

Geopolitics and the relationship between China and India *

Gertjan Dijkink

What does it mean to analyze the relations between states from a geopolitical point of view? There are several interpretations of the term geopolitics and it may be instructive to deal with them separately in my commentary on the relations between the rising superpowers China and India. Although somewhat academic, the approach is useful since our audience today is also employed in education.

1. Geomorphology and borders

There is an old tradition to judge the strength of countries from the degree of **geographical logic**, that means a territorial shape that is easy to defend (extreme negative example is non-contiguity as in former West- and East-Pakistan) or the presence/absence of defendable physical borders (mountains). According to Robert Kaplan India is not complete “in fact, the present Indian state does not conform to the borders of the subcontinent” (Kaplan 2012, p. 233). To put it in other words: India suffers from vulnerability to threats from the outside world. We may immediately remark that it did not prevent two Chinese attacks across the most mountainous border in the world, the Himalayas, in 1962. Moreover borders that do not follow the relief map are the rule rather than an exception in this world. Conflicts would be overwhelming worldwide if this constituted a very grave disadvantage in the external relations of countries. In the case of the Chinese-Indian border we can also add that high altitudes may be a source of conflict if they are the origin of important resources like water. There is a real problem with China’s plans to divert water from the rivers that rise on the Tibetan plateau like the Brahmaputra. It may cause shortage of water and occasional floods in lower (Indian) regions.

From a strategic point of view there is another alarming development on the Tibetan plateau: the inexplicable boosting of military infrastructure by China: an enormous increase in the capacity of the Golmud-Lhasa railway, the construction of 58.000 km of new highway, 5 new airfields, 58 small aperture satellite terminals, a very dense glass-fibre network. Is this all intended to involve the Tibetan in the thrust of globalization? Military exercises in operating at extreme high altitudes including the provision of pressure cabins and rocket launchers seem to suggest a different aim. Anyhow, high mountains are not necessarily a geopolitically reassuring condition.

2. Eurasia as geographical pivot in the history of international relations

This is the old theory of Mackinder (1861-1947), reinterpreted by Spykman (1893-1943) and recently by Robert Kaplan (1952-). They all share the same awe for the mystical power of Eurasia, particularly the capability of controlling the continental ‘rimland’ that has access to the ocean. The theory is inspired by the fear in maritime powers like the British Empire and the US that an invincible power with great land resources and well-protected harbors may rise in Eurasia. Now that the potential dangers from Europe (Germany and the USSR in the 20th century) have been subdued, China seems to be the most suitable state embodying such a danger. However, Mackinders fear about an amalgamation of the Eurasian land core (Russia) and the maritime Rimland has stealthily slipped away. The revival of the theory tells us primarily something about the struggle of the US to keep a grip on the new developments in Asia rather than on the nature of conflicts that may occur in South and East-Asia. This is not to deny that any rising (regional) superpower will inevitably become involved in serious conflicts with other states. We encounter here two rapidly developing economic giants that, to invoke a term of the 19th century German political geographer Friedrich Ratzel, have an expanding ‘spatial consciousness’ (*Raumbewusstsein*).

* Lecture at the educational conference of the *Atlantic Commission* in Utrecht, March 6, 2013.

3. Chessboard pattern / balance of power

Any differentiation in the degree of hostility/friendship between states may easily result in the formation of a checkerboard pattern in international relations. If two states develop a negative relationship we may safely predict that a third state which is befriended with the one will also be more or less hostile to the other. It is not surprising that the discordant relations between India and both Pakistan and China have resulted in cooperation between Pakistan and China and that the former tense relations between China and the USSR have resulted in rapprochement between India and the USSR. The US tends to replace the former USSR in South Asia and this not very compatible with its current dependency on Pakistan (Afghanistan) as increasing tensions testify. If a state develops a global significance as superpower, the chessboard pattern may transform into broader regional alliances that display the geographical phenomenon of territorial **containment** (like the cold War). Thus the countries of South and Southeast Asia attach some value to relations or treaties with the US and India as a countervailing power against China although they take care not to provoke that country. They avoid entering into alliances that really operate as a defensive wall against China but, by participating in a multilateral framework, they want to show their freedom to choose from a varied set of strategical options, that they are not dependent on China. In all these processes the danger lurks of creating a syndrome of encirclement or paranoia in the opponent. We have seen the disastrous consequences of such paranoia in the history of Europe. China suffers from it (in a global sense) but India as well particularly concerning China's maritime projects.

4. Geopolitical codes or stereotypes

A geopolitical code indicates the location of a country in a theory of good and evil which is used by politicians and public in another country. For example US president Reagan used the term *rogue state* for a number of states that do not comply with the norms of international behavior, i.e. harboring terrorists, not living up to agreements, etc. *Axis of evil*, a term use by George W. Bush, denoted a similar category. One of the most emotionally charged categories in the Indian repertory was *non-aligned* state. It was a discursive and political strategy to distance oneself from the 'cold warriors'. Chinese sometimes seem to attribute the geopolitical code of a 'languishing world power' to the US. It is the hallmark of a power that one does not need to fight actively, one only gently accompanies it on its inevitable way to decay. India and China do not apply this type of stereotype to each other, they are engaged in a continuous exploration of the others strategic position and strength and they are alarmed by each change in the international posture of the other. In this respect there is certainly a question of fear of encirclement which is particularly stirred up by China's activities in the Indian Ocean.

5. Logistics in a global network

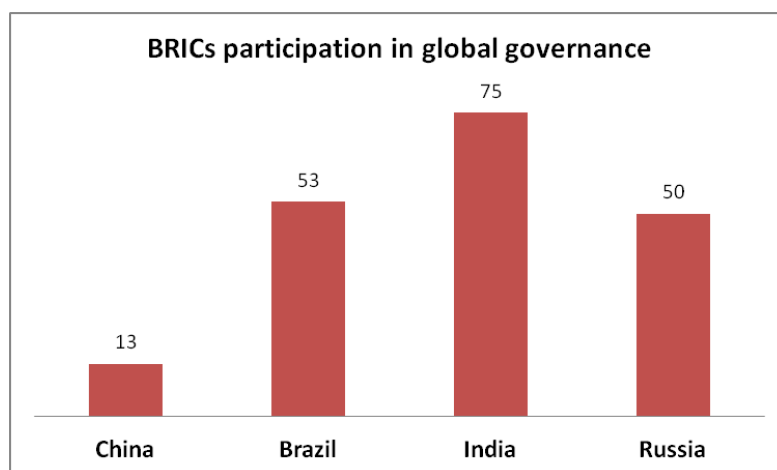
Notwithstanding territorial conflicts in which India was involved (with Pakistan and China) we should recognize that power in the 'age of globalization' does not primarily concern the possession of territory but increasingly access to water, food, energy and minerals. Philosophers of internet will tell you also that we live in an age in which property is less important than access. The economic growth of China and India has unleashed enormous streams of raw materials and products that focus on the Indian Ocean. This has shifted the discussion to the geopolitical vulnerability of this area. As Kaplan writes "The Indian Ocean is where the rivalry between the United States and China in the Pacific interlocks with the regional rivalry between China and India, and also with America's fight against Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, which includes America's attempt to contain Iran" (Kaplan 2010, p.9). There is a common interest among these international players but also mutual distrust. China fears a possible blocking of the entries to the Indian Ocean in the Strait of Malacca (access from the South China sea), the Strait of Bab-el-

Mandeb (access to the Red Sea and Suez canal) and the Strait of Hormuz (to the Persian Gulf). India, for its part, fears the ‘pearl necklace’ of Chinese commercial and naval ports on the territory of India’s neighbors like Birma, SriLanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan. During recent years commentators have emphasized that the two countries act with caution in avoiding doing things or making statements that could amplify mutual antagonism. One has also stressed the tendency of China to present its logistic connections (like port facilities) as a network of commercial contacts rather than a type of extraterritorial settlements. In this way the contracting out of the management of Gwadar port (Pakistan) to the firm Singapore Port Authority has been explained as something that suits the Chinese policy style of merging the military and the civil, just like merging of public and private is characteristic of the Chinese economy. Yet, when the contract with SPA was cancelled by the Pakistani authorities, it appeared that China had always wanted Chinese authority on the ins and outs of Gwadar port.

This information would also fit the observation (of Kaplan and others) that there is a recent trend in China to emphasize territorial sovereignty even in domains where no exclusive rights from states are recognized internationally like the South China Sea. China has claimed sovereignty over the Scarborough bank (vs. Taiwan and Philippines), the Paracel isles (vs. Taiwan and Vietnam), the Spratly islands (vs. Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Philippines) and the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands (vs. Japan and Taiwan). The atmosphere of crisis created by such claims in the relationship between China and South-Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines is interpreted in India as a favorable circumstance because it in some way should eliminate China’s strategic pressure on the Indian Ocean.

From the part of China a sense of permanent siege is also sustained by global conditions that surpass the regional theatre. This is particularly caused by various internal events in China that have evoked international criticism such as the riots in Tibet (2008) and in Xinjiang (Uighurs 2009), the award of the Nobel peace prize to Liu Xiaobo (2010) and China’s keeping aloof of human rights violations during the Arab Spring or in Sudan. In these issues the Chinese defensive instincts are more irritated by the West and in particular the US than by its Asiatic region. They suspect the West of waging a war against China with the lethal weapon of ‘soft power’.

In their criticism on the West and the quick labeling of external interference as neocolonialism, China and India can agree with each other although India is much more embedded in a network of global governance. India’s diplomacy is more inclined to work with multilateral networks whereas China pursues bilateral relationships and divide and rule tactics. The Indian foreign policy elite is itself divided because one half wants to seize on any means to develop a strong position of alliances against China whereas the other half is still strongly attached to the traditional ideal of non-alignment.



Based on rank data from H. Wang and E. French 2013. The figures are recalculated by this author in order to represent the average rank on 13 indicators with a theoretical score of 100 meaning first rank on all indicators.

6. Conclusion

For the purpose of a geopolitical evaluation of the relations between China and India a geographical conclusion would be first of all that we cannot distinguish a clear territorial separation in spheres of influence as it still existed during the Cold War. The emphasis is not on territorial conquest although the two states have long lasting interests in the same geographical areas. This does not inevitably imply conflict unless there is a scarcity of strategic raw materials which turns international relations into a classic zero-sum-game. At this moment the main problem is mutual distrust and the undeniable fact that China pursues a hegemonic position, not only regionally but globally. According to some commentators China would be glad to leave world leadership (or global governance) to the US, an opinion that would fit the picture of the BRICs participation in global governance. However, this presumption ignores the strong desire of China to transcend the humiliations of the past and the wish to restore the superpower status of the pre-Qing dynasties. This may lead to conflicts because China still shows a tendency to create an Asian sphere of influence (incorporating states like Iran and Syria) even where no economic gains are in view. On the other hand this attitude stimulates other countries to build coalitions including India. For the time being this indicates a tendency in Asia toward a (gentle) *balance of power* rather than toward a massive (nuclear) conflict. This outcome would be consistent with Edward Luttwak's recent claim that real world hegemony is unattainable for the Chinese because they would always run into an ever growing coalition of countries that are bent on blocking China's rise to superpower status.

Literature

- Dijkink, Gertjan, 2009, 'India, geopolitiek en nieuwe machtsverhoudingen'. *Geografie* 18, pp. 8-11.
- Fingar, Thomas, 2012, 'China's vision of world order', In: Tellis, Ashley J. and Tanner, Travis, eds., *China's Military Challenge*. Seattle / Washington D.C. : The National Bureau of Asian Research, pp. 343-373.
- Gare, Frederic, 2012, 'Ocean Indien : La quête d'unité'. *Hérodote* 2012/2 (no. 145), pp. 6-20.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe, 2011, 'Inde-Chine, conflit et convergences. Litiges territoriaux, affirmation antioccidentale'. *Le Monde diplomatique*, mai 2011.
- Kaplan, Robert D., 2010, *Monsoon. The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. New York : Random House.
- Kaplan, Robert D., 2012, *The Revenge of Geography. What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*. New York : random House.
- Luttwak, Edward N., 2012, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*. Cambridge (Mass.) : Belknap Press.
- Pant, Harsh V., 2010, 'China's Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean and India-China Rivalry'. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 18-4-10, May 3, 2010.
- Sahgal, Arun, 2012, 'China's military modernization; Responses from India '. In: Tellis, Ashley J. and Tanner, Travis, eds., *China's Military Challenge*. Seattle / Washington D.C. : The National Bureau of Asian Research, pp. 277-305.
- Saint-Mézard, Isabelle, 2012, 'Quelles architectures de sécurité pour l'Océan Indien ?' *Hérodote* 2012/2 (no. 145), pp. 129-149.
- Siddi, Marco, 2011, 'Projecting economic power: the China factor'. *InStoria* 38, February 2011. http://www.instoria.it/home/economic_power_china.htm
- Wang, Hongying and French, Erik, 2013, 'China's participation in global governance from a comparative perspective'. *Asia Policy* 15 (National Bureau of Asian Research).