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China, Russia and The Multipolar World

By Andrew Korybko
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China is the only Great Power with the economic wherewithal to challenge the US all across the world, and as such, these qualities neatly complement Russia's military capabilities in assisting both civilizational poles as they jointly forge a multipolar world order. The manifestation of their shared global vision and the framework through which they cooperate in achieving it is the Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership, and because of Beijing's intimate closeness with Moscow, it too has been targeted for full-scale proxy destabilization by the US. Washington's strategy isn't limited to solely obstructing multipolar transnational connective projects (as ambitious of a goal as that is already), but also in physically containing China in its own home region, similar in many respects to what it's been attempting to do to Russia ever since the end of the Cold War.

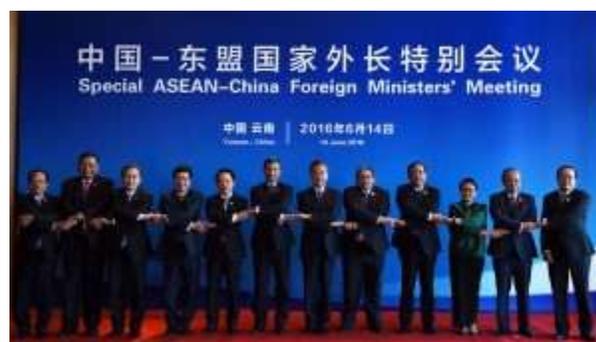
These two strategies intersect to a large degree and have a major commonality between them in that they can both be furthered by American-driven Hybrid Wars. This part of the book explores the applicability of this method to ASEAN, the strategic 'backyard' and 'soft underbelly' of China. In many ways, ASEAN is to China just what Central Asia is to Russia, although it can be strongly argued that ASEAN is of much more critical economic importance to China than Central Asia ever will be for Russia (though both regions have equal strategic value as relative to each respective Great Power). The first part of the book mapped out the three ASEAN states most vulnerable to Hybrid Wars (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand), but their geopolitical

significance and the attractiveness that the US has in targeting these specific states can't be fully understood if explained in isolation from the larger ASEAN region.

For that reason, it's integral for the first parts of this geopolitical study to focus on ASEAN as a whole in explaining its strategic saliency in general and then in describing how the US plans to weaponize the bloc for macro-regional proxy rivalry against China. Along the same lines, it's also relevant to detail China's grand strategic plans in responding to this aggressive encirclement and the unipolar militarization of the international waterways through which so much of its economic growth depends. This naturally brings the research along to a thorough discussion about why China selected Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand as the host countries for its multipolar transnational connective projects and how these are envisioned as suitable countermeasures in evading the trap that the US is setting in the South China Sea. The socio-political vulnerabilities of all ASEAN countries will then be touched upon before the research goes fully in-depth investigating the Myanmar and Thai case studies, after which these two scenarios will be compared with one another in highlighting the difference between their respective likelihoods and overall strategic impact.

The Global Economic Crossroads

ASEAN's solid growth in the past few decades has made it an enviable partner for many, and the economic bloc has entered into several high-profile free trade agreements (FTAs) in the past couple of years. As of the end of 2015, it has bilateral FTAs with Australia and New Zealand, China, India, Japan, and South Korea, essentially making it the formal economic crossroads between these leading world economies. Furthermore, it's currently engaged in free trade negotiations with the EU and the Eurasian Union, which if ultimately sealed, would give ASEAN free trade rights with almost the entirety of the supercontinent with the exception of the Mideast and a small handful of other countries. With the convergence of so many economic interests over ASEAN, it's only a matter of time before this smattering of bilateral agreements is expanded into a multilateral framework that progressively includes each of the given parties.



Such an arrangement would represent a major victory for Eurasia and the multipolar world because it would tie each of the Great Powers together and make them collectively more interdependent on one another than either of them individually would be with the US. This is obviously a long-term vision and isn't something that can be actualized in the scope of just a few years, but the path is already being paved the closer that ASEAN comes to inking free trade deals with the EU and the Eurasian Union. The increasingly intertwined FTAs that these respective

economic partners reach with one another will inevitably bring them all closer together with time, despite existing political and structural differences between some of them such as the current American-dictated chill in the EU's relations with the Eurasian Union.

TTIP Tramples Everything

If given the chance to behave freely, the EU would likely intensify bilateral ties with the Eurasian Union as evidenced by Junker's late-November 2015 outreach to the bloc, but US grand strategy has always been based on keeping the two divided, hence the manufactured Ukrainian Crisis and subsequently planned New Cold War. Should a breakthrough in bilateral relations occur, perhaps due to the structural changes that Balkan Stream and the Balkan Silk Road would generate inside the EU if either of them is successfully completed, then it's probable that their overlapping economic interests in ASEAN (independently negotiated up until that point) could represent the perfect catalyst for banding together and formalizing a larger and more inclusive economic framework between all actors. The reasoning behind this is because the current American-attributed deterioration of EU-Eurasian Union relations is the only 'non-natural' structural impediment preventing all of the supercontinent's trade blocs from cooperating on the all-inclusive scale suggested above.

From the American strategic standpoint, however, this would represent the ultimate failure of its divide-and-rule policy in Eurasia, and it's for this institutional reason why the US is so adamant about pursuing the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the EU. In the event that this neo-imperialist proposal ever enters into force, then the US would have the dominant say in deciding whether its junior EU 'partner' is allowed to continue its existing free trade negotiations with Japan and India. More likely than not, it would indefinitely freeze these already-stalled processes in order to consolidate its economic control over the bloc, and only after it exercises indisputable control over it will Washington allow the talks to proceed. By that point, the goal would be to link TTIP and the TPP (which will be expanded upon shortly, but whose Asian component will be led by Japan) together to make the US the institutionally essential actor between them, and then complete the unipolar-dominated economic envelopment of Eurasia by bringing India into the mix to some capacity.

This strategy is contingent on the US using the New Cold War hype that it's created to scare its partners into agreeing to the TTIP and TPP out of the manufactured perception that they need to contain Russia and China, respectively. In the scenario being describe above, if the US doesn't succeed in pushing through TTIP and the EU independently aligns itself with either of those major Asian economies (let alone that it begins free trade negotiations with China), then the US could rapidly lose its present preeminence over the EU economy. In a short time, Brussels might finally come to the conclusion that everyone else in the world has already arrived at and realize that the future of the global economy rests in the East, not the West, and enter into wider and freer trading relations with the rest of its prospective partners. This would of course naturally include Russia and the Eurasian Union, and with the two economies already converging on their own as it would be (remembering that it's only because of American-attributed political impediments that they aren't doing so already), it's foreseeable that they could coordinate their respective FTAs with ASEAN as a final stepping stone before engaging in a similar one amongst themselves.

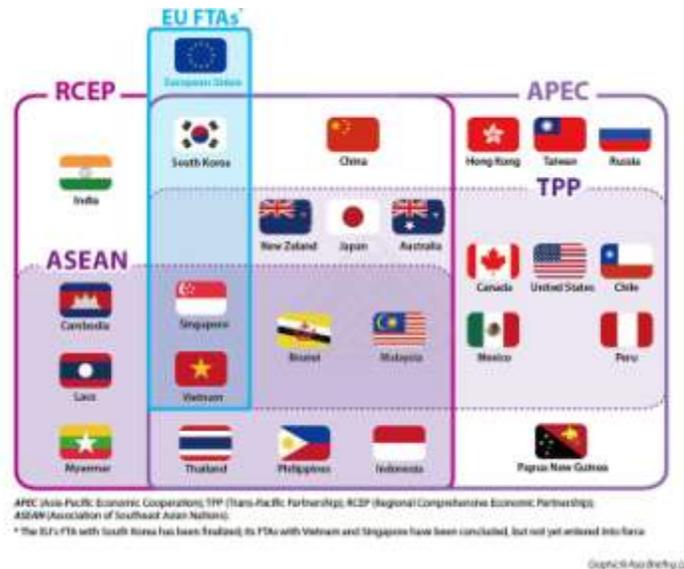
Multilateral Backup Plans

As positive of a picture as the above section paints, it probably won't happen for at least the coming decade, if at all, seeing how serious the US is in 'playing for keeps' within the New Cold War rivalry. Whether through the institutional workings of the TTIP or outside of it via more unscrupulous measures if the said agreement isn't passed by that time, the US will do everything in its power to prevent the EU from expanding its independent economic relations with the Eurasian Union, China, and ASEAN. It might potentially be allowed to deepen its ties with Japan and India (per the unipolar grand strategy described previously), but even that is debatable unless the US feels assured enough that it can maintain control over the bloc after those prospective agreements are clinched. It probably wouldn't have the confidence to do so unless it formally controlled the EU through TTIP, thus making these potential free trade areas unlikely, at least in the short- to medium-term timeframes, barring of course any unexpected geopolitical shifts. For the most part, then, the EU can be safely discounted from any serious discussions about intra-Eurasian free trade zones, but that doesn't mean that such dreams should be discouraged simply because the bloc realistically can't take part in them for a while (if at all).

RCEP And FTAAP:

To compensate for the expected non-participation of the EU inside the envisioned multipolar economic frameworks, a few modified proposals have been suggested. Two of the most talked about are the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP), both of which are actively supported by China. The RCEP is the formalization of a multilateral FTA between ASEAN and each of its already-existing free trade partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea), while the FTAAP takes things a lot further and proposes a grandiose free trade zone among all the countries that constitute the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, thereby including Russia, the US, and a few other Western Hemispheric countries but at the expense of a full free trade deal with ASEAN as a whole (Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia are not APEC members).

Nevertheless, it's still significant that most of the countries within the bloc would be participants in that framework, highlighting just how important ASEAN economies are for transregional free trade deals nowadays. At the same time, however, the inclusion of the US would greatly erode the multipolar flexibility of the intended grouping and turn it into more of an apolitical economic organization that can't be used in a relative way to weaken the US' unipolar standing. It's probable that Russia and China only support this idea so as to score political points of their own in contrasting it with the US' exclusionary TPP plans that threaten to undermine both Great Powers' existing trade connections and future opportunities with the involved states.



Russia's Vision For GEFTA:

The latest proposal to be brought up for creating a multilateral transregional trading bloc came from Russia and was pronounced during President Putin's Address to the Federal Assembly on 4 December, 2015. The Russian leader announced his country's intention to form an economic partnership between the Eurasian Union, ASEAN, and SCO states (including the two ascending members of India and Pakistan), arguing that the new organization would "make up nearly a third of the global economy in terms of purchasing power parity." This is the most realistic of the three suggestions and the most likely to be implemented in practice. China already has a FTA with Pakistan (the 'zipper' of Eurasian integration), and the Eurasian Union is exploring the possibility of sealing similar deals with India and official SCO-prospect Iran. Of note, Russia and China are also engaged in a trilateral partnership with Mongolia that could predictably become a free trade area sometime in the future as well.

Assuming that Moscow will be successful in reaching these (and there's no reason to doubt that at the moment), then joining the Eurasian Union and the SCO together in an economic partnership would be a natural fit, with ASEAN offering a perfect complementary touch that would economically excite all of the members. Furthermore, India and Pakistan's inclusion into the discussed framework would likely lead to the rest of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC, and which has its own internal free trade area) joining in as well, which would then push the proposed organization's ranks to also include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Taken together, Russia's vision amounts to a **Grand Eurasian Free Trade Area (GEFTA)** that's supposed to encompass the vast majority of Asia and one day merge with the EU, with the notable exclusions for now obviously being the European economies (both EU and non-EU-member states), the Mideast (except for perhaps Syria and Israel [an odd combination to be sure, but pursued for entirely separate reasons]), the Koreas, and Japan.

The Indian Impediment Opens Up An ASEAN Opportunity

Even assuming a minimum of external (American) interference in trying to offset Russia's vision, it's foreseeable that India will present a major challenge for GEFTA's implementation. India and China are engaged in a very intense security dilemma at the moment that neither side publicly wants to acknowledge, and under such conditions, it's not likely that either of them is serious about pursuing a FTA with the other. From New Delhi's perspective, India has no motivation whatsoever to sacrifice what it feels to be its national economic interests by entering into a FTA with China, no matter if it's in RCEP or GEFTA. Relating to RCEP, India already has FTAs with Japan and South Korea, and it doesn't believe that including Australia and New Zealand into the proposed multilateral framework would compensate for the economic unbalancing that it thinks it would experience through the tariff-free trade with China that it would have to agree to as part of the deal. With respect to GEFTA, the concerns are very similar. India is currently in a free trade relationship with ASEAN and might eventually enter into one with Iran after the latter proposed such an idea in spring 2015. With progress looking quite positive in reaching a free trade deal with the Eurasian Union one day soon, India doesn't see any need to jump into GEFTA when it's already all but assured to receive every benefit that it would be seeking out of the arrangement minus the foreseen complications that would happen if it has to do so with China as well (and to which its leadership presently sees no benefit).

India's expected absence from GEFTA doesn't translate into the vision's failure, but it does raise its dependency on ASEAN's inclusion in order to be geopolitically broad-based enough to become a defining point in the global economy. By itself, the Eurasian Union and its bilateral free trade arrangements are positive developments in and of themselves, especially if they lead to a prospective Eurasian Union-China FTA that multilaterally incorporates the other deals reached prior to that point (such as with Iran), but multipolarity would be infinitely more enhanced through the addition of ASEAN to this accord. Vietnam is already party to such a deal with the Eurasian Union, and even though it's a robust component of the bloc's partnership portfolio, its mutual potential pales in comparison to if both economic groupings had their own inclusive bloc-to-bloc pact. One of the steps in advancing this possibility would be for Russia to make efficient use out of ASEAN's SEZs in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia in order to reach individual FTAs with the rest of the organization's mainland members (including Thailand, whom Medvedev offered the possibility to in spring 2015) so that they can collectively lobby their insular counterparts in this direction.

The TPP Strikes Back

The greatest threat to the multipolar world's economic relations with ASEAN comes directly from the TPP. The US is pushing this exclusionary trade arrangement in order to obstruct the existing trade partnerships that non-allied countries (Russia and China) plan on enhancing with each of the bloc's members. In a sense, it can be thought of as a preemptive declaration of economic war because the US is taking proactive steps in carving out a restricted market that will fall under its primary control. Washington is keenly aware of Moscow's envisioned Pivot to Asia and understands that it must be diversified past China in order to achieve its full economic potential, and regarding Beijing, the US recognizes how obstructive a disturbance in bilateral Chinese-ASEAN economic relations could be for the New Silk Road plans that it hopes to complete in the coming years. The US would like to use the economic hegemony that it would acquire over each of the TPP's ASEAN members in order to bully them away from these

multipolar centers and firmly entrench them in the unipolar camp, and there are concrete reasons that this strategic threat should be taken seriously.

The AEC:

ASEAN reached an historic milestone during its 27th summit at the end of November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, agreeing to form the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in order to coordinate the bloc's economic relations with the outside world and strengthen social, cultural, and security cooperation among its members. It's expected that the AEC will seek to enact bloc-wide trade agreements from this point on, striving to eventually expand the TPP to include the rest of the organization with time. The reasoning for this is quite simple, and it's that ASEAN would like to standardize the trade deals that its members have with outside countries and blocs so as not to create an internal structural imbalance between its economies. If Malaysia is in the TPP but Vietnam has a FTA with the Eurasian Union, the thinking goes, then that creates a disadvantage for the Philippines which doesn't have institutionalized ties with either, for example, and the mishmash of various external actors interacting with ASEAN on a member-to-member basis instead of dealing with the entire group creates an unnecessarily complex intra-bloc situation that makes it all the more difficult for the AEC's diverse members to economically integrate with one another.

Although it's not the most accurate comparison in general, in this case it's somewhat fitting to pair the AEC with the EU since both blocs want to control their members' institutionalized economic relations with other states and organizations. Even though this objective hasn't been formally proclaimed by the AEC as of yet, it's functionally inevitable that it will move in this direction sooner or later once its members get more serious about their shared integration goal. This means that the AEC will one day have to make the decision over which non-bloc-including bilateral agreements it wants to expand to cover the entire organization and which ones its respective members must be forced to abandon. It's significant to note at this point that most of the AEC seems to be moving in the direction of the TPP, judging at least by the statements coming out of the group's top two economies, Indonesia and Thailand. President Joko Widodo told Obama during a White House meeting in late October that "Indonesia intends to join the TPP", while one of Thailand's deputy prime ministers proclaimed at the end of November that his country "is highly interested in joining TPP...chances are high that Thailand will seek to join TPP."



Thailand And Indonesia:

Thailand might be trying to publicly defer to the US for as long as possible in order to deflect some of the hostility that many in Washington harbor towards it ever since the multipolar coup ousted the pro-American leadership and the country largely reoriented towards China. It's probable that Bangkok doesn't sincerely intend to join the TPP, or at least at this point, because it would endanger the strategic partnership that it's rapidly developed with Beijing over the past year and a half (and which will be addressed more in the research later), but the situation with Indonesia is a lot more straightforward. Unbeknownst to most observers, the West has been engaging in a mini-containment of sorts against the country in order to further pressure its leadership into making pro-unipolar decisions when the appropriate time comes. Widodo is already recognized as being Western-friendly as it is, but he's still the steward of one of the largest economies in the world and has a tricky role to play in strategically hedging against China (as the Indonesian leadership sees it) while simultaneously preventing itself from falling under the US' full supremacy as its latest proxy state.

Rewriting The Rules

Regretfully, however, it looks as though Indonesia is about to use its economic leadership role over the AEC to misguide the rest of the organization into moving along the path of unipolar servitude. If Jakarta commits to the TPP, then it's foreseeable that this will be the deciding factor in whether the rest of the AEC accepts the US' disadvantageous trade offer at the expense of upgrading its ties with the Eurasian Union. In fact, the implementation of the TPP might even result in the eventual nullification of ASEAN's FTA with China, thereby dealing a double-whammy to the multipolar world's institutional influence in Southeast Asia.

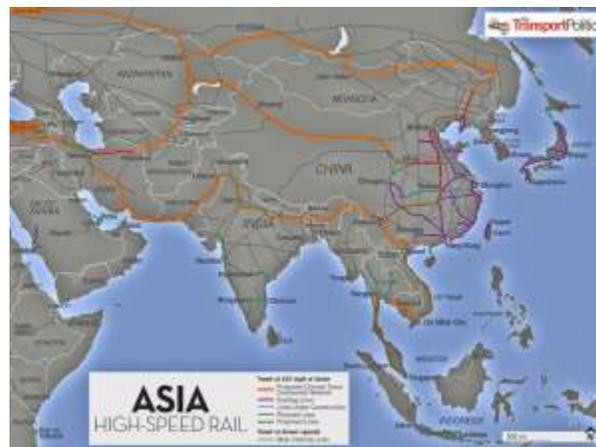
While scarcely any details are known about the TPP (the leaked text is around two million words in length and nearly impossible for a single individual to read through and totally comprehend on their own), it's already been well-established that the "preferential" legal adjustments that it mandates each party abide by are nothing more than a smokescreen for major corporations to acquire decisive political rights. One of the controversies herein is that companies could sue national governments if the respective state enacts or enforces any

“environmental, health or other regulatory objectives” that inhibit the said organization’s legally enshrined trade advantages or endanger its profits (it doesn’t even have to result in any actual decline, just the possible threat thereof).

Recalling that Vietnam is already in a FTA with the Eurasian Union and all of ASEAN has a similar arrangement with China, it’s definitely possible that the US would find a pretext within each of these existing agreements to argue that they violate the TPP and must be rewritten or outright abandoned. If they fail to rectify the problem within the given period of time, then the US’ supportive companies will take each of the ‘violating’ states to court on Washington’s behalf to squeeze a punitive settlement out of them and/or force them to make the dictated changes. US-ally Japan may also direct some of its major companies to do the same as part of a coordinated push to maximize the ‘legal’-economic pain being inflicted on the targeted state.

How It Could Be Stopped

As extreme as such a scenario may sound at the moment, it perfectly correlates to the US’ strategic objectives of pushing multipolar Great Power influences out of Southeast Asia and hoarding the region’s economic potential all to itself. Doing so also has very specific geostrategic underpinnings that will be described in the next chapter, thus adding another layer of motivation for the US to move forward in this direction. As much as Washington wants to carry out this strategy, however, it doesn’t mean that it’s guaranteed to be successful, and there’s still the very real possibility that its plan could be stopped in its tracks before it ever has the chance to come to full fruition.



The greatest obstacle to the US’ TPP-dominating dream for Southeast Asia is China’s ASEAN Silk Road, the high-speed rail line that’s expected to run from Kunming to Singapore and traverse through Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. The first two transit states have the most to gain from this proposal and are thus anticipated to remain the most ‘loyal’ in safeguarding China’s FTA with ASEAN in the event that the AEC ever tries to revise it (perhaps under a TPP-influenced Indonesian initiative). There’s also the China-Myanmar Pipeline Corridor that was launched in early 2015 to transfer Mideast oil and gas to Yunnan Province via a more thought-to-be geostrategically secure route than the Strait of Malacca (which is questionable and will be explained later in the work), with the envisioned potential of evolving into a full-scale trade corridor with time. This theoretically gives Naypyidaw a stake in

preserving the institutional FTA status quo with China, although this could (and probably will) change with Suu Kyi's increased role over the state. Cambodia is also a close Chinese ally nowadays, but it's not institutionally tied to any major infrastructure projects, thereby meaning that it's capable of being 'bought off' by the 'highest bidder' and isn't fundamentally dependable. Therefore, the most reliable partners that China has to defend its economic interests in the AEC are Laos and Thailand.

It's predicted that these two states have already made the conscientious choice among their top leaderships to economically tie themselves closer with China through their participation in the ASEAN Silk Road project. For this reason, they have vested interests in making sure that their TPP-adhering AEC counterparts don't enforce their unipolar trade terms on the rest of the bloc and/or compel the others to restrict their established economic ties with China (at the behest of the US, of course). An intra-organizational split could easily occur under these conditions, with the TPP-affiliated states facing off against the non-TPP ones as the AEC struggles to streamline its institutional economic engagements in its quest for greater coordination and integration among its members. The anticipated friction that this will produce would lead to a likely deadlock in implementing any institutionally revisionist (or expansionist, as per the TPP) policies within the AEC and prevent the US from achieving its full unipolar objectives in the theater. Consequently, due to Laos, Thailand, and to an extent, Myanmar's highly strategic economic relations with China (the first two being party to the ASEAN Silk Road and the latter being host to the China-Myanmar Pipeline Corridor) that are standing in the way of the US' full-spectrum unipolar dominance over ASEAN, all three of these states are 'valid' targets for a Hybrid War sometime in the future.

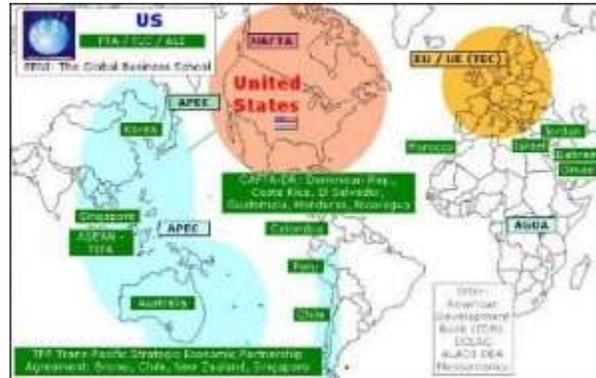
The Global Perspective

The economic proxy war going on between the unipolar and multipolar camps over ASEAN is of immense significance in terms of its global impact, but in order to truly appreciate how it relates to the rest of the world, it's essential for the reader to be reminded of certain elements of contemporary American grand strategy.

The US capitalized off of the end of the Cold War by exporting its neo-liberal economic practices all across the world, with the ultimate intent being to entrap Russia, China, and to an extent that's ever more relevant nowadays, Iran, in an institutional net of Washington-dominated control from which there'd be no escape. It's taken some time to advance, but right now the US is steadily moving forward with great speed in tying the four corners of Eurasia into its matrix of control, de-facto encircling these three Great Powers and making them disproportionately dependent on a shared center of economic-strategic gravity.

The TTIP, should it enter into force, would place the EU's external economic relations under the control the US, thereby meaning that Brussels would be powerless to enter into any FTA or similarly privileged trading accord with other countries without the US' explicit blessing. Moving along in a counterclockwise direction, the US and the GCC are working on intensifying their economic relations to the point of an eventual FTA. This isn't too important right now because of the lopsided dependence that the Gulf economies have on energy sales, but eventually they'll have to transition to a more 'normal' economy based on material trade, and at that point, their hefty financial reserves that they've been saving will go towards purchasing products from

the US and any other country that it's likely to be in a FTA with by that time. The next object of American focus is ASEAN, which has just been comprehensively described, and the final part of the supercontinental strategy is South Korea and Japan. The US already has a FTA with the former, and it's planning to use TPP to enter into the same arrangement with the latter.



Altogether, one can clearly see that most of the cardinal directions in Eurasia are covered by America's FTA plans. To reexamine the US' plans from this perspective, the EU represents West Eurasia, the GCC is Southwest Eurasia, ASEAN is Southeast Eurasia, and South Korea and Japan are Northeast Eurasia. The only missing link is South Eurasia, mostly India, which is being wooed by the US anyhow as it is, although it's still a far time away from entering into a FTA with the US. Nonetheless, if TTIP and TPP are allowed to enter into practice, then it's only a matter of time before an irresistible offer is made to New Delhi in coaxing India into this unipolar economic web. Even without India's formal incorporation into the US' global neo-liberal scheme, it's already been argued that it'll most likely remain outside of GEFTA because of concerns for its strategic sovereignty vis-à-vis neighboring rival China. In that case, Russia, China, and Iran would then share the same economic-strategic space in Central Asia, one of the last parts of the supercontinent to remain outside of the US' formal institutionalized control. This would make Central Asia the unquestionable center of multipolar gravity between these three Great Powers, but conversely, it would also make them disproportionately vulnerable to American-engineered Hybrid Wars there.

In order to avoid a three-for-one ultra-dependency on Central Asia, it's urgently imperative for the multipolar world to maintain and defend its inroads in the AEC, ergo the importance that goes into China's counter-TPP efforts via the ASEAN Silk Road and the China-Myanmar Pipeline Corridor. A retreat from these fronts and the cession of Southeast Asia to America's unipolar clutches will create a strategically dangerous situation for China, and by extension, the rest of the multipolar Great Powers, and resultantly push up the US' timetable for corralling their shared economic interests into Central Asia. China also has very clearly defined geostrategic interests in sustaining its influence in ASEAN (or at least in part of its mainland component) in order to halt the advancement of the US' 'Chinese Containment Coalition' (CCC) and maintain non-American-controlled outlets to the Indian Ocean that allow it to safely access the burgeoning African markets on which its future growth depends.