

India and the New Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific

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This paper assesses the new features of competition and cooperation that define the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. While the USA seems clear about the source of its primary threat being China, the response to that threat is still evolving. Unlike its Cold War competitor, the Soviet Union, the contours of China's national power are much more comprehensive and more widely felt. Moreover, the interdependence with some countries that China has created with its economic largesse is unlike anything seen till now. As such, the USA is found recalibrating its traditional alliances, and building new partnerships with like-minded countries to counteract China's assertive turn. The essay attempts to understand the new parameters and indicators of the geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, what is new about this balance of power, what kind of responses it necessitates from stakeholders, and why India's foreign policy choices will be significant in the shape of things to come.

The USA has become increasingly clear-eyed about the threat to its supremacy in the international system from China. As it withdraws its forces from Afghanistan after fighting an inconclusive war for more than twenty years, the USA under the Biden Presidency seems even more convinced of the need to focus its national power towards countering the rise of an assertive China. In terms of calling China as the primary strategic threat to America's national security, there is a broader continuity pervading in the Trump and the Biden Presidencies. With the National Security Strategy of the Trump administration calling the inter-state strategic competition the new priority of America's threat perception, a clear strategic reality seems to be defining the US foreign and national security orientations. There is a broader consensus among the strategic and policymaking communities across the international system that the post-World War II security and financial order spearheaded

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by the USA has been gradually weakening. Undeniably, the rise of China as an economic and military power, and its associated influence across regions, has led to debates on America's relative decline and its waning influence. Nevertheless, the transition to a new order is not clear yet. Such a strategic flux in the Indo-Pacific region pushes several countries, including India, to recalibrate their foreign policy choices, with the primary intent to maximise their respective national interests, but in doing so, not losing independent agency in their external engagements. This has been - and will be - the primary test for India's foreign policy and its national security mandarins: how to manoeuvre the tumultuous global landscape - which is being most prominently affected by the deepening US-China great power competition, while practicing its strategic autonomy.

Complex Balance of Power and the Indo-Pacific

New geopolitical regions, such as the Indo-Pacific, emerged primarily as a result of tectonic shifts in power distribution in the international system, leading to new threat perceptions, responses, and counter-responses.¹ With the onset of the 21st century, policy elites in Washington began to perceive the rise of China as a matter of concern. In fact, Washington began to take note of India's centrality as a probable strategic partner in the emerging US-China competition.² Early in the George W. Bush administration, the 9/11 attacks orchestrated by Al Qaeda heralded a new era in America's war on terror. American's attention in terms of policy and resources to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq diverted the USA from dealing with a long-term threat that China's rise would pose to its global supremacy, and provided a vacuum in which China's national power and global influence grew.³ However, before long, President Barack Obama attempted to reorient US foreign policy priorities with the Asia rebalancing strategy, deeming India as a lynchpin of that strategy, and called out China's anti-access/area denial strategies as threats to US interests in the Asia-Pacific.

It was during the Trump Administration that the US-China great power rivalry entered the official lexicon in starker terms, and major strategic documents on the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the National Military Strategy clearly projected the growing competition with China as America's primary concern.⁴ Moreover, the assertive turn in China's behaviour across the Indo-Pacific began to irk a number of countries, especially under Xi Jinping's unprecedented hold over the Chinese political system,⁵ China's intentions have become more audacious, and its capability is

being exhibited to challenge the international rules based order. Such a shift in China's worldview and its external manifestations are just as detrimental to America's global interests as they are to the regional interests of India.

President Biden's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance contended that China "is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."⁶ Delhi's view of China has also become much more sceptical after the military clash in the Galwan valley, following China's military aggression at the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC).⁷ While India and the USA, along with other like-minded powers like Japan and Australia through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), push ahead the intention and joined interoperable capabilities towards a "free, open, inclusive and rules based Indo-Pacific", Beijing has remained largely disdainful of the Indo-Pacific, and has continued to use 'Asia-Pacific' as the term of reference. China views the strategic coalescence around the Indo-Pacific as a means to counter China's rise. However, the Quad countries continue to maintain that groupings like theirs in the Indo-Pacific aim at ensuring peace and stability through deterrence, and are not aimed at any particular country.⁸

Contrary to many of the views from other major stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific that see China's assertive behaviour threatening peace and stability in the region, China - in its 2019 White Paper, China's National Defense in the New Era - painted a different picture of the global landscape. "As the realignment of international powers accelerates and the strength of emerging markets and developing countries keeps growing, the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced," it contended.⁹ However, it also commented that the "international security system and order are undermined by growing hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism and constant regional conflicts and wars." While contending that international strategic competition was on the rise, the White Paper accused the USA of adjusting "its national security and defense strategies", and adopting "unilateral policies."¹⁰

US-China rivalry is evolving, and taking on many contours which are shaping the international system. The US is confronting a major power in China, unlike the Soviet Union it encountered during the Cold War. The comprehensive nature of China's national power, and its deep economic engagements with the USA and all other major powers of the Indo-Pacific, present a very different challenge - one which cannot be tackled with a Cold War era security and economic framework.¹¹ Washington will need to

revisit and reimagine its alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, and develop new toolkits for the new world order, which is neither bipolar nor truly multipolar in terms of power symmetry and asymmetry. While there is a warning of relative American power, there are still significant limitations in China's national power, and other major powers of the international system, including India, all of which still experience substantial power asymmetry relative to China and the USA.¹² Biden's strategic guidance document noted,

We will reinvigorate and modernize our alliances and partnerships around the world. Beyond our core alliances, we will also double down on building partnerships throughout the world, because our strength is multiplied when we combine efforts to address common challenges, share costs, and widen the circle of cooperation.¹³

India's Strategic Autonomy: An Asset to Indo-Pacific Peace and Stability

Seen as one of the central planks of America's new partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, India presents new strategic opportunities in terms of managing the ramifications of China's rise, and moving the region towards greater peace and stability. Certainly, India's foreign policy choice stands at a precipice in terms of its complex balancing behaviour vis-à-vis a distant power like the USA, and a proximate power like China.¹⁴ With the former, India has been building a multifaceted strategic partnership; and with the latter, despite intertwined economies, India harbours a difficult history and an unresolved border dispute, leading to localised military clashes. Intending to practice its strategic autonomy, India has not bought either the prospect of a formal military alliance with the USA, or the containment of China in the Indo-Pacific.

However, China's recent aggression at the LAC has quite evidently led to a more anti-China attitude in the Indian policymaking class, the strategic community as well as the public in India. India's approach to the Indo-Pacific has undergone a significant shift - especially from the times when Prime Minister Narendra Modi went to the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018 and took a soberer tone towards China's behaviour, as opposed to American sabre rattling. Prime Minister Modi said,

India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country. A geographical

definition, as such, cannot be. India's vision for the Indo-Pacific Region is, therefore, a positive one.¹⁵

Following China's aggression along the LAC, Prime Minister Modi has been more direct about India's resolve to give a befitting reply when tested.¹⁶ Whether Beijing accepts it or not, the Indo-Pacific is a reality in the current strategic discourse, and the rise of China, most particularly its assertive behaviour across the maritime and continental realms, is what has given currency to the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct in the first place.

China's military modernisation and the economic integration that has emerged across the region (because of its external economic footprints), has remapped regional and global politics in hitherto unseen ways. The evolving US-China competition across the spectrum of issues is, literally, rewriting the terms of engagement between the USA and many of its allies and partners. Moreover, it is testing the foreign policy choices of countries like India that stand to reap strategic gains from its partnership with the US in managing its security dynamics with China. However, countries like India also show inherent hesitancy and discomfort in being pulled too close to the USA.¹⁷ A major threat perception enveloping the Indo-Pacific is the rise of a hegemonic China with unilateral tendencies, even as Beijing points fingers at others for disturbing peace and stability in the region. While the quest for a multipolar Indo-Pacific remains a stated objective of many countries, including India, such a power configuration does not automatically grant strong multilateral practices.¹⁸

Despite structural limitations, India has developed an enduring foreign policy practice of engaging multiple poles of power, based on a convergence of interests, and not on the basis of some ideological identities. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why India's notion of power and partnerships will be germane to how the geopolitics and geo-economics of Indo-Pacific pans out.¹⁹ The ability to hold contrasting views simultaneously and still operate remains a challenging practice in engaging external players. However, India's civilisational history of diversity provides it with a dexterity that forms the bedrock of its strategic autonomy.

The threats to multilateralism in a multipolar world order can be manifold, and some of these became prominent at a time when the world was undergoing a severe COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when, as an aspiring global power, China should have shown more responsible partnerships with the international community, it was rather seen as using "wolf warrior" diplomacy to silence critics in the global forums, or increase its military adventurism in the Indo-

Pacific waters as well as the India-China border.²⁰ While China's infamous activities in the South China Sea have prominently featured as a primary challenge to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, China's more recent military posturing in the Taiwan Straits has also raised war clouds in the region.²¹ The deepening and widening US-China competition also poses a challenge to the promise of a multipolar Indo-Pacific. While the international system is not bipolar - as seen during the Cold War when all substantial matters of global concerns were subordinated to the means and ends of two prominent powers - the power asymmetry inherent in the current power configuration does not exactly contribute towards a multipolar order.²² Therefore, the role of other independent minded powers, like India, becomes crucial in terms of managing the changing balance of power in the region, and helps strike a balance between its own path of partnerships and the predominant imperative to preclude any move towards Chinese unilateralism as well as US-China bipolarity.

The order in the Indo-Pacific which is slowly but certainly consuming the post-World War II security and financial order is unlike anything that the US has confronted earlier. It is an order emerging in a very congested Indo-Pacific, brewing with areas of contestation, conflicts, competition, and imperatives for cooperation born out of interdependent economies as well as issues that require countries coming together. The region is filled with Cold War era security and economic frameworks, alongside 21st century bilateral, multilateral, and minilateral mechanisms. The geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific will require Washington to create partnerships with countries that have their own independent paths of conflict and cooperation with China, unlike during the Cold War wherein the lines of convergence and divergence were clearer. Washington will be required to build interest-based partners in the region, whose threat perceptions and strategies might not always evenly align with that of the USA.²³

The India-US partnership is a significant test case of the complex dynamics of mutual expectations and implications in the new strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific era. While the USA rapidly emerges as the most important security and defence partner for India in the 21st century, the recent S-400 missile defence system deal between India and Russia tells a more complicated story of India's foreign policy and national security goals.²⁴ Moreover, Russia has been developing a robust strategic understanding with China focused on the USA as a threat.²⁵ Like-mindedness over the quest for a “free, open, rules based and inclusive” order brings together India with the USA, Japan, and Australia through the Quad and interoperable military-to-military Malabar exercises. And, India still finds convergence of interests with China and Russia

in transnational and regional groupings, like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), RIC (Russia, India, China), and the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization). India's strategic deficit relative to China's military and economic capabilities makes it imperative for India to broaden the scope of its defence partnership with the USA, attempting to move the buyer-seller relationship to one of co-development, co-production, and greater interoperability by signing agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA).

Given China's economic inroads into South Asia, and the Indian Ocean littorals, how the Quad - and most particularly the USA - envisions India's overwhelming security and developmental role in the region is significant. The rationality of the significance placed on India as an Indian Ocean power is evident from its geostrategic location, capabilities, strategic intentions as well as its maritime diplomacy aimed at the overall growth, security and development of the region such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).²⁶ One of the biggest questions in front of India and its partners in the Indian Ocean region would be assessing the real world impact of China's ambitious yet infamous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and bringing together a viable collaborative alternative to aid countries in need of development assistance, infrastructure financing and building.

A few initiatives have been put forth in this regard through the Quad grouping. As the leadership summit, held in September 2021, clearly emphasised, "Building upon each of our regional infrastructure efforts, separately and together, we are launching a new Quad infrastructure partnership." Aiming at China's controversial lending practices that have led to many recipient countries falling into the debt trap, the Quad leaders' statement emphasised "the importance of supporting open, fair, and transparent lending practices in line with international rules and standards for major creditor countries."²⁷ Beyond this, the Quad countries have also pledged to develop habits of cooperation in helping shape the way "technology is designed, developed, governed, and used", including the "deployment of secure, open, and transparent 5G and beyond-5G networks."²⁸ On India's end, policy planners have to assess the new opportunities that the Indo-Pacific construct provides to India as an Indian Ocean power, in terms of spearheading new partnerships with and beyond the Indian Ocean littorals.²⁹

That the global order undergoes significant shifts, and that uncertainty accompanies it is preordained. Whether the USA was, and is, prepared to deal

with the multifarious changes emerging due to the rise of other powers continues to be debated.³⁰ Moreover, the dynamics of mutual expectations between the USA and China regarding sphere of influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific waters, are playing out in real time. When there is a hegemon facing challenge from an aspiring hegemon, there is bound to be tussle in the structural realm, which will have ramifications for several other powers in how they approach such a competition as well as their engagements with both the powers. The recent virtual meeting between President Biden and President Xi Jinping reflected a sense of tension but also a realisation of the need for building cooperative behaviour to manage “strategic risks”, and avert miscalculations in geopolitical hotspots like the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits. During the meeting, President Biden “noted the need for common-sense guardrails to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict and to keep lines of communication open.”

The transitory nature of the balance of power between the USA and China lends an air of uncertainty not only for both these countries but also for the international system. The USA and China are in a phase of their relationship wherein Beijing - in its quest for some sort of power parity with Washington - is seen flexing muscles and testing America's redlines in some of the most volatile areas of the world, the most recent one being Taiwan. On Taiwan, President Biden while underscoring US commitment to the “one China” policy, also strongly opposed “unilateral efforts to change the status quo or undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”³¹ As such, the geopolitical dynamics between the two most powerful countries in the world is leading to recalibration and reorientation in the foreign and national security strategies of many countries, including India, which currently shares a more robust and multifaceted relationship with the USA than, perhaps, any other power. India more than ever in its independent history, is facing geopolitical circumstances that makes it easier for it to justify going closer to the USA, as Prime Modi speaking at the US Congress in 2016 contended that India was ready to move beyond the “hesitations of history.”³² India's engagement with the western world is not just limited to the USA but extends to substantial political understanding with some of the most important poles of power in Europe, and now extends to engaging with even the G7 grouping.³³

The mood for engaging India bilaterally and multilaterally is equally upbeat in Washington, with both the parties considering the partnership with India as one of the most important ones in the Indo-Pacific. In the political, economic, security, and strategic realms, the mutuality in India-US. relations is more evident and goes beyond rhetoric. The strategic rationale of managing China's

rise - which brought India and the USA together in the first place - is stronger than ever, owing to China's belligerent behaviour and intransigence on areas primary to America's and India's national security interests. During the recent visit of the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, to India, she was categorical in pointing out, "We'll compete vigorously with China where we should, we will cooperate with China where it's in our interest to do so. I am sure the same is true for India."³⁴

India's penchant for practicing its strategic autonomy may come across as a challenge at times, especially in stitching together working security partnerships with the West, particularly with the USA. Most specifically, in terms of aligning threat perceptions, India and the USA might find each other on different pages; but over the years, both these complex democracies have shown the maturity to work through these operational difficulties in the pursuit of broader strategic goals. The juncture at which the international system and the Indo-Pacific stands, nothing is more paramount than jointly managing the repercussions of China's assertive rise, while precluding the flaring up of tensions and avoidable conflicts. Moreover, India's pursuit of its independent agency, and its own experience in dealing with geopolitics and geo-economics of the region now called the Indo-Pacific, should be viewed as an opportunity as the USA looks for greater burden-sharing with allies and partners in order to deal with challenges it may not have experienced earlier. Given India's inherent capabilities, intentions, and experience, it is an asset in the quest for a "free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific."³⁵

Conclusion

Amid the pandemic, global geopolitics is undergoing significant shifts, with the US-China great power rivalry assuming a more intense dimension. The overwhelming trend of a changing balance of power has affected the policy and academic discourse on global power configuration. While there is clarity that the world is no longer bipolar, there is uncertainty whether the world has really entered a multipolar era in the real sense. Although the USA remains the most powerful country in terms of military and economic capabilities, China has rapidly emerged as a competitor in multifaceted realms. The US policymaking and strategic community is clearer eyed about China's intentions to challenge US primacy in the international system and the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, China's assertive turn across the Indo-Pacific continental and maritime realms, has been a growing concern for many countries, pushing ahead the augmentation of groups like the Quad to invoke like-mindedness in

terms of counteracting China's unilateral activities. China's infamous and ambitious BRI has fundamentally altered the policies of countries at different levels of development as well as of those that are concerned with the strategic ramifications of China's opaque infrastructure financing and building. While many countries are wary of such projects, the alternatives are not very clear. Indeed, and this will, perhaps, be one of the mounting challenges in front of the Quad countries, in their efforts to provide quality, sustainable, and transparent infrastructure assistance to countries in need.

China's multifaceted national power differentiates it from the former Soviet Union, and hence, the growing rivalry between the USA and China is different from the one witnessed during the Cold War. China's economic rise has created a web of economic interdependence with most countries in the world, and countries concerned with the security implications of China's rise cannot totally ignore the deep economic aspect of their engagements with Beijing. As such, the USA is dealing with a power, the likes of which it has not confronted before and, hence, the new geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific cannot be tackled with its old experience of traditional allies. Amid these new features of competition and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, new parameters and indicators of great power politics are reshaping the strategic orientations of many stakeholders, and the external orientations of a country like India will be a paramount factor.

Even during relative material deficit during the Cold War, India exuded a quest for independent agency which even though challenged many times, has remained a primary operating principle of India's foreign policy. Now that India's material capabilities have grown substantially, the practice of its strategic autonomy still plays a pivotal role in its external engagements. India's choice of partners in the international system as a result of emerging geopolitical circumstances is not a case of India squandering away its strategic autonomy. In choosing to go closer to the USA in the face of an assertive China, India is practicing its strategic autonomy to protect and promote its national interests. While at the outset, India's opposition to strict military alliances and practice of strategic autonomy may appear anachronistic to its engagement with the USA and other like-minded partners, the USA and other western powers need to recognise the complexities of competition and cooperation that produces such behaviour on the part of India. Only upon a sober assessment of India's foreign policy options and choices, will the USA and other powers be able to make the most of their partnerships with India. On the other hand, India must make a hard-nosed assessment of its capabilities as well as vulnerabilities, and manage mutual expectations with other like-minded partners in order to

optimally realise the potential of its national power to shape the contours of a “free, open, inclusive and rules based” Indo-Pacific order.

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