

Raja Mandala: After Indo-Pacific, the Eurasian idea

If Indo-Pacific is an idea that gained traction during 2017, Delhi must now cope with another expansive geopolitical construct — Eurasia. The Indian political and policy establishment, long brought up on the notion that Europe and Asia are different, must adapt to their slow but certain integration into a single geopolitical theatre. Three events last week point to the importance of Delhi quickly adjusting its mental maps.

The Chabahar port on the south-eastern coast of Iran, formally launched on Sunday by President Hassan Rouhani, opens up not just an alternative route to Afghanistan but also facilitates India's overland connectivity with Central Eurasia.

Second was the annual gathering of the heads of government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Sochi, Russia. Delhi, along with Islamabad, was accepted earlier this year as a full member of this organisation whose membership covers the heart of Eurasia but is named after a city on China's Pacific coastline.

A third and equally consequential event last week in Budapest, Hungary went entirely unreported in India. It was the annual summit of an organisation called C-CEEC that promotes cooperation between China and 16 Central and East European Countries. It is more popularly known as "sixteen plus one". That India is hardly interested in this new forum underlines the problem it has in dealing with a changing Eurasia.

Like the Indo-Pacific, the concept of Eurasia is quite familiar to geographers. Marine biogeographers use the Indo-Pacific to describe the large stretch of tropical waters from the east coast of Africa to the Western Pacific that has many common features. For geologists, Eurasia refers to a tectonic plate that lies under much of what we know as Europe and Asia. But it is in the domain of politics that the terms Indo-Pacific and Eurasia acquire a baggage all of their own. Recall the resistance in Delhi to the idea of the Indo-Pacific. Although Prime Minister [Manmohan Singh](#) occasionally used the term, there was considerable scepticism within the South Block. For many, the Indo-Pacific was a suspicious American invention.

But it was really Japan's Shinzo Abe who imagined the Indo-Pacific. Australia was quick to adopt it. Jakarta, which along with Delhi dreamt of Asian unity and founded the non-aligned movement in the middle of the last century, was enthusiastic in its embrace of the Indo-Pacific.

Like India, America was not quite sure. It was President Donald Trump who ended American ambivalence by consistently using the term "Indo-Pacific" during Asian tour last month. One wonders if the concept of "Indo-Pacific" survives the Trump Administration. The story of Eurasia is a little more complex.

There is indeed a Eurasia Division in India's ministry of external affairs that deals with a significant part of the post-Soviet space. That is quite close to the most common usage of the term. In Russia, the Eurasian idea has a special resonance. Eurasia is supposed to represent a unique cultural, spiritual and geographic space that is neither east nor west. For many in Russia, Eurasia invokes either the memories of the vast Russian empire or rekindles nostalgia for the Soviet Union.

What is new to the debate, though, is China. Much in the manner that the rise of China is connecting up the Pacific and Indian Oceans, Beijing is breaking down the idea that Europe and Asia are two different continents. More immediately, it is about the expanding Chinese economic and political influence in spaces that were once dominated by either the West or Russia.

To be sure, China is not about to supplant America's large military footprint, Russia's political weight or the European Union's economic heft in Central Europe. But in exporting large amounts of capital for infrastructure development, drawing its economies eastward, and creating new political groupings, China has begun to undermine the Western hubris and Russian self-regard in Central Europe. It also widens the strategic options for Central European states. Fed up with bullying from both Brussels and Moscow, the Central Europeans are quite happy to play ball with China.

The problem for India is two fold. Delhi's world-view, traditionally defined in terms of an irreconcilable tension between "East and West", "North and South" or "Europe and Asia" is becoming unsustainable as China's massive Silk Road Initiative begins to integrate Europe with Asia. The old metrics of foreign policy purity in Delhi — distance from the West and solidarity with the East — make no sense as Chinese expansion and American retrenchment reshape the political and economic geography of Eurasia.

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has put India back in play in the maritime world by accepting the Indo-Pacific idea. But Delhi is yet to come to grips with continental Eurasia. If the Great Himalayan barrier and post-Partition geography have made it hard for India to develop connectivity with inner Asia, Delhi has been reluctant to walk through the open door in Europe. Focused as it is on bilateral relations with France, Germany and Russia, Delhi has neglected the European Union and ignored Central Europe. Correcting this imbalance is the first step towards a more purposeful Indian engagement with Eurasia.

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