

THE EURASIAN SAGA: PRESENCE OF THE PAST

Since the dawn of time peoples and cultures have migrated and propagated across the length and breadth of Eurasia. This shared past dictates that Eurasian nations should form an economic and political union to restore the balance of power and maintain global peace.

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The largest percentage of mankind (some 80 per cent or nearly five billion people out of a global total of six) dwells on the Eurasian landmass where the major living civilisations and religions were born. Even the Pre-Colombian and colonial populations of the Americas and the Pacific had their source in Eurasia. The most illustrious ancient African culture blossomed in Egypt on the near-eastern Asian border with which it had, from its inception, extensive and profound interactions and synergies.

In our fast-changing geopolitical environment it has become pragmatic, perhaps for the first time in history, to look at this massive 'world island', spreading from Iceland to Japan and from Norway to Indonesia, as an economic and cultural whole, with regard to contemporary logistical and strategic considerations for three main reasons:

A. AN INITIAL CIVILISATIONAL COMMONWEALTH

There is growing evidence, as was argued in an article in the issue of *World Affairs* (Vol 7, No. 2) for a common primeval or at least archaic Eurasian

culture which decisively influenced most of the later civilisations that developed across that vast expanse of land at various periods.

B. THREE ETHNO-HISTORIC AREAS

If we look at an ethnographic map of Eurasia, we notice that it can be divided into three major ethno-cultural zones, to wit from East to West (1) the Sino-Mongol-Turkic area extending from the Pacific shore across Siberia, Tibet and Central Asia all the way to Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and even to Magyar Hungary which stands as a living testimony to the westward penetration of the Uralo-Altaic tribes, (2) the Indo-European orb which spreads out from India and the Meridional Himalayas across Afghanistan, southern Turkestan, Iran, the Caucasus region and Russia all the way to Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, Graeco-Roman and Celtic Europe and (3) the Semitic region whose borders encompass the Iranian province of Khuzestan on the Persian Gulf, containing the Arabian peninsula, and run across Iraq between the Arab and Kurdish areas, separating Syria from Turkey whereas in the South they run deep into northern and Oriental Africa.

Those three areas are naturally contiguous and often overlap. Along the centuries their respective influences and sizes have waxed and waned according to demographic, political and economic factors. The Turko-Mongol people built some of the largest and mightiest empires in history, under successive Scythian, Hunnish, Turkish and Mongol sovereigns such as Attila, Chengis and Timur. They gave China some of her greatest dynasties, and ruled India through a series of Turkic (Ghori, Khilji, Tughlaq and Timurid or 'Mughal') emperors while their Seljukid and Ottoman tribes conquered much of the Near and Middle East and Oriental Europe. It may be said that between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, the Turkic people seemed at various times to come within reach of the ambitious goal of politically uniting Eurasia from the Pacific to the Mediterranean.

The Indo-Iranian cultural commonwealth seems however to have reached the greatest extent of all because we can easily find its linguistic, religious, mythological and cultural legacy from Sri Lanka to Scandinavia. Until the advent of European colonial expansion across Asia in the late fifteen hundreds, the sprawling area known as East India or the Indies (*'Les Indies'* in French)

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extended from the eastern borders of Persia to the ill-defined Oriental oceans all the way to the 'West Indies' of Columbus, encompassing thousands of islands of the Sea of Oman, Indian Ocean and the China Sea where the religious, artistic, literary and commercial civilisation of India provided a common denominator, even after the penetration of Islam into

the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago. Great Indo-Buddhist cities, shrines and monasteries dotted the landscape of Central Asia, Tibet, southern Siberia, Mongolia, Turkestan (an area known as 'Serindia' for centuries), Burma (presently Myanmar), Indochina and 'Insulindia' (which included modern Malaysia, Indonesia and extended as far as the Philippines). Indian or Indo-Iranian spiritual ideas, icons, symbols and texts enriched the civilisations of China, Korea and Japan for more than twenty centuries.

A telling illustration of the age-old and wide-ranging Indic influence is provided by the names of acropolises or temples that still stand across southern Asia, such as the Khmer capital of Angkor in Cambodia and the Hittite citadel of Ankara (Ancyra-Angora) in modern Turkey, both derived from the Sanskrit word *nagara* (city). It is awe-inspiring, in our times of cultural globalisation under the influence of English inherited from the British empire, to realise that since millennia an expanse that covers nearly twenty million square kilometres and is now inhabited by almost three billion people absorbed a deep Indo-Buddhist irradiation in many spheres of thinking and action. That influence accounts for thousands of generally little known ethnological facts, i.e. Japanese, Koreans and Chinese still worshipping a number of Hindu and Buddhist deities or Indo-Chinese and Malay places and people carrying Indian mythological names and regarding the Hindu epics as the founding classics of their national literatures (still regularly enacted in theatrical and dance

performances) while their traditional princes claim spiritual and even blood parentage with the homonymous legendary dynasties of the subcontinent. It is noteworthy in this connection that many of the coastal and inland regional kingdoms of India influenced the East Asian lands directly, in specific political, economic, artistic and linguistic matters. Thus areas as diverse as Gujarat, Maharashtra, the Malabar coast, the Dravidian Pallava, Chola and Chalukya States, Orissa, Bengal, Magadha and Videha in Bihar all left their marks at different times across the eastern Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

On the Western or European end, we only need to briefly recall the successive great empires (Roman-Byzantine, Frankish-Germanic and Russian) that were built by various branches of the continental Indo-European civilisation, in line with a common heritage visible across the ages from Athens and Rome to Constantinople, Aachen, Vienna, Paris, London, Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In due course these States or their offsprings conquered or colonised all the other continents.

The Semito-Arabic area, though less sizeable and less densely populated also produced powerful empires, such as the Assyro-Babylonian kingdom and, more than a thousand years later the Muslim Khalifate which reached its peak in the second century of Hijra (ninth century of the Christian Era) before breaking up under the onslaughts of Iranian, Turkic and European invaders. However it is not easy to clearly separate Islamic civilisation from its non-semitic neighbours which made major contributions to it. At the zenith of its greatness the Abbasid empire of Baghdad was effectively administered, under the rule of the half-Persian Harun Al Rasheed, by the Bactrian-born, originally Buddhist family of the Barmekids just as Greek Christians had played a prominent role in helping the earlier Arab Ummayyads organise their new realm.

C. SIX CIVILISATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS

At present six major interlocking political and cultural collective entities share Eurasia. Their interplay determines the balance of power on the continent and their respective influences will decisively influence the shape of the global system in the newborn century.

Those entities are, again from East to West:

1. China and the contiguous satellite States over which her cultural and economic influence is determinant (i.e. Mongolia, North Korea *et al.*)
2. The Indochinese-Indomalay region of South Asia, partly integrated within ASEAN which historically, as its name indicates, is a civilisational condominium of the two great neighbours, India and China.

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3. The Indian sphere of influence, encompassing the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which regroups most of the pieces of historical 'Greater India' i.e. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, in geographic and cultural contiguity with Afghanistan and Iran, also to be regarded as natural members of the Indo-Iranian

civilisational commonwealth.

4. The old Russian empire, now loosely reassembled for the most part as the 'Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS), which connects many Republics of the former Soviet Union. Beyond the pale of the CIS the Slavic sphere of influence still extends to Eastern European nations such as Romania, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslav republics, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Greece.
5. The Asian Arabic area is divided into a number of countries and deeply torn by the creation of Israel which is also a culturally semitic state but was built by Western settlers on Euro-American political lines and therefore has a 'Western' identity. The vast mineral wealth, relatively sparse population and seminal spiritual importance of south-western Asia for the Jewish and Christian faiths have made it a target of colonial ambitions since the Crusades but especially after the Ottoman Empire began to decline. Those long-standing interests explain the massive Anglo-American military, political and economic presence in the Gulf area which have led stage by stage to the occupation of Iraq, the historical cradle and geographic centre of the region.

6. The Western European tip of Eurasia, now partly integrated within the European Union, has gradually and hesitantly cast off the yoke of US paramountcy which arose as a result of the fratricidal inter-European conflicts of the twentieth century. However American hegemony is still embodied in strategic terms by NATO and a powerful 'Atlanticist' ideological tradition continues to regard the 'East' as only a subject or an enemy. According to that view the current geopolitical theatre sets the stage for a new battle of the age-old war between the West (Catholic-Protestant Europe and America) against the 'rest' (Orthodox, Islamic, Confucian, Buddhist and Pagan).
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A NEW REALITY

However the new reality is challenging that century-old order. Specifically a number of agreements and other links have been created between the various components of Eurasia, prompted by geographic, historical and economic compulsions. The preponderance of the United States, an extra-continental nation, constitutes an anomaly in Eurasian history, just as the hegemony of Britain over India was the result of a quirk of fate, unsustainable in the long run.

Needless to say major differences, often rooted in age-old rivalries and suspicions persist between neighbours but common security imperatives and critical economic incentives make continental integration increasingly attractive because it maximises benefits for all parties as the following prospects show:

Central Asian stabilisation under the joint auspices of the major adjacent powers, Russia, China, Iran and India can create suitable conditions for the development of the sprawling landlocked region and its vast mineral resources, while giving it access to the southern, northern and eastern oceans by road and rail and supplying the vital energy and industrial needs of the four aforesaid powers. The Shanghai Cooperation Treaty represents a milestone on

the path to that strategic integration which can, step by step, extend to all of Eurasia.

Economic and cultural cooperation and integration between India and China can create the world's largest economic community connecting two and half billion people and capable of protecting the safety of sea lanes between the Persian Gulf and East Asia. India occupies the geographic and historical centre of the Indian Ocean and, as Prime Minister Vajpayee has recently

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recalled, her area of influence extends from the Suez Canal (and down the East African coast to the Cape) all the way to the tip of the Malay peninsula, at which point the Chinese sphere logically begins. Such commercial emporia of our age as Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Hong Kong evince by their

prosperity the true potential of a condominium of the two Asian giants which should and can maintain the closest relations with Indonesia and the rest of ASEAN.

An additional advantage of the China-India alliance would be to restore the historical cultural and trading relations across the Himalayas through Tibet and areas of China which were heavily Indianised in ancient times, bordering India's mongoloid north-eastern states, and to the West, the 'Greater India' of Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, Turfan, Karashar and Kapisa. The exchange of ideas and cultures between the 'Western Paradise' (as India was known) and the Middle Kingdom through the centuries was one of the most fruitful and far-reaching cultural phenomena in history, and China can rediscover much of her spiritual, intellectual and artistic heritage, devastated during decades of Maoist rule, by reconnecting with her southern neighbour.

Japan could see her strategic and economic security guaranteed by the India-China union which it would be in her interest to join. The opening of an uninterrupted land route from Korea to Western Europe across Siberia and safe sea lanes from the Persian Gulf would satisfy Tokyo's fundamental priorities while considerably reducing the risk of an inter-Korean war and hence allowing the departure of all US troops from the region.

The Persian Gulf states in particular and the Arab nations of the Near and Middle East in general stand to gain from the construction of a Eurasian community which could assist them in protecting their much threatened independence while guaranteeing their economic interests under a reformed oil trade regime.

The plans being discussed between Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries for a gold reserve currency (the gold dinar) to provide a stable tool for commodity trade could be implemented under the Eurasian umbrella, as part of the process to replace the US

dollar in the world economy since the American monetary unit is now a '*fiat*' currency whose largely fictitious value is being eroded by the systemic weaknesses of the debt-ridden unsustainable national economy. The economist William Clark published in January 2003 'A Macroeconomic and Geostrategic Analysis of the

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Unspoken Truth' in which he noted that "The US Federal Reserve's greatest nightmare is that OPEC will switch from a dollar standard to a Euro standard. (Under Saddam Hussain) Iraq actually made this switch". Though that bold move spelt doom for him and for his country, it is unlikely that Washington will be able to prevent the abandonment of the dollar by energy exporters and major Asian powers if they coordinate their actions.

The millennial Arab dream of Khilafat for unity of the Umma can be met to the greatest realistic extent through the integration of the Middle Eastern nations into a Eurasian commonwealth which can also protect them from the perceived Iranian threat while providing Tehran with an effective mechanism to defeat American designs on the country. Mention should be made of the Pentagon's long-standing (since 1973) but recently declassified contingency plans to militarily occupy the oilfields of the Arabian peninsula. The most effective way to thwart those aggressive schemes would be to deploy a joint Eurasian security shield involving the three (or four) independent nuclear arsenals of the region (Russia, China, India and Pakistan).

The European Union is bedevilled, despite having made notable progress in various areas over the years, by the overwhelming pressures brought to bear by Washington and by internecine rivalries between its members that the USA customarily exploits for their benefit. Common policies are thus very hard to achieve especially since Britain and a number of continental states such as Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark and the new Eastern European members can more often than not be relied upon to second American policies even when the latter are inimical to the real interests of the

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EU. There is a need for Europe, especially its core states (France, Germany, Belgium, Austria) to find support and strategic depth in Asia, along the transcontinental commercial and cultural routes stretching eastwards toward the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. An active collaboration of the 'axis' or spine of the EU (France, Germany and their closest neighbours) with Russia, China and India would

decisively shift the balance of power between the aforesaid states and the more Atlanticist European governments, forcing a realignment of the EU with its natural Asian partners.

Last but not the least, economic and techno-scientific development will be powerfully stimulated by transcontinental cooperation which can connect the various poles of often complementary high-tech research that flourish in Western Europe, Russia, Japan and to a lesser extent in other Asian nations. The founder-chairman of Sony, Akio Morita is known to have advocated close R&D collaboration in microelectronics, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence between Japan and Russia in order to create a powerful synergy in areas of respective national excellence. That is surely only one of the many promising avenues that are open to Eurasian bilateral and multilateral ventures, in fields as diverse as space exploration, environmental restoration, biodynamic agriculture, traditional medicines and renewable energy generation.

The superficial assessment that Eurasia is too large and too diverse and too ethno-socially, religiously, linguistically and economically heterogeneous to be brought into a confederal structure does not stand close scrutiny. First, a gradual integration can be achieved through coordination between regional associations such as the India-led SAARC, the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council, the ASEAN, the Russo-centric CIS and the EU.

Second, history bears witness to the fact that peoples, ideas, languages, myths, cults and goods have crisscrossed Eurasia since the earliest known times. The mysterious Indo-Aryans and the better known Medo-Parthians, Macedonian Greeks,

Scythians, Huns, Mongols, Turks, Germans and Slavs have over the centuries travelled almost from one end of that vast expanse to the other, setting up great, multicultural empires across its length and breadth. Too little is certain yet about the real origins and migrations of the Ugrians, Celts, Goths, Jutes and Saxons who in successive ages brought to western and northernmost Europe tongues, civilisations and religions akin to those of India and eastern Asia. The blue-eyed and fair-haired Tokharians of ancient Turkestan are still a historical enigma. The greatest empire of the West, the Roman *Imperium* was an Indo-European cultural construct which remained until its end largely faithful to its origins. Latin became the 'Sanskrit' of the Occident and remained its religious and intellectual linguistic medium until the modern age, side by side with other equally Indo-European tongues.

In Asia, mighty kingdoms were built at the crossroads of civilisation and commerce, astride the great ethnic divides between the Turkic, Indo-Iranian and Chinese spheres of influence. One only has to recall the Persian Achaemenid state which extended from the Danube to the Indus, the Seleucid and Parthian monarchies and the Kushan (*Yueh Chih*) empire which encompassed Turkestan, Afghanistan and north-eastern India or the Chinese Tang, Yuan and Ch'ing hegemonies over the Orient, not forgetting the Khmer and Srivijaya kingdoms, whose reach embraced the racially mixed areas of Indochina and Indonesia, interacting with both South India and Imperial China to realise that the

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continent has been culturally and economically interconnected since the dawn of history.

Closer to us, the Russian empire and its successor the Soviet Union brought together much of Eurasia, sharing borders with Central and Northern Europe, China and Korea as well as Iran and Turkey. It was that implicit prospect of

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Eurasian integration that concerned the British, bent on protecting their monopolistic interests in the near-east and in India and prompted them to block by all possible means Russia's advance towards the blue waters of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. That same threat is worrying contemporary American policy-makers such as Brzezinski and

accounts for the increasingly aggressive attempts to impose their presence in the Persian Gulf, the Caucasus and Central Asia while they try to convince India to become their surrogate in the Indian Ocean in order to contain China and dominate the Muslim nations of the region. The age-old Anglo-Saxon policy of playing up divisions and fostering conflicts while striving to weaken and break up Russia is clearly detrimental to the real long-term interests of the Eurasian people and must therefore be opposed.

One can notice two traditional polities in the Eurasian continuum; one is centralised and authoritarian. It is best illustrated by the universalistic empires of China, Rome, the Islamic Middle East and Russia. The other tradition, typically Indo-European, shuns political and religious unification but fosters the dissemination of a common civilisation across the borders of independent, often small states, whether they be merchant republics or dynastic kingdoms, as we find in India — where many of the rajas maintained their independence even under the British Raj while acknowledging at times the largely ceremonial supremacy of a paramount overlord who assumed the universal crown as a 'Chakravarti' mostly on the strength of his merits and exploits — and also in ancient Greek, Celtic, Slavic and Germanic Europe. All those lands remained for many centuries divided into numerous States under the unifying aegis of a shared culture. It is obvious that the sheer size and diversity of Eurasia

requires that the second formula (i.e. loose federalism) be retained since all attempts to forge an empire from the Atlantic to the Pacific have failed so far or been short-lived, bringing great wars in their wake.

Eurasia is now entering a decisive, defining period and must find the will to acknowledge her unity in order to pave the way towards global concord while resolving the many conflicts that require a multilateral mediation, in the Balkans, Palestine, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Turkestan and the Korean peninsula. The fact that the flag of revolt against American-led globalisation was raised in the mountain fastnesses of ancient Gandhara, at the crossroads of the Graeco-Iranian, Russian, South Asian, Turkic and Chinese worlds, where the syncretic pan-Asian Kushan empire once had its seat, is an ominous sign that an ageless but renascent alternative civilisation will not submit to a remote and alien military-mercantile rule.

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The size and complexity of the Eurasian map dictates that for the sake of efficiency, a few major States take the lead in creating the basic conditions for transcontinental integration. The central members of the European Union, especially France and Germany, Russia in the centre, India and Iran to the South of Asia and China to the East are the key players in terms of geography, cultural influence and economic importance. If those six countries can achieve closer cooperation between them, there is every reason to believe that many other nations will gradually join this commonwealth whose greater heritage they share in many ways.