

**Comments on Anita Sengupta : *Being Connected: Logistic Visions to the East and West***

**Discussant: Sanjay Chaturvedi**, Professor and Coordinator, Centre of Advanced Study (UGC SAP)

Department of Political Science (Centre for the Study of Geopolitics) & Honorary Director Centre for the Study of Mid-West and Central Asia, Panjab University, Chandigarh

The imaginative meta-geographies of spatial struggles between the 'Land Power' and the 'Sea Power' as *the* geographical causation behind history, and the 'Great Game' over strategic access to so-called 'Geographical Pivot of History', 'Natural Seat of Power' and Heartland/Rimland remained central to the Eurocentric *imperialist-racist* international relations and geopolitics over a long period of time (see Hobson 2012). Re-deployed at the service of Cold War policies and practices of containment by the West, the static but strategic geographies of 'Eurasian Heartlands' are in a state of flux today due to ever increasing flows of materials, ideas, and to a lesser extent people/labour, across national-territorial borders. Complex and compelling 'functional' geographies of global supply chains, communications and logistics are said to be dictating the 'inevitable' rise of a hyper-connected, brave but baffling, new world of what Parag Khanna (2016) would describe as '*Connectography*'. In this 'supply chain geopolitics of networks', multiple geographies of competing connectivity are said to be turning nations into nodes and borders into bridges in various parts of the globe, but not without invoking concerns and causing contestations.

The metaphor of 'Grant Chessboard', popularized by Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzezinski (who served as President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor from 1977–81) too is getting increasingly eclipsed by the metaphor of 'Tugs of Wars', with huge uncertainty, bordering anxiety, over possible hidden geopolitical agenda of seemingly economic initiatives and their intended and unintended consequences. According to Parag Khanna (2016: xvii), "Competition over connectivity plays out as a tug-of-war over global supply chains, energy markets, industrial production, and the valuable flows of finance, technology, knowledge and talent. Tug-of-war represents the shift from a war between systems (capitalism versus communism) to a war *within* one collective supply chain system. While military warfare is a regular threat, tug-of-war is a perpetual reality --to be won by economic master planning rather than military doctrine" (Ibid.). Consequently, argues Khanna, "the U.S. 'pivot' of greater forces to East Asia should be conceived as an exercise not just in protecting allies from China, but in safeguarding America's growing trade volumes across the Pacific" (Ibid. p. 177) and related supply chains.

In this apparently borderless world, the geo-economic logic is further fine-tuned and refurbished to argue (see Blackwill and Harris, 2016) that the wars of tomorrow *would*--and realistically speaking *should*-- be waged by the major powers in ways remarkably different from those conventionally fought by 'reaching for the gun'. Blackwill and Harris define 'Geo-economics' as "the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nation's economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals" (Ibid. p. 20). One of their key policy prescriptions, in the shadow of China's One Belt and One Road initiative, and directed at the new President of the United States of America, is that "in another aspect of rebalancing to Asia, the United States [in search of a new grand strategy] should make geo-economic investments in India's emergence as a Pacific power" and "the final pillar of U.S.-India strategy should be a maturing of the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor. This vision of an economic corridor powered by new energy and transport infrastructure would undermine Myanmar's economic dependence on China and offer an answer to Beijing's plans for its own corridor from the Indian Ocean to southern China" (Ibid. pp. 232-233). It is to state the obvious perhaps that India is being discursively re-located here by Blackwill and Harris on the map of "vital national interests" and "extremely important national interests" of the United States in the hope that the geo-economic agendas and interests of the two countries would converge.

Given that 'connectivity', for its makers, movers as well as takers, is a means to realize certain geo-economic-political goals, the proverbial billion-dollar question before the post-colonial, post-partition India (with connectivity/logistic plans of its own on land and at sea) thus appears to be as follows. As one of the fastest growing economies, but with highly uneven geographies of 'development' and noticeable socio-economic regional disparities, how can India --with its strategic peninsular location *on* both continental Asia and *in* the maritime *Indian Ocean World*-- build infrastructure-logistics plans and partnerships (both in its

immediate and extended neighborhoods) in a manner that both serves the objectives of ecologically sustainable, socially just and culturally appropriate development and 'strategic autonomy' in foreign policy within the framework of cooperative federalism and sub-regional economic diplomacy? The task of harmonizing 'logistic spaces' and 'social-ecological spaces' is by no stretch of imagination an easy one, especially in post-partition South Asia. And yet it is in South Asia, one of the most disaster prone regions on the face of the globe, that the logistic-social interface acquires both unparalleled complexity and compulsion in favor of regional and sub-regional cooperation over mobility, connectivity and logistic. Imperatives of such cooperation further make the boundary between India's 'immediate' and 'extended' neighborhoods highly porous.

The paper by Anita Sengupta entitled 'Being Connected: Logistics Visions to the East and West of India' is full of stimulating insights. The article, as pointed out by the author (emphasis mine), "is an attempt at examining *logistic visions* in an *extended Indian neighborhood* with the idea that the *emergence of new logistic spaces* will be the *marker of future Asian engagement generating new forms of circulation and reconfiguration of sovereignties*". This intriguing focus instantly provokes a number of questions. What constitutes India's extended --and extending-- neighborhood? After all there is a complex geography (political, social-cultural and economic) and history (e.g. Indian Ocean World) to India's neighborhood and its extensions to north, south, east, west. What kind of logistic visions are emerging in India's extended neighborhoods? *Who* (i.e. actors and agencies) and *what* (i.e. logics, hopes, fears) are driving these logistic visions? What is the extent to which they converge or diverge? What is common to them? Can we take the translation of these 'logistic visions' into 'strategic spaces' for granted? Can we assume in an unproblematic manner that these logistic visions, after being turned into logistic spaces, will lead to reconfiguration and rethinking of Asian borders (both physical and mental) as well as conventional understanding of Westphalian territorial sovereignty? Asia is not a part of 'post-Schengen' world --if at all one such world exists-- yet.

It is to state the obvious perhaps that questions posed above can be answered in a serious and systematic manner only with the help of carefully chosen case studies, that would permit a theoretically informed empirical engagement. The strategic value of a case-study approach is further enhanced by the ongoing battle for 'knowledge-production' about 'connectivity' between a reductionist geopolitical mapping concealing inequalities and expansive social mapping seeking details to make the invisible pronouncedly visible. One promising possibility in this regard could be the case study of BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) corridor. The fact that BCIM is a 'work in progress' could be seen by some as inhibiting, but then most of 'Connectography', including 'One Belt, One Road', is yet to be fully conceptualized and might take longer still to operationalize. The BCIM corridor could be located in the intriguing geopolitical-geo-economic contexts of competing narratives of connectivity, outlined above, before seeking new spaces for alternative imaginations of more cosmopolitan logistic spaces, anchored in the vision of universalism (in contrast to narrow nationalisms) in Asia and beyond.

The emphasis placed by the CRG project on 'social mapping' of 'logistic spaces' is most strategic in the sense that it insists on not losing sight of place-specific social-political and cultural geographies in the imaginative metageographies of 'Connectography'. It goes to the full credit of Anita Sengupta therefore to point out that, "While transnational connections/flows and mega infrastructural developments attract attention, the many different pathways that local actors follow as they integrate and manage their everyday lives in the 'receiving' states of these logistic visions and the multiple relations that reconnect them to their places of origin also remain significant." She talks of these 'alternative corridors', giving examples from the Ferghana Valley Borderlands. Looking for similar narratives and every day practices in India's immediate and extended neighborhood to the east, with special reference to BCIM corridor could be most illuminating example of 'social mapping'.

Certain sections of the paper by Anita Sengupta remind us in passing of her widely acclaimed book *Heartlands of Eurasia: The Geopolitics of Political Space* (2009). The paper could begin with some of the concluding critical reflections of the above-mentioned book. Here are just a few possibilities. She persuasively points out: "...the numerous ways in which areas, regions or even places are imagined,

constructed and defined [and resisted I would add] calls for an understanding not just of the insiders' portrayal but also of the outsider's gaze" (p. 160). This insight is quite applicable to not only 'spaces of places' but also 'spaces of flows'. After all *places*, and those who inhabit them, continue to matter --in terms of their identities, values, choices and perceptions—even on the "true map of the world" that "should feature not just states but megacities, highways, railways, pipelines, railways, Internet cables, and other symbols of our emerging global network civilization" (Khanna, 2016: xvi-xvii). One key question, posed from a critical social science mapping of competing narratives of connectivity, could be this: What are the numerous ways in which the new emerging spaces of connectivity/logistic spaces/infrastructure/supply chains are being imagined, constructed, defined and resisted in both insiders' portrayals and outsiders' gazes? What implications do the top-down imaginative geographies of connectivity, beyond and across bounded spaces, carry for the making and/or unmaking of in-between, peripheral places/peoples and their micro/ everyday/lived-in geographies?

I have no issues with Anita Sengupta's engagement with the geopolitical arguments of Halford J. Mackinder in general and his Heartland thesis in particular. While doing so it will be instructive to note, as pointed out by John Hobson (2012), that highly fearful of a 'closing world' at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "neither Mackinder nor Mahan granted Eastern Agency a Progressive role in making either of the West or of world politics. Eastern people were cast with the negative stereotypes or tropes of barbaric activism --i.e. predatory Eastern Agency—contributing nothing positive to progressive civilization or to world order and constituting merely the harbingers of an anarchic new world disorder". Furthermore, "behind the universalistic veneer of geopolitics among nations lurked the sound and fury of race struggle: The Barbarians are coming! The Barbarians are coming!" (Ibid.) As various world becomes more connected (at least physically if not mentally), giving rise to various 'Tugs of War', real and imagined, is there any evidence so far of spatial-racial biases underpinning certain narratives of connectivity? It is useful to bear in mind that the success of Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is by no means a foregone conclusion and a great deal of uncertainty and confusion surrounds its future. Serious concerns over the ecological and social impacts of connectivity/logistics seem to be clouding the futures of a 'China centered trade network' and Russian lead economic community'. India's 'Act East' policy in newly carved out 'Indo-Pacific' space is yet another 'work in progress' that awaits further conceptual clarity and highly desirable policy consensus among a large number of stakeholders including sub-regions, cities, ports, civil society actors and nodal agencies. Beyond the metaphor of 'Tugs of War' lies a rather complex labyrinth of agencies, interests and agendas with entangled logics. Anita Sengupta persuasively concludes on the note that, "Taking note of changing global networks, linking with other Asian logistic frameworks, *keeping in mind the 'slip roads' that local mobilities traverse are just some of the imperatives that India would have to keep in mind as it negotiates its own development in a future that belongs to fluidity*" (emphasis mine).

## References

- Blackwill, Robert D. and Harris, Jennifer M. (2016) *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hobson, John M. (2012) *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khanna, Parag(2016)*Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*, New York: Random House.
- Sengupta, Anita (2009) *Heartlands of Eurasia: Geopolitics of Political Space*, Lexington books.