chin (2018), and reveal higher rates of annual increase (Zenz 2018).

These "three evils" are also highly placed in the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a new style of security grouping which, unlike the conventionally-conceived military alliance, NATO, finds the sources of insecurity within itself. Thus apart from seeking to enhance the norm of "good neighborliness" and promote development across the region, there is the call to "jointly counteract terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations" (SCO Charter Article 1). Since its Beijing-inspired inception in 2001, and before that its Shanghai-Five predecessor of 1996, the SCO has grown to include another region prone to fragility: South Asia. Pakistan stands out most in terms of "informal sovereignties," especially in the tribal areas of its North West Frontier province where, as Tim Marshall (2015, 206) memorably writes, "a Pakistani army containing Panjabis, Sindhis, Baluchis and Kashmiris (and some Pashtun) is considered a foreign force once it moves into the tribal areas." The SCO's current membership comprises India, Kazakhstan, China, the Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. There are also a number of observer and dialogue partners.

In speaking about the "three evils" and their importance in the grander scheme of regional security surrounding China, this label not only provides a certain common ground with the unbridled *yin* aspect of the *Indic Mandala* in today's world, but also leads to a contrarian view of the narrative of the *Chinese Paradox*. One of the ironies here is that there is little evidence of the first paradox to be discussed in this article, *harmony in difference*, being found in the border provinces of Tibet or Xinjiang. These "Autonomous Regions" the Beijing authorities deem to be hotbeds of the "three evils," and have employed punitive (including domestic counter-terrorism) measures (Dellios 2019). However, the ruthless treatment of perceived dissidents and their confinement in heavily guarded "re-education" camps strays far from the ideals that China's foremost philosopher Confucius (Kong Fuzi, 551-479 BCE) espoused – especially *Ren* (仁, benevolence) and *Shu* (恕 reciprocity or consideration for others). The PRC policies are more in line with "harmonized" conformity and resemble another traditional philosophy, that of Legalism (*Fa-jia*, 法家). With its harsh punishments and standardization of

systems of state and society (rather than diversification), it uses law for state control of the population compared to the more humane approach taught by Confucius.

Harmony (*he*, 和) represents a core doctrine in Chinese culture and is particularly emphasized in the teachings of Confucius. The paradox of *harmony in difference* (or *harmony in diversity*) derives from the notion that differences, be they ethno-cultural, religious, socio-economic or those of nationality, can cause conflict. This relates to the processes by which 'in' and 'out' groups/tribes/societies are formed. Islam as a cultural other had been etched in European historical consciousness by Islamic conquest of Christian lands and the crusades which followed. For the Russians it was the "Tartar Yoke" from Mongol conquest. In an everyday sense, people construct roles for themselves in relation to an 'other'. This is not necessarily a cause for condemnation, but boundaries between *us* and *them*, *self* and *other* can be used to create an enemy, diminish or malign the *other*.

However, when difference is perceived, it need not convert to threat. Rather it may be likened to the harmony of instruments playing in an orchestra, or singers in a choir. One of the early meanings of the Chinese word for harmony is one singer replying to another harmoniously. The culinary metaphor is also instructive. The root character (和) of grain and mouth together suggests preparing food in a balanced way so that it satisfies taste and life-giving nutrition (Dellios and Ferguson 2013, ch.2). *Harmony in difference* is therefore paradoxical only when viewed from a threat-disposed perspective. Yet such a perspective is sufficiently prevalent for turning *harmony in difference* into a conditional paradox. Here the narrative of domestic threat has overwhelmed the inclusive perspective of early Confucian thought.

Another paradox in Chinese philosophy is *actionless action* (*wu-wei*), prized by the more naturalistic counterpart of Confucianism, that of Daoism. This is not inaction, but rather a spontaneous action, or a productive absence of overreaction and micro-management. Being in harmony with the Dao (Tao) or the Way – hence this philosophical school's name of Daoism – is the key message. Its classic text, the *Laozi* (named after its legendary master) is also known as the *Book of the Way and its Power* (*Daodejing*). This book explains the Dao in *wu-wei* terms, saying that the Dao "invariably does nothing (*wu-wei*) and yet there is nothing that is not done." More precisely: "To make complete without acting (*wu-wei*), and to obtain without seeking: this is what is meant by the activities of Heaven" (Lao Tzu I:37).While laudable, and certainly a humane improvement on authoritarian Legalism when applied to forcible "harmonizing" of differences, as has occurred in China's restive regions, it can have its drawbacks in dealing with NTS threats of the environment, climate change, and energy policy. Unless there is a clear plan of action, the *actionless action* paradox could prove to be a luxury that policy-makers can ill-afford. *Wu-wei* recommends itself, however, as the second phase when norms and attitudinal changes work effortlessly to abide by forward-planning climate policies.

Another Daoist paradox that contributes to the Chinese narrative of security is the dictum that "the soft can control the hard, the weak can control the strong." This was the advice proffered in a first century BCE military text, known as *The Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* (Sawyer, trans. 2007). It constitutes one of the *Seven Military Classics* that were a familiar educational resource informing military minds throughout dynastic time, just as the Confucian classics were for the civil service. *The Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*, attributed to a general in the Han dynasty, speaks of the need to balance different forms of power, finding that a proper mixture of four aspects of power – soft, hard, weak, strong – are needed: "Combine these four and control them appropriately" (Sawyer, trans. 2007, 292). This military advice recalls its Confucian counterpart in which difference or diversity constituting harmony in the above paradox of *harmony in difference*. Such thinking explains the related strategic paradox that *the strong need the weak*. There is a tendency for the stronger (in terms of comprehensive national strength) to need the weaker; but equal powers take longer to cooperate.[4]

Thus the United States needs its allies for its global and regional security policies. China has relied on weaker, developing nations for political support, the most memorable being the admission of the PRC as the only legitimate representative of China to the UN in 1971, thanks to the support from 26 African countries, among others. Recognition of the PRC and its One China policy among Pacific and African states, in rivalry with the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan, has continued apace. By 2019, only 14 poor and small states recognized Taipei as the legitimate China politically. Economic opportunities (including via the BRI) also provide a huge incentive for putting into practice the paradoxical motto of the strong needing the weak. Besides diplomatic support, China needs energy resources from Africa, the Middle East and Eurasia if it is to continue on its stated trajectory of becoming a "modern socialist global power" by 2049 – the country's centenary anniversary since its founding in 1949 and the close of the "century of humiliation."

To return to the Chinese general's observation that the strong need the weak *but equal powers take longer to cooperate*, this can be seen in the continued undercurrent of rivalry between China and India, and China and Japan. As China and the United States become increasingly regarded as "peer competitors," so too their cooperation is losing its bearings. Economic mutual dependence has succumbed to trade conflict. By contrast, China and Russia are cooperating rather than competing as they too need the "weak" in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (and each other) in light of the problems associated with a more belligerent West (led by the US). This Western stance has been in response to Russian and Chinese perceived transgressions (such as annexation of Crimea by Russia and militarization of South China Sea by China), a manifestation of a changing order that seeks its own points of geopolitical navigation. However, the quest for stability

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[4] This was said by a Chinese general who was also an academic at the China National Defense University in his presentation on East Asian security, attended by the author. Symposium organized by the Center for Strategic and Conflict Management of the China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU), PRC, and the Center for Global Studies, New Haven University, USA, held at CFAU, Beijing, June 22-26, 2009.

in an inherently unstable Central and South Asia is also a uniting framework for Sino-Russian cooperation.

Future Directions and Lessons Drawn

Just as cultural otherness can fuel insecurity on the one hand and harmony on the other, it can also be subsumed within a larger identity of common ground. This can be seen in the EU pooling of sovereignty in current times, but it has also been a fundamental characteristic of Islamic culture and one which has a chance to re-energize. Class, culture, race, and other distinctions of *us* and *them* may not be so compelling when viewed in the larger scheme of things – that is, the wider identity of a community of believers (*ulama*). This idea acts as a powerful magnet for meaning in the global format. Moreover, a security narrative of Islamic transition under the influence of globalization holds even greater potential with the disgrace and effective defeat in the Middle East of renegade sects such as Islamic State. It is not only Islam that speaks of community on this scale. The UN itself remains an ardent believer in the global whole. Kofi Annan, a former secretary-general of the United Nations and recipient of the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize, expressed it this way:

> What makes a community? What binds it together? For some it is faith. For others it is the defense of an idea, such as democracy. Some communities are homogeneous, others multicultural. Some are as small as schools and villages, others as large as continents. Today, of course, more and more communities are virtual, as people, even in the remotest locations on earth, discover and promote their shared values through the latest communications and information technologies. (Annan 2009)

With the expansion of multipolarity – or in more mandalic terms, polycentrism with geocultural diversity – the West's global projection of power resembles a historical phase, albeit a singularly influential one. In creating the conditions of contemporary globalization the West must contend – and be changed by – the world beyond itself. Narratives of security in Asian geopolitics continue to shape the policies of state and non-state actors in the Asian international context. There are lessons in this for all the players, but especially for China which is fast approaching the tipping point of returning the East to a geostrategic centrality.

For China, with its internal security budget soaring, much work remains to be done. Taking a leaf from the page of Kautilya's statal circle, a spiritually powerful centre is more efficacious in the cause of domestic security than internment camps. "Trust in virtue not walls," as a traditional Chinese saying has it. For President Xi Jinping, this means more Confucian humanism and less Legalist punishment for the diversity that comprises a much sought harmony. The Islamic community of believers have much to offer in this respect. The Uighurs need to feel part of the Chinese political community, which socialism in its universal ideals should understand. Buddhists and Christians would appreciate a more accepting, faith-based diplomacy of inclusion too. Socialism under the sculpting hand of globalization is pliable enough to accommodate a post-secular world. The problem lies in the CCP's narrowing vision of its role, which increasingly appears to be one of Legalist survival. Historically speaking, this too is a phase with its dialectical

rituals of socialist understanding. A return to *harmony in difference*, *actionless action* and the *balance of different forms of power* would do more for the CCP's continued longevity than a strategy that wins "strike hard" campaigns but loses the "hearts and minds" war.

Irrespective of current changes in power dynamics, and how the leading states in the region respond to the security challenges that they face together and individually, what remains is that narratives of security in Asian geopolitics continue to shape the policies of state and non-state actors. The philosophers of the East have not been abandoned. They form part of a pluralist construction of security by diverse cultures now interacting more intensely that ever before.

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