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Chapter 1

On the Metageography of Euro-Asia

Pekka Korhonen

Introduction: On Metageography

The main purpose of this article is to try to understand from a long historical perspective the changes taking place in our understanding of the concept of Asia within the larger geopolitical entity of Eurasia. Even the most omphalopsychotic European researchers cannot by now have failed to recognize that something is happening in Asia, that “Asia is rising” and moving forward with great developmental energy.¹ This economy based perspective towards Asia is nowadays a commonplace, and there is no point in going once again through the statistics here. Instead, I try to take a look at the metageographical assumptions that we have when we discuss Asia as a geopolitical phenomenon. By metageography I mean the usually unreflected and often unconscious set of spatial conceptual tools with which people arrange their knowledge of the world. This results in a more or less mythical set of categories of ancient or more recent origin, with which the world is arranged into regions containing characteristics based on a mixture of social, political, racial, cultural, religious, economic, etc., narratives. The result often tends to approach what we can call geographic concordance, where disparate phenomena are supposed to exhibit the same variation in space, so that different regions become systematically essentialized. For instance, ‘Europeanness’ is supposed to permeate everything in the region named Europe, and likewise ‘Asianness’ is the basic characteristic of the region named Asia. To be able to set the current discussion into a perspective, I shall employ a really long temporal framework for analysing changes in the concept of Asia, starting from ancient Greek geography over two millennia ago.

In this approach I am much indebted to Martin W. Lewis’s and Kären E. Wigen’s book *The Myth of Continents* (1997), where they systematically try to analyse the jumbled mass of historical rubbish attached to continental names. One of their conclusions is that we might well do without the old continental scheme altogether, and instead reclassify the world using other criteria, such as functioning politico-economic groupings of states. This is what is actually taking place in practice, but purely functional names for integrative organizations, such as Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or International Monetary Fund (IMF), which were fashionable in the immediate post-World War II situation, are not used nowadays. In spite of all hype of globalization and the speed of communications, geographic proximity still is one of the basic ingredients in the creation of functional communities. In other words, regionalism is a strong element in functional cooperation. One cannot help noticing the prevalent use of the old continental names in contemporary discussions, with Africa, America, Asia and Europe being not only constantly maintained in national and international discussions, but also reinforced by the creation and strengthening of regional interstate organizations, such as the European Union, the African Union, the Free

Trade Area of the Americas, the East Asia Summit, or the Asia Europe Meeting. Old continental names seem to have such a tight grip of our world spatial imagination that they cannot be discarded.

Nevertheless, the metageographical assumptions connected with them certainly should be clarified. This article attempts to find clarity on the geopolitical uses of Asia, both historically and at present. The approach is that of conceptual history, the source material is both cartographical and textual, covering both Asian and European discussions on the subject. However, as I am in practice familiar only with discussions in Western Europe and East Asia, I will limit myself to analysing these only.²

Ancient Greek Geography

Many of the basic concepts of our contemporary geography are derived from ancient Mediterranean thinking. The central metageographical concept was the basic division of the world into water and land, which cartographically lead into the depicting of continents as islands in the middle of World Ocean. Another important metatheoretical notion is the contrast between civilization and barbarity, which in many kinds of forms has accompanied the narratives connected with continents. Humans lived on the continents, making their living out of various occupations, especially in the centre of the world, where the continents met, and where the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Phoenician and the younger Greek cultures were situated. The farther one travelled from the eastern Mediterranean area either over land or over sea, the more monstrous the world became. The habitable world was supposed to have been composed of three continents, namely Asia, Libya and Europe. Romans later changed the name of the second continent to Africa. These ideas date from three millennia old eastern Mediterranean geography, whose first concepts were developed in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and which later were adopted by classical Greek authors.³

Because of the importance of the notions of civilization and barbarity, these three continents were evaluated also along this dimension. By stretching the concept of geopolitics outside of its strict usage as foreign policies of nation-states, we can well call also this practice ‘geopolitical’ in the sense that different places were ranked higher and lower with it. John Agnew’s term civilizational geopolitics⁴ could perhaps be used here, but it is important to notice that the evaluations differed drastically from the nineteenth century valuations that Agnew studied.

The first systematic analysis of the continents that have survived was made in minute literary form by Herodotus (484–424 BC), who was an Asian Greek, born in Halikarnassus in Caria as a subject of the Great King of Persia. Herodotus claims that he does not know who divided the world into Asia, Libya, and Europe, or who gave to these continents the names of ladies. The division simply looked ancient to him, and it was evident that the names were used not only by the Greeks, but also by Persians and other inhabitants of Asia. Libya as a continent was bounded by Nile in the east, the Mediterranean in the north and the World Ocean in the south and west.⁵ Asia was a place similar to Libya, namely blessed with high culture, warm climate and abundant harvests. The river Nile separated Asia from Libya, and mythical river Phasis from Europe. An additional metageographical element seems to have worked here, namely cartographic symmetry; Phasis was a theoretical extension of the Mediterranean and Black Sea towards the east. Both Libya and Asia were small, but Asia perhaps was smaller—so small that it was basically covered at any time by a single empire, like those of the Median, Scythian and Persian empires, which all were said to have encompassed all Asia.⁶ Likewise, the later Macedonian conqueror Alexander the Great was also said to have ruled all Asia. The

centre of Asia was Persia, surrounded by the lands of the Medes, Saspis and Colchians to the north, Assyria, Arabia, Palestine and Egypt in the south, and India in the east. Asia was inhabited from the eastern banks of the Nile all the way to India, but after India there existed only uninhabited deserts, and Herodotus did not have any information about them, or what lay beyond them, but he did not think that Asia would extend far to the east.⁷ Asia was the most well known of all the continents, and excepting the eastern deserts, with nothing residual waste lands imposed conceptually on its area.

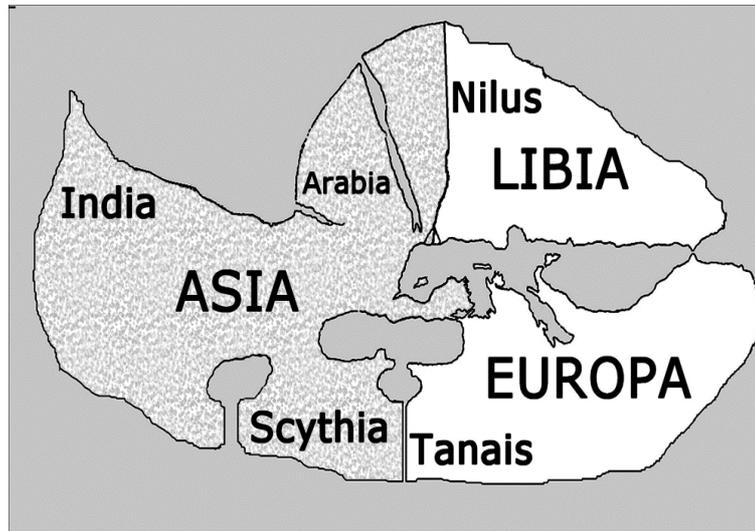


Map 1.1

Europe was the greatest anomaly, because it seemed to be indefinitely vaster than the other two continents. It spanned the length of them both, and no one knew where it ended in the west, north, and east.⁸ Europe thus appeared to be incomparably broader than either Libya or Asia, containing all residual land that could not be meaningfully placed into the other two continents. That residuality here implies barbarity in contrast with the images of civilization attached to Libya and Asia. Europe was a cold and dark place. While Asia was populated by civilized people, Europe was populated by mythical beings, such as Arimaspians, who had only one eye in their head, and who were very warlike. In Europe lived also men who were completely bald, and there were also rumours of men with goat's feet, living in distant mountains, and about people sleeping six months of the year.⁹ Considering humanlike beings, most of Europe was populated by Scythians, who were divided into many nations and spoke different languages. The general term Scythian was not an ethnic denomination, but rather described a way of life, that of nomadic people moving around after pasture with their herds of horses, cows and sheep over the grasslands and forests of Europe. Scythians were ferocious people. A Scythian drank the blood of the first man he had slain. Scythians used to take the scalps of their killed enemies, some even making garments to wear after collecting many of them.¹⁰ Europe was thus essentially a place of barbarity, occupying the lowest place in the hierarchy of continents.

It was only at the time of the Roman Empire that the continental division was changed so that Europe acquired some civilizational characteristics and a small size, while the area of Asia necessarily became expanded because of this. The most influential geographer proposing this kind of division was Strabon (63 BC–AD 19), a Hellenic Greek, but a Roman subject. As the centre of the Roman Empire was in Italy, the status of Europe had to be elevated, and Strabon simply did this by proposing a south-north boundary between Asia and Europe, running from

the Nile via the Mediterranean and Black Sea to the river Tanais (Don). That definition made Tanais flow symmetrically with Nile; the former east-west symmetry was thus replaced with south-north symmetry. Don was not exactly on the same meridian as Nile, but not far from it.¹¹ As a consequence, Asia became the continent holding all the residual land that could not be placed elsewhere, but that did not mean that it as a whole would have become uncivilized.



Map. 1.2

Strabon continuously considered Egypt to be more civilized than Rome in the Mediterranean area, although he had to write carefully about the subject. Being politically correct he defined Europe as a place characterized by the excellence of people and governments, contributing most for the other continents. Such an admirable place also had to be favourable in terms of nature, and thus Strabon limited Europe—cutting out the mythical far north not fit for human beings—so that almost all of it appeared habitable, suitable for human life. Besides Egypt, there was only one other place that exceeded Europe in blessedness, and that was India. Strabo called it the greatest of all nations and happier than any other.¹² India was not only fertile, but its farmers were good and its fighting men were excellent. Indians were living under orderly government, ruled by the best of men. Indians never set out to warlike expeditions outside of their own country, because of their respect for justice. The land was organized properly in castes just like presented in Plato's *Republic*, with farmers, herdsmen, artisans and merchants plying their respective trades, the soldier class taking care of all military activities, and learned overseers and scholars taking care of public affairs. All rulers and administrators were chosen from the class of scholars. Indians were lean, tall and much lighter in movement than other people.¹³

Strabon's scale of grading areas in terms of civilization was not systematic, but the discrepancies can be explained politically. He praised Europe when he was writing about it, and he praised some other places when writing about them, but clearly his praise of India was stronger than his exultation of European virtues. It might even have been dangerous not to praise Europe and especially the Romans. Strabon's native town Pontus had only recently become incorporated into the Roman Empire, and anti-Roman arguments would not have been considered favourably by the new rulers. India served as a romantic utopia in contrast to the harsh Roman rule. In Strabon's text, and especially in its discrepancies, one can clearly see

that power and military might is a metageographical element; perspectives of the powerful tend to strongly influence the way geopolitical evaluations colour our understanding of geography.

Geography of European Enlightenment

Basic elements from Strabon all the way till the beginning of the period of Enlightenment in Europe at early eighteenth century stayed the same. Greek geographers were considered as the basis of geographic wisdom, and Greek metageographical notions were systematically employed. The idea that Europe represents civilization and Asia its opposite is of much more recent origin than people usually realize. The fact that the Portuguese and later the Spanish were able to get some foothold in Asia from the sixteenth century onwards did not mean that they did not respect Asian cultures. It was only religion and sea faring where they thought of themselves as better than Asians. Economically and in terms of political organization Asia appeared systematically superior to what the Europeans had.¹⁴ This began to change during the period of European Enlightenment, when we enter the proper period for using Agnew's concept of civilizational geopolitics. As such Agnew tells the story well, but I would here like to point out the importance of Swedish and Russian collaboration in this turning point of world idea history.

The seminal text attaching Enlightenment thinking to the concepts of Asia and Europe was Philip Johan Stralenberg's (1676-1747) *Das Nord und Ostliche Theil von Europa und Asia*, published in Stockholm in 1730, translated into English in 1738 as *Russia, Siberia, and Great Tartary (Russia Observed)*. The rhetorical redescription presented in this book was in many senses dramatic, as it for the first time in millennia departed from the descriptions of the Greek ancients. The most well known feature of the book was its redescription of the boundary between Europe and Asia. Characteristic of the situation was that the new Enlightenment narrative spread from the west to east. Europe was the place inhabited by the people whose astounding achievements in the development of sciences, technology, and especially overseas conquest dwarfed the achievements of all previous generations.¹⁵ Europe was the continent of overwhelming progress, and progress became the new metageographical element shaping the conceptualizations of continents.

The characterization of Europe as progress centred especially on the maritime states bordering the Northern Atlantic, the Netherlands, Britain and France. They definitely were Europe, and nations to the east participated in Europeanness to the extent that they also could be depicted as progressive achievers of great deeds overseas. Pure geographical definitions were found wanting in this ideational climate, not only because they were found to be empirically inaccurate, but also because they did not contain this narrative of progress. During Stralenberg's time, the boundary issue had already come under discussion. The classical Greek practice of placing the boundary at river Don was not satisfactory, because Don was not a very long river, and clearly did not divide the land mass into two separate halves. In maps drawn during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious criteria sometimes replaced classical geographical ones, in the sense that there was a tendency to consider Turkey and Tartaria, or the area under Mongolian rule, as clearly non-European, and the little known kingdom of Muscovia was considered as similar with Tartaria. The Catholic Hapsburg and Polish Empires, and the Protestant Swedish Empire, on the other hand, clearly were understood as European.¹⁶ In several maps, though not in all, this lead to the solution that Dnepr was adopted as the practical boundary between Europe and Asia, the boundary then going from the upper course of Dnepr to Lake Ladoga and the White Sea. The boundary thus became a political and religious one, empires and kingdoms professing the western Catholic

and Protestant faiths forming Europe, everything else being Asia. Stralenberg toned down the use of religious criteria—although of course pointing out that even Russian Orthodox religion is Christian. Instead, he ostensibly returned to geographic criteria, but in a way that announced the ending of the relevance of geographic criteria in geopolitical argumentation. This is not altogether clear at first sight, because he apparently returned to pure geographic arguments. He nevertheless discarded the basic ancient metageographical notion of continent as a large piece of land separated from others by water. Instead of Don, Stralenberg wanted to use a mountain range as the boundary of Europe and Asia, declaring:

From the Ice [Polar] Sea between the mouths of Petšora and Obi Rivers rises a mountain range, which the ancients called *montes Riphæos*, but Russians call it *Kamenoj* or *Weliki Pojas*, which mean the Stony or Great Mountain Belt, or they even call it the Belt of the Earth.¹⁷

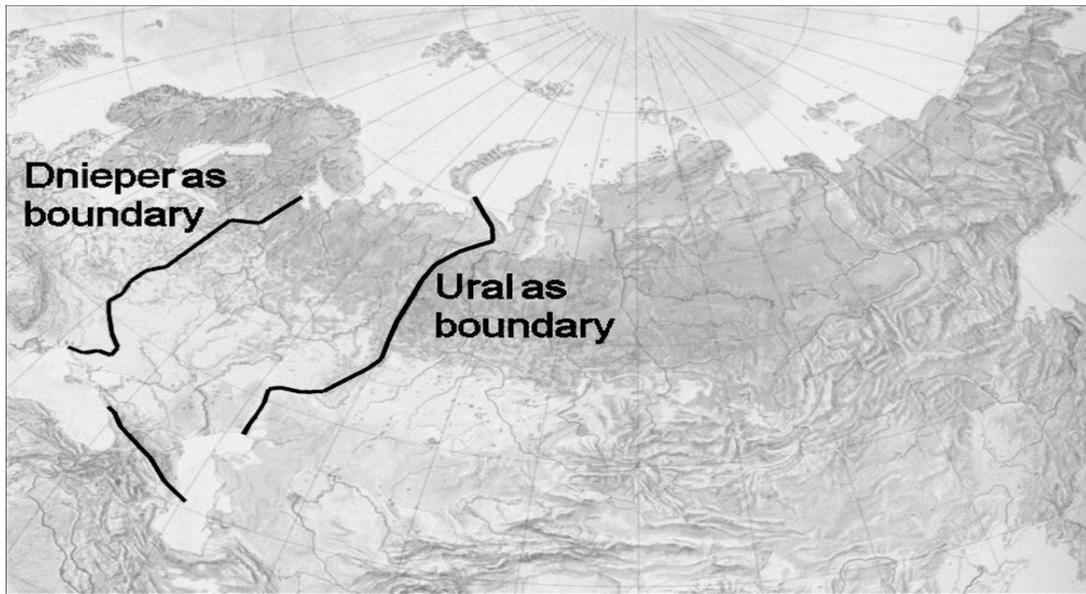
Stralenberg is not a poetic writer, and his sentences seldom rise to a level of elegance, but this opening sentence of the new conceptualization displays a rare event of a purposeful attempt to use rhetorical *pathos* to move the minds of his readers. Here Stralenberg writes in a strongly metaphorical way, creating a mental picture of a magnificent stony wall dividing the continent into two halves. *Montes Riphæos* was a name used by ancient Greeks to denote the extreme northern reaches of mythical Scythia. This Stralenberg took to mean the Ural Mountains. That name meant in Stralenberg's time only the southern regions of the area, but later superseded other Russian names. Stralenberg's text was even more metaphorical in view of the fact that the Ural Mountains are not very high, and large areas of the supposed mountains is simply hilly country between the Russian and Siberian plains, but in his argument the magnificent Belt of the Earth, which connected the Ice Sea with warmer southern climates, was suitable to act as the boundary between Europe and Asia. This reconceptualization simply stated that because it was futile to search for an indisputable boundary formed by water, you should look for something else, and that something else was the Ural Mountains with their grandiose Russian names. Thus Stralenberg effected the dropping of the ancient metageographical notion of Asia and Europe as separate continents in the geographic sense. Yet, even if they were not real continents, they should conceptually be kept strictly apart. This needed argumentation that sounded more geographic. Stralenberg proceeded with the *logos* part of his redescription by giving empirical reasons for accepting the Belt of the Earth as the boundary. I'll present some of them, enough to show his line of argument:

1. In Europe big rivers run in many directions, such as Veiksel, Düna, Dwina, and Petšora to the north; while Dnepr, Don, and Volga run to the south. In Asia the big rivers, namely Ob, Lena, Irtysh, and Yenisei, run only to the north.
2. The European side of the Ural Mountains is drier, while the Asian side is wet, swampy and full of trees.
3. Rivers on the western slopes of the Urals flow to the west, while the rivers on the eastern slopes flow to the east.
4. In European rivers there are lax and crabs, but in Asian rivers these cannot be found.
5. There grow spruce, oak and hazel in Europe, but larch and fir in Asia.
6. Along European riverbanks you can find small stones of various colours, but in Asia you find grey rock.

We can see that although Stralenberg presented many arguments, they really are not very convincing, if we consider the issue at hand to be redrawing the boundary between Europe and Asia. Some of the 'facts' he mentions are irrelevant, such as the direction of the flow of rivers,

and some of them are even dubious, such as his biological data. The whole *logos* of his argument is oddly empty, distorted and incoherent.

Inferring from the fact that the *pathos* of the argument rested largely on the magnificence of the Russian name for the Urals, it is quite possible that the idea originated from Russians, and that Stralenberg acted only as a spokesman and publicist for it. The Ural Mountains were a perfectly logical civilizational boundary from a Russian point of view, because they had long served as the boundary between Russia and Siberia, which in Russian imagination had clearly been distinguished from each other.¹⁸ Russia represented the traditional area of agricultural economy under the practical rule of the czar, while Siberia was a wild area to the East populated by pagan nomadic populations, hunters, and Russian fur traders, who could not be effectively governed by anyone. What later emerged as the generally accepted European and Asian boundary was originally an intra-Russian division of civilization and way of life.



Map. 1.3

As a matter of fact, the idea has been credited to Vasilii Tatishchev, an historian and geographer in the service of Peter I, and as has been pointed out, this is one of the first instances in Russian history when Europe was taken into use as a speech act, whereby Europe was talked and written into existence in connection with Russia.¹⁹ Compared with the prevalent Western European idea of Dnepr as the political and civilizational boundary, removing the boundary to the Urals had the effect of moving the rapidly westernizing Russia under Peter I from Asia to Europe. This is the political sense of Stralenberg's rhetorical redescription of the Euro-Asian boundary. As Mark Bassin argues, in pre-Petrine Russia the orthodox concept of Moscow as the Third Rome had served both as the ideological and geopolitical definition, setting Russia apart from both Europe and Asia, which were irrelevant concepts. Classical Greek geographical theory had been known in Russia, but the continental boundary issue was treated simply in a scholastic manner, Don being taken without qualms as the boundary, simply because the whole question of placing the country geographically either in Asia or in Europe was politically and religiously irrelevant. Russia was an Orthodox Christian realm, pure and solitary. With the ascent of Peter I the situation changed drastically during the first quarter of the eighteenth century, exactly when Stralenberg was in Tobolsk as a prisoner of war. The Petrine ideology adopted western civilizational categories, and with them acknowledged the absolute pre-eminence of Western European civilization. The Petrine reforms from the ban of beards, and requirement for a German dress at court, to constructing

the new capital of St. Petersburg a thousand kilometres west from Moscow, attest to the comprehensiveness of the ideological change. Situating Russia within the Europe-Asia division also became an important political issue. Tatishchev, an ardent supporter of the Petrine reforms, had been given the task by Peter I to construct the geography of the new reformed Russia, and he had also been in contact with Stralenberg first during his captivity and later in Sweden. Stralenberg seems to have been the first to publish the idea in print; Tatishchev's manuscripts for his geography seem to have become ready for circulation among the Russian elite only during the 1730s, when Tatishchev also wrote a commentary on Stralenberg's book.²⁰ It is probably impossible to determine indisputably who first came up with the idea of using the Urals as the Euro-Asian boundary, but it seems absolutely clear that the political impulse for the redescription came from Russians, Stralenberg simply complying with it.

How should we then interpret Stralenberg's rhetorical redescription in a geopolitical sense? From a later perspective one could understand the situation in terms of the expansion of Europe. Western European colonial empires were definitely expanding at this time, as was also Russia with the victorious wars of Peter I, and it would be easy to equate the two. Western European conceit towards the rest of the world was increasing in leaps and bounds, as was also Russian pride of their own achievements. After the victory over Sweden in 1721 Peter I abandoned the old idea of Muscovia as czarism, and instead the rank of the ruler was proclaimed to be *imperator*, not mere Czar, and simultaneously Russia was ceremonially proclaimed to be an *imperiia* or colonial empire, similar in rank with Spain, France and Britain.²¹ During the nineteenth century Siberia also was consistently 'Asianized' in Russian discussions, with colonial images relating to its emptiness in terms of population, its exotic ethnic composition, and its economic value as a provider of 'soft gold', namely the expensive furs, whose monetary importance as Russian export articles resembled that of Spanish gold and silver derived from the American colonies. The Russian Empire was conceptually divided into a European Russian metropolis and its Asian colony in Siberia, and similar orientaling language was used about Siberia as western colonial empires used of their own colonies.²²

However, this represents the mature phase of an established discourse; the situation at hand during the Petrine period was the necessity to establish the terms of the discourse in the first place. With the acceptance of the cultural and epistemological superiority of Europe the principal evaluation making audience of Russian rhetoric also shifted to the West. The redescription of the boundary was specifically a Russian argument. Russia first had to be accepted as a European country, and only after that it could pose as a European empire colonizing vast tracts of Asia. In terms of naming Russia initially had to move rhetorically westwards, until its physical movement eastwards could be interpreted as European expansion. With Stralenberg's and Tatishchev's rhetorical redescription Russia left Asia and entered Europe. Stralenberg's book attracted considerable attention around Europe, because first-hand knowledge of Russia as a new great military power in the East had been scarce, and during the subsequent decades it was translated into English (1738), French (1757), and Spanish (1786).

While the narrative of enlightenment and conquest was thus attached to the name of Europe, Asia began to resemble everything opposite, a place to be conquered and colonized. Geography as such became irrelevant in Eurasian geopolitical discussions, civilizational politics clearly becoming the overriding metageographic elements, although this tended to be clothed under the use of geographic language, in the same way that Stralenberg did. From this time onwards for a couple of centuries geographic concordance, with the exception of the Oriental Renaissance of the nineteenth century,²³ began to influence nearly everything written about Europe and Asia. This historical phase has nevertheless been studied so thoroughly by others²⁴ that I shall not touch it here.

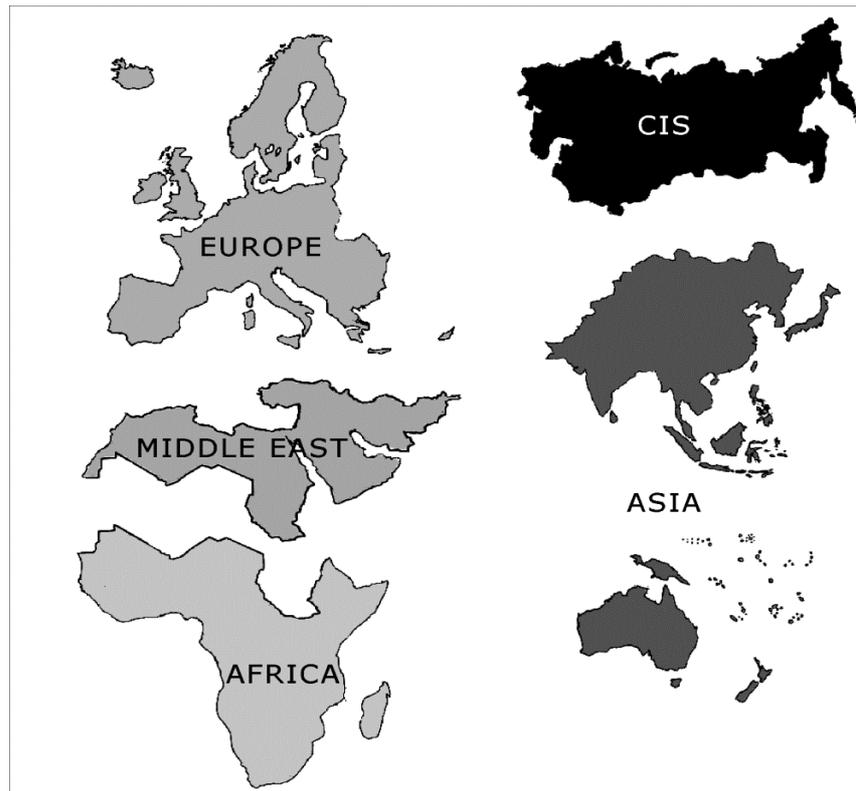
Post-War American-Asian Geography

The next period when really interesting changes began to happen was the post-World War II situation, as Western European narrative spinners found themselves in a quite different situation compared with the eighteenth century. The colonial empires crumbled, and European states ceased to be great powers. The concept of the West itself changed.²⁵ The United States, as the new world hegemonic power, assumed the central position within that concept, and the rest of the West meant a disparate collection of American allies in the Cold War from Norway and Turkey to Japan and Australia. Simultaneously Western Europeans lost their previous monopoly for defining themselves, and American discussion on Eurasia became a strong, if not altogether dominating, influence. Americans had little interest in ancient European beliefs, but instead named the Eurasian landmass according to their own geopolitical interests, as an American geographer pointed out in 1951, in an all out rejection of old European naming practices:

Is the huge landmass of Eurasia one continent or two? The common practice is to slice the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in two parts along an arbitrary line [...] This so-called continental boundary in the general vicinity of the Ural Mountains follows no significant division of topography, drainage, climate, soils, land use, culture, or history. [...] Europeans have looked eastward to Asia, hence the usage of Near East and Far East. These directional terms have no significance to the people of Asia itself, or to Americans. Accordingly they are not used in this volume [...]²⁶

Even from a purely geographic standpoint, Americans were not only looking at the Eurasian landmass from the west, behind the backs of Europeans, but also directly from the east, over the Pacific Ocean, and already this fact made much of old European geography of less value for them. In addition, as a great military and economic power with varying interests towards all different political divisions of Eurasia, Americans simply needed more finely tuned divisions than Europeans during the colonial period had needed. The Urals as a boundary, and even the necessity for a boundary between Europe and Asia became largely irrelevant. That definition survived in school geography and family atlases, but the Soviet Union became such an overriding geopolitical entity that it began to acquire the characteristics of a new ‘continent’. Especially in maps using the Mercator projection, the Soviet Union became a huge portion of land dwarfing everything else in the landmass, and this happened in a similar way in western as well as Soviet maps. The Ural Mountains returned to being an inner boundary within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

From American discussion also the name Middle East superseded names like Western Asia, Near East, or Levant, and as a consequence Europe practically ceased touching Asia. As Europe became militarily and politically small, there was no longer any necessity to honour European naming practices, and its geographic area could be contracted to the “Western peninsular Eurasia.”²⁷ It is an interesting fact that this corresponded roughly with the same area where it had been conceptualized during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries before Strahlenberg’s reinterpretation.



Map. 1.4

The metageographical notion of a continental dichotomy in Eurasia was destroyed by Americans. The Old World became composed of five politically and functionally meaningful “continents,” namely the old ones Europe, Asia and Africa, and the new ones Middle East and Soviet Union/CIS. Partly this phenomenon also reflects the fact that residual areas—unknown, uninhabited, and needed by no one—exist no more. This makes the concept of Asia again smaller, corresponding with the thinking of Herodotus, although the exact geographic location of Asia is vastly different. Early twentieth century discussions about Asian unity by such figures as the Japanese art historian Okakura Tenshin and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore were still departing from Stralenberg’s definition of Asia, and it is exceedingly difficult to find some kind of cultural unity for the whole area east of the Urals. The results are necessarily thin.²⁸ Breaking the old conceptualization freed Asians of the necessity to try to find some commonalities with Russians and Arabs. For instance, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has verbally since the 1960s, and graphically since the early 1990s, used a five-fold division of the old world, shown in the map. This is a practical division, which reflects the divisions within the ministry itself. For the purpose of being meaningfully able to conduct its affairs, it has been divided into sections, where knowledge of history, culture, customs, languages, politics, economics, etc., has been concentrated. For any kind of practical administrative purposes Stralenbergian geography does not work, and thus it has been discarded. The practical result of all this is that Asia has become geographically a much smaller place than contemporary Europeans tend to think, which is directly linked to the fact that there exists an accompanying conscious effort to attach also the properties of an actor to the name of Asia, i.e. Asian regional organizations can nowadays be created. In continental geopolitics size is essential, as only smallness implies the capability to act. Action involves heavy amounts of multilayered international cooperation and integration, and the larger amounts of sovereign nation-states you have integrating with each other, the messier the results tend to be. Thus, nowadays, under the name of Asia is generally placed countries from Pakistan eastwards and Mongolia southwards, the Pacific and Indian Oceans forming the

eastern and southern boundaries. This can sometimes be quite difficult for Europeans to grasp. For instance, despite all evidence that the geopolitical language describing the meaningful divisions of Eurasia has changed, Göran Therborn in his recent discussion of the concept of Asia simply thinks that Asians are wrong, and he knows better what should be counted into Asia.²⁹

How to Conceptualize Contemporary Asia

So we have nowadays a smaller Asia than we did before. It is smaller especially in terms of geography, but not really much smaller in terms of population. Even this kind of definition of Asia contains more than half of humanity, and political, military, economic, religious, linguistic and cultural divisions between Asia tend to be serious. We are not talking about an EU like structure at all. If the European Union can be defined as an organization, where states give up part of their sovereignty for the purpose of creating a larger whole, which would be stronger and more important in world politics than the constituent states separately, in Asia, at least in the case of most states, regional cooperation is taking place precisely to enable the states become stronger as sovereign states, and to consolidate themselves as nations. Of course common bargaining power towards outsiders also has to be taken into consideration, but that is in practice possible only for certain Asian subunits, such as ASEAN, but hardly for Asia as a whole.

More than an integrated area, Asia is a collection of security complexes. One of them is in the south, composed of India and its neighbours, especially Pakistan and China; one in Southeast Asia including Australia and New Zealand, although within ASEAN there hardly has been any violence between countries for decades, but most countries have had disputes with China. The third security complex is situated in Northeast Asia, being composed of Japan, the two Koreas, Taiwan and China, with Japan having varying levels of tension with all of them. China, as the territorially largest state, and being also the most imperialistically oriented, in Hans Morgenthau's old realistic sense, is part of all these security complexes. Because Asia is not a unity, and because both small scale and large scale military violence always looms in the possible action horizon, outside powers, especially the United States, have considerable influence in the area.

Asian unity can hardly be seen at the level of citizens, who tend to identify either with their states, or smaller ethnic and regional units within their states. Only at the level of national intellectual, economic and political elites discussion of Asian cooperation has been thriving during the past two decades. This discussion in its modern form is not old. It is based on the somewhat older discussion of Pacific integration, which started to emerge in Japan in the 1950s, and which led to the establishment of organizations such as Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC) in 1980 and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1991.³⁰ The basic axis of these organizations has been Japanese and US cooperation with a number of smaller American and Pacific Asian countries. Asia began to be thematized in discussions of economic integration from the middle 1980s onwards for two reasons. For the first, the United States with its economic health being spoiled during the Reagan administrations, took an increasingly hostile stand towards the rapidly growing Pacific Asian states with large trade surpluses with the United States. For the second, China entered the economic configuration of the region with force, and this changed also the geopolitical situation. The theoretical economic viability of the Asian side of the Pacific system increased, while a clearly political dimension was added to the tensions with the United States. In addition, Chinese participants entering discussions had influence also on the rhetoric, because they systematically used the term Asia instead of the Pacific.



Map. 1.5

In a sense the new Asian discussion has meant a return to dichotomous metageographical concepts, because the discussion seldom touches the niceties of sharp divisions in other parts of the world than Asia. The discussion takes mainly place at the eastern maritime states of Asia, and they have, so to speak, monopolized the use of the concept of Asia, much like Western Europeans have tended to monopolize the use of Europe. East Asian states from Japan to Singapore represent economic success, and thus they form the nucleus of organizational and rhetorical activity. While concentrating on speaking about Asia as a small region capable of organizing, they at the same time necessarily treat the rest of the Eurasian continent as a residual category, and unless specific names are given to that area, as the Japanese Foreign Ministry does, then the non-Asian part of the landmass necessarily has to be Europe. Europe also unfailingly comes up in discussions when it turn to history, because only the West, meaning Europe in the past and the United States backed by the European Union nowadays, is a factor strong enough to create a meaningful conceptual unity in Asia. With some personal experience I can say that many Europeans find it rather startling to find themselves placed into a residual category, but that is the way the world changes.

Simultaneously, a new metageographical element is added. This time it is not civilization, politics, or religion, but economic performance. Many Asian states may be poor, but the norm defining inclusion to that chosen group of countries is economic growth of the order of doubling the economy in a decade, i.e. roughly 7.2 per cent annually. This is not an ideal, this is a norm. States, like Japan, and corresponding political entities, such as Hong Kong, which already are rich, do not have to fulfil this norm nowadays, but they have had such a performance in the past. All poor states either have to attain the rate of growth, or they at least have earnestly to strive for it. In practice there are exceptions, such as Myanmar/Burma, but that does not destroy the existence of the metageographical norm itself. A true Asian country is an economically successful country, but defined by way of a process, and not as a steady state, as would be the case in EU Europe. As evidence for the argument I can cite the declaration of the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in December 2005.

I find there is a great support for India's engagement and India's involvement. The South-East Asian countries recognise that a fast-growing Indian economy with a Gross National Product of

over seven hundred billion, growing at the rate of seven to eight per cent, has beneficial impact on growth processes in South-East Asia as a whole.³¹

According to Singh, getting closer to East Asia has been an important goal of Indian diplomacy ever since the formation of its Look East policy in the early 1990s, and now after clearly fulfilling the Asian metageographical growth norm India can approach East Asia with confidence, relying on the support of ASEAN countries in the process.

Asian Regional Organizations as Name Politics

Prime Minister Singh uttered those words on his way to participating in the first East Asian Summit, which was held in Kuala Lumpur in 14 December 2005. It has been called an historical event, because it was the first time such a meeting of Asian heads of states took place under such name. The organizational etymology of this meeting goes back to the tumultuous year of the post-Cold War period, when new forms of constructing the international situation in the Asian Pacific area were being sought. In 1991 the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad proposed the formation of an East Asian Economic Caucus, which would have been composed of ASEAN, Japan, South Korea and China, and which would have been lead by Japan. It was also described as a caucus without Caucasians by pundits. At that time the organization was not established, principally because the United States vehemently opposed the creation of a potentially important international organization, where it was not a member, and which also potentially could have adopted an anti-American agenda. As a consequence the Japanese government refused to go along with Mahathir's proposal, and the idea was buried as such, but over the years it developed into an arrangement called ASEAN+3 (or APT), where leaders of Japan, South Korea and China used to have a special meeting with ASEAN leaders in connection with ASEAN's annual summit meetings. ASEAN+3 started to convene during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 to discuss mutual help in handling the situation. The main point of this arrangement has been to gather together and discuss mutual financial, trade and security relations, while avoiding a name that would suggest an anti-American organization. Over the years ASEAN+3 has acquired the character of steady cooperation not only on head of state, but also at ministerial and bureaucratic levels.

A somewhat related forum has been the ASEAN Regional Forum, established in 1993, dedicated for discussing security and political matters, and which nowadays includes, in addition to ASEAN, Australia, Canada, China, European Union, India, Japan, Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Timor Leste, and the United States. It is an open ended process, where new members constantly have been added over the years, the only criterion being that the activities of members should have some bearing on security issues in Northeast and Southeast Asia. Thus also the EU is a member. Many Asian international organizations tend to grow in size in terms of membership and geographical area exactly because the principle of exclusivity is applied with utmost care, especially towards great powers. The purpose of these organizations is the management of mutual interdependences, and that is best done by gathering state representatives together to talk. No spectacular achievements or grand decisions are usually made in these meetings, and that is not even their purpose. As it is said in the ARF home page, "cultivation of habits of dialogue" among potentially conflicting states is one of the basic goals of the organization. Decisions should be made by consensus, which means that major decisions cannot be made at all. Decision making is not the purpose of ARF, but rather "moving at a pace comfortable to all," which means a very low pace. In addition, both ARF and APT have been successful organizations in their own terms because their activities have been organized around ASEAN rather than any great power, and that is

symbolized also by their names. There is no official leadership, and no special goal, except the creation of stability in the area for the purpose of economic development and state consolidation. ARF meetings, just like the APT meetings, are venues for multilateral as well as bilateral diplomacy. They are not actors by themselves, but diplomatic space for state representatives to act according to a formal set of rules. They are thus examples of international society.

The idea of placing APT activity openly under a clear name displaying Asia resurfaced after a decade, when Mahathir's successor, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, suggested discussions about the idea of an East Asian Community at the 2004 ASEAN+3 meeting. The name East Asian Community is a direct reference to the European Economic Community/European Union, and potentially would have meant the creation of an exclusive regional organization, which perhaps could become an actor, and not only a venue. Badawi won immediate backing from China's Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Both China's recent interest in multilateral diplomacy and resurfaced anti-American feelings were important factors in renewing the discussion. China has to an extent replaced Japan as a possible leader in the area, and at the same time it cautiously seems to be trying to create a sphere of action independent of the United States. The Shanghai Group with Russia, Kazakhstan and Central Asian states is one example of this, and China's agreement to form a free trade area with ASEAN by 2010 is another. On the other hand, there has been widespread exasperation with the United States during the administrations of George W. Bush. They have not shown any special interest in Asia, and especially since September 2001 American foreign policy has concentrated on the War against Terrorism, which has little meaning to Asian countries as such. The Bush administration has used even the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summits for spreading its anti-terrorist agenda as a global strategy, while practically all Asian members would have been willing to regard terrorists as a police matter, requiring no doubt some amount of international collaboration, but nothing more. Instead, Asian countries would have liked to concentrate on trade, investment and finance issues within APEC, which would have been much more sensible for them. By concentrating on the War against Terrorism, the United States during the first half of this decade succeeded in losing a considerable amount of its political influence in Asia, and irresponsible American economic policies, possibly placing the whole global economic system into jeopardy, and thus potentially seriously harming also the Asian states, have eroded also American ideological influence.

Badawi's original idea seems to have been only to place ASEAN+3 under a new name and increase its scope and depth. Subsequent diplomatic maneuvering by Japan seems to have made considerable changes in the membership. To balance China's rising influence in the area, it demanded that also India, Australia and New Zealand are allowed to participate, and especially in Australia fairly strong governmental circles had since Mahathir's original proposal demanded access to existing East Asian organizational arrangements. This finally became possible after Australia and New Zealand signed with ASEAN a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. The name of the meeting was agreed to be East Asian Summit (EAS), although it might as well have been called simply Asian Summit because of its geographic composition. The agenda of the inaugural meeting was not very ambitious. In practice the summit meant only a few hours of common talks of Asian leaders, plus ample possibilities for bilateral diplomacy. Clearly, the EAS did not start on the road to form itself into a tight regional organization capable of united action, but rather the events seem to point towards another ARF-type venue. Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro declared before and also during the conference that the continuation of good relations between Japan and the United States is a precondition for Japanese participation in Asian integration,³² which perhaps indicates that

Asian integration still is a worrisome project outside of it. The leadership of the United States tends to regard any attempts to distance the superpower from Eurasian geopolitics with suspicion.

The term ‘community’ did not appear in the final communiqué of the meeting, but instead the EAS decided to establish itself as a permanent meeting.³³ The only other concrete decision from the meeting was another joint declaration of combating the avian flu.³⁴ Apparently also the question of the location of future meetings was discussed, the result being that they would not be held in any of the regional major powers, such as China, but always in connection with ASEAN summits in some ASEAN country. Thus, although the name changed, the organizing ethos remained the same. The same can be said of the second EAS held in Cebu, the Philippines in 15 January 2007. This time publicity around the summit was much lower than during the inaugural conference, but discussions seem to have been more concrete, centering on ways to maintain rapid economic development, especially problems of energy security.³⁵

Activities in Asian international organizations as a norm are not dramatic, but rather extremely boring. Nothing especially interesting seems to take place, but a new organization is added, or a change of the name of an existing organization takes place, once or twice in a decade. No one is in a hurry, except perhaps outside participating powers such as the United States, and all activities tend to follow the sacred norm of “moving at a pace comfortable to all,” and especially to those that want to move slowly. That does not mean this is serious business. The temporal framework simply is wide. A state has to react to events fairly rapidly, within days, weeks or months, normally, and it has the capacity to do that. A relatively tight and established international organization, such as the European Union, works in a somewhat slower temporal framework, but nevertheless it has the capacity to contemplate budgetary decisions and policy alternatives in such diverse fields as common foreign policy, agricultural policy, or the Bologna process in education at the pace of a year. In Asian international organizations the smallest meaningful temporal unit of analysis may be a decade, and a longer meaningful unit is that of a generation. This temporal framework can be discerned very clearly for instance in the speech that Prime Minister Wen Jiabao gave at the East Asia Summit.

Looking ahead, we are full of confidence. Our goal is to double China's per capita GDP of 2000 by 2010, and after that, to bring China's GDP to US\$4 trillion and its per capita GDP to US\$3,000 in another 15 years. This will turn China into a country of moderate prosperity. [...] For China to be fully developed, it will take the unremitting efforts of several generations, or even a dozen generations of the Chinese people. China thus needs a durable and peaceful international environment that enables it to concentrate on economic development.³⁶

The temporal sense is very natural. The goal of attaining the level of moderate prosperity is within the reach. If everything goes all right, that stage could dawn in 20 years from now, i.e. within a generation, and within the life time of most Chinese living at present. Not only are most of Asian states still in a transition process from weak to strong states, in Barry Buzan’s terms, but economically most of them either are still growing or have until recently been growing at a pace of more or less doubling or tripling their GNP in a decade. The relative capacities of Asian states can change a lot during a decade, and there is no wish to harden the system in any way that would inhibit that. Because a collection of loose discursive structures works, nothing is broken, and there is no reason to fix anything drastically. Because rapid change is taking place at the state level, the organizational level can move forwards to greater levels of complexity very slowly.

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