

Airports, air traffic and global power transition

By Mitali Patel

Can airport traffic be a good lead indicator for transitions in global power in the 21st Century? That is the question I explore here.

The dominance of American and European airports is being challenged by airports in Asia. The data on air passenger traffic are telling.

Table 1: World's Busiest Airports: Passenger Volume

Year 2016		Year 2000	
Rank	City (Airport)	Rank	City (Airport)
1	ATLANTA GA, US (ATL)	1	ATLANTA (ATL)
2	BEIJING, CN (PEK)	2	CHICAGO (ORD)
3	DUBAI, AE (DXB)	3	LOS ANGELES (LAX)
4	CHICAGO IL, US (ORD)	4	LONDON (LHR)
5	TOKYO, JP (HND)	5	DALLAS/FT WORTH (DFW)
6	LONDON, GB (LHR)	6	TOKY (HND)
7	LOS ANGELES CA, US (LAX)	7	FRANKFURT/MAIN (FRA)
8	HONG KONG, HK (HKG)	8	PARIS (CDG)
9	PARIS, FR (CDG)	9	SAN FRANCISCO (SFO)
10	DALLAS/FORT WORTH TX, US (DFW)	10	AMSTERDAM (AMS)
11	ISTANBUL, TR (IST)	11	DENVER (DEN)
12	FRANKFURT, DE (FRA)	12	LAS VEGAS (LAS)
13	SHANGHAI, CN (PVG)	13	MINNEAPOLIS/ST PAUL (MSP)
14	AMSTERDAM, NL (AMS)	14	SEOUL (SEL)
15	NEW YORK NY, US (JFK)	15	PHOENIX (PHX)
16	SINGAPORE, SG (SIN)	16	DETROIT (DTW)
17	GUANGZHOU, CN (CAN)	17	HOUSTON (IAH)
18	JAKARTA, ID (CGK)	18	NEWARK (EWR)
19	DENVER CO, US (DEN)	19	MIAMI (MIA)
20	BANGKOK, TH (BKK)	20	MADRID (MAD)

Source: Airports Council Internationalⁱ

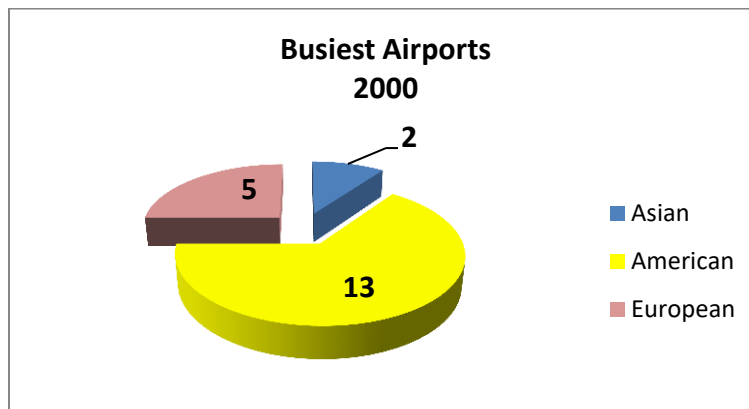
(Blue indicates airport based in 'Asia/Indo-Pacific;'ii yellow indicates an American airport and rust, a European airport – the latter two signify the 'transatlantic').

There has been a marked shift in passenger traffic over this time period, from clear dominance of American and European airports in 2000, to an emerging dominance of Asian/Indo-Pacific airports in 2016.

In 2000, of the twenty busiest airports in the world, thirteen were in America and five in Europe- the transatlantic region, as a whole, held 18 spots. Their share was 90 percent of the total. Only two Asian/Indo-Pacific airports made the list.

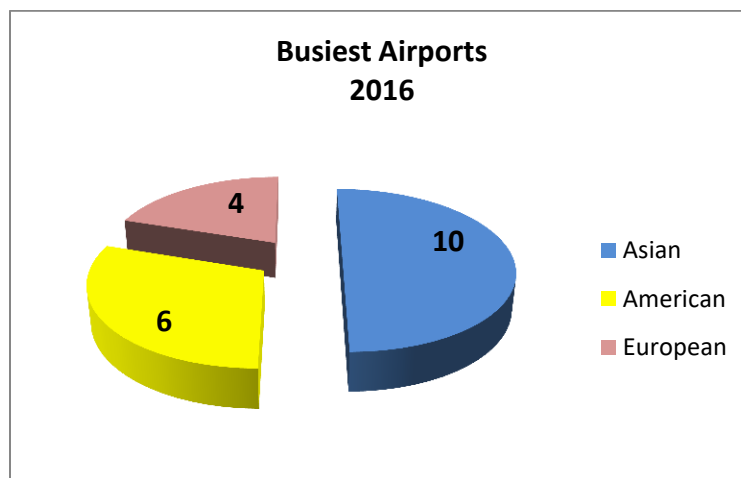
Figure a: Busiest airports by passenger traffic, by region

Chart 1: Year 2000



In 2016, only six American airports made the list, while Europe had four- the total dropped from 18 to 10. In contrast, Asia's share of airports went from two to ten; the Indo-Pacific region's share grew from 10 to 50 percent.

Chart 2: Year 2016



I contend that air traffic measured by passenger volume could be a concrete proxy measure for 'soft power',ⁱⁱⁱ a phenomenon very difficult to quantify yet acknowledged as a crucial component of global influence in international affairs.

Transitions in global power dynamics are usually shown in 'hard power' categories such as economic wealth of nations, their military might, technological edge and/or population.^{iv} These indicators are staple fare for influential international affairs theorists.^v

Using 'hard power' indicators, the shift in political and economic power from the 'Atlantic' largely powered by Europe and America, to the 'Pacific or Indo Pacific' has been documented by many observers.^{vi}

Global airport rankings by passenger volume could be a good soft power proxy to document the shift of global power from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. They can be used as a stand-alone measure, or in a mix of measures, to show certain directional shifts in power.

One advantage of the airport volume indicator is its simplicity – global economic measures such as gross domestic product are fraught with measurement problems. With increased interconnectedness and cheaper air travel, and regular database updates by Airports Council International and others, one can see the advantages of passenger volume data in being relatively simple and straightforward.

The downside is that the airport volume data naturally gravitates toward larger countries and broad regions. So, while it is simpler to use these proxies for larger geographies, one cannot use these indicators as substitutes – smaller geographies are at a disadvantage.

Also, one needs to undertake further research into air travel indicators, and methods of data collection to show trends and how they lead or lag other measures.

We need to measure soft power better in global politics to explain and make reasonable predictions regarding global affairs. Global business recognizes this already: nearly 80 percent of the value of S&P comes from intangible assets like intellectual property and brand power.^{vii}

Airport and their dominance, illustrate a tenable proxy for soft power trends globally. Airports are increasingly the gateway to nations and are a brand currency – see what happens there and you have a better idea of things to come.

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Endnotes:

ⁱ Airport Council International, Airport Statistics and Data Center, available at: <http://www.aci.aero/Data-Centre> accessed on April 26, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Indo-Pacific is a phrase that the Trump Administration has put in use. For more refer, the Council on Foreign Relation's recent article: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/trump-administrations-free-and-open-indo-pacific-solid-idea-difficult-pull>

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Nye (2004), *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, Public Affairs.

^{iv} Kishore Mahbubani (2008), *The New Asian Hemisphere*, Public Affairs; John Mearsheimer (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W W Norton & Company; and, of course, Samuel Huntington (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone

^v Mearsheimer (2001).

^{vi} Kishore Mahbubani (2008), *The New Asian Hemisphere*, Public Affairs.

^{vii} Ocean Tomo (2015), refer: <http://www.oceantomo.com/2015/03/04/2015-intangible-asset-market-value-study/> accessed April 26, 2018.