



**Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of  
Armed Forces (DCAF)**

**Policy Paper - №13**

**Global Security in Perspective:  
The “Comeback” of Eurasia and the Changing Role  
of Military Power**

*Curt Gasteyger*

Geneva, April 2006

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## Abstract

Global security is being increasingly determined by a rapidly shifting configuration of primarily economic and technological forces as well as by growing internal fragility and external dependence on vital resources. Both developments are principally due to four fundamental changes: a shift from a basically multilateral power constellation to a one-power pre-dominance; from inter- to intrastate armed conflicts; from the use of force guided by “doctrines” or established strategies to ad-hoc or “non-doctrinal” fighting; and, finally, from state-controlled armed forces to free-wheeling, non-state armed actors.

One of the principal consequences of these developments is the ever widening understanding of “security”, hence the possibility of using it as a pretext for any kind of politico-military action.

Various factors point to a change in the global power distribution – this in spite or because of continuing US dominance. In a certain sense, we observe a “renaissance” of geopolitics with, at its centre, the Eurasian mainland and, as its “outsider”, the “off-shore balancer”, the United States. While for the moment the United States is able to pursue its dual mission as both the dominant player and the ad-hoc ally, the latter may become either more difficult or less acceptable to others. Such seems particularly possible if and when the “Eurasian powers” – i.e. the EU, Russia, China, India and neighbouring Japan – achieve a real comeback on the international stage. Some of them lack, however, either the tradition or the will to engage in any kind of politico-security based multilateralism, their security concerns still being either internal or bilateral. This helps to explain why the conditions for tangible and sustainable security cooperation, ideally based on multilateral institutions, is very different in Asia from that of other regions in the world. There is no clear and present danger in sight that would prompt Asia’s major actors to initiate institutionalised security cooperation of strategic relevance.

Finally, the changing role of the armed forces in general and, ever more so, their privatisation in particular raises the question if and to what extent the big players – in particular those in Asia – will have to re-appraise their own place and role in tomorrow’s world. Above all, they are bound to address the question where, how, and on what kind of legal basis and, possibly, institutional framework they see the role of armed forces, both official and private in the years to come.

# Global Security in Perspective: The “Comeback” of Eurasia and the Changing Role of Military Power

*Curt Gasteyger*

## 1. Introduction

Nowhere is the much debated “acceleration of history” more clearly evident than in the rapidly shifting configuration of – primarily economic and technological – forces on the one hand, and growing internal fragility and external dependence on vital resources on the other. Together, this twin development raises the question as to the future role and mission of regular armed forces.

Indeed, in retrospect the international community has discovered that the end of the “Cold War” with its almost freezing effect on the moving forces in world politics – the exception being the global process of decolonization – was far from leading the world into more peaceful and orderly waters. In his book “The Coming Anarchy” Robert Kaplan predicted, quite to the contrary, a world of brutal competition with powerful states ruthlessly acting to ensure their control of the world’s ever scarcer resources. He also foresaw intensified ethnic and religious conflicts with fundamentalist prophets “imperilling what remained of order and security in the international system”<sup>1</sup>.

It would be difficult to refute all or most of these sober predictions. The “glorious Nineties” appear in hindsight more like a transitory period, if not a harbinger of turbulent times: September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 being its tragically spectacular door-opener. In fact, as Henry Kissinger once remarked, the “acceleration of history” over the last four hundred years (i.e. since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648) seems to lead to ever shorter periods of peace and order. Hence the question as to whether the world finds itself still in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> period with, as its prime organizing principle the “global and common war against terrorism;” or whether it is already on the verge of a new era in which emerging great powers begin to challenge American supremacy by ever more vigorously striving for a more balanced distribution of power and an increasingly reckless competition for ever scarcer raw materials.

If such a scenario – though possibly still in its early stage – is somewhat close to reality, then the following central questions deserve to be addressed: albeit tentatively at least with all the uncertainty a basically unpredictable future inevitably holds:

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted after John GRAY. The Mirage of Empire, in: The New York Review of Books. Vol. L III / Nr 11 (12.1.2006), p. 4; Kaplan’s article appeared in “Atlantic Monthly”, February 1994.

- Who are (or are likely to be) the main actors in this unfolding “drama of global competition”;
- What consequences can or will this scenario have for global order? (leaving aside those for the role and future of present international organizations like the United Nations);
- And what can or will be the role and mission of regular armed forces in such a new global configuration?

This latter question would seem to be all the more relevant in view of four fundamental changes that, directly or indirectly, have a bearing precisely on this:

First, we observe a shift from a primarily Western dominated and, in various respects multilaterally organized world to on the one hand, one with a single and omnipresent global power – the United States – and, on the other, several newly emerging though so far only regionally influential powers with an as yet limited reach of military power;

Second, a shift from “classical” interstate war to intra-state armed conflict by mostly non-state actors;

Third, a move away from the central Cold War debate about strategies of nuclear warfare and deterrence to basically unregulated (or “non-doctrinal) use of force, principally involving “small arms”;

Fourth and finally, a shift from legally circumscribed and government controlled armed and police forces to an almost total free and unhindered use of force by non-state and/or private security actors; in other words the Clausewitzian possibility for everyone to pursue his or her own objectives, if need be and, the situation allowing, with military force.

These and possibly some related developments have at least two important consequences in the present context: First, the traditional concept of politico-military security is becoming ever wider. As such it is more prone to misuse or abuse (or pretext) for all kinds of more or less legitimate purposes that, in essence, have little or nothing to do with security proper; Second, as a consequence of these developments, the predictability of actions is getting more and more diffuse or outright difficult. This reduces the possibility of rational decision making, the more so as ever more actors enter the stage with more tools of action at their disposal and with more causes to fight over.

## **2. America’s Power Monopoly: How Long is it Sustainable?**

With more actors of all kinds of status and objectives on the global stage any prediction on what this means for future power configurations and, in particular, global security, becomes extremely hazardous. And yet it would be too facile – and not particularly helpful – to take refuge in Mao Tse-tung’s overcautious answer when asked about the consequences of the French revolution: he replied that “it was too early to say”. One fact, however, deserves consideration, namely relating to the almost relentless “acceleration of history”. Thus, with the brief – and according to Kaplan – far from tranquil post Cold War interlude the world

would now seem to be on the threshold of a new phase “post September 11<sup>th</sup>”. In other words, the never really solid common front in the US-led “war against terrorism” shows ever more fractures and deviations. They are, no doubt, prompted and spurred by the war in Iraq on the one hand and, unrelated to it, by what – still somewhat prematurely – is called the “Asianisation of the world economy”.

Still, various developments or trends do in fact point to changing power relations, new upcoming forces on the international scene with all the consequences that they can or will have for international security writ large.

The big “movers” in this new game are no doubt – though of course not exclusively – the major powers, old and new. Without undue simplification it is fairly easy to identify them: only one is, in a certain sense, a newcomer – the European Union in its global impact and influence. As such it is still untested. The others are in a sense traditional nation states with a clearly identifiable power centre and national identity: the United States, the Russian Federation, China or, officially still the Chinese People’s Republic, India and Japan.

Without being unfair to other important countries – such as Brazil, Mexico, South Africa or Indonesia – we can still maintain – following the resuscitated geopolitics of Halford Mackinder<sup>2</sup> that four of these major actors are located on the Eurasian continent, Japan being in the same way its maritime adjunct. Hence the conclusion that Eurasia remains in a certain sense the “pivot of history or the central shaper of world politics”. This concept is now undermined by the rise of the United States. It is the “off-shore balancer”<sup>3</sup> – and this no doubt for an indefinite period of time – barring, of course, unforeseen or, more likely, unforeseeable events. Still, whatever the future of this North American continent and thus its prime occupant, the United States, it is safe to predict that its political position will remain an unalterable factor in any future power constellation, be it in the Atlantic to the East or the Pacific to the West.

Taking a closer look, one can wonder whether such a geographic position is an advantage or – to some degree – a disadvantage. To be sure, stupendous technological progress reduces to almost nil the relevance of geographic distance; it allows for a quasi-omnipresence at least in such crucial fields as investments, outsourcing or joint ventures; and it creates an ever denser network of transport and communication; this is, in the case of the United States, supported by a worldwide network of military bases and installations.

And yet, this vast and multiple presence can be seen as a source or factor in multiple vulnerability. Power, however, overwhelming, remains something relative. It is strong and vulnerable at the same time, present and passing<sup>4</sup>. It is not the fact of possessing sheer power and the possibility to actually use it. The real test of its value lies in the determination to put it effectively and, if need be, indefinitely to one’s use, to prevail against all odds and, by so doing, to strengthen rather than weaken one’s influence abroad or support at home.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Halford MACKINDER. “The Geographical Pivot of History”. *Geographical Journal*. XXIII (1904), pp. 422 ss.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen M. WALT, *Taming American Power*. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No 5 (September / October 2005), p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the Stimulating definition of power by Serge SUR, “La puissance - définitions et caractère”. *La Tribune du monde*. July 1995, pp. 23-37.

For the United States this is not just a question whether, at some point in time, it will be faced with a counterforce coming from rivals of similar strength and ambition. It is rather a question whether it, as the first democratically governed global power, can indefinitely muster the necessary support and endurance from its people. Such support may dwindle if the burden of empire becomes markedly more costly than its rewards, including those regarding people's own security and well-being. The "breaking point" – as probably everywhere – comes when the price of power becomes a serious and lasting source of a worsening economic and social situation at home. As of now (early 2006) this is not the case. The present Administration of President George W. Bush can thus pursue, without much restriction, this twofold global mission: fighting terrorism and promoting "freedom and democracy" world-wide. The underlying "imperial temptation" appears to be prompted by four principles:

- Maintaining its superior position of power, in particular with the help of assured and recognized military supremacy;
- Strategic independence by combining a clearly articulated unilateralism with some elements of instrumentalised multilateralism;
- A deliberate extension of the notion of "legitimate self-defence", implying the right to pre-emptive defence;
- Promotion of freedom and democracy with particular emphasis on the Arab world – no doubt prompted by the latter's importance for US oil supply, the protection of Israel and its harbouring the main centres of Islamist terrorism. In other words, the Middle East still represents a unique configuration of strategically vital factors no state, let alone a global power can ignore with impunity<sup>5</sup>.

All this adds to what is not without some justification called "imperial temptation". It is, in other words, a combination of self-chosen Messianism and an externally imposed need for self-defence, nourished by an almost irresistible moralistic urge for punishment. It is difficult to criticize, let alone oppose such a complex mixture of motives and objectives and pass a somewhat rational judgement of America's actions and their specific justification. It is even more difficult to evaluate, let alone predict its future destination and duration. And yet, the much discussed – and disputed – contention or prediction of America's impending "overstretch"<sup>6</sup> suddenly gains new –and this time apparently more justified – significance. The risk of such overstretch, however defined, no doubt exists. It is not only confirmed by the experience of former great powers from the "Imperium romanum" to the Soviet Union (incidentally, none of them a democracy). To be sure, America's worldwide military presence – not to speak of the Internet, investments or Coca-Cola – serves also third countries; one often overlooked or underrated example of this being the protection of ever more imperiled maritime straits.

Still, both logic and experience tell us that the more outposts, bases, training camps, airports, barracks there are, the higher is the likelihood of their being attacked. However serious, that

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Peter RUDOLF. "Rückkehr des liberalen Hegemon". *Internationale Politik*. Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2005), pp. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Today more appropriate than when Paul Kennedy wrote his book. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. London/Sydney/Wellington 1988.



may not constitute the central problem of America's global exposure. We can think of three other, possibly more serious challenges. The first can be found in America's impatience - or lack of endurance. Thus Francis Fukuyama reminds us that "Americans have the habit, to embrace enthusiastically a given project only to lose interest in it when the situation deteriorates"<sup>7</sup>. Hence, lack of endurance or simply "stamina" can weaken the credibility and effect of American engagements. Second, the United States may find it increasingly difficult to mobilize – and keep – old allies or recruit new ones for its own policies and actions. Nowhere has this become more painfully evident as in its war in Iraq. In other words, alliance building will tend to become an ever more an ad-hoc affair. It will be based more on a usually temporary convergence of interests than on a more enduring community of shared values. Third, nowhere is such a distancing from commonly agreed rules of behaviour more visible than in America's attitude towards the United Nations. The idea that the latter's Charter defines the rules of communication in case of conflicts, war or human rights' violations does not seem to mobilize the United States anymore.

The UN, as one observer critically remarks<sup>8</sup> "does no longer serve American interests." Instead they constrain American power to act unilaterally: "The UN lacks the legitimacy to pass such judgments (i.e. on America's invasion of Iraq). America is the world's greatest democracy; hence all its actions are inherently legitimate. America cannot and should not be held accountable by any global body".<sup>8</sup> It is worth remembering that such proud self-assertion of America's superior standing developed already in the nineties – as a triumphant exclamation of the former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright proves: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future". President Clinton's successor in the White House could not have formulated it better.

The problem with such self-assertiveness is, however, that as a democracy caught by some of its more controversial or daring commitments, it can either be restrained by domestic opposition or, perhaps more seriously, can lack the stamina and endurance to pursue its once proclaimed and acclaimed objectives to their very end. Such are the strengths or weaknesses, occasionally also the self-assured arrogance or the constitutional constraints of a democratic global power. In any case, the so far undisputed predominance of the United States clearly proves the end of the 1945 post-war system while at the same it opens up the perspective of an emerging new and more complex power configuration. Its contours are still vague. The question may therefore seem to be premature as to which powers may eventually become the big players, possibly even the antagonists of America, and what all this means for global order and, in particular, for global security and the role of armed forces called upon to sustain it.

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<sup>7</sup> In: "Internationale Politik". Vol. 61, No. 1, p. 25 (translated from German).

<sup>8</sup> Kishore MAHBUBANI, "The Impending Demise of the Postwar System". *Survival*. Vol. 47, No. 4 (Winter 2005/06), p. 11.

### 3. Candidates for the Global Power Play

In trying to find a tentative answer to these questions we are led to speculate. Still, some facts and developments are already discernible, while others are open to at least sensible guesses.

The inevitable question regarding the duration of America's supreme and unique power position raises immediately the one about potential rivals or "counter-forces". As we will see, this may turn out to be the wrong question. Still, the candidates for the "great power league" have long been identified. There are no miracles of totally unexpected "dei ex machina", i.e. giants suddenly rising out of nowhere. Following the discipline of alphabetical order, they are China, the European Union (henceforth the EU), India and Russia – with Japan still as the external, in terms of power politics, unpredictable fifth candidate.

It is more than a coincidence that this alphabetically imposed sequence reflects – barring unforeseeable events – rather well the likely sequence of their rise to great power status. The more interesting question, however, appears to be how far these "candidates" want to go in challenging the United States or what kind of status or accommodation they consider to be adequate for the pursuance of their specific objectives and, possibly, a mutually tolerable, if not beneficial coexistence with the United States or among themselves. This for the simple reason that they all suffer from various and specific forms of increasing vulnerability: all of them – with the partial exception of Russia – vitally depend on the import of strategic raw materials such as oil and gas; all are vulnerable to terrorist acts or internal unrest; and, all are confronted with the danger of proliferating weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, they share a geographic location on the Eurasian continent and are, with the exception of Europe, located entirely on its Asian part or, in the case of Russia, straddle its European and Asian components. Whether one likes it or not, the possible, if not very likely "comeback" of Eurasia with its "Great Game" not only reveals the singularity of America's geographic position but no less the revived geopolitical potential of this huge transcontinental landmass.

So what is being announced as the upcoming "Asianisation of the world economy" may gradually broaden into one of world politics writ large. This would become, in a sense, the belated revenge for many non-Europeans would see as an overdue re-balancing of global dominance or at least influence – only this time of truly universal dimension. If so, the United States would no longer be seen as the undisputed leader of the "Western" world but, given its geopolitical location, as it were, as the intermediary between "East" and "West" with all the advantages and burdens associated with it. If and for how long such strategic duopoly can or could last, may become one, if not the central question of international security.

In other words, we find ourselves on the verge of a prolonged and potentially unsettling process of global readjustment or re-balancing; a search for new, now more global rules of the power game, in which no doubt the military-strategic dimension retains an important but certainly no longer central place. Such a process is bound to lead to misperceptions particularly among the principal players, leading to fierce, principally economic-technological competition, a possibly reckless rush for strategic raw materials and, last but not least, a

growing disregard, if not obsolescence of hitherto seemingly indispensable international organizations, above all the United Nations in its erstwhile mission as “global peacekeeper”.

From such – possibly too dire a forecast – may follow the question whether and to what extent the threat, if not the actual use of military power becomes again more likely and, if so, how it can be prevented or at least contained. Or, put differently, how the emerging or, in the case of Russia, possibly even Japan, the traditional powers see the utility of, or the recourse to, military power as part and parcel of their newly acquired status or simply as a necessary counterweight to American supremacy. This in fact might signal the “Asianisation of world politics” in which then also the Asian “newcomers” would gradually join the global power play.

Such an assumption – for which the past holds some justification – opens up interesting perspectives. In other words, the world with a potentially unsettling process of re-adjustment or search for mutual though often confrontational competition, a hopefully sustained or sustainable accommodation without recourse to armed conflict and a strengthening of existing or the creation of new and more adequate instruments of conflict prevention and arms control.

One of the central questions here is likely to be whether and to what extent the recourse to military power (or threat thereof) can be prevented or at least contained. Or, put differently, whether the availability of such military power which the Asian “newcomers” are in the process of acquiring, including nuclear weapons, can and will provide sufficient incentive for more concerted political and security cooperation. This seems particularly desirable in such delicate domains as potential indigenous unrest, the increasingly fierce struggle for vital resources and the fight against the many forms of terrorism. In other words, to put it somewhat crudely, there are still many good and not so good reasons to serve as a pretext for the recourse to force below the level of classical international war.

We concentrate here on the two principal actors, China and India, and give some due consideration to Japan. As regards the two other “Eurasian” actors, the EU and Russia, their future destination and weight still lie in the balance: the EU is only a slowly emerging and is still in various ways a hamstrung political-security actor;<sup>9</sup> Russia in turn can be seen as a “giant in waiting” with as many strategic assets as institutional and social-structural weaknesses.<sup>10</sup> Both Russia’s and the EU’s potential as global powers thus remains limited so far. And yet both are part and parcel of this vast geopolitical power constellation, or, if one likes, power play, in which the outsider America takes fully part. It does so in two ways: first by shifting its military presence from West to Central-Eastern Europe and, second, by engaging in new relationships with countries in the Caucasus (e.g. Georgia), Central Asia and India (leaving aside its highly complex and long-standing relationship with Pakistan or its engagement in Afghanistan).

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bettino THALMAIER. Die zukünftige Gestalt der Europäischen Union. Münchner Beiträge zur Europäischen Einigung. 11. Baden-Baden (Nomos), 2005; Judith BLATT et al. Partners and neighbours: a CFSP for a wider Europe. Chaillot Papers. No 64. (September 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dmitri TRENIN. The End of Eurasia. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Washington 2001.

Returning to Asia proper it is safe to say that, once more, geographic location retains its full weight when assessing the future role of China and India. It is a truism – though nonetheless important – to remember that what we summarily call “Asia” is far from being a coherent region. In fact, the “Far East” with China and Japan as ever rivalling powers, includes on its peripheries Russia in the North-West and the United States in the Pacific. It thus differs in almost every respect from South Asia with its “lonely” giant India. It is a subcontinent in its own right, open to West, East and South, but seriously handicapped by being cut off from Eurasia’s mainland by the almost insurmountable Himalaya. Furthermore, India’s immediate neighbourhood is almost permanently conflict prone – with its seemingly unending rivalry with Pakistan, conflict ridden Sri Lanka and, more recently Nepal, and a demographic and environmental time bomb ticking in Bangladesh. In other words: for all three giants, China, Japan and India, Oswald Spengler’s dictum remains valid, namely the seemingly obvious but often overlooked fact that a country’s destiny is in many ways also “influenced, if not determined by its relations and by the power relationship with other countries, in other words, not just by its internal order”.<sup>11</sup>

Both India and China while rapidly advancing economically and technologically, suffer from serious and, we must assume, in many respects growing handicaps. Amongst them are a huge population (incidentally a rapidly – as in Japan – ageing one in China), of which some 80 % are still poor and marginalized, and rapidly growing environmental hazards (desertification in China, pollution and water scarcity in both countries). Above all, they, like the United States and Europe, lack increasingly strategically and economically vital raw materials, oil and gas in particular. Their huge population and their rapidly growing consumption are bound to make this dependence ever more serious and hence a stimulus for fiercer rivalry. Not surprisingly, China – no doubt to be followed by India – has entered in a rush for such materials.<sup>12</sup> It does so with little consideration for the political regime of the country it is dealing with.

In some respects both, China and India, are “newcomers” to the international scene. This because or in spite of the fact that during the Cold War each of them propagated its own political philosophy regarding both changing power relations worldwide and their position in them. China in particular, after the split from its erstwhile leader, the Soviet Union, was never slow in adapting its doctrines to the environment. They went from the “two camps” theory (“socialism” vs. “capitalism”) via the emergence of “international” to “global villages” and eventually ended with the “theory of three worlds”, China belonging to the poor, exploited and underdeveloped one.<sup>13</sup> Little, if anything of all this is left nowadays; pragmatism is the order of the day.

India in turn has gradually and almost secretly abandoned – in practice if not also in theory – the doctrine of “non-alignment” and “peaceful coexistence” of which it has been the main instigator and leader for over forty years. In other words: both countries, each in its own way, have ceased to be political and strategic loners. China lives and acts with the confidence of forthcoming unmatched greatness, India with a sort of self-confident feeling of

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<sup>11</sup> Oswald SPENGLER. *Der Staatsmann*. In : *Politisches Denken im 20. Jahrhundert*. Ed. by Herfried Münkler. Serie Piper. München 1990, p. 70.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. “China woes Latins in oil hunt“. *International Herald Tribune*, 2.3.2005; “China courts Latin America“. *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, February 2005, pp. 52 f.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Kay MOELLER. *Die Aussenpolitik der Volksrepublik China 1949-2004*. Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. Wiesbaden 2005.

upcoming predominance. More concretely, such exclusive visions of self, place and role in Asia, if not sooner or later in the world, helps to explain why in the complex relationship between China and Japan neither side was willing to accept the superiority of the other. There are signs that something similar may also happen between China and India.

Indeed, China in particular has, given its history and size, always remained self-centred. As a consequence, it has failed – or possibly not cared – to spread its culture beyond its borders and, in so doing, expand its influence abroad. This in a sense is also true for Japan and, under very different circumstances, for India as well. Whether such cultural self-sufficiency is good or bad, remains open. Its result in any case is that we are dealing here with so far mainly demographic and economic-technological heavyweights who – in one way or the other – are expected, and no doubt determined, to play an ever more important role first in their own region and then beyond. The great question here is whether they are prepared and willing to take on gradually expanding political and security responsibilities in their own region and, almost inevitably, on a global scale.

So far, multilateral institution building beyond the economic and partly financial realms is almost absent or at best in its early stage. This is true for both Northeast Asia and South Asia. Both regions have gone through mainly unsuccessful experiences with bi- and/or multilateral treaties. Practically all were little more than South- and Eastwards prolongations of the East-West conflict in the Northern hemisphere. That is true for the short-lived South-East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), the Soviet-Chinese alliance in the Eighties and the various treaties with the United States. The one with Japan is the exception as it still provides the central platform for America's military presence in the region.

Asia's specific security concerns would thus seem to be still basically internal and/or bilateral. China had to go through various domestic upheavals – from a revolutionary war to a cultural revolution and now possibly growing internal unrest; India in turn experienced the difficult process of decolonisation and a twofold brutal fragmentation, plus wars with Pakistan and one, not yet fully digested, with China. To this we must remember and add the Asian traumas of the wars in Korea and Indochina.

Taking all this – and much more – together one can understand why, contrary to an almost war-free Europe, multilateral alliance building and the role of military power is still seen in Asia in very different ways. To be sure, there are – beyond an ever tighter American-Japanese strategic cooperation, particularly in the field of ballistic-missile defence<sup>14</sup> – various attempts at security-related institution building. But so far neither the Indian dominated “South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation” (SAARC), founded in 1985, nor the Chinese inspired “Shanghai Cooperation Organisation” (SCO), set-up in June 2001 (including today Russia and several former Asian republics of the Soviet Union) carry much politico-strategic weight. This is not to play down its value as a first platform for Sino-Russian cooperation in fighting terrorism. Still, it is far from fully institutionalised multilateral security cooperation. Perhaps this is also the conclusion of Russia's present leadership: given the country's ever more clearly emerging role as today's, and, even more so, tomorrow's

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<sup>14</sup> As regards the ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM it has been pointed out that, for the first time, it binds China and Japan into a regional institutional framework. Cf. Barry BUZAN. “Security architecture in Asia: the interplay of regional and global levels”. *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 157.

principal provider of oil and gas, they make it unmistakably clear that they see Russia moving back into the role of a superpower, only this time based more on its wealth of raw materials than just on raw military power.

We can only guess so far whether the possession of nuclear weapons helps or rather hinders the creation of common security institutions or at least cooperation. After all, three – with North Korea it would make four – Asian countries have them: China, India and Pakistan. Two other nuclear powers, the United States and Russia are visibly and operationally present in the region. In addition, three other countries – Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – can be considered nuclear threshold states.

In sum, then, the configuration for tangible and sustainable security cooperation is totally different from any other a region in the world. In other words, in spite of in some cases staggering economic growth, ever expanding trade relations and stunning technological advances, somewhat sustained by a semi-political network of various treaties and associations, an actual network of cooperation does not exist in Asia. APEC (Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation) or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) may lead to some forms of consultation, possibly coordination. But it is still far away from anything more than structured cooperation, let alone integration.<sup>15</sup> In fact, neither of these two options is likely in any foreseeable future. The continent's vastness and diversity, the lack of tradition and many unsettled issues or conflicts – Kashmir and the Indian-Chinese border issue, Taiwan, Japan's northern Russian occupied islands, Korea's division, various disputes about maritime oilfields – suggest that they together with latent, if not more open struggles for influence and power, work against closer, let alone, institutionalised security cooperation. There is no “clear and present danger” in sight that would move Asia's major actors into such a direction. Economic and technological competition, or locally limited political or territorial conflicts are simply not enough to drive these countries to set up or join political-military alliances of any substance and duration.

Does this forebode ill for Asia's security and the role of military power? What we presently and at best can expect in the field of cooperative security are two things. First, we are witness to some, still rather cautious attempts to address specific security issues on a – mostly informal – multilateral basis. That applies to border control and to an as yet selective cooperation in the war against terrorism and banditry.

Second, we see the beginnings of some still rather loose forms of dialogue or even cooperation within existing, though in terms of “security hardware” politically non-committal regional organisations. In other words, if dialogue there is, it is still far from actual and sustained cooperation in central fields of regional, let alone international security.

Traditions, outlooks and interests particularly in this sensitive field either lack or have an openly antagonistic slant. This concerns such central and sensitive topics as the interpretation of, or recourse to, the use of force – both at home and abroad. It is also clearly evident in the openly diverging views on the pros and cons of nuclear proliferation. There is, beyond the probably shared consensus on preventing armed conflict, scarce, if any

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<sup>15</sup> Cf., for instance: Kay MOELLER. “Zusammenarbeit in Ostasien”. SWP-Studie, October 2005.

willingness to enter into binding, let alone open-ended or “restraining” alliances. This caution, or possibly aversion has, as mentioned before, its reasons. After all, besides China, Japan and Thailand, all other Asian states are post-colonial constructions.<sup>16</sup> Their only common denominator is the close or more distant multi-layered presence of the United States. It is precisely this presence which either provides a pretext for some countries not to look beyond their borders in search of possibly more congenial partners or in fact “delegate” their security concerns to the ever present superpower.

#### 4. The Western Exception

The combination of these factors not only helps to understand why any comparison of Western (or Atlantic) security institutions with the situation in Asia, is if not misleading, then not very helpful. Asia did not experience what, with hindsight, we may call a Cold War imposed “institutionalised security system” ranging from NATO with its opponents and the Warsaw Pact via the OSCE to the West-European Union up to the now at least incipient “Common Security and Defence Policy” of the European Union. Nor in fact did this occur in any other region outside the Eurasian continent.

There is no particular merit in such a wide-ranging institutionalised security framework. It was imposed either by fear of aggression or by a common interest in keeping an escalating arms race under joint control. Thus, without underestimating the merits of transatlantic and “trans-European” security cooperation, we still can conclude that there is only a very partial merit in this very specific, if not exceptional “institutionalisation” of security policies. Much of it was, as just alluded to, imposed either by fear of aggression or by the menace of losing control over an accelerating and potentially mutually suicidal arms race. Such – at first glance no doubt exceptional – situation cannot be transferred to, or repeated by, other regions.

Furthermore, we see that with the end of the East-West confrontation both NATO and the EU, not to mention the 55 members of the OSCE, find it increasingly difficult to maintain their erstwhile unity of purpose. Nor are they either capable or willing to formulate – beyond their common but in actual practice never clearly defined “war against terrorism” – a politically coherent and operationally sustained security policy. Nowhere is such fragility, nay diversity, of policy more evident than in the frequently changing attitudes towards the potential friend and actual rival Russia.

In other words, “security” is no longer principally an interstate concern. It has become something much more diffuse on practically all levels of state and society. In very general terms, it makes its institutional protection and international control infinitely more difficult and complex. This for the reason alone that its definition becomes ever more a highly subjective or indeed ideological matter, hence more susceptible to become mutually exclusive than a common basis for joint action. Nowhere is this presently more evident than in the context of the “war on international terrorism”.

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<sup>16</sup> BUZAN, *op.cit.*, p. 148.

## 5. The Eurasian Triangle

This brings us back to Mackinder's "Pivot of history", i.e. first to Russia and then to its Asian part with, as its upcoming "heavyweights", China and India. All three have their own, very specific ways of weighing the role of military power as an instrument of internal order and external status.

Russia is a former and perhaps future real power in more than a military and/or resource-based sense. The explanation for such a cautious and, for Russian's pride hardly flattering prediction, can be found in a number of serious problems the country is faced with. Most of them are scarcely hidden by their enormous wealth in raw materials and, as a result, almost spectacular balance of payments. All this is reflected in the Kremlin's occasionally rather imperial behaviour in those countries which vitally depend on Russian oil and gas. And yet, failures and weaknesses become ever more visible, including: a rapidly ageing and dwindling population; sparsely populated or in fact practically empty spaces, particularly not far from the Chinese border; a spread of fatal diseases such as HIV/AIDS; an environmental degradation of huge dimensions; an inadequate, at best only partly modernized infrastructure. Last but not least, we observe a growing and socially dangerous gap between the several millions of very rich and the tens of millions of very poor people. Yes, Russia has managed to be invited to join the club of the seven most industrialized countries.<sup>17</sup> But this is no convincing proof of a corresponding economic performance let alone Russia being a full-fledged and thus predictable democracy.

All this is true. It makes the evaluation of Russia's future status and role in world politics and security embarrassingly difficult. Difficult in the sense that nobody can – or indeed should – sideline Russia when it comes to forecasting the future shape of world order and a ranking of those players expected to shape it. To be sure, Russia is still (and likely to remain so) a military power of serious weight – both conventional and nuclear. But this, in the present context, is precisely one of its problems: such kind of military power has, for better or worse, lost much of its importance. The mere fact that Russia, after ten years of devastating and mutually brutal warfare in and around Chechnya, has as yet not been able to pacify that region, can serve here as a reminder of this fact.

Thus, looking at the two strategically most relevant border areas of Russia – Europe in the West, China in the East – we are entitled to wonder what role Russia is going to play, or will in fact almost driven to assume in the years to come.

Is not the same true for China, India and Japan? If Russia in a certain sense may presently be seen as a "once great power" the two emerging Asian giants can be seen – perhaps somewhat prematurely – as "future great powers". Given their size and economic performance one is entitled to assume that they will rise to a position of more than just a regional power. Both China today and India most likely tomorrow are engaged in an almost breathtaking process of transformation – from principally huge markets via "investment absorbers" to ever fiercer competitors, first economic, then political and strategic. The not yet clearly answerable but nevertheless pertinent question is whether, no doubt under

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<sup>17</sup> Though it is worth noting that in terms of GNP Russia takes only the 77th place. (in 2003).



different conditions and with a wider gamut of instruments, their own widening trade and investment interests will be, as in European colonial times, followed by “the flag”, i.e. military hardware and commitments.

Two questions arise out of this twin emergence of China and India on the international and of “pan-Asian” stages. First, what kind of effect will it have not just for their mutual, still rather ambivalent relationship and, more important, for Asia and its regional political order? Second, what impact for the role of their armed forces both as a reflection of these changes and, more generally, their future status and mission? This latter question concerns, of course, not just Asia but regular armed forces in general. And yet, it seems that, here too, we can distinguish three stages: the first is dramatically highlighted by America’s war in Iraq, the second by the shift of Europe’s military activities from the “home front” to ever faraway regions, and third, the still more “traditional” views on the utility of armed force as an instrument of maintaining order at home and a useful component of influence abroad. The central difference between Europe on the one hand and “Asia” (including Russia) on the other is that in the former ever more units of national armed forces are partly or fully integrated into a European (sometimes also NATO) command. This is no doubt due to the triple recognition that, first, war on the continent has become highly unlikely; second, as a consequence, that national armed forces are more difficult to justify and finance – hence transnational cooperation appears ever more “economic”; and, third, that the actual threats to security for all come from distant regions and have to be dealt with there – and jointly.

Asia (Russia again included) is still far from such conclusions. This finds, as mentioned, its reflection in the, at best, still incipient or plainly insufficient multilateral efforts at regional or continental consultation, let alone cooperation in security related matters.

The second explanation for the still prevalent emphasis on strong national armed forces in this vast region can be found in the fact there is neither a tradition nor in fact, any evident intention of more than gradual and cautious political accommodation. We are rightly reminded of the fact that there has never been anything like a “balance of power” in the Far East, let alone in ex-colonial South East-Asia.<sup>18</sup> Nor, partly as a consequence of this, were there any lasting alliances except those created or imposed by the United States during the “Cold War”.

This situation has not changed. It is, in view of China’s and India’s ascendance plus Japan’s close ties to the United States, unlikely to change in any foreseeable future.

If this assumption is not totally wrong we can conclude that, as a consequence, the countries in this region will, in all likelihood, see the role and future of their respective armed forces in a different light than both the United States and, probably even more so, the Europeans. This is not only and possibly not even principally because, as mentioned before, interstate war fought with traditional armies has become highly unlikely. Nor indeed because armies have also served as a last resort for maintaining or restoring internal order. The central and in many ways most challenging reason has to do with the changing nature of warfare in an ever more complex and often geographically remote environment. Nowhere, so far, has this

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Paul DIBB. “Towards a New Balance of Power in Asia”. Adelphi Paper. No. 295 (1995), p. 11.

become more dramatically and painfully evident than in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Of course, one may hope that the case of Iraq will remain the – painful – exception. But who can be sure?

## 6. Re-examining the Role of Regular Armed Forces

In any case, “Iraq” is presently serving as a catalyst for self-examination not just, one may assume, of the US military establishment but for that of many other countries. The still incipient debate about the apparent or real failures of the US army in Iraq was launched particularly critically by an article by the British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin Foster. Significantly, nay surprisingly, it was reprinted by the U.S. Army magazine “Military Review”.<sup>19</sup>

In this article the British author describes the US Army as “bureaucratic, inflexible, stiflingly hierarchical and culturally insensitive” to the point of “institutional racism”. Not only is this a truly devastating critique of the most powerful army in the world. The no less astonishing fact is that the second ranking American officer in Iraq seems to agree with it. We might even add that every observer of the behaviour of Russian forces at home or in the Caucasus would probably not be far off the mark when passing a similar judgement on them.

Are we – as Hobsbawn called the Twentieth Century<sup>20</sup> – back in the “age of extremes”? Or can we take comfort in the fact that the war in Iraq will remain the exception? The jury is still out. But the question must nevertheless remain on the top of the international community’s military agenda. This for two reasons: first, because, to put it prudently, we cannot be sure that the war in Iraq – though probably extreme - will remain the exception. The recourse to armed force has not come to end. It is still occurring in different places with different causes. It will be all the fiercer if justified or propelled by irrational – that is primarily religious or ideological – motives. If that is a reasonable assumption – incidentally supported by the Thirty Year War in Europe and several major wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – then the role, mission and behaviour of today’s and tomorrow’s armed forces have to be seriously re-appraised.

Such re-appraisal seems all more the necessary as states are no longer the sole and unrivalled agents in the use of armed force. Ever more actors join in what Herfried Münkler calls “the new wars”.<sup>21</sup> And ever more are being fought by private or semi-private military or security companies.<sup>22</sup> They are to be found particularly in Africa, Latin America and now most prominently in Iraq. They raise a series of delicate and difficult questions as to their status, funding, political role and, perhaps most seriously, their legal status and responsibility. They do so not least in connection with the Geneva conventions. This is not the place to deal at great length with a phenomenon that is not all that new – there have always been

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<sup>19</sup> The following is based on an article by Roger COHEN, “U.S. Army in Iraq takes a radical look at itself”. *International Herald Tribune*. 1.2.2006, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Eric HOBBSBAWN. *Age of Extremes. The short Twentieth Century*. London 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Herfried MUENKLER. *Die neuen Kriege*. Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> See, amongst others: Fred SCHREIER and Marina CAPARINI. “Privatising Security: Law, Practice and Governance of Private Military and Security Companies”. Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF). Occasional Paper - No. 6, Geneva March 2005, and Deborah D. AVANT. *The Market for Force*. Cambridge. University Press 2005.

mercenaries of various kinds. And yet, they introduce both in terms of their number and missions – an increasingly serious element of uncertainty with regard to their political control and legal responsibility.

Must we assume that such privatisation of the use of armed force is likely to spread to other regions – in particular to the ones we are concerned with here, i.e. Europe and Asia? The answer can be relatively easy in as much as such a spread is almost bound to happen if and when there are armed conflicts or an actual war to be fought out. Those in former Yugoslavia provide clear evidence of this. From here emerge at least four questions.

- First, the question whether the “delegation” of the use of armed force to private firms is likely to become general practice worldwide or whether it will remain limited to those countries which actually can afford and have sufficient reason to use them;
- Second, what such a shift in the use of “strategic-military power” means for the future of warfare or, put more cautiously, armed conflict, both for eventual peace-making and peace-keeping. After all, one can think of valid reasons for delegating these –albeit less dangerous and hence publicly more acceptable – missions also to private firms (a practice for which there are no doubt already precedents);
- Third, one of the most delicate questions is whether and how private security forces are or can be held responsible for their acts according to international treaties and in particular the Geneva Conventions.<sup>23</sup>
- Fourth and finally what such a development will mean for the political and legal control of armed forces and, last but not least, arms control or hopeful renewed disarmament efforts.

## 7. Institutionalising Security Dialogue

This or similar questions do not seem to be, for the moment at least, high on the political and security agenda of Asia or to a certain degree, Russia. None of the former is directly involved in ongoing armed conflicts – Kashmir being the exception, and the Taiwan question is being seen as, if at all, a “conventional conflict”. The control and use of military power in Asia is, in other words still seen and treated as the exclusive domain of the state: delegating even parts of it to “private institutions” would seem to be not only anathema but a serious challenge to an as yet undisputed state monopoly.

Many observers do see this as reassuring. And in view of the highly controversial consequences of a delegation of military power to private agencies it indeed shows Asia’s still very different perception of the role of armed force in international relations. The downside of this is that there are very few and as yet insufficient platforms or international institutions through and with the help of which potential rivalries or actual conflicts can be moderated, negotiated and hopefully settled. Nowhere, so it seems after the present overview, do

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<sup>23</sup> Cf., for instance: Gilles CARBONNIER. “Corporate Responsibility and Humanitarian Action”. *International Review of the Red Cross*. Vol. 83, No. 844 (December 2001), pp. 947-968; and: Christian SCHALLER. *Private Sicherheits- und Militärfirmen in bewaffneten Konflikten*. SWP-Studie. September 2005, Berlin.

countries either lack or refuse the possibility of joining a regionally relevant and effective security institutions or platforms. We have tried above to indicate some explanations for what may look to the outsider as a deficiency. It would be wrong to conclude from this that Asian countries will not develop at some point in time those common institutions that they believe to reflect their own traditions and outlooks and thus satisfy their security needs. At this point they may find out as the “Western World” came to conclude that an institutional dialogue, possibly even cooperation amongst the relevant partners may serve their ever more common interests better than a self-centred going alone approach.

Here then we see perhaps more clearly than in the almost frantic and divisive economic competition on the one hand and a dangerously escalating race for ever scarcer raw materials on the other a field of shared interests; i.e. security broadly defined. If Asia actually wants to become a major international actor of more than economic-technological relevance it will have not only have to define more clearly its relationship with a potentially uncertain world power – the United States – but even more so how and with what instruments and institutions it wants to define and organise its own security. In the final analysis such an undertaking is not all that different from that of its partners on the Eurasian continent: Russia and the European Union. As they, too, are increasingly confronted with such a rapidly changing environment, even the proudest and most successfully emerging powers will come to realise that economic power and technological process will not suffice to make them and their people less vulnerable. Quite the contrary could happen both at home and to the extent they get ever more involved abroad, they become part and parcel not of what Norbert Elias called “a process of civilisation” but, on the contrary, of multiple exposure. They will then find that if not the only then certainly the most promising way of protecting themselves against the hazards of such expansion and exposure, is cooperating with other nations. And this precisely in those fields which they had so far considered to be their own, almost nationally sacred concern.

In other words, the Eurasian powers we have been primarily concerned with here, are bound to discover, perhaps reluctantly, that they, too, will have to embark on the path of more than informal or loose international cooperation. As a consequence they will have to include in one way or another, their armed forces in this process – except, of course, if they allow the latter to gradually abdicate in favour of private “security providers”. If, as we can assume so far, they do not want to embark on such a road, they, too, like the United States today and Europe tomorrow, will have to think hard about what kind of missions these armed forces will be faced with and within what kind of institutional setting – national or ever more international – they will have to accomplish these missions. If such a, no doubt long and demanding, double process of “internationalising hitherto national security policies” and “re-thinking the missions and methods of regular armed forces” will also expand to the central players in Asia, we will in fact witness another “revolution” in world politics.



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