Introduction: An Overview of Asia

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THE IDEA OF ASIA was created by Europeans, for Europeans and it led to Western dominance of vast lands and of large numbers of peoples who possessed tremendous wealth and a sense of history and culture. This idea passed through several hands. A number of attitudes and policies emerged as a result, each representing the practical circumstances of the makers of Asia. The Greeks were the first to conceive the notion of Asia. To them the Aegean sea was the centre of the world. The west of Greece was Europe and modern day Turkey and Syria were Asia. The Macedonian expansion brought the Greeks into contact with India. This encounter was brief but it was benign, leading to diplomatic and cultural contact between the two. As a result the Greek idea of Asia was broadened somewhat. The Roman conquests and trade extended the idea of Asia further by its contact with China. Among Asians there was no sense of the Asian collectivity but there was a vague awareness of worlds beyond the princely realms. Thus Indian kings had contact with Persia and China and Indian coastal trade connected the littoral regions of the modern Indian Ocean area. The Chinese empires divided the world between China as the central kingdom and the world of the barbarians. With this in mind an office of Barbarian Affairs was maintained to regulate the contact with foreigners. Invariably the conceptions of these kingdoms were geographically limited and psychologically ethnocentric.

In historic terms the Western dominance of Asia was initiated by the encounter between Christian European and Muslim powers. In this encounter religious, commercial and strategic interests were at work. Seapower played a crucial role in this historic Christian-Muslim fight. Seapower had two qualities: sea transport facilitated trade between Europe and the East; and seapower enabled the projection of superior European sea-based power against Muslim powers and the pagans. Between 1492 and the 1700s (for example the famous Battle of Plassey) the European motive changed from trade to conquest. By the mid 1800s Europeans saw themselves as the superior civilisation and the superior military force. This was a significant reversal of the earlier European view of Asians as superior civilisations.

There was another dimension to the process of Western expansion against Muslims and the pagans. The trade and conquests of Europeans in the Arab,
African, Persian and Asian worlds were driven also by inter-European balance of power struggles. Asian colonialism was a manifestation of the struggle among the powers in Europe, and sea battles between British and French naval forces in the Indian Ocean were signs of intense European rivalries. The encounters among the Europeans in the Afro-Asian-Middle East worlds, and between European powers and powers in these areas, led to a proliferation of dominant-subordinate relations between the metropolitan powers and the colonies. This massive incorporation of third world societies, economies and princely and feudal regimes within the Europe-dominated international system for almost 300 years was a historic development; in contrast the American and the Soviet spheres of influence pale into insignificance. The Soviet empire in Eastern Europe lasted about 40 years; the American century has had a span of about 40 years as well.

Thus, European colonisation served several ends of the European powers. They disoriented third world societies and produced a loss of self-confidence over their inability to meet foreign military and cultural challenges. They brought them under their military and political authority. They organised a transfer of third world wealth into Europe. Finally, they used colonies to transfer European balance of power struggles away from Europe into far-away lands and to regulate their competition and to carry on with balance of power activities as the way to run the system of states. Here the key players were the European powers and the objects or the pawns were Asian polities and societies.

In other words, two main fights brought the Europeans into Asia: (1) the fight between Christian European powers and Muslim powers; and (2) the fight among the European powers for Asian (and third world) spoils on the principle that there had to be a continuous accommodation of the interests of the major players on the basis of compromise and compensation. (Thus, when England got Egypt, it was glad to acknowledge the necessity for France to get Morocco.) By the 19th century a third fight entered the Asian/Middle Eastern picture. After the defeat of the Ottomans and the Muslims by the European powers in the First World War, and after the consolidation of European empires in Asia and other parts of the third world, British fear of Russian expansion and colonisation of Central Asia and its drive towards the Pacific transformed the orientation of the British empire (especially the British India empire) and made the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East the centres of Anglo-Russian rivalry. Asia became the arena in the fight between two highly motivated imperialisms. It became the arena where British policy was quite successful in securing buffers, neutrals and spheres of influence as methods to manage the Russian threat and to organise the frontiers of British and Russian power.3

This struggle was still on when a number of events changed the Great Game. (1) European powers became preoccupied with the ideological passions and divisions of fascism, democracy and socialism and with the total war preparations which accompanied the upheavals of the inter-war period. (2)