

# GeoPolitics and the Media in Asia and the Pacific



# GeoPolitics and the Media in Asia and the Pacific:

*Pulling in Different Directions*

By

Kalinga Seneviratne

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## PREFACE

On a Sunday morning in the mid-1990s, I had picked up my two Australian-born children from the Sunday Dhamma (Buddhist) lessons in Sydney and on the way home, my, then 7-year-old, daughter Amali asked: "Thathi (dad) what is respect?" I was somewhat taken aback by the question and did not have an instant answer. It transpired that her Sri Lankan teacher has been talking about respect during the Buddhist lesson and it was the first time she had heard that word – even though she's had 2 years of primary and another 2 years of pre-school lessons in Australia. It made me think about how we learned respect, because by that age, while growing up in Sri Lanka, respect would have naturally come to us through the social norms of society – such as respect for elders, for books, for knowledge and wisdom, for teachers and so forth.

I just Googled the word 'respect' and came to the Oxford Dictionary's definition of it, which gives two interpretations of the noun:

- 1 - a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements.
- 2 - due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of others.

In terms of the verb, the International Organisation of Migration site gives good contemporary meaning to the word as follows<sup>1</sup>.

*Respect is an important component of personal self-identity and interpersonal relationships. It tends to be a self-reinforcing behavior. Treating someone with respect means:*

- *showing regard for their abilities and worth,*
- *valuing their feelings and their views, even if you don't necessarily agree with them,*
- *accepting them on an equal basis and giving them the same consideration you would expect for yourself.*

Throughout this book, I have reflected on the lack of respect, coming especially from the Western alliance, for different viewpoints and different ways of doing things; and for calls from what is now known as the *Global South*, for reforms to the international order. You would note – as I have pointed out repeatedly – that the argument based on “rules-based order”,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/staff-welfare/the\\_psychology\\_of\\_respect.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/staff-welfare/the_psychology_of_respect.pdf)

boils down to this attitude of lack of respect for other points of view and inability to understand these points of view on an equal basis. The West, unfortunately, does not seem to understand that the rules they talk about have been rules they have set themselves – with hardly any consultations with non-Westerners – and these are designed to benefit themselves. Now it is challenged, not only by China but most of the rest of the non-Western world. To understand why it is being challenged is to learn to respect other points of view.

In March 2018, in a keynote address at the Mekong Ganga conference at Thamassat University in Bangkok<sup>2</sup>, Dr Ram Madhav, Director of India Foundation and the then National General Secretary of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) argued that 'soft power' which is promoted by big powers these days is an imposition of one's cultural practices on others without using military means, and is not a suitable option for Asia. "The Ganga-Mekong cultural flows (in ancient times) were interplay of cultures," he said, adding: "The history of India has shown how culture has helped to prosper others." Pointing out that Indians have been traveling as far as China since at least the 1st century CE marrying princesses and establishing communities influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, Madhav said: "From Cambodia to Bali, Indian influence was not seen as colonizing." Though Indians saw the region as greater India or further India "traders, monks, and travelers did not come across 'savages' in the lands they encountered; they came across people living in similar civilized societies like them".

It is this last comment that is of relevance to understanding today's geo-political battles and the rules-based order narrative. Pankaj Misra (2012) in the prologue to his thought-provoking book 'From The Ruins Of The Empire' refers to a great landmark in world history in 1905 that has similar connotations to today's geo-political battles that are the subject of this book. That is the annihilation of much of the Russian navy by a small Japanese naval fleet in the Tsushima Straits, which sent shock waves across the Western nations, while the rest – from the Middle East to East Asia - celebrated.

The defeat of Russia proved that Japan's program of catching up with the West has been stunningly successful," noted Misra (2012). "For many other non-White peoples, Russia's humiliation seemed to negate the West's racial hierarchies, mocking the European presumption to 'civilize' the supposedly 'backward' countries of Asia". He adds further: "Japan has

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<sup>2</sup> I was present and was a speaker at the conference. See Chapter 8 for more details on Mekong Ganga Cooperation.

shown that Asian countries could find their path to modern civilization, and its special vigour".

By choosing to focus on South and Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific, I'm addressing the same issue in a new era. What Japan achieved then, is what China is today – not necessarily in military terms, but in economic management, technological innovations and adaptations, raising millions of people out of poverty within a generation, etc. If all these have been achieved under an "authoritative system", then what do you call the European colonial era that helped to propel Europe out of poverty that was driven by invasions, plunder, massacres, and enslavement of over two-thirds of the world?

As you read through this book, you will note that the West's attitude towards the East tends to reflect a mindset of looking at issues from a militaristic framework. Is that the right attitude to take? How can the West learn to respect Asia's rise and acknowledge the peaceful path it has taken? I will leave you to reflect on that as you read through this book.

In the introductory chapter, I look at the issues of geopolitics and "security" through the frameworks of Intercultural Communication, Ideological Supremacy Mindset, and the media's adversarial culture leading to the military focus of the narrative. Meanwhile, in the second chapter, I go back in history to the ancient silk routes arguing that it is the earliest form of globalization. I also point out the peaceful nature of the exchanges of not only goods but also culture and raise the question of whether we can learn from that experience to defuse the geopolitical conflicts of today. There is also discussion about the debt trap narrative pointing out that the Bretton Woods system was the front-runner in this process.

Chapter 3 is a critical assessment of the 'rules-based order' narrative and question whose order are we talking about? The need to address the role of the military-industrial complex that drives today's geo-political battles and militarization is also discussed. In Chapter 4, China's concept of a 'Community of Common Destiny' is discussed through the framework of China's promise and America's concerns.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the geo-politics of the Indian Ocean with a critical look at India's muscular behavior in the region, and China's incursions into the area. Chapter 6 is devoted entirely to Sri Lanka's predicament with its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, and in the middle of the East-West sea lanes. Sri Lanka epitomizes the dilemma and threats faced by small island states in today's geo-political battles. Chapter 7 goes away from the oceans to the mountain ranges of the Himalayas

because managing the geo-political battles looming there is crucial to peace across Asia.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on Southeast Asia questioning the US role in fermenting conflict in the South China Sea, while critically analyzing China's claims to much of the maritime territory there. The chapter also looks at China's building of railways under the BRI project with a favourable look at how it could develop pan-Asian trading pathways; while also the prospect of the geo-political battles spreading to the Mekong River is discussed. Chapter 9 focuses on the Philippines because while I was writing the book, with the election of junior Marcos as the President of the Philippines, his tilt toward the US raised tensions in the region. This is an ongoing issue that will certainly see new developments when this book comes out. But, this chapter should give a good background to how the tensions started.

Chapters 10 and 11 focus on the South Pacific. I was based at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji for half of 2022 and the whole of 2023 when a ferocious geo-political battle brewed up with China on one side and the US tagged by Australia on the other side. Thus, I was able to observe this disturbing development from close quarters and was able to interview and discuss issues with Pacific scholars and media people during the time.

In a speech delivered at a Pacific Island Forum Economic Ministers meeting in Suva in August 2023, Fiji's Finance Minister Professor Biman Prasad(2023a) warned that the Pacific is at a "cliff edge" with a growing burden of climate change at a fierceness not seen before". Prof Prasad, a former economics professor at USP, asked that at a time when they are so vulnerable to this existential threat – must the region be subject to a new era of geo-political contestation?

The final chapter discusses how the media is being weaponized to fight geo-political battles, and the need to understand the role of the military-industrial complex in the media narrative, and why the Asian (and Pacific) media need to develop independent narratives on the issues at stake.

Li Wei (2024), Dean of the School of International Studies at China's Renmin University, in a commentary published by China Daily argues that the Sino-US competition is set to be a long-term three-dimensional battle, with diplomacy, capital flows, and technological innovations playing pivotal roles. In terms of diplomacy, he points out that the US system is based on its military alliance system, "which is relatively exclusive and rigid". In contrast, China's diplomacy is founded on a global network of partnerships that focus on cooperation, "which is more open and flexible".

I hope this book will assist in understanding these different approaches to diplomacy. But, a rising India, re-militarising Japan, and an assertive Russia that is refocusing its attention (or alliance building) towards Asia, need to come into play in coming years. Though not much has been discussed about the BRICS alliance in this book, it could be an important player in the geo-political battlefields of Asia and the Pacific in the coming years.

I would like to take the opportunity here to thank a few people who have provided some useful assistance in the course of putting this book together. Dr Palitha Kohona, Sri Lankan diplomat and former Head of the UN Treaty Section gave me useful backgrounders and comments in shaping some of the issues discussed in the book. I'm thankful to Dr Shailendra Singh, Head of Journalism Program at USP for giving me the opportunity to be engaged as a consultant to the program based in Fiji for almost 18 months. Also, I appreciate the lengthy interviews given to me by Professors Vijay Naidu and Gordon Nanau at USP, B.N Balji, a former newspaper editor in Singapore, and Thai scholar Thanachate Wisaijorn.



## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION TO GEOPOLITICS IN ASIA AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC

“The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.” — Mahatma Gandhi<sup>1</sup>

I chose to begin this book with this famous quote from Indian independence hero Mahatma Gandhi made at the peak of India's independence struggle. This is a quote that should reverberate across the world today as the United States (US) fights to maintain its stranglehold of the world's resources, while China rises to grab some of it as well as find new resources far from its shores. We call these geo-political battles that are destabilizing the world and threatening to trigger a global war without giving much thought to how we can provide enough for humanity's needs, and how we can stem peoples' greed.

The world's great religions teach a lot about greed, but all religions have let down their devotees, as the religious leaders themselves are unable to control their greed for money and expansion. Thus, this book's underlined theme will be the greed (not only for money) that drives geo-political conflicts and the inability of the media to understand it and provide a platform to curb it.

### **What is Geopolitics?**

Though geopolitical flashpoints can be seen flashing across the globe, what I would focus on in this book are the geo-political battles in the 3 oceans in Asia and the Pacific - South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific – and also in the Himalayas mountain region that encompass the long land border between India and China, and along the Mekong River that flows through 6 Asian countries.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/427443-the-world-has-enough-for-everyone-s-need-but-not-enough>

Geopolitics by definition is the analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations. Historical analysis of the rise of the British Empire was the starting point for the geopolitical debate. It argued that the control of sea routes was decisive because of the superior mobility of the oceanic sailing vessel over animal-powered land transport<sup>2</sup>.

The European colonial conquest and the development of trading relations were based on maritime routes and their control by the colonial powers. This mindset is still prevalent among Westerners, which helps to fuel the geo-political tensions in the 3 oceans that are the main focus of this book.

However, the ancient Silk Routes that promoted trading (and cultural) relations first between Chinese and Indian civilizations and later further west through Central Asia and West Asia into Europe, were based on land transport. The new Belt and Belt Initiatives (BRI) rekindle these great trade routes of the past.

These ancient trade routes were important routes of intercultural communications through which, Buddhism for example, spread west to Central Asia and east to China and across East Asia.

Amir Zekrgoo (cited in Elisseff, 2000: 326) argues that the Silk Routes should be counted as the most important route in the history of mankind. "Along the Silk Routes, technology traveled, ideas were exchanged, and friendship and understanding between the East and the West were experienced for the first time, on a large scale" he notes. "The Silk Route owes its importance and the value to the unity it brought about".

I will be looking at the ancient Silk Routes and their relevance to today's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Chapter 2.

Addressing a Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia in October 2023, the World Bank's new President, the Indian-born American Ajay Banga said that geopolitical tensions pose the biggest threat to the world economy and that risks "tend to move around" fast. "At the end of the day, when you put all this together, I think the impact on economic development is even more serious," he added, warning, "We're at a very dangerous juncture."

China and Asia's rise has been largely due to a comparatively peaceful environment built up in Asia since the US defeat in Vietnam in 1975. China did invade Vietnam in 1979, but, after receiving a bloody nose, they have not indulged in military adventurism since then. This has been a major reason for China's phenomenal economic growth. It was the 7<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world in 1980 and today it is on the verge of becoming the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/geopolitics>



world's largest economy.

Since 1980 except for a few sporadic clashes the Asia and the Pacific region was a peaceful region more interested in developing their economies and taking millions of people out of poverty, rather than fighting over territory or ocean boundaries. Spearheaded by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) grouping, the region was developing win-win economic and trading relationships to spur economic growth with a firm belief that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to be Asia's century with the center of gravity of the global economy moving to Asia.

This peaceful atmosphere was disturbed in July 2010, when the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton raised the South China Sea issue at a press conference in Hanoi (in a lengthy briefing) and said that she discussed this issue with ASEAN leaders<sup>3</sup>.

"The United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea. We share these interests not only with ASEAN members or ASEAN Regional Forum participants but also with other maritime nations and the broader international community. The United States supports a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants for resolving the various territorial disputes without coercion. We oppose the use or threat of force by any claimant," Clinton told the media briefing. "While the United States does not take sides on the competing territorial disputes over land features in the South China Sea, we believe claimants should pursue their territorial claims and accompanying rights to maritime space in accordance with the UN convention on the law of the sea," she added.

Ironically, though it was adopted by the UN with a large majority in 1982, to this date the United States has neither signed nor ratified the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The convention has been ratified by 164 UN member countries and 4 organisations, that includes the European Union. However, the US has been demanding that other countries adhere to the UNCLOS, creating geopolitical conflicts in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific. These issues will be discussed in more detail in chapters 3, 6, and 9.

Speaking at the end of the two-day Asia Future Summit organised by the Straits Times media group in Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong argued that to realize its promise, Asia must create conditions for peace, security, and continued prosperity.

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<sup>3</sup> US State Department archive contents –  
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>

“Past few decades, Asia has been fortunate to enjoy a peaceful, stable, and increasingly globalized environment. The global and regional stability has been critical to the region’s dynamism and prosperity”, he said. “We hope that the decades ahead will see peace prevailing and economic progress continuing in Asia. But this is far from guaranteed. The future depends on the choices that we make,” warned Lee<sup>4</sup>.

## **Geopolitics and "Security" Issues**

The mindset of the Western leaders and their media – which is often uncritically transmitted by the local media in Asia and the Pacific region – is always focused on "security" issues. Any port China builds in the region is a potential naval base, any railroad or highway they build is a military asset. But, for the Chinese, and most Asians, these are much-needed infrastructure to link the region that will benefit greater trade and tourism flows. If you look at the railroads the European colonial powers built in Asia, it is clear that most of them were built to link their plantations or mines to the ports to ship the resources of the country to Europe – which enriched Europe and pauperised the colonies. Thus, they see China’s BRI project within the same prism (which I will discuss further in the next chapter).

When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in 2015 in Xian – the historic Chinese city that linked Indian and Chinese civilizations via the ancient Silk Route – they agreed that cultural exchanges would become an important element of the new Silk Routes project that was taking shape (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Unfortunately, the clashes that took place in the Himalayas between Indian and Chinese border guards in June 2020 disrupted such Indo-Chinese collaborations with mutual suspicions creeping in (see chapter 7).

When Modi and US President Joe Biden met in Washington in June 2023, the joint statement released by the White House<sup>5</sup> focused mainly on technological cooperation with a major defense component and a desire to curtail Chinese supply chains and the semiconductor industry. A major agreement stated in the White House document as a "next generation" defense partnership. Thus, it is drilled into Indian minds that China’s economic rise is a military challenge.

"The U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership has emerged as a pillar of global peace and security. Through joint exercises, strengthening of defense

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<sup>4</sup> Report by Goh Yan Han in Straits Times, 6 October 2023, Singapore.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-india/>

industrial cooperation, the annual "2+2" Ministerial Dialogue, and other consultative mechanisms, we have made substantial progress in building an advanced and comprehensive defense partnership in which our militaries coordinate closely across all domains," the statement said. Such agreements and India's more aggressive attitude towards its South Asian neighbours are creating potential conflicts rather than cooperation.

In 2014, when Modi became Prime Minister for the first time, he invited all South Asian leaders to his inauguration. He wanted to develop cooperative relationships between regional countries, perhaps taking a leaf out of the ASEAN strategy. But India's attitude seems to be changing now, and one wonders if that is due to the increasing military alliance with the US, and India is being plodded to become its proxy, as Australia is in the South Pacific, to serve the US's geopolitical interests vis-à-vis China (see chapters 5 to 7 for more discussion on geo-political tension in the Indian Ocean and Himalayas).

## **Intercultural Communications**

Intercultural communication studies communication across different cultures and social groups and describes the many communication processes and related issues among groups of individuals from varied cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication skills also include a willingness to be adaptable and accept that other cultures may communicate and do things differently.

Our thought process regarding culture is often "other-focused," meaning that the culture of the other person or group is what stands out in our perception.

"Because of different historical origins and various social customs, all the countries and nationalities on the earth have formed their specific cultural backgrounds, and these specified cultural backgrounds give birth to differing attitudes towards value, ways of thinking, social conventions, and pragmatic regulations. All these factors combined bring about potential barriers for communications," argues Liu, Jiang, and Li (2017).

Intercultural communication can allow us to step outside of our comfortable, usual frame of reference and see our culture through a different lens. Additionally, as we become more self-aware, we may also become more ethical communicators, as we challenge our ethnocentrism, or our tendency to view our own culture as superior to other cultures<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Communicating in the Real World, Open Book p 403  
<https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/>

Liu, Jiang, and Li (2017) say that intercultural communication has emerged because of a demand for what they call "new boundary science", that involves message transmission or cultural exchange activities between various entities from different cultural groups that may speak a different language. "In this way, what needs to be paid attention to and how to communicate properly in foreign exchanges have become the main content for intercultural communication," they argue.

Many of the global populations are familiar with the American culture – at least the popular culture – due to the enormous global reach of the US media and entertainment industries. But, as China aspires to become a global power, they are facing a tremendous challenge to spread its “soft power” through popular culture and other forms of intellectual and social interactions.

A study done by Professor Michael Leslie of the University of Florida with a Chinese Master’s Student Yuxuan Jin on perceptions of the Chinese in two African countries (where China has invested heavily) and the Chinese perspectives of Africans (many African students study in China) indicates the challenge of such intercultural communication. The study was done by content analysis of postings on social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for Africans and Weibo, We Chat, Douyin, and Tencent for Chinese.

China is now Africa's largest trading partner with over \$282 billion worth of trade.<sup>7</sup> There are an estimated one to two million Chinese people living and working in Africa, and 500,000 Africans living in China.<sup>8</sup> China has continued to greatly expand its influence on the African continent over the recent period, thanks to the huge projects carried out by the Chinese government in many African countries and the pumping of further investments into various vital areas on the continent. This has helped give China a positive image in African official public opinion. It has also strengthened ties between Beijing and most of the African ruling elites as part of its policy to strengthen its presence vis-à-vis competing powers in this important geopolitical sphere.

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<sup>7</sup> Xinhua. (2023, June 30). Economic Watch: China-Africa Trade Index Debuts, indicating strong economic growth. *8th Ministerial Conference on the FOCAC*. [http://www.focac.org/eng/zfzs\\_1/202306/t20230630\\_11105868.htm#:~:text=Official%20data%20shows%20that%20bilateral,billion%20U.S.%20dollars%20in%202022.](http://www.focac.org/eng/zfzs_1/202306/t20230630_11105868.htm#:~:text=Official%20data%20shows%20that%20bilateral,billion%20U.S.%20dollars%20in%202022.)

<sup>8</sup> Quartz Africa. (2020, June 5). The truth about Chinese migrants in Africa and their self-segregation. *ILO Asia-Pacific Migration Network*. <https://apmigration.ilo.org/news/the-truth-about-chinese-migrants-in-africa-and-their-self-segregation>

However, in recent years, China has faced a wave of resentment from a broad sector of African communities that reject some of China's policies there, especially about its approach to some types of projects and investments in Africa. This situation raises questions about how much Chinese influence on the continent might be threatened by the *negative digital emotional communities* that have emerged in social media and on the internet, challenging the Chinese presence in Africa (Leslie and Jin, 2023).

The study found that China enjoys a significant reservoir of goodwill in Africa built up due to its expanded relationships with African countries at all levels, investments, economic and humanitarian assistance to African countries, and a strong relationship with African ruling elites. Furthermore, there is a consistent upbeat version of Africa-China relations diffused by both the Chinese and the African media. Yet, at the community level, there is much resentment about Chinese activities in Africa. This includes pressure by Beijing to force African governments to quash domestic opposition to Chinese projects which includes censoring social media; African anger toward Chinese companies using Chinese labor instead of the local African workforce which have resulted in intensified clashes including looting Chinese property; and the rhetoric adopted by some African politicians toward Chinese projects, whereby they portray these projects as serving Chinese interests at the expense of African countries, makes it more likely that Chinese projects might be disrupted.

Leslie and Jin (2023) also warn that some international powers, especially the US and France, may find an opportunity to demonize Beijing as a way to check its growing influence on the continent and persuade Africans to beware of dealing with China. Their contents surveys of African comments on the Chinese provide ample evidence that such strategies could succeed if China is not able to modify its public relations strategy with on-the-ground community-based assistance.

On the other hand, they found that Chinese comments on Africans reflected a disturbing trend of racist behavior with comments that degraded Africans. There has also been a continuous flow of racist anti-African videos and commentary by Chinese netizens, distributed on social media in China. The Chinese government has banned these after protests from African leaders, yet, some netizens seem to find a way in. The paper notes that the current anti-African manifestation is deeply ingrained in Chinese cultural thought, derived from racist Western concepts of superiority.

If one were to do a similar study on Indian and Chinese social media comments and discussions about each other, similar racist stereotypes would be found. Unfortunately, it seems that both countries' media is

stirring up such stereotypes, particularly in India amid the ferocious US wooing of India to help them contain the rise of China.

A 2020 study by Ankuran Dutta and Anup Goswani (2021) noted intense sinophobia in the way the Indian media covered the COVID-19 pandemic blaming China for everything. They traced the historical background to India's anti-China nationalism and showed how it has been reflected in the COVID-19 coverage, especially after India became one of the world's hotspots.

Not to be outdone, China's Global Times in particular has been very scathing in reporting India's tilt towards the West during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially after the border skirmish between the two countries in the Himalayan mountain region in June 2020 (see Chapter 7 for more discussion). In May 2021 after India attended a G7 leaders summit as an invited party, Global Times published a not-so-flattering cartoon of India's representative in an elephant trunk with an IV drip (as India was at the time undergoing a devastating Covid pandemic) in a G7 group photo<sup>9</sup>. The illustration went viral on Chinese social media immediately, generating more than 306,000 likes and 27,500 retweets within five hours on Weibo – the Chinese version of Twitter - with users heatedly discussing the Indian man being on a drip alone in the illustration. They criticized Indian authorities for still painstakingly trying to ride on the G7's coattails to suppress China, regardless of the tens of thousands of domestic lives being lost as a result of the prevailing COVID-19 outbreak at home (Lanlan, 2021).

## **Ideological Supremacy Mindset**

Ideology according to the common definition is a system of ideas and ideals, especially one, which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy. Ideological supremacy may not be a problem associated purely with the West. As the study by Leslie and Jin indicates Chinese attitudes towards engaging with Africa, and Africans' misgivings, may be facing a similar dilemma.

Today democracy, freedom of expression, free trade, rules-based order are some of the ideological concepts that are been presented as universal or supreme, because of the hegemonic nature of the global Anglo-American media. But, the Western-centric ideologies are today being challenged – for the first time in more than 300 years. The reawakening of Eastern civilizations led by China and India is spearheading this movement. The

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1226050.shtml>

challenge comes with redefining these ideologies from a less Western-centric perspective. But, also one, that will be fairer towards less powerful nations and people. We are thus witnessing an exceptional period of turmoil because those who controlled the global ideological mindset are unable to listen to the advice of Gandhi – that we have enough resources to satisfy our needs but not our greed. This greed also includes the greed for power and hegemony.

The theme of the 2023 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) sessions was "Rebuilding Trust and Reigniting Global Solidarity". As the weeks-long UNGA opened in New York on September 17, outside the UN headquarters a two-day Global Peoples' Assembly was held organised by the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) calling for peoples' voices to be heard in tackling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Director of GCAP Ingo Ritz argues that the financial systems, dominated by rich western nations, are not creating global prosperity. "We strongly believe that the world can change for the better if leaders listen to people's voices and concerns, rather than racing to protect the interests of the affluent. We must move beyond empty rhetoric and prioritize concrete actions to implement the SDGs," he added (Deen, 2023).

But, what about the Chinese, the world's emerging superpower? As far as the Africans are concerned, there is doubt whether the Chinese are any different from the European colonisers of an earlier era.

With the rapid expansion of Chinese investments across the Global South in particular, Chinese investors are often accused of bribing local politicians and officials to get business contracts, being involved in human trafficking to bring in cheap labour to work in their investment projects, introducing money laundering, prostitution, and other corrupt activities in establishing casinos, especially along the BRI projects.

Though the Chinese government may not be directly involved in these activities, western media and its local media echo chambers have worked overtime to link these activities to the Chinese government – meaning the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Not enough coverage is given to the Chinese government's attempts to crack down on such corruption or the Chinese media outlets such as Xinhua, Global Times and China Daily are not giving enough attention to expose such activity by its people. This pays into the hands of Western critics who want to discredit Chinese investments, especially in the Global South.

Addressing the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (RT, 23 Sept 2023), Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov offered a more optimistic note. He said the world has a chance to achieve "*authentic democratization*" in international relations by establishing a multipolar

world order, marking the first such opportunity since the end of World War II. But, he added that the US and its Western allies seek to prevent such a development by stirring up new conflicts to divide humanity and keep their “*hegemony of the global minority*” in place.

The US and its allies seek to stall the onset of a multipolar world order, in particular by “*stirring up conflicts that artificially divide humanity into hostile blocs and prevent it from achieving common goals,*” the Russian minister pointed out, adding, that the international community should instead strive for a world where everyone “*agrees on how to solve issues together, on the basis of a fair balance of interests*”<sup>10</sup>.

A popular mantra of the Americans and their allies today is that they are protecting a “rules-based order” that is being threatened by the rise of China and its “no barriers” alliance with Russia. In Chapter 3, I will be looking at this issue in more detail.

## **Media’s Adversarial Culture Leading to Military Focus**

For well over 5 decades, we have been teaching the idea of a “free media” as one that is privately owned and can make governments accountable for the welfare of its people – not suppress them. We call it “watchdog” journalism. Today this “watchdog” has become the “lapdog” for everyone with power and they are not necessarily governments.

Watchdog journalism worked as long as media owners only owned media; today they have become conglomerates owning not only networks of media but also other businesses - even in the oil and arms industry. If the media is going to act according to the true spirit of the watchdog media, they should be questioning loud and clear the military mindset of the West, where everything is today interpreted as “security threats” and solutions are promoted as increasing your military budgets and preparing for war.

War is good business for Americans. Just look at their stock prices. London’s Financial Times in an editorial<sup>11</sup> on 10 January 2024 under the heading ‘The Revival of the Defence Industry’ pointed out, “A more belligerent world is bad news for everyone — except perhaps the defense industry. As threats rise, so do its order books”. It pointed out that the world’s biggest defense companies — including Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, and BAE Systems — are near the healthiest on record, having grown 10 percent between 2021 and 2022 alone.

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.rt.com/russia/583450-lavrov-un-speech-empire-lies/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=Email](https://www.rt.com/russia/583450-lavrov-un-speech-empire-lies/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Email)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/8d21287f-d4cc-4b72-9872-9e3d766d56de>



Governments are buying weapons, ammunition, and equipment to fight wars, donate to allies, or build reserves. In Europe, countries are replenishing national stockpiles depleted by offerings to Ukraine. Global military expenditure hit a record \$2.2tn in 2022. Investors have got on board. The MSCI's global benchmark for defense stocks is up about 15 percent over the past 12 months. British defense shares — which have soared more than 140 percent since the start of 2021 — are at record highs (Financial Times, 2024).

Financial Times warned: “Even if current conflicts do not escalate, it seems clear that the world is in a new era of geopolitical tension and increased war risk”.

Media worldwide has a major role to play in avoiding such a "war risk" but unfortunately the “watchdog” journalists (especially in Western democracies) have become their cheerleaders. Today this theory of "free media" has created an adversarial culture among the journalism fraternity almost everywhere. We are good at creating and promoting (even nurturing) conflicts and don't know how to put off the fires we have helped to start.

The rest of the chapters in this book will take a critical view of the reporting of geo-political issues in Asia and the South Pacific, and we will also discuss ways of – perhaps stepping outside the box – to defuse these geopolitical conflicts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SILK ROUTES: THE ANCIENT AND THE NEW IN A GEO-POLITICAL BIND

When China launched its new Silk Routes project in 2013, it was seen in the region as a timely project to build infrastructure in the region to propel Asia into the nerve center of the global economy. But today it is seen more as a “debt trap” and a security threat. How did the international media change the narrative and is it a true reflection of what this project is all about?

In this chapter, the vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will be compared with infrastructure development during the European colonial era when ports, roads, and railways were built to transport products from the interior to the ports to ship to Europe. The ancient Silk Routes will also be discussed and compared to the modern BRI, while the “debt trap” narrative will be investigated in comparison to Western development funding – euphemistically called "aid" - since the Second World War.

#### **Ancient Silk Routes: Pioneers Of Globalisation**

The silk route probably the largest ever network of roads was the main commercial artery of Eurasia in ancient times. It not only connected the two continents of Asia and Europe but also linked many great empires of their times such as the Roman, Persian, Kushān, and the Chinese empires. The whole silk route starting at Changan in China, up to Antioch on the Mediterranean Sea was 7,000 miles long almost one-quarter of the length of the equator. It was also the longest surviving trade route as it gained prominence around the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. (CE). and commercial activities along the route, with minor upheavals continued till the 13th century A.D. It was thought that silk was the most valuable commodity to have been traded through this route but there were more valuable things such as cultural trends, art styles, religious faiths, scripts, and languages that traversed and were exchanged along the route. The most valuable is Buddhism - the religion of piety and compassion. The traders and travelers embarking upon such a long and perilous journey always carried an additional baggage of their culture which they dispersed on the way and filled back with the

elements of other cultures and brought it back to their place. This cultural exchange along the route initiated a process of cross-pollination of cultures resulting in spectacular examples of hybrid cultures and art. This makes it a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind. The silk route added a glorious epoch of peaceful coexistence, cooperation, mutual appreciation, and fusion of cultures in world civilization - Sushma Trivedi<sup>12</sup>.

The Silk Road is neither an actual road nor a single route. The term instead refers to a network of routes used by traders for more than 1,500 years, from when the Han dynasty of China opened to trade in 130 B.C.E. until 1453 C.E. when the Ottoman Empire closed off trade with the West. The term also serves as a metaphor for the exchange of goods and ideas between diverse cultures. Although the trade network is commonly referred to as the Silk Road, some historians favor the term Silk Routes because it better reflects the many paths taken by traders. Robbers were common. To protect themselves, traders joined together in caravans with camels or other pack animals. Over time, large inns called caravanserais cropped up to house traveling merchants. Few people traveled the entire route, giving rise to a host of middlemen and trading posts along the way. An abundance of goods traveled along the Silk Road. Merchants carried silk from China to Europe, where it dressed royalty and wealthy patrons. Other favorite commodities from Asia included jade and other precious stones, porcelain, tea, and spices. In exchange, horses, glassware, textiles, and manufactured goods traveled eastward<sup>13</sup>.

The Great Silk Roads still rekindle glowingly in the imagination of the world's richest exchange of trade and culture. Caravans of camels, men, and horses bearing cargoes of lazurite, silver, and spices traveled across thousands of kilometers, some of it arduous journeys across the Himalayan mountain ranges into Central Asia and beyond. The route was treacherous and crossed huge deserts, as well as difficult mountain passes and steep valleys. A well-organized expedition relied on camels and good knowledge of local watering holes. Along the way, there were peaceful interactions of ideas and religious philosophies - perhaps contributing to its greatest glory - enlightening civilizations from Beijing to Rome. They had to navigate arduous terrain and had to fight pirates and bandits on the way. They did not have accompanying armies, but, they were able to withstand these threats by traveling in convoys of caravans. History shows these threats were

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<sup>12</sup> Vietnam Buddhist University Series: Buddhist Studies: Contemporary Approaches, edited by Ven. Dr Thich Nhat Tu p820-821

<sup>13</sup> National Geographic - <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/silk-road/>

navigated without major wars.

There were at least 3 major routes that consisted of the ancient Silk Route. The Northern Route started at Chang'an (modern-day Xian) in China and went northwest through the Himalayan mountains (splitting into 3 routes) to reach modern-day Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran. The southern route is mainly a single route from China through the Karakoram mountains bordering India's Kashmir region, where it persists in modern times as the Karakoram Highway - a paved road that cuts through some of the most astounding rock faces on the planet - connecting Pakistan and China. The third one is the southern route that connects modern-day Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces of China through Myanmar across the Mekong River to Bangladesh across India connecting with Brahmaputra and Ganges rivers to Central Asia.

### **Why “Silk Route”**

Silk is a textile of ancient Chinese origin woven from the protein fiber produced by the silkworm as it makes its cocoon. The cultivation of silkworms for the process of making silk, known as sericulture, was, according to Chinese tradition, developed sometime around the year 2,700 BCE. Regarded as an extremely high-value product, silk was reserved for the exclusive usage of the Chinese imperial court for the making of clothes, drapes, banners, and other items of prestige. At some point during the 1st century BCE, silk was introduced to the Roman Empire, where it was considered an exotic luxury that became extremely popular, with imperial edicts being issued to control prices. Additionally, the needs of the Byzantine Church for silk garments and hangings were substantial. This luxury item was thus one of the early impetuses for the development of trading routes from the East to the Far West (Europe)<sup>14</sup>.

Today we talk about “Globalisation” and “Multiculturalism” but these Silk Routes were the forerunners. As National Geographic notes:

It is hard to overstate the importance of the Silk Road in history. Religion and ideas spread along the Silk Road just as fluidly as goods. Towns along the route grew into multicultural cities. The exchange of information gave rise to new technologies and innovations that would change the world. The horses introduced to China contributed to the might of the Mongol Empire, while gunpowder from China changed the very nature of war in Europe and beyond.

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<sup>14</sup> Source: UNESCO Silk Route Project

## Cultural Exchanges on The Silk Routes

The Silk Route has connected far-flung peoples and civilizations throughout the world for hundreds of years. The vast trade networks of the Silk Roads carried more than just merchandise and precious commodities. The constant movement and mixing of populations brought about the widespread transmission of knowledge, ideas, cultures, and beliefs, which had a profound impact on the history and civilizations of the Eurasian peoples. Travellers along the Silk Roads were attracted not only by trade but also by the intellectual and cultural exchange taking place in cities along the Silk Roads, many of which developed into hubs of culture and learning. Science, arts, and literature, as well as crafts and technologies, were thus shared and disseminated into societies along the lengths of these routes, and in this way, languages, religions, and cultures developed and influenced one another (UNESCO)<sup>15</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, Buddhism spread from India via these trade routes to Central Asia and in the other direction to China. At one stage Central Asian countries were thriving Buddhist civilizations that lasted for centuries before Moghul Muslim invasions, also through these routes.

An important episode in the spread of Buddhism from India to China is the journey of Chinese scholar-monk Xuanzang to India in the 7th century CE, where he is believed to have spent 13 years at Nalanda University. He has traveled through Central Asia via modern-day Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to reach India. When he returned to China in 645 CE via today's Bangladesh and Myanmar, he carried with him over 600 Buddhist texts, and he spent the rest of his life at a monastery in modern-day Xian, to translate these texts – he died in 664 CE. The monastery in Xian where he spent 20 years translating the texts is today a national monument and a popular tourist and pilgrim site in China.

Dr Sushma Trivedi<sup>16</sup> from the University of Lucknow notes:

The silk route, coming from the west bifurcated at Kashgar to avoid the Taklamakan, one of the deadliest deserts, into northern and the southern branches, skirting the desert. These routes were dotted with oases states and trade colonies. Beside Bactria, Kucha, and Turfan on the northern branch and Yarkand, Khotan, and Miran on the southern branch were the strongholds of Buddhism. These states had a very unusual composition of population. Settlers belonged to various races and ethnicities as well as nomadic tribes. These multicultural, multiethnic states developed into

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<sup>15</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-roads>

<sup>16</sup> Vietnam Buddhist University Series: Buddhist Studies: Contemporary Approaches, edited by Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu p821-822

heterogeneous societies, which were very open and receptive to outside influences. Thus they provided a congenial climate and fertile ground for cultural syncretism, particularly fruitful in the realm of art. Buddhism, for a larger span of silk-route's life, remained the dominant religion in the colonies and oases states. By far the greatest number of manuscripts, monuments, and art relics recovered from the Silk Route region belong to Buddhism.

Studying the history of these trading routes has great lessons for the modern generation. Thus, both UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) and UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organisation) have developed educational websites to encourage today's young generations to learn more about these routes.

The Silk Road, commonly known as the first global trade route in history, had a scope and importance far greater than the simple exchange of goods. Indeed, the myriad of interconnected routes served as a vehicle for the fruitful exchange of arts, religion, cultures, ideas, and technology. Many important developments, in fields ranging from mathematics and philosophy to architecture and gastronomy, were only made possible thanks to the intrepidity of pioneers eager to explore and overcome man-made boundaries and natural determinants. In the present time, and building upon a natural and cultural wealth spanning thousands of years, the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) is in a position to revive and give a new significance to a route capable of transforming the way we think about and relate to travel (UNWTO)<sup>17</sup>.

### **Kyrgyzstan: Linking Caravan Routes Between East and West**

Kyrgyzstan has long been a historically important point in the center of Asia, at the confluence of trade routes and empires. Its scenic landscape of high, forested mountains and lush grasslands attracted Silk Road travelers, not only for its natural beauty but also for its cool climate, sparkling lakes, and green valleys. This was a refreshing break after passing perilous, exhausting, and arduous western Chinese deserts.

Due to its location being at the center of the main Silk Roads, there are many ruins of entire cities, trading towns, and caravanserais of different races that passed through this land. Kyrgyzstan was also a land of peaceful interaction between people of different religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Located right between the Chinese, Persian, Arab, Indian, Turkic, and

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.unwto.org/silk-road>