

Evolving Strategic Architecture in Asia-Pacific Region : Implications for India

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Arguably, the post cold war and a globalised Asia-Pacific remains fluid and in search of tenable medium term equilibrium. The geo-strategic and economic architecture of the region is still evolving and a new power balance is taking shape. The pieces of the jigsaw still remain to fit in a settled slot. While the region is unique, diverse and fraught with imbalances and disparities, its evolving paradigm, arguably, is characterised and being defined, among others, by certain emerging imperatives. These are given in the succeeding paras.

Some would argue that in recent years, the USA, which had dominated the region as the sole super power, has diffused and possibly even downgraded its regional priorities, resulting in what some would call a strategic vacuum in the region. The current US focus, though not exclusive, appears to be on China and Northeast Asia. The USA, apparently, is not unduly concerned about its exclusion from the recently held East Asia Summit in Kuala Lumpur; nor does the USA appear to be overly keen to revive the moribund APEC or participate actively in other Asia - Pacific arrangements. It does not appear to be keen to take on new regional commitments. The global war on terror, no doubt, is a US priority but it appears to be selective and in consonance with its larger global view and policy. If this argument were to be advanced further, then it would be logical to assume that the USA would prefer its regional partners to play a more proactive and substantive role in the region. Japan, Australia and, perhaps, even India, Pakistan and South Korea would, in USA calculations, be expected to assume greater regional geo-strategic responsibilities. This, indeed, could be the rationale behind the idea of promoting a regional response to the emerging challenges, involving Australia, Japan, South Korea and India, now actively being propagated

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specifically by Australia and Japan, no doubt, at the behest of the USA.

China unquestionably is the rising global power with a strong regional and global agenda. Evidently, China is slowly but surely occupying the strategic space vacated by the USA and taking advantage of the short-term regional opportunities whether strategic, political or economic. China's strategy also appears to be to work in partnership with regional countries rather than to go it alone, albeit on its terms. In any case, China would like to work towards blunting any scope for causing it discomfiture. Its evolving strategic ties with ASEAN, its now dominating position in East Asia and its leadership and proactive role in the Asia-Pacific institutions [East Asia Summit, Summit dialogue with ASEAN, ARF, APEC, Northeast Asia Six Party Talks, SCO, CSCAP etc.] are all integral parts of the evolving Chinese strategy in the region. At the bilateral political level, China has developed special strategic relations with countries like Myanmar, the Indo-China countries and neighbouring countries surrounding it, apart from forging deeper political and economic links with the other regional countries purely on political considerations and not always insisting on arithmetical reciprocity. In furthering this policy, it has taken tactical steps to downplay its territorial and other differences with the countries of the region [e.g. on the Spratly Islands issue and its still persisting border and political differences with some neighbours], has signed and ratified regional agreements like ASEAN's Treaty of Peace and Amity and a path breaking Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN. Briefly, China's growing presence and goals in the region have raised a number of issues resulting in new challenges and forging of new equations in the Asia-Pacific. In the 1960s, China was a feared political force aiding and abetting in subversion and insurgencies in some countries; today, even as the Chinese shadows lengthen, China is not feared but held in awe and respect. The imperative of China's dominance is manifest and compelling. The ASEAN countries, in the 1960s and 1970s, had used economic integration and enmeshing as an instrument of policy to blunt Chinese propensities to cause them discomfiture; today China is using the same strategy to further its own regional geostrategic and economic interests.

As stated above, it is argued by some that countries like India, Japan, South Korea and Australia should play a more proactive and high profile role in the Asia-Pacific to counter the Chinese. This was apparently a purpose of Prime Minister Abe's recent visit to India and the many calculated overtures made by him to India. The Americans would surely welcome a greater role by these countries in cooperation with some other countries, under, of course, US leadership and direction. The Japanese, it appears, may have lately lost some edge in the Asia-Pacific and may be in search of strategic partners. The Japanese Prime Minister Abe's recently articulated proposal during his visit to India in August 2006 for an "axis of democracy" comprising India, Japan, Australia and South Korea is, no doubt, in pursuance of that policy. Japan, it appears, would prefer to proceed collectively rather than traverse the path alone. The Japanese proposal is in consonance with US strategic aims and purposes in this region. Our Prime Minister's earlier call for an "arc of advantage" was made mostly in the context of India's evolving economic relations with the Asia-Pacific and may not have had any strategic implications. It, therefore, should not be confused with the Japanese proposal. The joint military exercise "Malabar" involving Japan, USA, Australia, Singapore and India held in September 2007 and the earlier exercises, may however, have a larger strategic purpose from the point of view of these countries, possibly inspired by the USA. In recent times, the Japanese and others have shown interest in consolidating and deepening their strategic relations with India. Their troubled relations with China, most recently following the Yasikuni shrine visit by their former Prime Minister, and the continuing tense situation in the Korean Peninsula have more or less bogged Japan down to its own immediate neighbourhood and preoccupations. It would appear that Japan is passing through an unsettled phase and may take time to play its legitimate full role in regional and global affairs. Australia and South Korea, by themselves, may not be able to play a leadership role. Australia is keen to improve the quality and content of its relations with India. Its recent offer to sell natural Uranium to India, albeit under safeguards, has to be seen in this larger context. ASEAN, some believe, is not even convinced of Australia's credentials in the region. In any case, some analysts would argue that Australia's focus has been the South-Pacific and the adjoining regions more than the larger canvas of East and

South-East Asia. Also, Australia has carefully and deftly calibrated its relations with China, which it considers important. To what extent this nascent coming together of countries like Australia, Japan, South Korea and India along with ASEAN is aimed at containing the growing influence of China is a matter of conjecture but that could be the driving force in US calculations and the calculations of its allies in the Asia-Pacific. India on her part, may not have any such strategic purpose as it would independently like to develop and maintain good and mutually beneficial relations with China and not get too closely involved in the USA led game of containing China. China's response in the NSG on the question of granting waiver to India and Chinese sensitivity to India's other concerns will, no doubt, demonstrate her real intentions towards India. I personally do not believe that China will confront India on this issue, even though it will demand a price for its benevolence. There is nothing free that the Chinese offer and they seem to have a grand strategic design always in view.

India's Look East Policy, initially, was premised more on economic rather than strategic considerations. More recently, however, India has expanded her low level links with the Asia-Pacific to include political, defence, maritime, strategic and hitherto unexplored areas of economic cooperation. The Look East Policy, in other words, has now acquired a strategic dimension. The Southeast Asian countries too are beginning to see strategic convergences evolving with India. India, to them, provides an additional option and an enhanced comfort level. Their own Look West Policy takes into account India's potential political and military strengths, apart from her enormous economic and other attractions. The growing non-economic convergences include areas such as the war against global and regional terrorism and extremism, transnational crime, cross border subversion and insurgencies and maritime cooperation, including safety of sea lanes, ports, economic zones etc. The economic convergences also go beyond traditional trade and commerce and now include areas such as energy security, HRD, environment, Science and Technology and the new emerging areas of the knowledge economy. India is appearing to look attractive and a new imperative is beginning to become evident.

On her part, India is now looking at its growing relations with her eastern neighbours from the prism of her domestic compulsions,

particularly in the Northeast and in the Andaman Sea. Some of these problems, it is now recognised, have transnational dimensions and implications. Peace and normalcy in the Northeast, for example, cannot be fully restored and ensured without the cooperation of Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Thailand. This region is unique and has always had transnational links. Subversion and terrorism, drugs and its nexus with crime and trans border trade and economic links, for example, have to be seen in a historical and traditional context. Over 95% of the borders of the Northeast are with foreign countries, a reality we can ill afford to ignore. While there is no precise estimate of trans border informal trade, it is widely believed that it is larger than formal trade. There are other trans border links too based on cultural affinities, tradition, connectivity and ethnicity that have governed relations between the Northeast of India and the neighbouring countries. Likewise, the security of the Andaman Sea, the sea-lanes and our economic zone will need sub-regional cooperation with countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and Bangladesh. Cooperation in preserving the ecology, environment and the unique fragile bio-diversity of this region is also an imperative, which we cannot ignore. This region has emerged as a hub of piracy, poaching and Maritime crimes. Even intelligence gathering by foreign powers in this space is said to have increased. If China's growing influence and presence (China has military bases in Myanmar close to India and plans to augment her military presence in this strategic space) in this region is to be contained and managed, strategic links with our eastern neighbours are indispensable. That is a rationale of our renewed Look East Policy in the contemporary context. The Asia-Pacific now again is our strategic partner.

While the above makes for closer and mutually supportive relations between India and Southeast Asia, it would be too simplistic to look at the evolving India-ASEAN relations from the prism of countering China or its growing influence alone. While India does wish to expand and deepen her growing all-round relations with ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific, she does not see herself as a counter - weight to China. On the other hand, Sino-Indian relations are at an all time high and growing to our mutual advantage; our two-way trade is nearing the US \$ 25 billion mark and growing at about 20 per cent per annum. China is expected to emerge as India's number one trading partner ahead of the EU and the USA in about ten years time. Indian investments in China

and vice versa are growing. India and China are emerging as partners in the Asia-Pacific, Central Asia and the Gulf and in evolving a triangular partnership involving Russia; they, as major consumers, have an overriding interest in energy cooperation and security and in shaping a new world economic order in which they have a voice commensurate with their stake and interests. There are evident convergences. All three countries now sit on the G-8 high table and have overarching global responsibilities. There are other evident complementarities and enough space for India and China to work alongside in all these regions. In strategic terms, India still has and will have in the future problems with China but need not look at China as an adversary. There will be areas of tension and friction but there is no reason why the two countries should not learn to live together. The Asia Pacific certainly should be an area of cooperation rather than confrontation. India should not overreact or be unduly concerned about China's present policy of support for Pakistan as this is bound to change with improved relations between China and India and India and Pakistan. China's overt and covert support for Pakistan's nuclear and missile programmes is a matter of concern to India and to the international community. China's somewhat guarded and negative comment on the recently concluded Indo-US nuclear energy cooperation agreement is symptomatic of China's uneasiness over India's emergence as a major regional and global power with deepening relations with the USA, which could potentially challenge China. This too should moderate given the rapidly changing world view on proliferation issues. India and the other countries will have to engage China in dialogue rather than leave China alone. It is in our interest to see China act as a responsible global player subject to international discipline. Indian diplomacy's greatest challenge in the coming years will be to balance its relations with China, even as Indian diplomacy seeks to protect its long term national interest, an exercise that is not going to be easy but which is not beyond our ingenuity. Bill Gates was right in believing that the choice for the world is not between India and China but the reality may be that the world will have to engage and deal with India plus China as partners in the future.

The EU has historically had very close relations with some parts of the Asia-Pacific. However, following the emergence of a uni-polar world order, EU it would appear, has downgraded its

once close ties with the Asia-Pacific. EU's current priorities, it appears, are more Europe and trans-Atlantic centered rather than truly global. While EU is a participant in Asia-Pacific fora like ARF, APEC, ASEM, CSCAP etc., its participation and profile appear to some to be low key, if not proforma, rather than substantive. Even though India's and EU's perceptions on many issues of regional and global importance differ, India and the EU are now strategic partners. Though still meagre, India has excellent relations with individual European countries; however, at times there is disappointment in India that Europe has chosen to see India through the US prism or in the narrow context of SAARC and India-Pak equation and has failed to measure and fully appreciate India's potential and emerging regional and global role. Happily, this is changing now. Until recently, some thought that EU followed a policy of balancing its relations with India and Pakistan. Likewise, EU too must have had some difficulties with India's position on European and global issues. We must admit that we have had and we continue to have differences on many issues but the areas of agreement, congruence and constancy are also many and constantly enlarging. There is nothing that fundamentally should divide India and the EU, although we need to give greater strategic depth and content to our relationship to make it mutually beneficial and enduring. For India, EU has always been the middle point in our foreign policy calculus and India sees it to be in her national interest to build an independent and mutually beneficial all-round relationship with EU. Unfortunately, India-EU Summit level dialogues or the Troika Dialogues have so far been used to focus mainly on bilateral issues, mostly economic, where the two have differing views. Strategic partnership should involve comprehensive exchange of views, action and engagement on global issues covering all subjects and regions. India and the EU should also talk about possible areas of cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region including, for example, on issues like combating terrorism, trans-national crime, energy, environment, economic cooperation, maritime issues and on harmonising views on global economic and strategic issues. Likewise, India and ASEAN, and ASEAN and EU should also cover extra bilateral issues such as the above in their dialogues at all levels. The same is true of Russia. India and Russia, and EU and Russia must also expand the scope and canvas of their interaction beyond bilateral issues.

China, India, ASEAN, Japan, South Korea and Australia are pillars of any emerging Asia-Pacific architecture. In a globalised world order, a modus vivendi among all these powers, if not cooperation, is necessary to maintain peace and stability. The USA, EU and Russia could play a very important supportive role to ensure regional equilibrium and stability. Three fourth of the world's population inhabits this region, which also accounts for about two third of the global GDP. No part of the world can remain unaffected by the fortunes of the Asia-Pacific. The coming decades will clearly establish whether the Asia-Pacific will find equilibrium or remain in a fluid situation. India has a deep and abiding interest in the peace and prosperity of this region and the Eastern flank of India. In that sense, India could be the fulcrum of a new geo-strategic and economic order on which the edifice of global and regional peace and prosperity could be built and sustained.