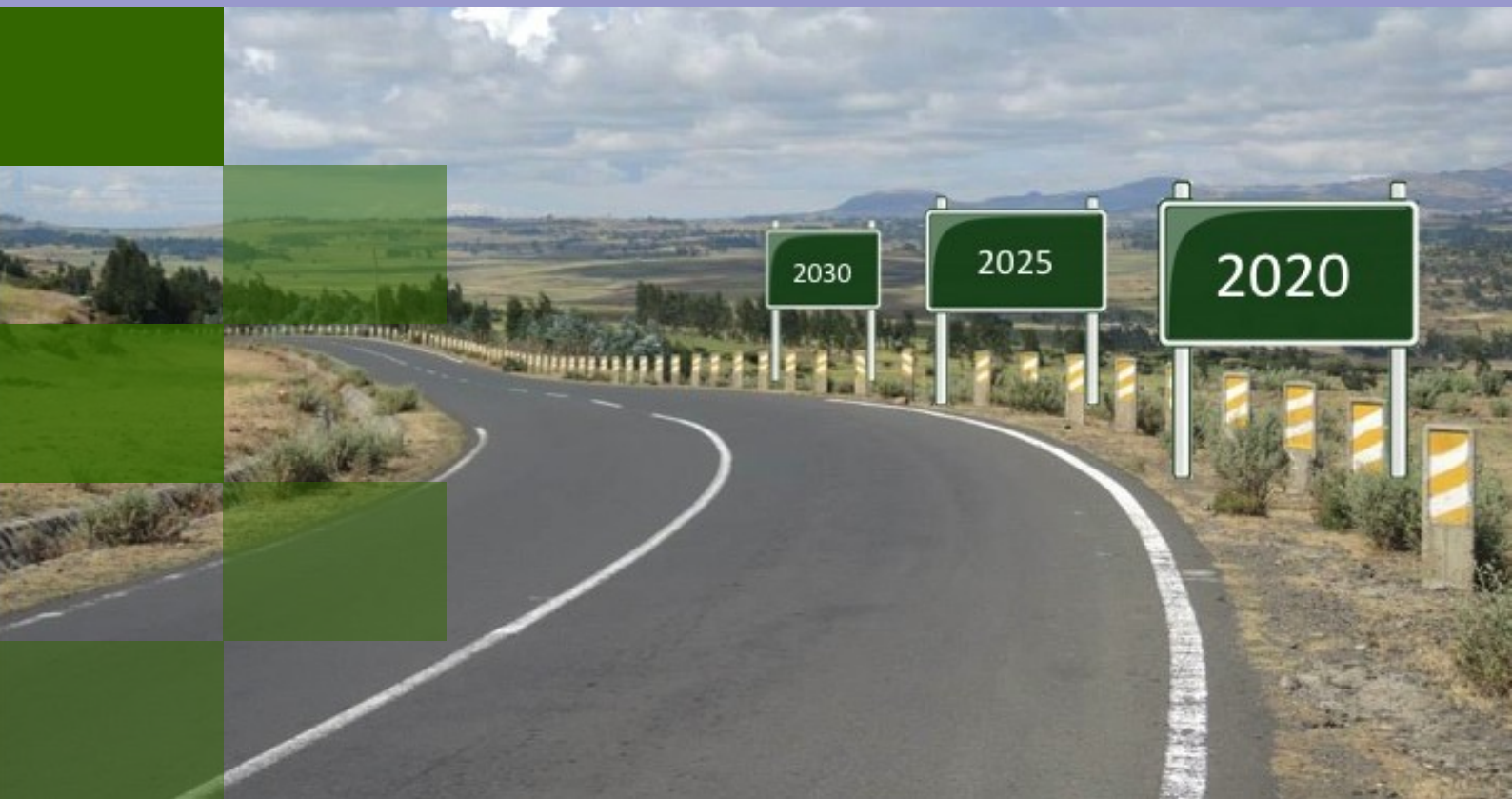


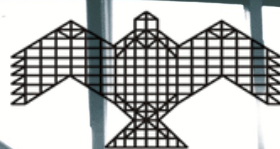
Trends. Threats. Projections

# Global Transformations: Four Tectonic Shifts

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# Global Transformations: Four Tectonic Shifts

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A quarter of a century after the demise of the Soviet Union that brought an end to the bi-polar confrontation of the Cold War, what is emerging today is a fluctuating plurality of on-the-verge-great powers. These verge powers are counselled at times and coerced at others, by one super power the USA. In this milieu the United States retains dominant influence over its European and Pacific allies, but finds itself in confrontation with China and Russia. Japan, Australia and India, also verge powers, politically finds an intuitive affinity towards the democratic covey led by America. Superimposed on this emerging global construct is the crumbling of the geographical order in West Asia put in place in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars. The trial of strength during the cold war assured a precarious peace in the region, however, a quarter of a century of inter-minable warfare and the stunning spread of radical Islam later, have exasperated the prospects of stability in the region.

## I

### The Crisis of Verge Powers

In West Asia Turkey is at war with the Kurds; the Kurds are at war with the Islamic State; the Americans target the Islamic State while militarily aiding the Kurds (and Turkey is an ally); Syria is at war with the rebels within who gain inspiration and provide resources to the Islamic State; Russia has intervened militarily on the side of the Assad regime in Syria while the US has been providing military aid to the rebels. If this is not entangled enough, the Saudis provide tacit support to the Islamic State while the latter finds in Afghanistan and Pakistan a fertile breeding ground for Islamic Jihadists. All this at a time when America is cozying up to Iran who are in the cauldron on the side of the Assad regime

Some have argued that contemporary convulsions in West Asia are fallout of fault lines that formed through imperial policies in the post First World War era which surgically created states there with neither a sense of nationhood nor historical tradition. This overlooks the fact that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire left no successor states other than groups with tribal loyalties. Others have today justified that solution lies in catalysing the process of universal education and technological unification with the rest of the world. However such an overly simplistic answer does not take into account that the spread of education and technology (as seen in the first two of decades of the twenty first century) has shown little or no ascendancy over human feelings to determine the course of geopolitics. Wars and militarism appear more a function of nationalism and psychology played out against a backdrop of civilizational and religious animosities. Whether motivation for conflict lies in the quest for power or piety is a moot question, but how they affect the international system and how the verge powers respond is the crisis of our times.

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In the maritime domain, convulsions in West Asia, tumbling of oil prices, global contraction of economies (barring India and China) and the emer-

gence of 'verge powers' have resulted in growing disregard for evolving conventions and an urge towards establishing proprietary markets and trade routes over sea (and land) and, in what must be seen as a historical paradox, of the return of a new form of colonialism. Through favours, money and the creation of local elites; control of national resources of the lesser developed powers has sought to be imposed through the agency manikin existing dispensations. Every verge power (whether it be China, Japan, Russia, Germany, Australia or indeed India) has, in varying degree, indulged in this practice with a difference that China not only seeks proprietary control over the instruments of growth, but also pursues change on its terms; while Russia's militaristic involvement in simmering West Asia and Ukraine runs the hazard of sparking off a larger conflict.

What is becoming clear is that nations involved, blinded by their immediate interests are unable to foresee the nature and full extent of the ordeal which confronts them. So, China in order to fuel its growth and buy the quiescence of its people embarks on a grandiose scheme to establish a 'maritime silk route' while seeking sovereignty over the South China Sea; Russia, on the other hand, sees strategic opportunity both in West Asia and Ukraine to regain some of its battered national prestige.

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## II Four Tectonic Shifts

To get a deeper sense of the transformations that are occurring in contemporary global affairs one notes four tectonic shifts. First, the diminishing sheen in what was the dazzling two and a half decades of double digit growth which provided global impetus to economic activity and military sway of China; as it shrinks the danger it faces is a bellicose and fractious populace that may not any longer suffer an authoritarian dispensation without the enticement of unparalleled growth. Therefore, for China and its politburo, garnering resources and control over the instruments of growth becomes an imperative. This may, to some extent explain the urge to securing resources and its flow.

Second, the fall and rise of Russia from a one time super power to that of 'verge' status attempting to salvage a little of its past with neither the economic clout nor the ideological resolve. This poses a uniquely prickly predicament for, within a period of a quarter of a century to have been reduced to pariah status and then rise amongst the verge powers with little to offer but its creaking arms industry, vast resources of primary produce in its icy wastes and a rapidly ageing demography. It need hardly be said that for Russia to view the changing challenges of the twenty first century international system in terms of early 20th Century great power struggles between governing elites emphasising hegemonic struggles, obscure imperial aspirations, competition for resources all to bolster state power is to brew a recipe for its second collapse.

The re-emergence of Russia's power status shrouds some astounding weaknesses. Above all its dependence on a petro-economy (30% of GDP and 80% of exports) at a time when oil prices are plummeting, grossly inefficient industrial base and declining living standard coupled with massive capital flight (\$ 130 billion in 2015 despite draconian anti flight laws) and the economy in recession. Russia could not have failed to note that challenges of the day are driven far more by people their energy, motivations, skills to globalize and network the instruments of wealth creation, urge to collective security and strategic effectiveness rather than raw military power. Recent wars in West Asia and Afghanistan have underscored the questionable efficacy of military power against even rag-tag militias equipped with little else than the internet, access to small arms and willingness to Jihad.

Third, the breaking out of Japan from its post World War Two enforced pacifism as it finds out today that commercial dynamism and financial clout do not constitute a security shield in the contemporary anarchic world of international power politics. After all the deepest anxieties of Japan is of an over extended USA weakening in its resolve to uphold its Asian commitments at a time when China has announced its intentions to dominate the West Pacific and the trade routes of the Indian Ocean. All the while, looming to the North and West of Japan across the Sea of Okhotsk is a declining and restive Russia showing a nervous propensity to reclaim its lost stature. It is equally clear that for the USA to bring about strategic rebalancing in the region it cannot do so with a fettered Japan (as exemplified by the strategic strictures of the San Francisco Treaty 1951, Cairo Conference 1945, Japanese Instrument of Surrender 1945 and the Potsdam Conference 1943).

And lastly the sole super power, USA, veering its strategic pivot in the wake of the centre of gravity of world economics shifting into the Indo-Pacific; underscoring the strategic importance of the region (both political and economic) while it strives to build an entente in the region to counter balance a possible revisionist thrust by a Sino-Russian combine. In these circumstances, if the long term US view is to bring about strategic equilibrium to the region then mutuality in security matters will be the rule as it is equally clear that the cost of security will stretch the resources of the United States. This is particularly so as armament industries divorce themselves from market manufacturing making their acquisition and deployment increasingly more expensive, far more elaborate and much less numerous.

## The Disruptive Transformatory Dynamic

The four ‘tectonic shifts’ that we have noted are a part of a larger transformatory dynamic which has today become palpable as technological and economic changes collide with political systems, social structures and military power. Through history the disruption caused by the momentum of collision has neither been uniform nor predictable since the rate of change produces innovation and growth of a nature that is influenced by political, social and human receptivity, climate, geography and, indeed, pressures on the existing order. In this milieu the only certainty is that change will be increasingly more disruptive and unerringly more self sustaining. The maritime domain has not been sequestered from dynamics of change. It is discernable by the anarchy of expectations of verge powers and the increasing tensions between the demands for economic integration and the stresses of fractured political divisions. These nations are persistently confronted by the need to reconcile internal pressures with intrusive external impulses at a time when the economics of raw military power and its efficacy to engineer desired political outcomes is in question. While most of the verge powers have sought resolution and correctives within the framework of the existing international order, China and to some extent Russia emerge as anomalies that have angled for and conspired to re-write the rule book. Our primary challenge, however, remains the former.

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China’s rising comprehensive power has generated an internal impulse to military growth and unilateral intervention in its immediate neighbourhood in the South and East China Sea and its extended regions of economic interests. It has developed and put in place strategies that target the maritime domain to assure a favourable consequence to what it perceives to be a strategic competition for resources and control of the seaways. The consequences of China activating artifices such as the Anti-Access and Area Denial strategy and geo-political manoeuvres to constitute proprietary sources of raw materials, their ports of dispatch and controlled routes euphemistically called the maritime silk route and the establishing the String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean Region evokes increasing shared anxieties and resistance by players in

the same strategic settings. Particularly at a time when the North Eastern Passage through the Arctic is emerging as receding ice cuts the Asia-Europe route via the Suez by half (from 23000 kms to 11500 kms) and technology opens the Antarctic to economic exploitation. The paradoxical effects of China's contrivances are to undermine its own strategic standing, hasten counter balancing alignments and urging a global logic of cooperative politics over imperial strategies. If at all a counter theory can be developed from this then it is "realism driven by uncertainty". It therefore becomes appropriate that the planner examine in some detail the challenge of China.

## A Period of Shengshi

In the 18th century, China under the Qing dynasty enjoyed a golden age. It was a period of shengshi, an age of prosperity. Currently some Chinese nationalists say that, thanks to the Communist Party and its economic prowess, another shengshi has arrived. Significant to political influence is its matching economic growth and strategic military narcissism. Power, historically has changed the very character of nations as it transforms their outlook towards the world and places primacy to their beliefs and interests giving it new drive to shape global affairs in a manner that promotes their well being. This search for geopolitical space that the emergence of a new cognizable revisionist power precipitates has been the cause for global instability and tensions. Add to this that the principle of nationalism is inextricably linked, both in theory and practice, with war. We are, in the circumstance faced with a situation when the military dimension of power will throw up conflicts. In this context the slogan of the Qing "the dream of a prosperous country and a strong army" has new connotations.

China released its most recent Defence White Paper in May 2015. When read as a sequel to its earlier white papers, it clearly announced the arrival of a self-confident China recognizing its own growing economic and military prowess. Beijing's intended military strategy of "a more active defence" without too much elaboration on how active their defence strategy would be left the analyst with more questions than answers. Notwithstanding, the paper places a premium on wide area maritime combat preparedness and manoeuvre and a thrust to attain a first rate cyber warfare capability. At the same time, criticality of containment of various internal fissures that growth had precipitated remains on top of the agenda. The paper significantly points out that struggles for cornering strategic resources, dominating geographically vital areas and tenancing strategic locations have, in fact, intensified. In this context West Asia's oil reserves, critical geographic location and economic opportunities provide the strategic canvas for the 'one belt one road' initiative. Control of a proprietary maritime route backed by vast continental economic investments furnishes the framework within which resources of the region could be cornered. China has to satisfy its growing internal demands and eroding markets at a time of declining growth if it is to keep the illusion of shengshi alive among its increasingly edgy populace whose appetite for wealth is yet to be whetted.

The Paper goes on to underscore Power as a natural currency for politics, it remains a preferred instrument. Under these circumstances, the document suggests that the portents for friction are ever present and would therefore necessitate military preparedness, modernization and a strategic orientation that would neutralize the fall out of such friction. Active defence would demand that the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) develop advanced assault capabilities, enhancement of mobility and strike capabilities in all three dimensions. Doctrines to back such capabilities involving sea-air-land integrated operations would be central to strategic posture. Development of 'Anti Access Area Denial' and control strategies would be decisive to military maritime operations. Progressively, China appears to be challenging not just today's economic orthodoxy and order, but the world's political and security framework as well without bringing about a change within her own political morphology.

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China's claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea; her territorial aggressiveness; her handling of dissent within Tibet and Sinkiang; her proliferatory carousing with rogue states such as North Korea and Pakistan are cases, amongst others, that do not inspire confidence in change occurring within that nation without turbulence. It is also noted with some foreboding, the breaking out of China from its largely defensive maritime perimeter into the Indian Ocean region. In addition contemporary thought has given strategic nuclear forces a restraining role to define and demarcate the limits within which conventional forces operate.

### III Strategic Imperatives for India

With uncertainty driving geo-political dynamics, the first imperative for India is to bring about policy coherence between strategic space, growth and security interests. It begins by defining the geographical contours within which a strategy can be developed to contend with challenges identified. The broad parameters in this definition must factor in the regions from where trade originates, energy lines run, sea lines of communication pass, the narrows contained therein which an inimical force would endeavour to secure and the geographic location of potential allies. In this context the sea space between the 30 degree East Meridian and the 130 degree East Meridian extending to the Antarctic continent provides the theatre within which Indian maritime strategy will have to function. This Oceanic body is dominated by ten important choke points and narrows. In essence the theatre gives to global trade efficient maritime routes and sea lines of communication that power the regions growth. It accounts for over 70% of global trade, 60% of energy flow and is home to more than 50% of the world's population; it also provides the strategic context within which Indian maritime strategy must operate.

The quest for strategic economic, political and security leverage in the maritime domain is founded on an oceanic vision and the idea must be backed by the development of a strategic posture that characterizes our resolve to fulfil the quest.

Inspiration may take the form of a policy declaration in relation to a geographic region such as the 'Look East (and now) Act East Policy', the 'India Africa Forum Summit' declaration or the Antarctic Treaty. Policy provides a frame of reference that not only has wide-ranging application but will remain central for purposes of

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force planning to develop a strategic posture. The current membership of the original ten ASEAN grouping plus 6 is symptomatic of the shifting centre of gravity of geopolitics to the East. From a security angle, the inclusion of India, USA, Russia, Japan and South Korea in addition to China provides the rationale for strategic equilibrium. India and China along with ASEAN are set to become the world's largest economic bloc. The grouping is expected to account for about 27 per cent of Global GDP and will very quickly overtake the EU and USA economies.

The buoyancy of the Indo-ASEAN relationship is backed by surging trade figures which is slated to hit USD 100 billion in the current year. With such burgeoning stakes the US strategic rebalancing in the region comes as a natural consequence and provides the settings for establishing strong and stable security ties. The expansion of the ASEAN and the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum are suggestive of the littoral's aspirations to counter balance the looming presence of China. USA's presence will dominate activities in

the region in the immediate and middle term future. Flash points such as territorial claims both in the maritime and continental domain will remain a source of friction that would necessarily demand military capabilities and a strategic orientation that assures mutual restraint.

Having thus brought about a modicum of coherence between security dynamics, strategic space and growth, it would now be appropriate to define and derive objectives of a Denial Strategy as applicable to the larger Indian Maritime Military Strategy. Denial seeks to contest and discredit the ability of regional or extra regional countries to unilaterally project military power to secure their interests either through aggression or through other destabilizing activities. The instrument to achieve denial is by convincingly raising the cost of military intervention through the use or threat of use of methods that are asymmetrical in form and disruptive in substance. The strategy's first impulse is to avoid a hot conflict. To 'contest and discredit' would suggest a clear understanding of where the centre of gravity of power projection forces lie.

In China's case, it is the triumvirate of the Aircraft Carrier; security of the narrows and of its 'string of pearls'. The 'Pearls' assure sustenance of forces and safety of hulls that convey resources and energy vital to fuel growth. Use of aggressive means is clear enough, but prying open faults that could destabilize and therefore distract the main exertions, are not at all patent. In India's case both internal as well as external stresses obtain that could be leveraged in order to subvert and undermine the primary thrust to contest and discredit the ability to project power; more importantly China not only has the will and capability to exploit these opportunities but also has a willing ally in Pakistan, this must robustly be guarded against. 'To raise the cost of military intervention' is a matter that resides in the mind of political leadership, yet there will always be a threshold, the verge of which is marked by diminishing benefits of intervention or power projection. It will be noted that it was a similar calculus (albeit in reverse) that must have come to play in the 1995 Taiwan Strait crisis that inhibited and forced China to reconcile to humiliation in the face of a possible debilitating confrontation.

Also the logic of weakening out-of-region motivation clutches in, diluting the efforts of the intervener. Lastly the threat of 'use of force' must not only be credible but also the 'value exchange' in terms of losses must weigh against the power projecting force. At the heart of the Denial Strategy, in the Indian context, must remain deterrence.

The reality of the international system is the place that power enjoys in the scheme of assuring stability. Uncertainty in international relations queers the pitch, in view of the expanded space of possibles. India's relationship with the USA and her allies is robust. India has shown itself, through restraint, pluralistic and popular form of governance to be a responsible State that upholds the status quo yet invites change through democratic forces. Its rise, in the main, is not only welcomed but is seen as a harmonizing happening that could counterpoise China.

But of the uncertainties that influence strategic stability, it is China, a stated revisionist autocratic power that will impact globally; particularly so, in the maritime domain where it appears to be challenging not just economic orthodoxy, but global political and security order without bringing about a change within. The next step would logically be to establish an Indo-US-Japan-Australia strategic framework in the maritime domain, if we are to resourcefully contend with the challenges that are present.

The advent of nuclear weapons with their intrinsic threat of mutually assured destruction may, as pointed out earlier, give strategic nuclear forces a restraining role to define and demarcate the limits within which conventional forces operate. Or, it may leave proxy wars as the future of conflicts as in West Asia today.

## IV

### Conclusion: To Sail the Stream of Time

Bismarck suggested that great powers travel on the “Stream of Time” which they can neither create nor direct but upon which they can “steer with more or less skill and experience”. How they emerge from that voyage depends to a large degree upon the wisdom of leadership. Bismarck’s sombre thoughts lead us back to the fundamental question in the opening paragraph: whether motivation for conflict lies in the turbulences of the Stream of Time or in the quest for power or piety is a moot question, but how they affect the international system and how the verge powers respond is the crisis of our times.

The cycle of relative power and the constant changes to the international system are caused as much by day to day actions of political players as by the deeper transformations that impact power of nations. Today it is the youthful character of demographics and how rapidly knowledge societies develop and generate wealth that lie at the core of a nation’s strategic power. And since all societies are varyingly subject to change and transformation, the international balance can never be still; never more apparent than in the current jostling for power amongst the fluctuating plurality of on-the-verge powers. Crumbling of the geographic and political order in West Asia has further stressed the anarchic nature of the international system while competitive rivalries have heightened friction between states.

The history of the international system over the last century has been a persistent history of warfare or at least preparation for conflict; and so it is with the current convulsions in West Asia and the emergence of a plurality of on-the-verge-powers. Whether China’s revisionist thrust, grandiose scheme to establish a proprietary ‘maritime silk route’ while seeking sovereignty over the South China Sea in order to fuel its growth and buy the quiescence of its people; or a Russia, perceiving strategic opportunity both in West Asia and Ukraine to regain some of its battered national prestige will lead to war against the US and the other verge powers is not at all certain. The advent of nuclear weapons with their intrinsic threat of mutually assured destruction may, as pointed out earlier, give strategic nuclear forces a restraining role to define and demarcate the limits within which conventional forces operate. Or, it may leave proxy wars as the future of conflicts as in West Asia today. In either case contemporary weaponry both in the maritime domain and on the battlefield will make the exchange bloody, long and economically will severely retard growth.

Each of today’s ‘verge-powers’ is therefore left grappling with the crisis of reconciling their respective rise with the four ‘tectonic shifts’ confronting them. Will China see its future in a militaristic surge aimed at securing the instruments of growth and survival of dispensation at a time when change collides with political? Will Russia accept its fall from great power status without militarily seeking opportunities to anaemically re stake its claim? Will a Japan unleashed from the strictures of its post war status transform from the condition of a successful pacific trading state to that of a militarily strong partner that provides strategic balance in the West Pacific Ocean? And lastly how successful will the USA be in forging a strategic entente to enable an Indo-Pacific equilibrium?

Or will the sagacity of leadership steer the ‘Stream of Time’ with skill.

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Views expressed are author’s own.

