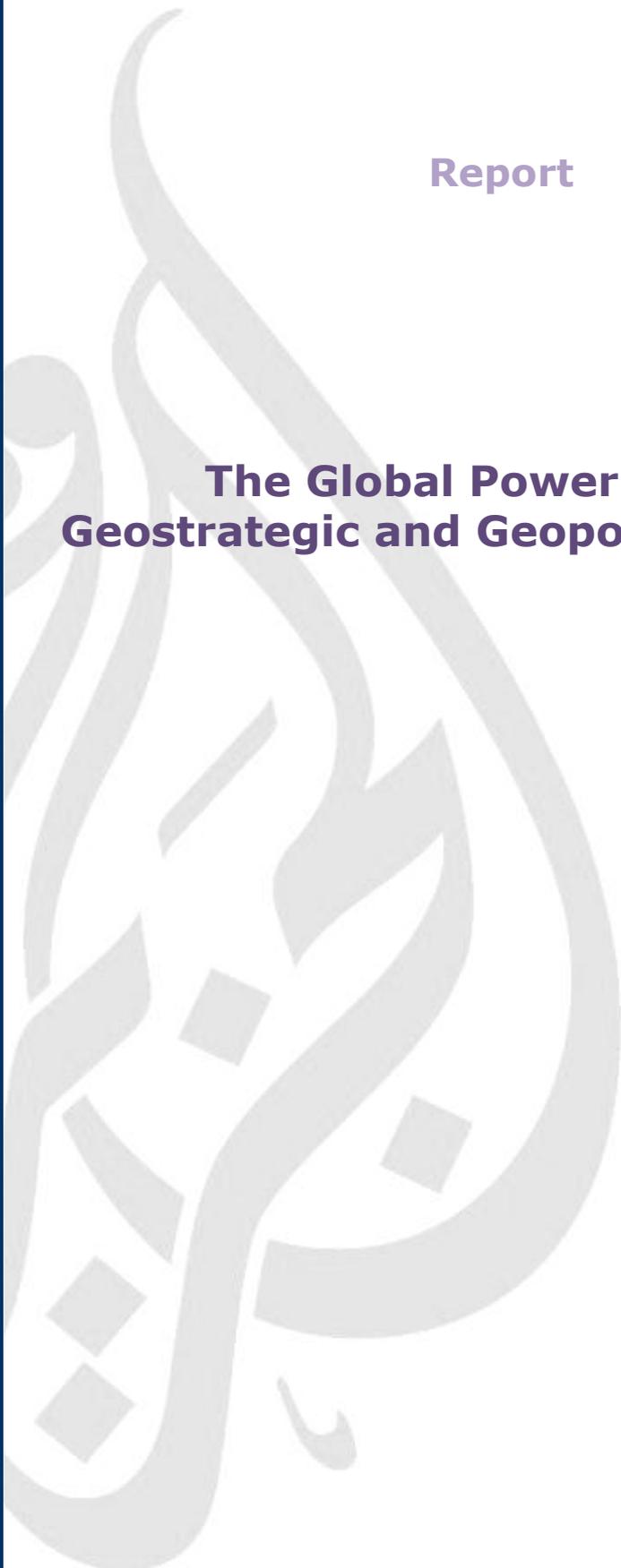




مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Report

The Global Power Shift to Asia: Geostrategic and Geopolitical Implications



Subhash Kapila*



Introductory Observations

Global power shifts are strategically and politically significant, as normally they are rare and chronologically well-spaced out. Global power shifts tend to displace or restructure existing international orders and are therefore prone to generating strategic and political turbulence.

The global strategic landscape and political and financial structures so far have been dominated by the United States and Europe. Asia remained dominated by European colonisation for nearly two centuries and was thereafter dominated by the United States comprehensively and strategically for another century.

Asia's economic resurgence and cumulative financial strengths over the last two decades have largely contributed to the global shift of power to Asia. Today, Asia overshadows the United States and Europe in economic and financial strength. This has greatly contributed to Asia's growing political leverages internationally.

In tandem with Asia's economic resurgence has taken place the fast-track military modernisation and expansion of Asian military capabilities. The continued growth of Asian economic, political and military strengths have contributed to the emergence of Asia's leading countries – China, India and Japan – as global players on an ascending trajectory.

Global power no longer resides in the trans-Atlantic region. The global shift of power to Asia portends that an "Asia unbound" and consciousness of its comprehensive strengths would now increasingly demand greater say in the strategic, political and economic future of the world.

In 2011-2012, the United States seems to have officially acknowledged the global shift of power to Asia, which the international strategic and political analysts had pointed out for more than a decade. Acknowledging this global shift of power to Asia, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted, "It is becoming increasingly clear that the world's strategic and economic center of gravity will be the Asia Pacific, from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of America."

An assessment of military capabilities and defence economies, *The Military Balance 2012* published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies comes to the same conclusion – i.e. that global power has shifted to Asia.

The debate on global shift of power to Asia intensified after the global financial crisis of 2008. The reality that global power has shifted to Asia is undisputed but what is being contested is whether the United States as a result is in "absolute decline" or "relative decline."

The Obama Doctrine of 2012 directing a United States strategic pivot to Asia Pacific through the relocation of U.S. forces from Europe and reductions in the Middle East further substantiates that the global shift of power to Asia is a matter of fact.

Significantly, unlike the essentially military challenges to the existing international order in the early twentieth Century by Germany and Japan, the current power challenges and power shifts in global power are being generated fundamentally by Asia's economic and financial strengths – all contributing to significant Asian political leverages over the established international order.

How Asia's increased defence expenditures arising from growing economic strength shape Asia's future strategic roles with greater strategic might really depends on whether the challenged current unipolar power, the United States, chooses to be adaptive or confrontational to Asia's newfound power and military influence.

The global shift of power to Asia presents geostrategic and geopolitical challenges at both the global and regional level. This paper intends to examine these challenges under the following headings:

- The Power Shift to Asia: Global Implications
- Geostrategic and Geopolitical Impact of the Global Shift of Power on the Asia Pacific
- The Impact of the Power Shift to Asia on the Middle East and the Gulf Region
- Concluding Perspectives

The Power Shift to Asia: Global Implications

Asia's combination of geostrategic locations and energy-rich regions as well as vibrant and dynamic economies imparts to Asia an unrivalled geostrategic and geopolitical significance in global power play. Thus, when the global economic and political centres of gravity shift to Asia, global power-play is significantly affected.

Geostrategically, the global shift of power to Asia marks the end of the United States' unipolar comprehensive domination of global affairs. Multi-polarity with Asian powers emerging as multiple poles will replace the existing unipolar global strategic structure.

Asia's military rise of its leading powers—China, India and Japan—fuelled by sustained economic growths is reducing the military power differentials with the United States.

In terms of advanced weaponry and military hardware, Asia's military profiles are rising and budgetary constraints are limiting military profiles of United States and Europe. Asia today boasts of six nuclear weapons states with sizeable missiles arsenals.

Military footprints of the leading Asian powers are now visible all across the globe on UN peacekeeping missions. For example, Asian navies operating far away from their home bases are involved in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. These are the first beginnings of Asian countries' bigger military roles worldwide.

Geopolitically, Asia and especially Asia's leading powers are emerging as more politically assertive and demanding on global political challenges and issues.

Politically, this has led to Asian major powers to vociferously demand the restructuring of global political and financial institutions like the UN Security Council, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to be more reflective of the global shift of power to Asia.

Finally, it needs to be reiterated that at the global level the United States may continue to be the dominant strategic and political power, but that global predominance will increasingly be questioned and contested by Asia's rising powers, more specifically China and India.

As a Eurasian power, Russia's joining of China and India makes an unbeatable and powerful strategic triangle to contend with the United States.

The last global implication that needs to be noted is that with the reduction of its capabilities, the United States itself is now seeking to enlist Asian nations in military operations that it is unable to undertake.

Geostrategic and Geopolitical Implications of the Global Shift of Power on the Asia Pacific

The Asia Pacific is predominantly the region to which the economic and political centre of global power has shifted to in what is being now labelled the "global shift of power to Asia." With the exception of the last decade when the United States was militarily distracted by Iraq and Afghanistan, the Asia Pacific has been the centre of gravity of U.S. military power. It was the scene of two major U.S. wars in Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War era.

The Asia Pacific has been strategically vital to the United States for two major strategic and military reasons. The foremost American imperative was that its outer western perimeter of U.S. homeland defence in East Asia depended on its military allies, namely South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, etc.

The second strategic imperative was that the Asia Pacific region was used by the United States during the Cold War for the containment of its superpower rival, the former Soviet Union.

The global shift of power to Asia arises to a great extent from China's stupendous economic rise and advanced technological military modernisation and upgrade of its military forces. This now seems to be unleashing a new China-centric Cold War by the United States in the Asia Pacific as China could militarily challenge the United States in East Asia.

India and Japan's rising military profiles do not raise U.S. military concerns as Japan is a long-standing military ally of the United States and India is being assiduously wooed by the United States for a substantial strategic partnership with the containment of China in view.

Geostrategically, the impact of the global shift of power to Asia would have been severe for the United States had Asia presented itself as a united strategic entity capable of strategic cohesiveness and integrated strategic responses to global strategic challenges.

Notably, the global shift of power to Asia in the geostrategic context has ended up in a diffusion of power at the terminal end to a multipolar strategic combination of China, India, and Japan.

The global shift of power to Asia ending in strategic diffusion between China, India and Japan would have been a substantial strategic gain for the United States. The United States, however, remains strategically disadvantaged by the growing reality of the diminution of its global power and its shrinking defence budgets, both of which impact its military profile in the Asia Pacific.

Geopolitically, resulting from the global power shift to Asia, even traditional U.S. allies in the region are not all that politically certain of U.S. policies. Nonetheless, the "China threat" that weighs heavily on China's smaller neighbours in the region make them look towards countervailing American power especially in the South China Sea disputes.

In sheer geostrategic, geopolitical and geoeconomic terms, nowhere across the globe has the United States been so adversely affected and challenged as in the Asia Pacific.

Furthermore, in the Asia Pacific, the United States has to strategically reckon not only with China, India and Japan but with Russia as well as a Eurasian and Pacific power with strategic links to China and India.

With a Cold War between the United States and China, both indulging in brinkmanship strategies, a major flare-up cannot be ruled out. Global flashpoints in Korea, Taiwan and South China Sea will strategically challenge both nations.

Still, one thing is certain: in such an adversarial military confrontation, Asian nations are unlikely to unite militarily and politically with the United States against China.

Despite their differences and disputes, major Asian countries are showing signs of political cooperation including in the economic sphere. A major example of this is the exponential rise in two-way trade between China and India.

The Impact of the Global Shift of Power to Asia on the Middle East and the Gulf Region

Perceptively, the Middle East and the six Gulf states were virtually isolated from the rest of Asia by the United States and Europe for their own strategic reasons and exclusive claim on the energy resources of the region. The United States has exercised unipolar control of the Middle East, particularly the six Gulf states, ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf war against Iraq.

The Middle East region inclusive of the Gulf states has remained in turmoil as a result of two major U.S. military interventions in Iraq, the events of 9/11 (which brought intense anti-Americanism in the Arab public), and the whipped-up hysteria of the "Iran threat."

This had impaired the flourishing of independent policy postures of Middle Eastern nations until only recently. Turbulence still exists due to intra-regional power tussles between regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states were virtually the first to recognise the global shift of power to Asia and make discernible shifts away from the dominant external powers controlling the Middle East – the United States and Europe/NATO.

The global economic crisis of 2008 and the strength of Asian economies to overcome the storm (unlike the case for United States and major European powers) convinced Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to "look east." These nations diversified their political and economic relations with Russia, China, India and Japan, which in any case were anchored to the region for energy and security issues.

With surplus oil revenue funds, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states now sought to undertake substantial investments in China and India especially in the energy and petrochemical sectors.

In March 2009, the Emir of Qatar stated: "China is coming, India is coming, and Russia is on its way too. I do not know if America and Europe will still be in the lead." This of course has been a two-way process with significant political and economic impact for both sides. The signing of the Saudi Arabia-India Strategic Partnership Agreement testifies that a global power shift to Asia is an established fact.

The global shift of power to Asia, the diversion of Middle Eastern surplus funds to Asian economies, the American strategic pivot to the Asia Pacific and away from the Middle East, and Russia's substantive re-entry into the Middle East all point to a significant fact: with the rise of Asian powers, the United States has been forced to cede strategic and political space to Asian powers in the Middle East.

Asian powers like China and India alongside Russia also enjoy the political confidence of Middle Eastern powers like Turkey, Iran and Egypt. With the global shift of power to Asia, they occupy a unique place in Middle Eastern and Gulf affairs to politically bridge the divides that exist in the Middle East and the Gulf arising from intra-regional power tussles and externally driven threat perceptions.

The emergence of strategic and political convergences between abundant energy and surplus financial resources for investment of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states coupled

with the dynamic economies of the Asia Pacific will lead to the emergence of a significant "game-changer" in global affairs. The process seems to have begun with economic inter-dependence between the two opposite geographical ends of Asia.

Concluding Perspectives

In conclusion, the following perspectives are offered:

- The global shift of power to Asia is now a reality and took nearly two decades; and it can only be expected to become more substantial.
- The United States' global power is declining irrespective of the fact whether it is in "absolute decline" or "relative decline." Even if it is only in "relative decline," the chances of the restoration of its unipolar global predominance are slim.
- The Asian powers that will hold centre stage in global affairs in the decades to come are China, India and Japan. As a Eurasian power, Russia needs to be added to this list.
- Despite their differences, Asian powers can be expected to explore and evolve strategic and political convergences to make the global power shift to Asia more substantial.
- While Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia and Gulf states adopt "look east" policy formulations, Asia Pacific countries will increasingly and correspondingly adopt "look west" policy formulations to fill the strategic and political spaces in the Middle East ceded by a strategically diminished U.S. strategic pivot to the Asia Pacific.
- To break free from its captivity of sustained turbulence resulting presently from the hysteria of the "Iran threat," the Middle East needs to independently arrive at its own perceived threats. As in the Asia Pacific, enough strategic and political space exists for regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey to co-exist.

*Indian writer specialised in foreign policy issues and strategic affairs.

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