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Want a New Map of Asia? Include the United States

BY SATU LIMAYE

Re-defining Asia is now a common discussion among policy analysts. Evan Feigenbaum, for example, has argued that “[w]ithout a new map of Asia that reflects the ways in which Asians themselves are remaking their continent, US relevance—and influence—will wane in the coming decades.” But new maps of Asia are unnecessary to achieve America’s objectives. A loose definition of Asia has and will continue to serve American interests by providing flexibility of action and association precisely as Asia integrates—unevenly—within itself and with the globe. Achieving American goals requires not a strict definition of a “big Asia” but expanded commitment to the “Pacific principle”—American diplomatic, economic, and security engagement across the Pacific to Asia. The most meaningful and useful map of Asia must now include the United States.

Satu Limaye, Director of the East-West Center in Washington, argues that “achieving American goals requires not a strict definition of a ‘big Asia’ but expanded commitment to the ‘Pacific principle’—American diplomatic, economic, and security engagement across the Pacific to Asia. The most meaningful and useful map of Asia must now include the United States.”

The Makings of America’s Asia(s)

America has long had vital interests in the Asia-Pacific. What it has never had is a fixed conception of the region. America’s conception of what constitutes Asia results from an ever-shifting and messy confluence of European intellectual and imperial inheritances, geographical fashions, racial ideas, exigencies of war and national interest, and domestic political narratives. America’s definitions of Asia for policy purposes—namely, diplomacy and defense—have been shaped by bureaucratic necessity, turf battles, personal proclivities, and ad hoc decisions.

America’s outline of Asia comes from three main sources: intellectual/academic groups, immigration laws, and diplomacy/defense bureaucracies. The American Oriental Society, established in Boston in 1842 and still active today, articulated a “big Asia” encompassing the area from Egypt to Polynesia. Similar organizations established a century later such as the East-West Center echoed the “big Asia” approach. At a populist level, the National Geographic magazine was influential with maps such as the January 1900 “Philippine Islands as the Geographical Center of the Far East.” In November 1989, its Asia-Pacific map encompassed only the area between Burma and Hawai’i.

But it is US immigration legislation that provided the most precise legal articulations of Asia. The Asiatic Barred Zone of the 1917 Immigration Act seems to be the only legal definition of Asia by longitude and latitude. Subsequently, the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act created an “Asia-Pacific triangle” and the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act opted for “Eastern” and “Western” hemisphere quotas for immigration. In US diplomacy, the State Department established the Division of Far Eastern Affairs in 1909 to handle increased commercial and representative activities along with the acquisition of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. On the military side, a Pacific squadron was created in 1821, and an East India squadron was added in 1835. But America’s extant military organization for Asia, the Pacific Command,



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grew out of the 1946 Far Eastern Command and the broader Unified Command Plan.

The Return of “Big Asia”

During the second half of the twentieth century America’s policy and perceptual Asia contracted for complex reasons. But the region’s increasing importance, interconnectedness and efforts to build multilateral cooperation have revived the lure of defining a “big Asia.” Policy drivers include balancing China and shoring up relations among democracies. Ideas of a “big Asia” span from including Central Asia to encompassing the Indo-Pacific. But perhaps most curious is India’s re-emergence in America’s reconfigured Asia. Well into the twentieth century, maps of Asia were labeled “Further India.” India’s self-isolation after independence caused its near-disappearance, figuratively and literally, from the region’s map. India has never fit neatly into our definitions of Asia; for example, India is mentioned in only one of our East Asia strategy reports and episodically in recent policy statements about the region. India’s return to American thinking and policy toward Asia is welcome, but is less important than renewed commitment to the one constant in America’s enduring relations with the region: the Pacific principle.

The Pacific Principle

The Pacific is not an abstraction for the United States. The United States has one of the longest Pacific coastlines in the world and territories from the Aleutian Islands to Guam. Four of its coastal states account for 17% of national GDP and 15% of population. America’s Pacific identity is captured in various forms from poetry—e.g., Walt Whitman’s “Facing West from California’s Shores” and Robert Frost’s “Once by the Pacific”—to President Obama’s self-characterization as “America’s first Pacific President.” Beyond our Pacific coast, there is a deepening and widening integration of all America with all Asia across a range of interactions, e.g., trade, investment, ethnicity, immigration, tourism, and foreign students. It is appropriate that in the 1990s, Secretary of State James Baker warned against arrangements that would draw a line down the Pacific separating the United States from Asia.

But the Pacific principle also includes power, purpose, and commitment to achieving US interests in the Asia-Pacific. Our entry into regional efforts such as the East Asian Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus, re-engagement with Southeast Asia, and continued maintenance of alliances and forward deployed forces keep the Asia-Pacific connection strong. Political and military engagement must be matched with economic efforts including approval of the Korea-US Free Trade agreement, revitalization of APEC, and the completion of a Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. These actions in pursuit of our interests matter more than maps.

Malleable Maps, Enduring Interests

This is a dynamic era in the perceptual and policy landscape of relations between the United States and the Asia-Pacific. New maps are being devised. New relationships are being forged. New organizations are being established. Maps are malleable. When the State Department created the division to manage Far East relations, it also created one for the Near East that included Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia in an era when the “East” was thought to begin at the Elbe. Things change. But American interests and identities connecting it to Asia across the Pacific endure. So any new map of Asia makes no sense for the United States, or the region, without including the United States.