

The Geopolitical Change of the Sixteenth Century

At the turn of the sixteenth century the geopolitics of Eurasia turned literally inside out: Europe's Atlantic coast and Asia's Pacific shore became strategically pivotal, while the Mediterranean Sea and Central Asia became less important. This change affected the history of the Venetian, Ottoman, and Ming empires by forcing them to adapt their strategies to the new geopolitical reality. The objectives they pursued—trade routes, centers of resources—were suddenly less valuable because of competing routes and markets. In the end all three declined, in part because of misguided geostrategies, in part because of their growing irrelevance in Eurasia. The disconnect between their geostrategies and the underlying geopolitics led to their demise as great powers.

What Changed?

The voyages of Columbus and Vasco da Gama at the turn of the sixteenth century and the imperial expansion that followed altered the geopolitical situation faced by Eurasian powers in a dramatic and lasting way. As Adam Smith argued in 1776, perhaps somewhat excessively, "The discovery of America and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind."¹ These two events changed the pattern of trade routes and of power in the world. The discovery of the Americas bestowed an unexpected source of wealth on Atlantic Europe, while the circumnavigation of Africa connected Asia directly with western Europe. As a result, the continental (Central Asia, the Middle East, South Eastern Europe) and maritime (the Persian Gulf, the Black and Mediterranean seas) cores of Eurasia lost strategic relevance.

The first great change was that the main trade routes of the world moved from

within Eurasia to the oceans surrounding it. The 1497–98 voyage of Vasco da Gama around Africa resulted in the discovery of a new route linking Atlantic Europe (Portugal, Spain, and later the Netherlands and Great Britain) directly with Asia, while Columbus's discovery of America in 1492 established new routes from Spain (and western Europe) to the new continent. In the succeeding decades these routes became the key lifelines of a global commercial network. The historian J. H. Parry observed that "two major systems of European oceanic trade grew up in the first half of the sixteenth century: the one between Portugal and India, specifically between Lisbon and Goa; the other between Spain and America, specifically between Seville and various harbours in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico."²

The strategic importance of Columbus's discovery and of the resulting Spain-America route became tangible only when the newly discovered continent turned out to be a new source of wealth and power. Columbus's discovery altered the configuration of power more than it did that of trade routes, and although its impact was not as immediate as that of Vasco da Gama's voyage, it was perhaps more lasting because it introduced a new, initially unchallenged source of wealth for the Spanish Empire. Columbus discovered a new center of resources, and Vasco da Gama found a new route to a well-known center.

Trade between Asia and Europe dates back to Roman times, but it was only in the late Middle Ages that it became a key source of wealth and power. Because of the more advanced economic development of Asia, and China in particular, such trade was mostly unidirectional: Asian goods, mainly expensive but lightweight products such as silk and spices, were carried to the European markets, while relatively few European goods were in demand in Asia. The Asian goods reached Europe through a network of routes, crisscrossing Central Asia via the so-called Silk Road and following the coast of India to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The land and sea routes converged in the eastern Mediterranean, from where goods were carried to the various European markets.

The link between Asia and Europe began to change sometime in the fourteenth century, privileging the maritime over the land route. There were two main reasons for this change: the growing instability of Central Asia and Vasco da Gama's expedition. The land routes through Central Asia had always been subject to the political vagaries of the region and often had been interrupted or redirected by wars and the collapse of political authority. In the early 1500s the political situation along the caravan routes deteriorated: the Timurid Empire (modern Kazakhstan) collapsed, while a unified Persia under the Safavid leadership of Ismail caused tensions with the Ottoman Empire. The resulting instability hurt

commerce along the caravan routes in Asia. In fact, some historians argue that political instability in Central Asia, rather than the discovery of new maritime routes, was the main reason for the dwindling of continental trade. As Morris Rossabi writes, "Protection costs were too expensive, and plundering of cargo was a real concern. The economies to be gained from ship transport dampened still further the merchants' plans for overland trade, but a major motive for not dispatching caravans stemmed from the military and political conditions to be faced along the Asian landmass."³

The argument that the political chaos of Central Asia severed the commercial link between Asia and Europe is strengthened by the technical difficulties of sea commerce. Maritime shipping in fact did not offer clear advantages to Asian trade and by itself would not have caused the collapse of Central Asian routes. Silk and spices, in high demand in Europe, were light, easy to pack, and not perishable, making them appropriate for the long, slow caravans that crossed Central Asia. At the same time, in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries maritime commerce was infrequent, seasonal, and subject to shipwrecks. All else being equal, there was no reason to choose the maritime route, whether through the known sea lanes in the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf or, after 1498, the circumnavigation of Africa, over Central Asia. It is therefore doubtful that Vasco da Gama's voyage and the subsequent Portuguese expansion in Asia were the main reasons for the shift in trade routes between Europe and Asia.

Historians have debated ad nauseam the relative importance of Vasco da Gama's expedition and of the political turbulence in Central Asia, and there is little agreement on which one has been more influential in reshaping the commercial network of routes in Eurasia. To a certain degree this debate misses the point because it seeks a monocausal explanation of the geopolitical change of the sixteenth century. Those that argue that Central Asian land routes declined on their own because of the growing instability of the region often ignore the fact that a parallel maritime commercial system had been developing in Asia since the twelfth century. At that time, in part because of the Mongol invasions, the center of economic production in China had shifted toward the coastal areas. An intricate network of maritime trade developed linking East Asia with the Indian Ocean through the Malacca Strait and linking India with the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. According to G. V. Scammell,

The Portuguese, on their arrival in Asia, had encountered an ancient and complex commercial network reaching by land and sea from Europe itself to China. It was far larger, and probably handled traffic of far greater value than anything known in the

West. Because of the constraints of distance and seasonal wind changes it was conducted through entrepôts such as Aden, Hormuz and Melaka. It tapped alike luxurious products of China, the gold and ivory of East Africa, the cotton textiles of India and the spices of Indonesia. What little that was needed from Europe could be received via the Middle East, whilst Arabia supplied horses and Iran silk and precious metals.⁴

This maritime route competed with the caravan routes even before the early-sixteenth-century political instability in Central Asia.

Moreover, the competition between Central Asian land routes and East Asian coastal sea lanes ended in the eastern Mediterranean, where the two converged. The caravans reached it through Central Asia and the Black Sea region, the sea shipping through the Persian Gulf (and Syria and Palestine) and the Red Sea (and Egypt). Ultimately, no matter how the goods reached it, the Mediterranean was the funnel to Europe for almost all the Asian trade. The importance of the Mediterranean was not affected by the fluctuations in trade between Central Asia and the maritime route. It did not matter, therefore, whether the Central Asian caravan routes were being eclipsed by Asian coastal shipping. These two routes competed with each other, and not with the Mediterranean.

The importance of Vasco da Gama's voyage was that it directly affected the Mediterranean. His discovery of the Cape of Good Hope route and the subsequent Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean and East Asia opened a new terminus to the Asian trade: Atlantic Europe. Specifically, the Portuguese empire, established in the first decades of the sixteenth century, linked western Europe to Asia through a string of bases (from East Africa to Macao via Goa and Malacca) that not only created a route competing with the Mediterranean but also directly reached the source of that trade. It diverted the Asian maritime trade away from the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean was no longer the only route to Europe from Asia.⁵

Vasco da Gama's voyage alone was not sufficient to change the trade routes. Similarly, Columbus did not single-handedly give a source of wealth to Spain. The years 1492 and 1497 were only the beginning of a long trend that resulted in what is called the "Vasco da Gama age" (in Asia), the "Atlantic hegemony," or even more broadly, the "Commercial Revolution" or the "Age of Discoveries."⁶ The Portuguese expansion in the Indian Ocean, followed by the Spanish and Dutch onslaught, took decades to establish a western European foothold in Asia. And it was probably only in the late 1500s and early 1600s, a century after Vasco da Gama, that the ocean route linking Asia with Atlantic Europe replaced the Medi-

terrestrial as the principal commercial connection between these two centers of wealth.

The linking of Atlantic Europe with Asia and America marks the birth of long-distance maritime (or, more precisely, oceanic) trade.⁷ Sea routes were more reliable than land ones, especially after sixteenth-century improvements in seamanship and shipbuilding allowed for regular, relatively safe trips. Furthermore, sea lanes connected regions that previously had been separated. For instance, as early as the late sixteenth century, under the auspices of the Spanish Empire, a vibrant trade developed linking East Asia with Mexico.⁸ This was the beginning of a global economy.

The discovery, development, and management of new oceanic routes allowed the creation of a commercial network that was larger than the one based on land routes (and internal maritime routes, such as the Mediterranean).⁹ It is true that like land routes, sea lanes had to be maintained by a power to ensure free and safe passage to trade, but it was cheaper to maintain a maritime commercial network of ports than to impose imperial control over vast land areas. The Portuguese, for instance, preserved their sixteenth-century Asian empire from East Africa to Macao with only ten thousand troops. As Devin M. Ma comments,

The nature of the open sea meant that the survival of long-distance trade no longer depended solely on the shifting political cycles of giant land-based empires. So long as traders had enough power to fend off seaborne piracy, they could bypass intermediaries and trade directly with destination port cities through all-sea routes. . . . The cost of keeping sea routes open and safe for lucrative long-distance trade—the suppression of seaborne piracy and the securing of strongholds at strategic trading ports—was much lower than that for controlling overland routes, which normally required military conquest and administration of alien territories.¹⁰

Finally, da Gama's voyage changed not only the configuration of trade routes, the amount of trade, and the medium of commerce but also the actors involved. The direct link between western Europe and Asia (and America) transferred the seat of power in Europe westward and altered the constellation of power in Asia. It bestowed strategic importance to those who had access to oceanic routes, decreasing the commercial and political value of the land routes in Central Asia. To use Nicholas Spykman's terms, Eurasia's Rimland became more important than the Heartland. As William McNeill wrote, "European ships had in effect turned Eurasia inside out. The sea frontier had superseded the steppe frontier as the critical meeting point with strangers, and the autonomy of Asian states and peoples began to crumble—exposed, as they were, to European armies and navies

equipped with ever more formidable weapons and managed by increasingly effective national governments.”¹¹

This change affected the strategic calculations of the established powers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the Mediterranean Sea, Genoa, Venice, and the Ottomans suddenly had to face a radically different situation: they became commercially expendable and had to compete with new actors for control over European trade, which until then they had considered to be under their quasi-monopolistic control.¹²

In Asia the era of Vasco da Gama brought perhaps even greater geopolitical changes than in Europe. Not only did it lead to a realignment in favor of the coastal regions of South and East Asia but it introduced new powers into Asia. The European powers, led by Portugal, expanded and controlled maritime Asia, forcing the local actors to accept their hegemony. This was a geopolitical upheaval of enormous consequences that, in different form and with different actors, continues to characterize Eurasia. As Scammell observes, the “arrival of da Gama was to mark the end—although this was hardly apparent at the time—of Europe’s subjection to those incursions from the East which it had endured since Antiquity. It likewise heralded the beginnings of western hegemony in Asia.” Moreover, Asia became a theater of European conflicts. “The East was sucked into European rivalries, became central to European grand strategies, and was often the victim of forces originally deployed by one western power against another.”¹³ It was a new geopolitical situation that, as we shall see, forced Asian (e.g., Ming China) and European (e.g., Venice) powers to reconsider their entrenched strategies.

Thus, the geopolitical change of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was momentous. The geopolitical reality of the years 1000–1500 had been characterized by the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Central Asia serving as intermediaries between Europe and Asia, with Eurasia’s seat of power at its geographic center. At the turn of the sixteenth century the connection between Europe and Asia, and with it the seat of power, moved to the oceans surrounding the Eurasian landmass.¹⁴

Why Was There a Change?

Geopolitical shifts are multicausal. Because of their very long time frame, such changes are affected by multiple causes that work at different moments in history and on different levels. Geopolitical changes are, as John Lewis Gaddis called them, tectonic shifts resulting from several forces, none of which alone could, or had the intention to, change the geopolitics.¹⁵ First and foremost this means that

there was no grand strategic plan on the part of a king or a state to alter the geopolitical situation. No state or individual can plan and implement a change in geopolitics. These are processes that are too complex and large to be managed by one state. And they are often the unexpected result of small decisions. For example, Portugal began the exploration of West Africa and later of a new route to Asia more out of curiosity than out of a desire to change the geopolitical situation. Even if, as some historians have argued, Portugal wanted to find an alternate route to Asia in order to avoid Ottoman-controlled territories, it did not foresee the geopolitical consequences of the discovery of the Cape of Good Hope. The Spanish discovery of America was even more uncontrollable and unforeseeable. Columbus and the Spanish royals supporting him wanted to find another route to Asia and instead found a new continent, which brought Spain greater wealth and strategic weight than a direct link to Asia would have brought. Therefore, although they are easier to individuate as causes of geopolitical changes, the decisions and actions of individual statesmen and states have an effect on geopolitics that is rarely calculated and willed.

Moreover, any single action is not enough to alter geopolitics. Columbus's discovery or Vasco da Gama's voyage had to be followed by decades of further exploration, conquest, and management and defense of the newly acquired territories. Their individual actions started a trend that only after a considerable period of time, several decades at least, resulted in a geopolitical change. The discoveries of the late 1400s resulted in a geopolitical change only in the late 1500s. During the course of that century the geopolitical change—the switch from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, from Central Asia to the Indian and Pacific oceans—was only one among many possible outcomes of the original discoveries. At any given point Portugal and Spain could have decided not to pursue their imperial expansion in the Atlantic and in Asia, and the geopolitical change initiated by Vasco da Gama and Columbus would not have occurred.¹⁶

The difficulty of explaining this geopolitical change has led many historians and social scientists to seek more abstract causes based on the premise that large processes need large forces. The question also becomes broader. It is no longer Why Vasco da Gama, not Cheng Ho? but Why Europe, not Asia? Why Portugal, not China?

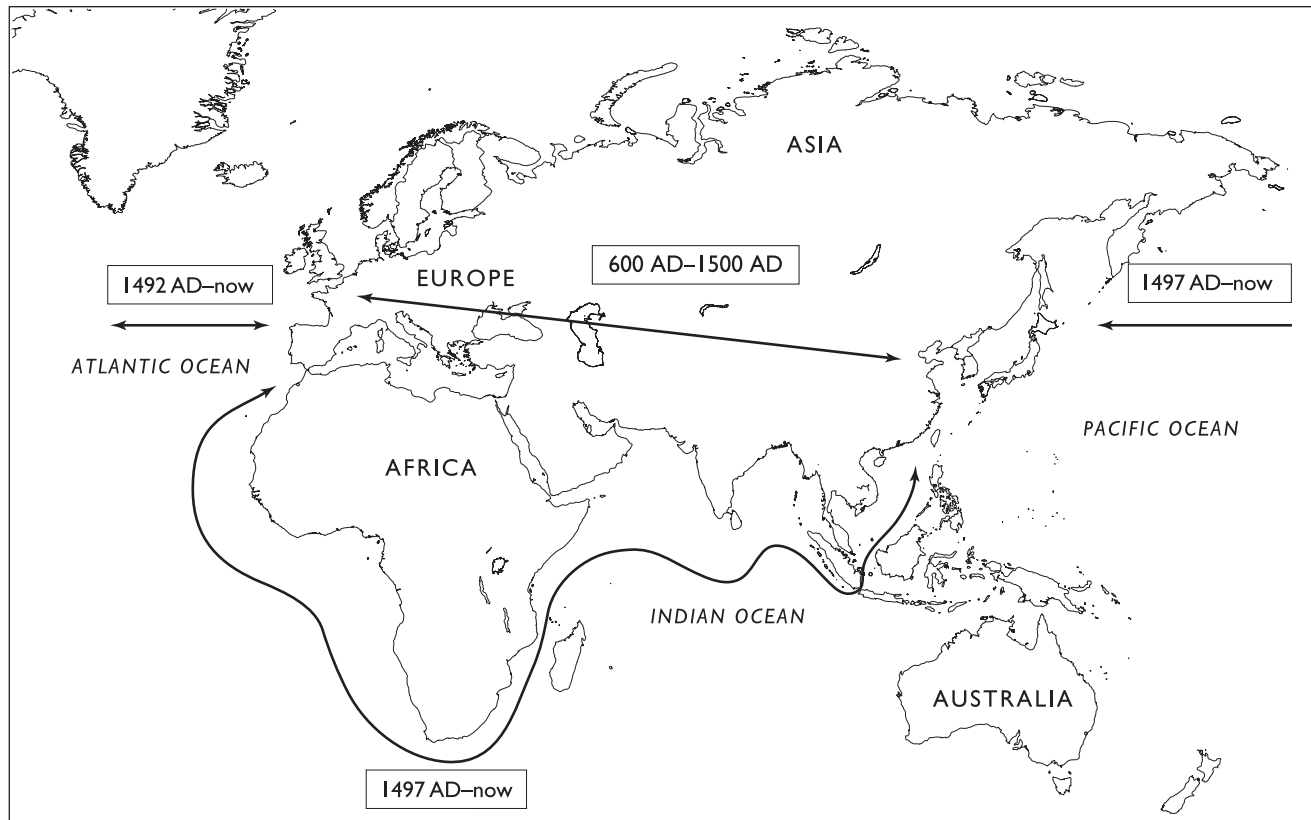
The answers are various and controversial.¹⁷ Here I will limit myself to two broad categories of explanations: the geographic and the technological. The geographic explanation is straightforward: Europe, in particular western Europe, had geological features that made it easier to develop a vibrant economy based on commerce, to exchange ideas and technological innovations, and to have a more

productive agriculture and industry. I have examined the gist of such explanations in previous chapters. Here I want to point out only the most interesting explanation of this category, which argues that Europe had an advantage over other continents, especially Asia, because it was subject to fewer environmental disasters. Disasters are defined as “abrupt, major, negative shocks which reduce the aggregate assets or income of a given population.” The growth differential between western Europe and Asia and the consequent geopolitical change can be explained through a simple analysis of such negative shocks. Europe grew faster and became a greater power than Asian because “Europe is and was a safer piece of real estate than Asia.”¹⁸

Geographic explanations have several limitations. As previously noted, they border on determinism. Moreover, geography does not explain variation in history. Specifically, a purely geographic explanation does not explain why Atlantic Europe was weaker than the Mediterranean powers and, arguably, than China until the sixteenth century.¹⁹ In other words, these explanations focus on the relative decline of Asia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the rise of western Europe and do not account for the remarkable success of China and Asia in general before the Vasco da Gama era.²⁰

The second explanation of the geopolitical change in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has to do with technology. Atlantic Europe had an advantage over the Mediterranean and Asian powers because of its more advanced, mostly military technology.²¹ And in the moment of the encounter between Europe and Asia (and between Europe and America), the Europeans had simply better technology, from artillery to tactics and military organization.²²

European superiority was particularly evident in naval technology. This superiority allowed Portugal and the other Atlantic powers to project power farther and with smaller expenditure of manpower than, for instance, China, which had to devote its resources to controlling its continental borders. As McNeill points out, “Supremacy at sea gave a vastly enlarged scope to European warlikeness after 1500” because it allowed Europeans to reach and control from a distance other parts of the world.²³ Moreover, because of their naval superiority European powers could avoid costly continental wars that would have been necessary to control the vast territories in Asia. On land European technological superiority was offset by a marked imbalance in manpower in favor of Asian states.²⁴ Europeans, the Portuguese in particular, placed their bases where there was less power to threaten them or where they could leverage local divisions to maintain their control over the city or port. They rarely expanded past these bases, for instance, inside China or in the Middle East, where there were powerful empires that would have required an



Map 1. The geopolitical change of the sixteenth century: old and new routes

enormous expenditure of military strength and manpower to battle. As a result, “colonial wars were . . . ‘small wars.’”²⁵ It was only in the eighteenth century that Europeans conquered large parts of continental Asia.²⁶

The main challenge to European powers in Asia was other European states in search of wealth. When European empires began to compete for the control of Asian sea lanes, military expenditures rose. It was more expensive for the Dutch to dislodge the Portuguese from Asia in the seventeenth century than it had been for the Portuguese to conquer key strongholds in the region a century earlier.²⁷

European superiority in naval technology can be summed up by three developments: the introduction of the compass, improvements to maps, and improvements to ships. The introduction of the compass, combined with increasingly more precise ways of fixing the latitude and longitude of ships, allowed pilots to navigate in unknown waters and far from coastal landmarks. Vasco da Gama’s voyage around Africa, for instance, was remarkable because it followed the prevailing wind patterns far away from the African coast in the Atlantic and close to the Brazilian shores. Chinese and other Asian ships (as well as, to a smaller degree, Ottoman and Venetian ships) were unable to perform such feats of navigation.²⁸

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries maps were becoming more detailed and reflective of reality. The first maps, printed in Europe in the 1470s, had been a sign of authority and a source of power.²⁹ As Geoffrey Parker has observed, “Maps became for the first time a standard instrument of government—a vital tool both for mobilizing the state’s resources at home and for projecting its power abroad.” And a “government that lacked the cartographic tools required to organize its resources or to project its power, and instead resorted to outdated general atlases for strategic planning, was no longer a convincing imperial power.”³⁰

Finally, perhaps the most visible example of European naval superiority was in shipbuilding, specifically in sturdier and oceanworthy vessels. Beginning in the fifteenth century the Portuguese and in general all Atlantic navies were much more powerful than those of the Mediterranean and Asian powers. One possible explanation is geographic: the geographic environment in which ships had to function forced shipbuilders to adapt quickly. The Mediterranean Sea and, to a degree, the Indian Ocean required lighter ships capable of traveling through shallow and often windless waters. The preferred and most convenient way of sailing was by following the coast and hopping from port to port. For instance, in the Mediterranean the galley was the main type of ship: its large crew served as oarsmen to maneuver the ship in coastal waters and as soldiers in naval skirmishes.³¹ While the galley’s construction made it easy to pilot in coastal waters and windless seas, it also required frequent stops to replenish food and water supplies.

The design of the Atlantic ship was based on the need to travel greater distances without the possibility of anchoring in a safe harbor. This required not only a sturdier vessel but also a smaller crew, which in turn meant that the ship could be out of port for longer periods of time, not needing large quantities of food and water. The resulting ship was heavier (and thus capable of carrying greater artillery firepower) and sail rigged (and thus faster and able to travel greater distances). The superiority of Atlantic shipbuilding became evident once guns were put aboard ships: the Mediterranean galleys and the Asian ships were too light to be able to withstand the weight and recoil of the guns. The 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada by the English navy was the defeat of the Mediterranean (and generally speaking of the non-Atlantic) ship and naval tactics.

Thus, in the sixteenth century the Eurasian Rimland—Atlantic Europe and East Asia—became strategically more important than the Heartland—Central Asia and the Mediterranean Sea. A combination of factors, from geography to technology and the actions of a few bold explorers, contributed to this geopolitical change. This was the geopolitical situation to which Venice, the Ottoman Empire, and Ming China had to respond.