

Reshaping Asia: Geopolitical Dynamics in the Wake of COVID-19

Most. Rukshana Parvin

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi-6205, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Geopolitics, a cornerstone of contemporary global dynamics, underpins state security policies rooted in geographical realities. The complex interplay of national interests and territorial boundaries frequently gives rise to conflicts across the globe. Amidst this landscape, the ascendancy of more powerful nations asserting dominance over weaker counterparts underscores the paramount importance of geopolitics on the world stage. However, the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), instigated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has induced a seismic shift in the global order. This transformative event has not only ushered in a new world paradigm but has also precipitated a profound transformation in the realm of geopolitics. The post-Covid era has witnessed an upheaval in the geopolitical landscape, presenting an intriguing new chapter in the international narrative. Nowhere is this transformation more evident than in Asia, a region characterized by diverse cultures, histories, and strategic interests. The pivotal player in this geopolitical metamorphosis is China, whose assertive rise has redefined the contours of power dynamics within and beyond the continent. Under the above circumstances, this paper attempts to examine the motivations underpinning China's recalibration of regional power dynamics. Through content analysis and discourse examination, the study aims to decipher the strategic narratives and policy frameworks that drive China's assertive stance. This analytical approach is complemented by comparative analyses of other significant Asian players, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the shifting geopolitical chessboard. Methodologically, this study adopts a comprehensive approach that combines qualitative analysis with empirical data. The study's findings not only shed light on the transformative changes in the region but also pave the way for the formulation of constructive recommendations. By employing a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning, the research proposes pragmatic strategies for Asian nations to navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape while safeguarding their national interests. Emphasizing the importance of responsible competition and cooperative diplomacy, these recommendations aspire to contribute to a stable and equitable post-Covid Asian geopolitical order.

1. Introduction

Geopolitics is an momentous term. It is something of significance that can change the map of a region or a continent or sometimes the world. In the current world system, the importance of geopolitics is increasing more than politics. Geopolitics is an approach to foreign policy studies to understand, explain, and predict international political behavior through geographic variability. In recent times, the geopolitics of Asia has become the focus of renewed interest among the world's superpowers. The superpowers have started to compete for dominance in geopolitical interests and to build strategic relationships with various Asian countries to protect national interests. China, the nuclear power of Asia, has been working for a long time to implement various plans and plans to control and dominate the geopolitics of Asia. China has emerged as a major player in post-Covid Asian geopolitics and China's interest in Asian geopolitics continues to grow, with China vying for the champion trophy. We observed China's vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic. China has donated millions of doses of Covid-19 vaccine to Asian countries to implement plans to build a vaccine platform in Asia (New York Times, 2021). Post-

Covid, almost all Asian countries are economically weaker but China has become economically stronger. Using its economic strength, China has been a partner in the development progress of the countries through economic assistance and investment in almost all Asian countries and has been able to build very warm relations with almost all countries (NB News Bangla 24, 2021).

On the other hand, the superpower America has focused on forming various economic frameworks and quads to counter the growing economic development and military dominance of their current main rival, China. In any case, China is now an important factor in Asian geo-politics, because of China's geo-politics Asian geo-politics is changing, Asia is being fully reshaping. The main aim of this study is to explain and analyze the restructuring of Asia in geopolitical dynamics with a focus on the restructuring of China in the context of Covid-19. Another important aim and objective of this study is to propose realistic strategies on how Asian countries can protect their national interests by emphasizing the importance of responsible competition and cooperative diplomacy that seeks to make a stable and equitable contribution to the post-Covid Asian geopolitical order.

2. Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to explain and analyze the reconstruction of Asia in geopolitical dynamics with a focus on China's reconstruction in the context of Covid-19. A more important aim and objective of this study is to propose pragmatic strategies for navigating the evolving geopolitical landscape on how Asian countries can protect their national interests, emphasizing the importance of responsible competition and cooperative diplomacy which seeks to make a significant and equitable contribution to the post-covid Asian geo-political order. It also has some specific aims and objectives which are as follows:

- a. To examine the motivations underlying China's reorientation in regional power dynamics;
- b. Deciphering the strategic narrative and policy frameworks that drive China's assertiveness;
- c. A comparative analysis of other important Asian players which allows a nuanced understanding of the shifting geopolitical chessboard;
- d. To explain the multifaceted changes that have emerged in Asian geopolitics in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- e. To provide deeper insights into the evolving strategic postures, diplomatic strategies and regional engagements of major Asian countries post-Covid.

3. Study Method

Methodologically, this study adopts a comprehensive approach that combines qualitative analysis with empirical data. Here, through content analysis and discourse examination, the study aims to decipher the strategic narratives and policy frameworks that drive China's assertiveness. Through an extensive review of scholarly literature, policy documents and media sources, the study attempts to explain the multifaceted changes that have emerged in Asian geopolitics in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the research integrates case studies of major Asian countries to provide deeper insights into their evolving strategic postures, diplomatic strategies and regional preoccupations.

4. Definition of Keywords

4.1. Reshape

Reshape means to shape something again or differently. It is a process in which an organization, industry, system, etc. is made to start operating differently. When we change the shape of something we completely change or transform it (BRITISH DICTIONARY). We can reshape a lump of clay, just as we can reshape our plans for our lives. A government can reshape the country's energy plan to include more environmentally friendly measures. A school committee can reshape the high school curriculum by adding higher-level science classes. A state can use its geo-political strategy to reshape its map and state.

4.2. Asia

Asia is the world's largest and most populous continent. The Greek word Asia has been Latinized into English as Asia. Later the name was adopted in Bengali along with other

Indian languages. This continent covers 8.6% of the Earth's surface and 29.4% of its land area. More than 60% of the world's people live in this continent. The eastern and northern hemispheres of Asia are traditionally sometimes referred to as belonging to Africa-Eurasia. The western part of the region was included in Europe long ago. Once Asia and Europe together were called Eurasia. Europe's borders are mainly defined along the Ural Mountains and the Ural River, the Greater Caucasus Range. Asia is separated from Europe by the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles and the Aegean Sea to the west. Separated from North America by the Bering Strait to the northeast. On the other hand, it is separated from Africa by the Suez Canal between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.

The continent of Asia is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean to the east, the Indian Ocean to the south and the Northern Ocean to the north. The other seas near it are - South Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, East China Sea, Yellow Sea. Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsk and Bering Sea and the Sumerian Sea to the north. The total geographical area of Asia is 4,45,26,316 sq km and the continent has 49 sovereign countries (Asia Obhidhan).

4.3. Geopolitics

Geopolitics is the English equivalent of Geopolitics. It comes from two Greek words Geo and Politikos. Geo means land and Politikos means state or politics. Geopolitics relates geography and politics. Basically, geopolitics is determined by the combination of political power and geographical elements or locations. According to N.J. Spykeman, "Geopolitics is the security policy of a state based on geographical realities" (Spykman, 1938, 28-50). So geopolitics is the analysis of the influence of geographic power on international relations.

The term geopolitics was originally coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén in the early 20th century and its use spread throughout Europe between the First and Second World Wars (1918–1939). Later it was used worldwide. In contemporary discourse, geopolitics is widely used as an additional synonym for international politics (Björk & Lundén, 2021, 27). Geopolitical theorists have emphasized foreign policy considerations such as the acquisition of natural borders, access to important sea lanes and control of strategically important land areas.

4.4. Dynamic

If a person, place, thing, state or nation is energetic and active, then it's dynamic. When things are dynamic, there's a lot going on (Vocabulary.com). Static change is one-dimensional change—simple movement from point X to point Y. An example of this is the transfer of an asset from one location to another. Dynamic change is multidimensional change that is predictable on a measurable scale. What has happened in the case of China is a multi-dimensional change, including economic, military, geo-political and due to this multi-dimensional change of China, China has been reshaped and dominates Asia, which has reshaped the whole of Asia.

4.5. Covid-19

Coronavirus disease 2019 or Covid-19 is an infectious disease in humans caused by a type of virus called coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome (WHO). The disease was first identified in China in December 2019. Most people infected with Covid-19 are only mildly ill and recover without special treatment. How sick a person gets depends on which variant of Covid-19 they are infected with. Covid-19 can spread between people through tiny droplets of liquid when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks or breathes loudly. A person can become infected by inhaling the virus from a person infected with Covid-19 if he or she is close to them or by touching something they have touched by touching their eyes, nose, or mouth.

5. Reshaping Asia in Geopolitical Dynamics in the Wake of Covid-19

The most remarkable aspect of the last century has been China's astonishing economic development. After the global financial crisis of 2008, China is the closest rival of the United States and is a major challenge for the United States. After 2030, China will become a single large economy, which will

make China a stronger superpower. In the international arena, China's growing energy amassing is bringing to the fore the competition between great powers, which is reshaping Asia (Lee, 2020).

China has long called for reform of the global system. To this end it is increasing its cultural, economic, military and diplomatic capabilities. In geostrategic competition, President Xi Jinping's announcement of the global martial plan 'One Belt One Road' in 2013 has strengthened China's position (Lee, 2020). The ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 initially brought disaster but China later saw it as a strategic opportunity. China came forward to help the affected countries in handling the corona virus and gave special importance to the countries associated with the One Belt One Road. This strategic situation has also greatly affected the geopolitics of Asia. America's failure to deal with the corona crisis at home and abroad has made China more aggressive, which has long-term implications for American leadership (Lee, 2020).

The United States is the major power in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States maintains balance of power and stability in the region by coordinating with allied nations and regional security structures and institutions. The distribution of power in international relations depends on domestic economic and military capabilities and global alliances. While the US economy has been damaged by the corona virus pandemic, China has developed the ability to control the global financial system (BBC NEWS Bangla, 2020).

China's export market and domestic services sector, which account for 60% of total GDP, were somewhat stagnant early on in the Covid-19 outbreak. China's economic growth has slowed due to 'Zero Covid' policy. China's economy contracted sharply in the second quarter of 2020 due to the negative impact on businesses and consumers caused by the lockdown imposed to prevent the spread of the corona virus. In the three months from April to the end of June, the country's gross domestic product or GDP decreased by 2.6 percent from the previous quarter. At the time, the country's major cities, including Shanghai, China's main economic hub, were under complete or partial lockdown, which was issued due to the country's 'Zero Covid' policy. 90% of global transactions are in dollars. US shares in global stock markets have increased since the 2008-09 financial crisis (Niquet, 2020). Despite the impact of the corona virus on Asian geopolitics, this reality cannot be avoided.

China's economic growth slowed down during the Covid period but China's economic recovery after overcoming the shock of Covid. After the lifting of various restrictions, the economic activities of the country picked up pace and the reality is that the corona virus has brought China's economy back on track. China's economy was crippled because of Corona and because of that Corona, China's export record increased because China has been able to handle the shock quickly. Due to the lockdown due to Corona and the virtual stoppage of exports abroad, China's economy has also suffered a severe blow but with the help of that corona, China has managed again. They are supplying medical equipment and electronic items including disposable PPE abroad because as a result of Corona, the demand for these things has increased manifold in all countries. China's exports rose by more than 21 percent in November 2020, the most in the previous three years, as the coronavirus has brought new opportunities to the Chinese economy. In all, imports increased by 4.5% (percent), foreign trade increased by 13.6% (percent). Trade surplus is \$7,540 crore (AP Roytars, 2020). Not since 1981 have such gains been made.

In fact, China was able to quickly deal with the corona virus and keep it under control but other countries in the world did not. While the rest of the world was dealing with the corona virus, China was doing a booming business because the demand for masks, PPE, medical equipment and medicine increased manifold in all countries and China supplied all those things. In most countries of the world, people were confined to their homes so the demand for electronics increased greatly, resulting in the boom of Chinese companies and these companies received a lot of money from the government as loans after the corona which made it easier for them to turn around (AP Roytars, 2020).

Barring the disaster of the Corona crisis, China has experienced massive economic growth over the past forty one years, becoming known as the mega factory of the world. China's economic progress is called the 'miracle economy' (BBC NEWS Bangla, 2022).

By challenging the monopoly of the United States for almost one and a half hundred years, China finally accepted the recognition of superiority. It's not about military power, it's about economics. According to the latest survey report of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China is now the

world's number one economic powerhouse (AP Roytars,2020). This transition of China as an economic super power has created a stir around the world. Today, China is a model of prosperity and development in front of backward countries.

A recent IMF survey analyzed China's economy and said that the United States had been the world's best economy since 1872. After all this time, China has taken the top spot in raw power and left the United States in the second position. The agency's survey also showed that India has emerged as the third largest economic power after China and the US. It is followed by Japan, Germany, Russia, Brazil, France and Indonesia. China's economic boom has not stopped rather continues to grow, as China is the world's largest exporter. During the last global economic recession, China, a country with a strong economy, saved many countries of the world, including the European Union, from the collapse of large economies (AP Roytars, 2020).

China is now the most powerful country not only in Asia but also in the whole world which inspires China to conquer the world so it is natural that China will play with Asia and become the biggest player in Asia. China's influence and prestige in Asia is reshaping Asia, there have been drastic changes in Asian geopolitics. It is true that China's influence in Asia is growing but there is a crisis of trust in the region. According to a Pew Research survey in February, trust in America is highest in Asia where China ranks below Japan, one of the region's powers. China is trying to create a great power image in Asia by cooperating in the fight against the corona virus and is running a strong media campaign against America and democracy. This issue is shaping China's image in many regions – especially Italy, Spain, Serbia, Iran received positive publicity. It is having an impact on free democratic societies but to what extent it cannot be said yet (Niquet, 2020).

Considering the impact of Corona on the international relations of Asia alone, it can be seen that there have been several changes in the geopolitics of China and Asia and there may be several more changes. These changes are reshaping Asia, it seems like a new age of Asia. These are briefly discussed below:

5.1. Increasing Strategic Competition

Although the regional structure of Asia has not changed radically due to the impact of Corona, the relationship between the two superpowers, China and the United States has changed. Meanwhile, the US military has been blamed for spreading the virus in Wuhan and has waged a campaign against American democratic institutions, a move aimed at establishing China's sole hegemony in Asia. The US administration took a tougher stance against China's campaign, resulting in an escalation of the trade war between China and the US which spans everything from 5G to medical devices to pharmaceuticals (Pal, 2021,12-15).

ASEAN: Chinese influence growing



Growing Chinese influence on Asian map; Image Source: Mapsofworld.com

It cannot be said whether other Asian countries have or will align with US efforts against China in the strategic rivalry between the great powers. While Japan is opposed to China's establishment of a single hegemony in Asia, it is skeptical of the United States' unilateral trade ban. The U.S. has banned Chinese firms from entering the 5G market as well as those that supply other components to these firms. It has affected many of America's allies. The unilateral withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has increased mistrust among allies regarding US policy in Asia (Pal, 2021, 12-15).

Indonesia, Vietnam consider deepening military and economic ties with Washington to counter Beijing's establishment of authority in the South China Sea. According to the security experts of the Southeast Asian countries, the increasing Sino-US strategic competition before Corona is one of the security risks in the region. Despite the increased competition after Corona, the countries of the region have maintained a strategic balance. If the balance is disturbed, it will create opportunities for China to increase its influence which will be a cause of concern for the United States and its allies (Parameswaran, 2020).

5.2 Creation of Multilateral Institutions

There is no alternative to creating multilateral institutions to deal with serious crises which on the one hand solves the crisis and on the other hand open doors to possibilities. Remember, a crisis is not always just a crisis but sometimes an opportunity. Any crisis always opens the door to possibilities. In 2004, on the eve of the tsunami, the United States, Japan, India and Australia formed a quartet with four countries. The six-party dialogue was established in 2003 after the Korean missile crisis. The Shanghai Initiative was taken after the financial crisis of 1997-1998 but in the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, neither China nor the United States has taken steps to establish a pan-Pacific regional structure and cooperation to prevent the corona epidemic. Both China and the United States are members of the existing institutions in the region and they could have established a common platform for mutual cooperation to prevent the corona virus but unfortunately that did not happen (Huang, 2020).

In this case, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) could have been strengthened but it was not done, why not? China's strategic competition, so that China can monopolize. A reserve of strategic medical equipment could have been made like the petroleum reserve after the 1973 oil crisis. Bilateral relations would have been strengthened in dealing with disasters.

5.3 Authority of Regional Power

Regional powers like China, Russia, Iran have become stronger. Despite China's material and ideological obstacles, China has taken advantage of the failure of US and liberal institutions to deal with the Corona crisis. China has become more authoritarian; Especially in the South China Sea but just as the US peacefully ousted Britain from global leadership in the past century, the same may not be possible for China. Harvard scholar Graham Allison warns of an impending Sino-US conflict in his book 'Destined for War' (Wu, 2018, 83-85).

Revisionist powers have strengthened their positions, such as China in Asia, Russia in Central and Eastern Europe- a clear example of this is Russia's attack on Ukraine, and Iran in the Persian Gulf. Brookings Institute Director of International Order and Strategy Thomas J. Wright, in his book *All Measures Short of War*, pointed out long ago that revisionist forces would move to establish regional hegemony by amassing power and weakening the international system and this has indeed happened (Wright, 2017, 72-74).

The post-Cold War global power structure has shifted from unecentric to polycentric and complex competitive global relations are devolving power beyond sovereign states. Non-state groups, especially regional organizations, financial organizations, armed organizations are becoming more and more powerful. The post-corona world has become more chaotic. Richard Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, referred to it as the 'New World Disarray' (Haas, 2018, 257).

5.4 Increasing Geo-Political Influence of Chinese Maps

Recently, the influence of Chinese maps has increased but this is not new to China. Last August 28, 2023, China officially updated its territory map. China claims India's Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin region as its territory in this version of the map. However, at the recently concluded BRICS summit in South Africa, Indian officials said that China and India have agreed to reduce border tensions (Ajker Potrika, 2023).



China claims India's Arunachal Pradesh as its own territory. Photo: Collected

The map published on August 28 claims that Arunachal Pradesh is China's southern Tibet. China has also claimed that Aksai Chin was part of its territory during the Sino-Indian War in 1962. Taiwan and the disputed South China Sea are also included in Chinese territory in the new map. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei also claim ownership of the South China Sea area. Geopolitical tensions in the region over control of this sea are quite old (Ajker Potrika, 2023).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping held a meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS summit, there Prime Minister Modi stressed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the border areas and maintaining the Line of Actual Control (LAC) for normalization of India-China relations. In this regard, the two leaders, Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping agreed to direct their respective officials to intensify their efforts. (Ajker Potrika, 2023).

China's surveying, mapping and geographic information play an important role in helping the country develop, meet the needs of all walks of life and manage natural resources.

China's next step will be to accelerate the application of geographic data such as digital maps, navigation and positioning in the development of the digital economy. By digital economy China will do location-based services, precision agriculture, platform economy and artificial intelligence-enabled vehicle operation (Ajker Potrika, 2023).

China has border disputes with all its neighboring countries. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has stepped up efforts to strengthen regional control. China has recently formally laid claim to parts of Arunachal Pradesh, which China says are part of Greater Tibet.

April 2023, China 'renamed' 11 Indian-controlled parts. These include mountain peaks, rivers and residential areas. Earlier in 2017 and 2021, China's Ministry of Home Affairs also changed the names of several other Indian-controlled areas (Prothom Alo, 2023).

Regarding China's move, Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "Inclusion of Arunachal Pradesh in India's map is part of China's hegemonic efforts and this is not the first such attempt by China." India has already condemned any such attempt. Regarding Arunachal Pradesh, India has also said that Arunachal Pradesh belongs to India and imposition of such an invented name will not change the reality at all (Prothom Alo, 2023).

However, China monopolizes Arunachal as part of their territory but India's claim is also fair, they say the province was theirs, is theirs and will remain theirs. Manish Tiwari, Congress Lok Sabha member and member of the newly formed working committee, claimed on August 29, 2023 that history is a witness, the border problem is caused by China's aggressive attitude, they have illegally occupied Indian land (Prothom Alo, 2023).

However, China's release of this map is quite significant in terms of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In this case, China could have shown a little more responsibility and implemented a little cooperative diplomacy. There will be competition but it is better if it is responsible rather than strategic. Successful diplomacy is diplomacy that is cooperative, adversarial diplomacy is failed diplomacy, that preaches war not peace. We definitely want peace and not war, with that goal and purpose, the countries of the world should move forward.

6. Findings and Discussion

The above study has several fascinating findings on Asia's reshaping of geopolitical dynamics in the context of Covid-19. The findings are mentioned below:

- i. China took Covid-19 as a strategy and through vaccine diplomacy China has been able to build a vaccine platform which plays an important role in China's influence in Asian geopolitics.
- ii. As China has become economically stronger post-Covid-19, China has developed good relations with various Asian countries through economic aid and investment which has put China ahead of all in terms of dominance in Asia.
- iii. America's failure to deal with the corona crisis inside and outside the country makes China more aggressive, as a result of which China plays a clever game in the arena of Asia and the world.
- iv. China has gained the ability to control the global economic system while America is economically devastated by the Covid situation which has made China dominate in Asia.
- v. China is now the largest exporter, the largest economy and the most powerful state which encourage China to play in Asia.
- vi. Strategic competition between China and the United States has increased, thereby affecting various Asian countries to a greater or lesser extent which is reshaping Asia.
- vii. China has not used multilateral institutions to solve the corona crisis due to strategic reasons of monopolizing Asia.
- viii. Asia's geopolitical reshaping is also being driven by China's rise to hegemony in Asia.
- ix. Asia's geopolitics is being remade due to China's occupation of various Indian territories such as Arunachal and Aksai China and non-compliance with the Line of Actual Control.
- x. The overblown trade war and trade sanctions between China and the United States have affected most of the Asian allies of both countries, allowing China to become a superpower that has aggressed China and has ramifications not only in Asia but the entire world.

In the light of the above findings, my point is that China has always become more and more powerful and authoritarian day by day with its highly strategic and sophisticated operational and acting style. China's trend of not obeying its border laws, becoming a strategic competitor, making countervailing diplomatic moves etc. has made China the story of becoming a major player in Asia where China is only a player, some countries are game objects and some countries are only spectators. This miraculous rise of China is shaking and thinking the whole of Asia as well as the world and giving a new shape to Asia. It is like a new youth of Asia whose highest liability or credit, whatever we say, is all due to China because China is the super hero here, the biggest change has come from China.

7. Challenges

The impact of the corona virus on Asian geopolitics has increased competition between regional and great powers. China has become stronger and monopolized, Sino-US bilateral relations have deteriorated, etc., increasing the possibility of tension and war. The use of force in international relations will make the existing global system more fragile and weak which will undoubtedly challenge the regional security framework in Asia. In this case, national interest must be ensured through responsible competition and cooperative diplomacy, avoiding war.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

As China becomes the master of the chessboard and plays one game after another in Asia, Asia is being rebuilt and the national interests of various Asian countries are being disrupted. Asian countries must protect their national interests through responsible competition and cooperative diplomacy. For this, the current study suggests some practical strategies, such as maintaining balance of power, alliances, free trade, strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations, maximizing strategic autonomy (the right to interact with others) and dealing with future epidemics jointly. As for example- Asia-Pacific superpowers China and the United States can work together in the future to prevent epidemics such as the corona virus through the coordination of regional institutions, so that through responsible competition and cooperative diplomacy Asian countries can protect their national interests. However, a review of the above case studies of Asian countries, particularly two Asian superpowers like China and India, makes it clear that Asia is being reshaped by geopolitical dynamics in the context of Covid-19 which is so important in the current world order that it has become a fascinating research topic and i believe that the outcomes of this research and suggested practical strategies will make an important contribution to the post-Covid Asian geopolitical order and also to the world management.

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