

Emerging Geo-Political Trends in the Indo-Pacific: Implications and Way Ahead

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) is witnessing a major flux in the geo-political and geo-strategic spheres as there is a gradual shift in the maritime trade centre of gravity towards IPR from the Atlantic and the Pacific Regions. With the West and the USA perceived to be in a strategic retreat, it opens a window of opportunity in the region for a geo-strategic reconstruct. China, the resident major power, is keen to seize this opportunity to gain influence in the region. Xi Jinping sees this geo-political flux as an opportunity for China to assert itself within the Indo-Pacific. Towards that end, he has clubbed the existing infrastructure projects, and added a few, under the much touted 'Belt Road Initiative (BRI)' with the aim of gaining geopolitical space in Asia.

The article provides an analysis of the US and the Chinese strategies and the emerging trends for the Indo-Pacific and their implications for India and the way ahead.

Introduction

The IPR is on the cusp of a major shift in the geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic spheres in its favour. It is witnessing a gradual shift in the maritime trade centre of gravity towards it from the Atlantic and the Pacific Regions and the rise of a revanchist China. Leading scholars have termed this phase as the 'Age of Strategic Uncertainties'. While China is keen to be recognised as a major power at the global stage, it still has not reached the level to be able to compete with the USA in all domains.

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It remains a major regional power in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the Western Pacific, South East Asia, and to some extent in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Concurrently, it is slowly expanding its influence in Central Asia, Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, South Pacific islands, Latin America and the Caribbean under the overarching umbrella of its BRI.

However, challenges abound due to its slowing economy, neo-mercantile predatory economic strategies and the debilitating trade war with USA. Xi Jinping considers this period of strategic uncertainties as a window of opportunity for China to take the lead on the global stage. This window is also perceived as small due to the challenge it faces with the rise of India and the coming together of like-minded liberal democracies of the region, supported by the western powers, which could be its counter balance. China has not, and cannot, deviate from this goal since it also serves as an effective tool for diverting attention from its internal instabilities through jingo nationalism.

Thus, while China may seem to be accommodative with other powers in the region, it would only be marking time to regain its Shi (strategic configuration of power) to push for its domination of the IPR. China lays a lot of faith in its ancient wisdom and sincerely believes in the concept of the Middle Kingdom, which was ordained as a mandate from heaven to rule. The current flux in the global order is now seen as a mandate from heaven for it to rule the world; it perceives that the Shi is now flowing in China's favour.

Asia needs vast investments for development of infrastructure, energy sector, communication and water needs. As per the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Report of 23 February 2017, Asia needs an investment of around US\$ 26 tn by 2030 for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ It is this vacuum that China is targeting in a focussed approach, to use its geo-economic strength, to gain influence and space through its BRI. For the moment, the Hong Kong turmoil, world focus on Xinjiang correction camps, US-China trade war, economic slowdown and a marked slowdown in the BRI; all seem to have pushed China on the back foot. Concurrently, the rise of many bilateral and multilateral partnerships by likeminded liberal democracies in the region,

supported by the US, present fresh challenges to the Chinese narrative for economic development in the IPR. This article looks at the following:-

- (a) US Strategy for the Indo-Pacific.
- (b) Chinese Strategy for the Indo-Pacific.
- (c) Emerging Trends and Implications for India.

US Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

For USA, IOR had long been a place for victualling and for linking the Atlantic with the Pacific. These are the two regions where the US and its companies have major investments, apart from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. The deployment of its forces, in these areas², provides a clear evidence of its interests in the region. However, the threat and competition posed by a rising and revanchist China pushing for its own influence in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean Regions led to a review of the US Foreign Policy in 2011, under the Obama Administration, with its 'Pivot to Asia'³, which was essentially dealing with the Asia Pacific, more of an 'East Asia Strategy' to counter China. At that time, the Chinese influence strategy, through geo-economics in the IOR, had not been unveiled.

The Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), the first part of the BRI, was unveiled by Xi Jinping on 07 September 2013, in his speech at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University.⁴ He next unveiled the second part, the Maritime Silk Route (MSR), during his speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013.⁵ This fundamentally changed the geo-strategic and geo-political dynamics of the region. China subsequently clubbed the two as One Belt One Road (OBOR – Yi Dai Yi Lu), later re-christened as the BRI.

On 01 June 2019, the US Department of Defence (DoD) released its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.⁶ This followed its National Security Strategy (NSS) released in December 2017⁷ and the National Defence Strategy on 19 January 2018⁸. The NSS identified China and Russia as the main challengers to American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.⁹ The NSS pitches for an America First policy and identifies four vital national interests:-

- (a) Protect American people, the homeland and American way of life.
- (b) Promote American prosperity.
- (c) Preserve peace through strength and ensure that the regions of the world are not dominated by one power.
- (d) Advance American influence, globally.¹⁰

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy Report stresses on preparedness, partnerships and promoting a networked region.¹¹ The whole thrust of the report is based on robust physical dominance of the region. The crux of the problem faced by the countries in the region is that the USA views the IPR as one that is extending from the West Coast of India till the West Coast of USA.¹² In short, US perceives only the Eastern Indian Ocean to be under its Indo-Pacific construct (Refer Figure 1 below), based on the area of responsibility of its recently rechristened Indo-Pacific Command.¹³

Therein lies the catch since the bulk of the Indian Ocean (Western) is out of purview of its Indo-Pacific strategy. The balance Indian Ocean portion is divided under its Central and Africa Commands (Refer Figure 2 below). However, the rest of the world views the Indo Pacific as the region extending from the East Coast of Africa till the West Coast of USA (Refer Figure 3 below). It is this dichotomy that needs to be addressed by the USA to ensure that its strategy can be synchronous with those of its allies and partners.

The USA has also enacted Better Utilisation of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act 2018¹⁴, which was signed by the President on 05 October 2018,¹⁵ and Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) 2018¹⁶, signed by the President on 31 December 2018, to counter China's increasing geo-economic push. But it has yet to gain any traction, since the money earmarked for these are very small as compared to the Chinese commitments under its BRI. The US private sector may not be as amenable to large investments in the region since the profits may not be either forthcoming soon or in the scale desired.

Thus, to effectively develop an alternate narrative to the BRI, USA needs allies and partners to jointly work towards a successful

liberal and democratic narrative as an option for the countries of the region to meet their development and growth needs in all domains. This entails a capability to finely balance the competing core interests of all allies and partners – the first being the definition of the term Indo-Pacific itself. It also needs to ensure that the interests of the companies investing in the region are met to some extent. A start has been made by India and Japan under the Asia – Africa Growth Corridor, launched on 25 May 2017.¹⁷ USA and other like-minded powers should consider expanding this structure by joining and supporting it.

Chinese Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

China under Xi is determined to show the developing and the under-developed nations that a contrarian model to the Western narrative, of liberal, transparent democracy, exists for economic and overall growth – autocratic socialism with Chinese characteristics. Xi Jinping showcased the same during his speech to the 19th Congress in October 2017 and in his New Year speech to the nation, wherein he stated that socialism with Chinese characteristics could be the path for developing nations to follow to achieve modernisation. It sees a great opportunity of expanding its sphere of influence in Asia, Oceania and Africa, amongst the global South, where it could sell this narrative to the smaller, under-developed nations, and so realise its ‘Dream’.

The ‘China Dream’ was enunciated in a book by Col Liu Ming Fu, “China Dream: The Great Power Thinking and Strategic Positioning of China in the Post-American Era”, where he argues that China should displace the US as world leader. As early as 1923-24, Dr Sun Yat Sen had laid out the vision for China to eventually surpass USA.¹⁸ His advice was to learn from the USA and the West to achieve the rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation. The *strategic continuum* since Deng Xiaoping created the strong foundation for Xi Jinping to be able to take an aggressive posture in global affairs.

Xi Jinping appears to view the coming decades as ‘strategic opportunity’ for China to establish a ‘Pax Sinica’ in Asia – the fruition of phase one of the China Dream and the great rejuvenation of the nation, though he has given some new timelines during the 19th Congress¹⁹ on the route to his China Dream, at some variance to the previous timelines, of the ‘Two Hundreds’²⁰.

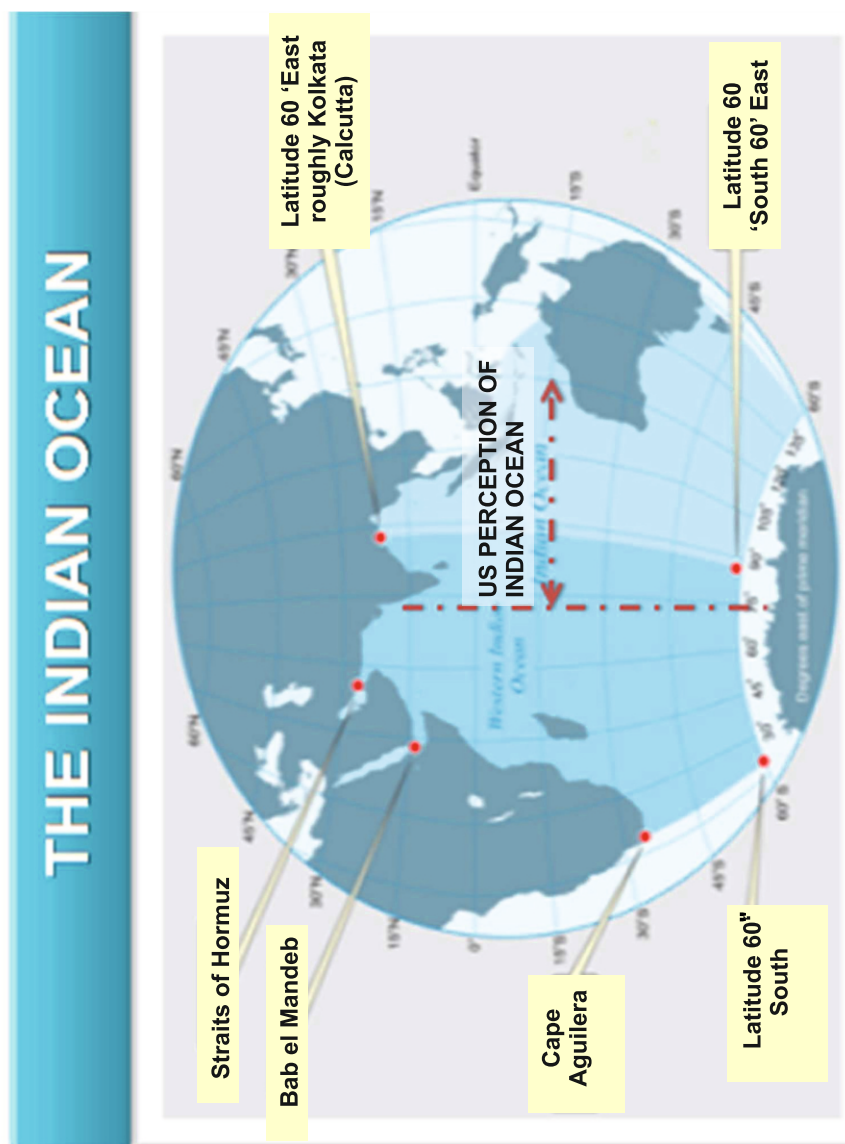


Figure 1 : US Perception of Indian Ocean under its Indo-Pacific construct

UNIFIED COMBATANT COMMAND'S AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY

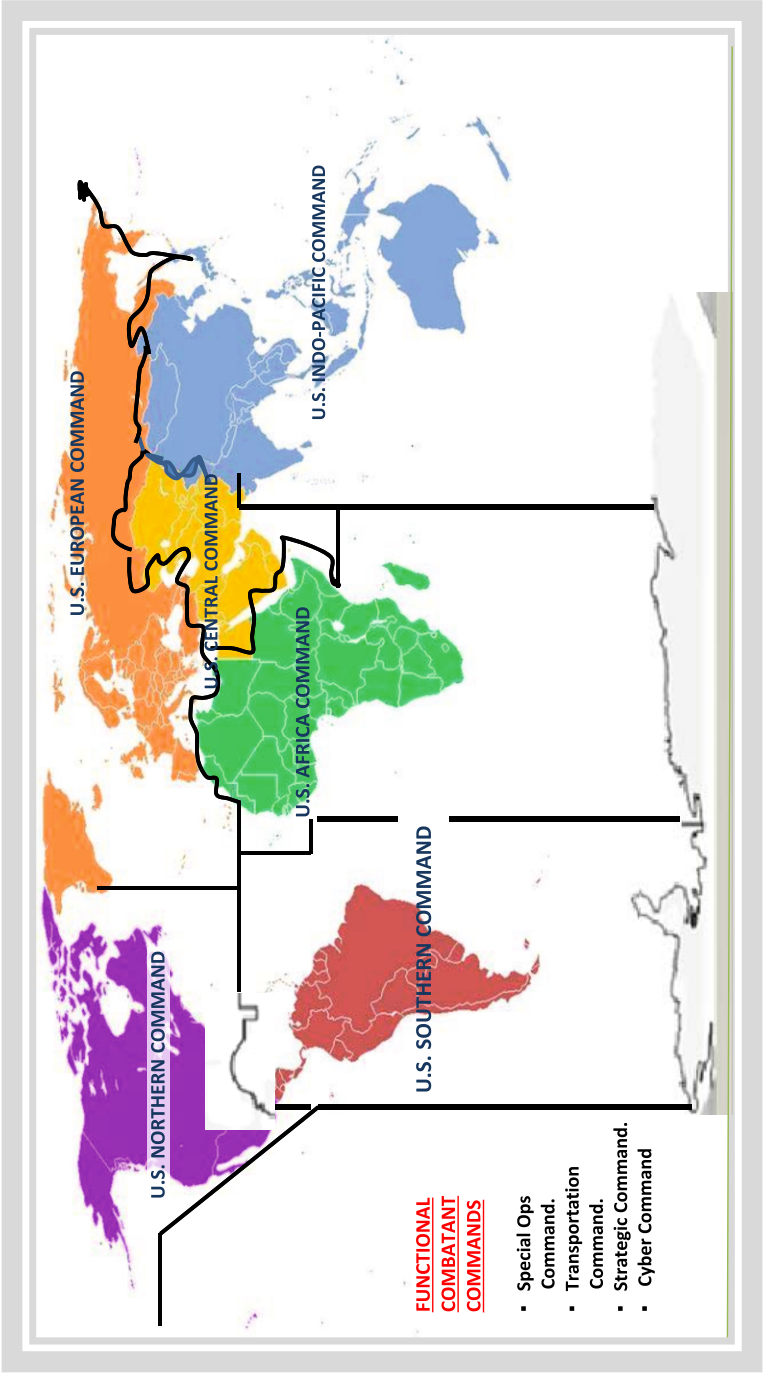


Figure 2 : Area of Responsibility of US Unified Combatant Commands

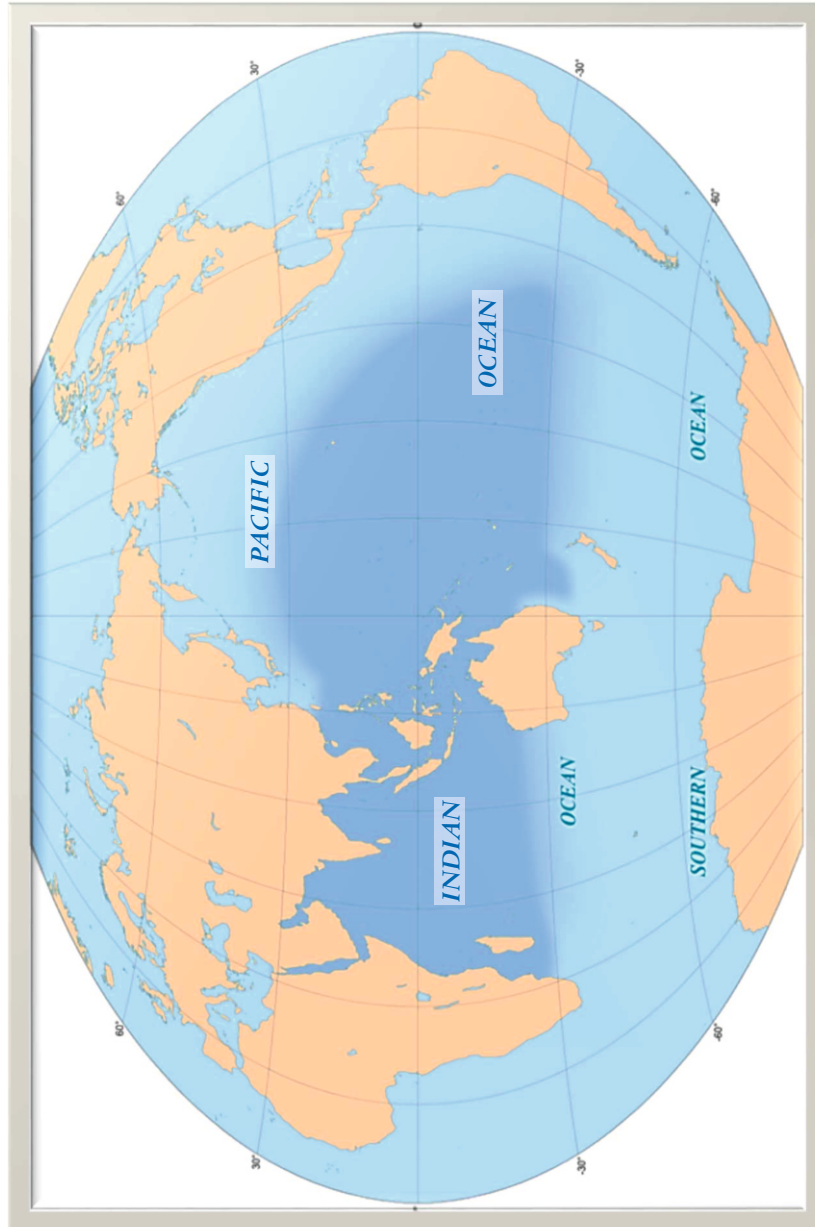


Figure 3 : Global Perception of the Indo-Pacific (Less USA)

A strong message is resonating from China under Xi that it is ready to assume leadership in the International Order. However, there is a push back by the US and the West against the Chinese opaque and predatory economic outreach lacking reciprocity. The US-China trade war could also be seen in this light. Concurrently, the smaller nations are also forcing China to review the terms and conditions of the BRI agreements; the Chinese arm-twisting of Sri Lanka to take control of the Hambantotta port, Pakistan's surrender of Gwadar port, and consequent loss of sovereignty over those pieces of territory has forced a rethink amongst these nations to avoid such an eventuality.

Despite this, and a steady economic slowdown since around 2013, China still possesses the heft and will aggressively push to achieve its Dream of national rejuvenation. It has followed a strategy of slowly gaining control of a major portion of the economy of many small countries, by setting up its industries, investing in mining and other natural resources and direct investments in its economic structures – a strategy of invest, acquire and dominate. To lower their guard, China acts in the open, hiding its true intentions, under the guise of common economic activities. Once the dependence on its investments reaches over double digit of the country's GDP, it gets the necessary leverage to ensure that they follow China's lead and abide by its decisions. This is its main strategy for gaining geopolitical space in Asia under what it terms as the Neighbourhood Diplomacy through the infrastructure projects of BRI. The projects under BRI have been selected by China purely for its own long to medium term geo-strategic gains and are usually not economically viable for the host country – as seen in the case of Hambantotta port and CPEC projects.

This strategy aims to ensure that the accumulated gain would radically alter the geo-economic and geo-commercial balance in the Indo-Pacific in its favour. It would attempt to restrict space for competing nations in the region and continue with its creeping assertiveness on strategic territorial space based on specious historical claims.

Towards that end, it appears to be utilising its doctrine of Unrestricted Warfare (URW) to denude the Comprehensive National Power (CNP) of the developing nations of the region, thereby making it easier to coerce and integrate them with China.

Concurrently, within the region it is also applying the concepts of its ancient game of 'Wei Qi' or Go - an 'encirclement game'. This game, along with the URW, aptly sums up their strategy and operational art. The game entails 'multiple battles' over a wide front, while concurrently 'balancing the need to expand' with the need to 'build protective clusters'²¹, built on specious claims that it aggressively attempts to dominate.

It does this by employing what the experts have termed as 'grey zone' warfare. On the continental front it implies sending its soldiers as civilians, either as herders or as fishermen as the first line, supported by the border defence units as the second line and the main PLA ground forces as the third line. On the maritime front it has created two more navies – the Coast Guard and the Maritime Militia, its second and third sea force. The Maritime Militia, under the garb of fishing trawlers form the first line of defence, supported by the Chinese Coast Guard as the second line with the PLA navy as the third line. Since the extant international rules of engagement do not cover such operations, it becomes difficult for nations to calibrate their responses effectively.

China is investing heavily in development of ports in the IOR. It has termed these as nodes in the Science of Military Strategy 2103, published by its Academy of Military Sciences²². Based on the geo-strategic and geo-political dynamics in the medium to long term, selected nodes would be converted to Overseas Strategic Strong Points (OSSPs) for effective forward deployment, victualling of its forces (like it has done in Djibouti and Gwadar). The Chinese prefer to call their overseas military bases OSSPs²³, since the term 'overseas military base' has the baggage of western imperialism.

According to it an expansion of the geographic scope of naval operations, based on the strategic tasks that the 2015²⁴ and 2019²⁵ Defence White Papers have laid down for the PLA, requires the establishment of replenishment points and various forms of limited force presence. OSSPs fulfil these demands and would support the military's long-range projection capabilities by effectively shortening resupply intervals and expanding the range of support for Chinese forces operating abroad. The artificial islands that China has militarised in the South China Sea (SCS) also fall in this category, along with the Paracel Islands and the Scarborough

Shoals. Some of these ports, secured at a later point in time by its Marines (like in Djibouti and Gwadar), would allow China to expand its outreach along the Maritime Silk Route (MSR). It would group a set of OSSPs to control various regions of the Indo-Pacific, viz., East China Sea and Yellow Sea, South China Sea, Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Eastern Indian Ocean and Western Indian Ocean, and Southern Pacific. This appears to be the overall strategy of controlling its neighbourhood, thereby constraining US in the Indo-Pacific and India's security in the Indian Ocean.

For China, its geo-economic strategy precedes its military strategy, wherein the economic squeeze that would be feasible in the middle to long term would provide it the geo-political and geo-strategic influence. The debt-equity swap provides it the opportunity to take control of the OSSPs. The military follows thereafter. This is at a stark variation to the strategies that US and the West has been following in the region.

Emerging Trends and Implications for India

To counter China's geo-economic strategy, India withdrew from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in November 2019 to protect its farmers, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), dairy and manufacturing sector, pharmaceutical, steel and chemical industries²⁶ from being overrun by cheap Chinese goods without any reciprocal entry for India into Chinese markets. The events unfolding in the RCEP negotiations indicate that China is slowly achieving its economic stranglehold over most of ASEAN nations, thereby inhibiting them from moving away from Chinese interests. Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, however, appear to be hedging for the moment, awaiting US strategy to fully unfold in the region, before taking a hard stance.

Chinese foothold in India's economy is tenuous at present but is slowly expanding by investing in technological start-ups and unicorns (like Paytm etc.), thereby enabling it to achieve disproportionate impact in the long run.²⁷ India and these companies need to understand the medium to long term risks that the country would face if due diligence is not paid to deny a back door influence and data loss to China. That said, the emerging trends show two possible scenarios in the near to medium term:-

(a) A *bipolar Indo-Pacific*, with China and its core vassal states²⁸ on one side and the US, with like-minded partners, on the other;

(b) A *loose multi-polar Indo-Pacific*, with China and its vassal states competing with US and a few partners, while the other emerging powers in the region would attempt to retain strategic autonomy by hedging, in order to protect their respective national interests.

The second trend is evolving at present, but could change depending on how USA and the West calibrate their strategies. Concurrently, Russia is also evolving its own strategy for the region, wherein it recognises that Greater Eurasia and the regions of the Indian and Pacific Oceans do form part of a common space. The same was evident in the joint statement issued by Russia and India after the fifth Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), held in Vladivostok in the first week of September 2019, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Guest.²⁹ Thus, Russia could also be seen as another emerging player in the region, which would also be keen to protect its core interests, especially in its Far East where it feels economically and demographically threatened by the Chinese.

For India, this presents a challenge for securing its core interests in the region. As such it would prefer to hedge for the moment, under the rubric of strategic autonomy. Hence, while it has a Russia-India-China forum, it also has a Japan-Australia-India forum, a Quad – with USA, Japan and Australia, informal dialogue at the apex level with China – Wuhan Spirit and Chennai Connect etc. India faces a clear present and long term threat from China in multiple domains, be it at the geo-political, geo- strategic or geo-economic levels.

A rising, liberal, democratic India is perceived as a direct challenge to China's narrative of socialism with Chinese characteristics being the path for other developing countries in Afro-Asia to follow and achieve modernisation. It provides an alternate model for development, a model that does not subsume the host country's economy with it but ensures inclusive growth.

The vast geopolitical trust that India enjoys within these regions should be built upon to create a free and open Indo-Pacific. Also

work with like – minded emerging powers of the region (including Russia) and with USA and the West to create a forum, which would provide the alternate geo-economic and geo-commerce model for the IPR and facilitate economic activities, security, trade, intelligence exchanges, military capacity building, technology sharing, agenda setting for regional forums and coordinated diplomatic initiatives. The overarching security architecture could be based on an expanded QUAD to encompass some more likeminded nations of the region. This architecture could also serve as the ‘net security provider’ within the IPR. This would lead to the scenario of a loose multi-polarity in the region and act as succour to the smaller nations ensuring that rule of international law, good governance, equality, transparency and economic prosperity for all is ensured. The foundation of the association or coalition would not be based just on countering any country’s narrative of geo-economic squeeze, but for stability and prosperity of Indo-Pacific, thereby making itself sustaining and long lasting. However, China would also be pushing its model aggressively, especially amongst nations where it has an economic stranglehold, thereby leading in the medium term to a bipolar region. Such a scenario, which would be debilitating for the region, with fault lines running through it, could be avoided if the alternate narrative succeeds and gains optimal traction.

India also needs to ensure that it secures itself comprehensively from external threats and internal dissonance. It needs to move fast on creating a modern integrated military, with a responsive restructured Higher Defence Organisation, concurrently with a restructured comprehensive Internal Security architecture. The recent announcement by the Prime Minister of creating a ‘Chief of Defence Staff’ (CDS), during his speech on 15 August 2019, is a welcome step. However, the duties and responsibilities of the CDS and a restructured Ministry of Defence (MoD) incorporating the Services also need to be addressed. There is a need for a bipartisan approach towards socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religious security, to ensure there is no internal dissonance that enemies could exploit. A similar approach is needed to ensure that India is secure from multi-domain threats that would be utilised to target the country and weaken its CNP.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping sees the current geo-political flux as an opportunity for China to assert itself within the Indo-Pacific and occupy the vacuum due to USA's strategic retrenchment. Towards that end, he has clubbed the existing infrastructure projects, and added a few, under the much touted 'BRI', with the aim of gaining geopolitical space in Asia.

This is centred on a phased commercial penetration through infrastructure projects and selling a short term 'economic dream' to the underprivileged nations on its periphery. Such commercial penetration is the precursor to the 'strategic equity', squeezed out from these nations due to the debt trap caused by these unviable projects, thereby gaining political, diplomatic and geopolitical space needed to achieve the China Dream of becoming a 'Great Power' by 2050 – *a unipolar Asia centred around China*. However, the past seems to have come to haunt the Chinese. Having given loans to these small nations at market rates for unviable projects, the countries are facing debt crises and are not amenable to China's arm twisting as yet.

The emerging powers of the region, supported by USA and the West, need to utilise this opportunity to provide an alternate narrative / economic model to assist the small nations and ensure peace and stability within this region. It needs to be responsive and ensure that only economically viable projects are undertaken and not the unviable projects that China had been pushing within the region to enable its geo-economic squeeze for strategic equity.

At the same time, India needs to revamp its internal and external security architectures and follow a bi-partisan approach to socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religious issues to curb internal dissonance. India and the other likeminded emerging powers of the region need to seize the initiative. This strategic window, due to the current geo-political and geo-economic flux, is small post which it would find increasingly difficult to maintain a multi-polar Indo-Pacific.

Endnotes

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