

The One Belt One Road (OBOR) / Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China: Security Implications for India and the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) and Response Strategies

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"Nations have no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, only interests that are perpetual and eternal and those interests it is our duty to follow".¹

-Lord Palmerston

Abstract

The economic prowess which China gained in last three decades has given its leadership the confidence to bring the blueprint of 'Chinese Dream', in the form of 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)', on the world stage. BRI is a major economic project for infrastructure development around the world which comprises 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and 'Maritime Silk Road'.

BRI is the tool to keep Chinese export led economy running, by shifting focus to South-South trade, in the wake of economic slowdown of the West. Beijing wants to use BRI to up the ante in the Indo Pacific Region, by ensuring that economic and thus, political interests of regional countries are aligned with its geo-political interests.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flagship project of the BRI, a reflection of the Sino-centric global order. While promising to change the destiny of Beijing's 'all weather friend' Pakistan, it is becoming a classic example of Chinese 'cheque book' diplomacy, by leveraging huge debt of

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Islamabad to promote Beijing's strategic interests. The principle opposition of India to CPEC is about the core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity, as major infrastructure projects are implemented in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK).

India has taken an in-principle stand against BRI in view of its unequal terms and opacity. Chinese empirical planning has ensured project inroads into the entire IPR with economic and strategic challenges to India in its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia. As India confronts growing Chinese assertion in IOR, it has to choose from a diverse range of options to achieve the national objectives.

As the US aims to counter Beijing's growing assertion by aligning with New Delhi, India could utilise the US economic power and global dominance for its advancement. However, as the strategic conflict intensifies and India decides to join the US led bloc, a possible troika of Russia-China-Pakistan could seriously jeopardise India's interests in its regional sphere. Hence, while a strategic alignment for security dependency is advantageous for India, a complete alliance with the US would adversely affect its overall interests.

Regional balancing is the best bet for India to balance a rising China, without becoming a pawn in the 'Grand Game'. A stronger economic bonding and strategic alignment with potential partners, to form an alliance, would assist in maintaining regional balance without a direct confrontation. Thus, India's vision of 'Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)' could provide a platform for an open, stable, secure and prosperous future for the world.

Introduction

Henry Kissinger through 'ping pong' diplomacy proved to the world that in international politics realism has triumphed over idealism. However, as the US grapples with an authoritative China today on the world stage, the real winner of his 1970's diplomatic

coup is still awaited. The economic prowess which China has gained gives its leadership today the confidence to step forward from Deng Xiaoping's philosophy of 'hide our capacities and bide our time'² to Xi Jinping's belief that it's '..time for China to take center stage'³. One Belt One Road (OBOR) / Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the practical manifestation of this confidence to realise the 'Chinese dream'.

BRI Architecture

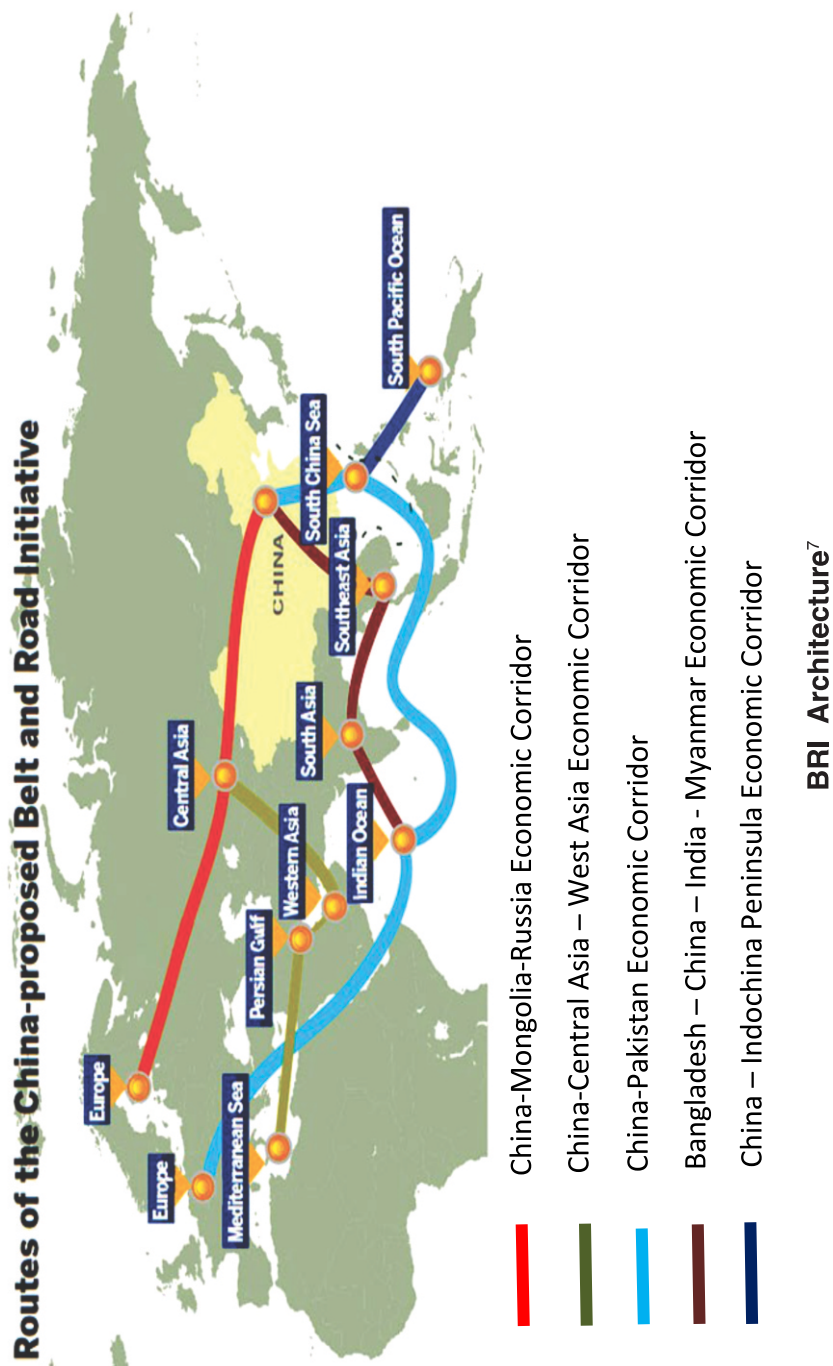
China's OBOR was initiated as a major economic project for infrastructure development around the world. The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) concept was introduced by President Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in Indonesia in September and October 2013 respectively.⁴ It is a web of infrastructure including roads, railways, telecommunications, energy pipelines, and ports, led by Chinese investment. In order to give it more credibility, OBOR was rechristened as BRI - an initiative for "promoting peace, mutually-beneficial cooperation"⁵.

SREB forms the land route extending from eastern coast of China to western ports of Europe. It encompasses five major routes forming economic corridors: China-Mongolia-Russia; China-Central Asia-West Asia; China-Pakistan; China-Indochina peninsula; and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar.⁶

MSR concept is towards developing the waterways of infrastructure development from coast of China, encompassing Indo-Pacific Region (IPR), to sea trade routes to Africa and Europe. It involves development of major ports on its route as well as economic hubs around these ports.

The Economic Factors

The three decades of manufacturing led growth created in China a large appetite for natural resources, which coupled it to Africa. However, Chinese fear of Japanese type stagnation came close to reality with General Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008. The jolt made Chinese leadership initiate an export growth led by South-South trade in what former Vice-President Li Yuanchao emphasised 'a profound adjustment' in international trade landscape.⁸ The fundamental economic factors behind the BRI can be summed up as follows:-



(a) Global Slowdown. As the leading exporter of manufactured goods, Chinese economy was adversely affected by GFC. Beijing has accordingly developed a blueprint for integrating world markets directly to its manufacturing base.

(b) Over Capacity. The huge manufacturing industrial capacity generated for the world consumption was suddenly devoid of markets by GFC. BRI is anticipated as the solution for finding new international avenues for Chinese industries at the cost of host countries.⁹

(c) Surplus Capital. China has an excess of \$ 3 trillion capital reserves with three decades of export led growth. BRI provides an opportunity for Beijing to diversify its portfolio to other than United States (US) Treasury bonds. It will also assist in increasing the acceptance value of renminbi, with China as the lead creditor for various countries.¹⁰

(d) International Avenue for Domestic Labour. Even with the scenario of over-capacity, any reduction in jobs would impact social stability, thus seriously eroding the foundations of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Through BRI, China is not only exporting the capital but also the manpower to execute infrastructure projects abroad.

(e) Securing the Resources. BRI is the instrument through which China is not only securing the markets for its products but also the natural resources required for its industries.

BRI Implications

The economic, political and strategic implications of BRI are as elucidated in the succeeding paragraphs.

Geo-economic Implications

While Beijing projects BRI as a benign project with “shared interests” and “shared growth” through “discussion and collaboration”, a closer look at the financial aspects reveals its one sided nature.¹¹ In the footsteps of earlier superpowers, China is using trade as the stepping stone for global supremacy. BRI is the practical implementation of ‘Chinese Marshall Plan’ to use huge Chinese foreign reserves to provide loans, expanding the Chinese sphere of influence.¹²

The financial instruments for implementation of the BRI are the first external challenge to the existing global financial order under the Bretton Wood system. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund provide an alternate to the funding mechanism dominated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Further, with minimal political restrictions required for Chinese loans, the authoritarian power structures are ready to usurp the opportunity.¹³

However, as China celebrated fifth anniversary of BRI, the negative aspects for host countries have started coming out in the open domain in the form of 'trap of debt'. Beijing, through a cocktail of opaque loans, has been financing projects with questionable viability. As debt stress soars, compromises in favour of loaning agencies are the only feasible options.

Geo-political Implications

As Beijing has been emboldened by its economic strength, the US sphere has been challenged by an assertive Chinese diplomacy. While the challenge to US supremacy of the 'commons' was initiated in the South China Sea (SCS), Beijing wants to use BRI to up the ante in the IPR, by ensuring that economic and thus political interests of regional countries are aligned with 'New Era of Socialism with Chinese Special Characteristics'.¹⁴

The problem is compounded by the US perceived retreat and imposition of trade tariffs across the spectrum. The US pull out from Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) has created a void in IPR, which China is successfully utilising by leading the formation of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). However, the US understands the challenges posed by a rising China to 'American power, influence and interests' and its 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) accordingly reflects this shift in approach. As "China seeks to displace the United States, in the IPR...and reorder the region in its favour", the US aims to "raise...competitive game to meet that challenge, to protect American interests, and to advance our values".¹⁵

Geo-strategic Implications

The fundamental change in Chinese ambitions is predominantly reflected in the outlook of its security forces. The Revolution in

Military Affairs (RMA) is rapidly transforming it from a large infantry dominated defensive force to a technologically advanced modern force. The task assigned to Chinese armed forces is now 'to participate in regional and international security cooperation and maintain regional and world peace'¹⁶ - a reflection of its intent to interfere at foreign lands, if the need arises.

BRI, through expansion of Chinese interests, provides the platform to give Chinese forces the umbrella to operate internationally. Djibouti has already been formally established as first overseas Chinese military base. However, equally strategic are commercial ports/land bases under BRI which could provide covert platforms for Chinese security forces to expand their operations. In case of any conflict, this 'String of Pearls' can be used to protect Chinese economic interest, while also spreading Chinese sphere of influence worldwide. With their strategic locations, the sea ports may be utilised for securing Chinese Sea-Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) while the SREB bases can provide alternate land trade routes for 'choke points'.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

CPEC is the flagship project of the BRI, a reflection of the Sino-centric global order. While promising to change the destiny of Beijing's 'all weather friend' Pakistan, it's becoming a classic example of Chinese 'cheque book' diplomacy. It aims to utilize estimated Chinese loan of \$ 56 billion to construct a 2000 miles route extending through the length of Pakistan from Gwadar port in Baluchistan to Kashgar in China's western province of Xinjiang.¹⁷

With its existing high debt, and miniscule foreign investment, promised Chinese investments are at odds when viewed with an economic sense. However, it's the prism of Pakistan's geostrategic location, through which CPEC is being executed by Beijing. The projects under the scheme are classic case of lopsided 'Chinese development model'- sponsored by China, contracts awarded to Chinese firms and executed by Chinese labour. With its opaque financing model, CPEC loans would deepen Pakistan's debt problem, providing further leverage to China for fulfilling its strategic interests. It has the potential to achieve three strategic objectives with one move- reduction of the US strategic space in Central and South Asia, control of access routes from Central to South Asia and counter India with Pakistan as the proxy.



CPEC Architecture¹⁸

CPEC Implications for India

- (a) India has opposed CPEC since inception in view of its opaque nature and uneven balance towards Beijing.
- (b) As the corridor passes through Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), India has flagged its objection about Chinese project “that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity”¹⁹.
- (c) The strategic location of port of Gwadar could be used against Indian SLOCs, threatening hydrocarbon supply through the Strait of Homruz.
- (d) With Chinese control over transport routes in Pakistan and growing Chinese relations with Iran, India’s access to Afghanistan and Central Asia may be restricted.

(e) As Chinese economic influence increases in South Asian countries, the balance may tilt towards Beijing, with even a futuristic containment policy towards India.

(f) Further as CPEC integrates Pakistan and China economically, politically and militarily, any future conflict for India could be on two fronts.

BRI Implications for India

As China launched its OBOR in 2013, India displayed a lukewarm response to the proposal in view of its opacity and one-sided control with Beijing. However, Chinese empirical planning has ensured project inroads into the entire IPR with economic and strategic challenges to India in its immediate neighbourhood in South Asia. The details are:-

(a) **Bangladesh.** Even though the present ruling party has ensured strong relations with New Delhi, Chinese economic influence is evident. With Bangladesh formally joining OBOR initiative in October 2016, New Delhi is making concerted efforts to maintain its balance.²⁰

(b) **Nepal.** The political turmoil in Nepal in recent past has occasionally disturbed the strong relations with New Delhi. While recent cancellation of a few projects displays Nepal's sensitivity towards 'debt-trap', its response to New Delhi led BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) exercise recently gave opposing signals. As China offers its ports for trade with land-locked Nepal, New Delhi is required to put up lot of economic and diplomatic efforts to ensure long term bonding with Nepal is closely maintained.

(c) **Myanmar.** While BRI has manifested itself as CPEC on India's western front, the eastern side would be covered by CMEC (China Myanmar Economic Corridor). With MoU already signed, it intends to connect Yunnan province in China to Kyaukpyu port in Burma.²¹ The project would provide China an alternate route from Strait of Malacca for hydrocarbon supply, along with increased Chinese strategic presence in Bay of Bengal.

(d) **Sri Lanka.** With the change in government, the 'debt trap' has most glaringly been exposed with Hambantota port project in southern Sri Lanka. As present government realised its inability to pay off the huge debts and unviability of the project, the port was leased to Chinese for 99 years, a stark similarity to history of Hong Kong leasing to British Imperial powers.²² While Colombo has presently warded off possibilities of PLAN usage of these assets; future is uncertain considering the continuation of Chinese 'cheque book diplomacy'.

(e) **Maldives.** Maldives is the most glaring example of strategic value of BRI for Beijing. A small archipelago in Indian Ocean, its strategic location at the prime SLOC makes it a key asset. The years of Indian diplomatic, economic, and even military support has been dwarfed by the huge Chinese investment in a short time period.

India's Response

The requirement of investment, specifically for South Asia with large populations, high growth rate and poor connectivity is paramount. With financial edge of Western countries slightly blunted after GFC, China is a promising avenue for providing this foreign investment. However, the same has to be on terms which are open and balanced. Accordingly, India has showed a positive response towards AIIB, RCEP and NDB (New Development Bank) while expressing its reservations about the opaque nature of BRI.²³

India has been among the very few countries which didn't attend Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in May 2017, attended by heads of 29 states and representatives from 100 countries, including the US and Japan. The principle opposition of India to CPEC is about the 'core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity'. Further, New Delhi has brought out its view that, "connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms,openness, transparency and equality" which "must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create an unsustainable debt burden for communities".²⁴

Accordingly, India has taken its own steps to provide practical alternatives to BRI which are economically viable and strategically balance Chinese spreading sphere of influence. India has rightly

transformed its 'Look East' policy to 'Act East' policy. Strong relations with Vietnam, pursuance of Trilateral Highway project, proposed Mekong-Ganga Economic Corridor, strengthening BIMSTEC and developing maritime relations with Indonesia and Singapore are steps in this ambit. Further with 'Go West' strategy, India is pursuing to be a partner in International North South Transport Corridor, ensuring access to Central Asia.²⁵ India's interest in development of strategic Chabahar port in Iran is viewed as a counter to Gwadar. Additionally, India and Japan are also collectively working on 'Asia Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC).²⁶

On the strategic front, India has donned the role of a 'Net Security Provider' in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Indian Navy, transforming its operational philosophy to 'mission based deployment' is playing a key role in 'securing the seas'. Through the conduct of joint naval exercises such as Malabar, Varuna, MILAN, coordinated patrol with neighbouring regional navies; participation in RIMPAC (Rim of Pacific Exercise), KOMODO multinational exercises; goodwill visits to foreign ports and HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) – the Indian Navy has built strong partnerships with strategic partners.²⁷ Further, through strong security relations with the IOR countries such as Seychelles, Mauritius and Oman and leading role in promoting collective security forums like Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)²⁸, India has gained a leading and respectful position in the IOR.

However, India's responses to BRI have not been that visual as they are executed in a more piecemeal manner. Further, the strategic responses have been reactive rather than an execution of a well calibrated plan. While one major factor has been the comparative lack of economic and industrial resources compared to China, more important factor is the fragmented execution of even a well thought out plan. Further, the plethora of options available in today's emerging multipolar world, diverge the views of policymakers.

Response Strategies Available for India

The three main factors which are shaping up the world today are declining western powers after GFC, an aggressive China in strategic alliance with Russia, posing a challenge to the US, and the US strategic and economic push back to these challenges to

maintain its supremacy over global affairs. India with its fast growing economy, huge population and unique geographical location can act as a swing state in this duel and hence is going to play a unique role in shaping up the world future. This provides Indian policy makers a diverse range of options to achieve the national objectives.²⁹

An Alliance with the US

A hegemonic China, with imperial interests, poses direct challenges to India's natural balance in her immediate neighbourhood. These challenges align India naturally to the US, whose global supremacy is challenged by a rising China. India could continue to utilise the US economic power and global dominance for its advancement. Further, the US assistance could help serving Indian interests in multilateral forums.

As the biggest military power in the world, the US could provide India a strategic umbrella for increasing its sphere of influence and countering Beijing's expansionism. The ever-growing Indo-US military relationship, defined by strategic agreements of Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016 and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in September 2018, is a testimony to their converging security interests. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed after 2+2 dialogue, "... India and the United States have a natural starting point for advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific. We should continue to ensure the freedom of the seas and the skies; uphold the peaceful resolution of territorial maritime disputes".³⁰

However, as India acts along with the US to balance Chinese influence, the bonhomie brings her in direct strategic conflict with Beijing. If Beijing views Washington's steps as containment of China with India as the willing partner, it could use its own resources for containment of India. India's geo-political situation in this case could become more precarious, if it doesn't get intended support from the US in case of any conflict. Further, this new bonding is creating stresses on existing time tested Indian relationships, specifically with Russia. Russia has been India's most reliable strategic partner and weapons supplier for decades. However, as the US share of the Indian arms market has increased, it has affected New Delhi's strategic relations with Moscow. As the strategic conflict intensifies and India decides to join the US led

bloc, a troika of Russia-China-Pakistan could seriously jeopardise India's interests in its regional sphere.

Further, with the US administration's present policy of 'America first', prompting partners to take more responsibility for joint interests, unpredictability of the US support has increased. Washington and New Delhi have been at the opposing ends of various global summits, specially related to trade and environment. Further, straightjacket approach of US administration could actually be detrimental for Indian interests. Already, the US pressure through Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and renewal of sanctions against Iran are conflicting with Indian strategic autonomy. Hence, while a strategic alignment for security dependency is advantageous for India, a complete alliance would adversely affect its overall interests.

Self-sustenance

Unlike the Cold War, in the present globalised economy, the dependency of the states is intertwined, creating a complex strategic environment. As the opposing forces compete in a multipolar world, each state has to keep its self-interests paramount. India, with its economic growth and demographic advantage, can chart a path towards achieving a dominant position for itself in global affairs. While tweaking its earlier non-alignment policy, New Delhi can have the best of both the worlds, while avoiding the downsides of a rigid alliance. Thus a security alliance with the US, to check Chinese expansionism, can be blunted through strong economic relations with Beijing. Similarly, maintaining Russia as a prime arms supplier can give a boost to 'Make in India' strengthening self-reliance in development of indigenous arms industries with positive strategic relations with Moscow.

However, maintaining these conflicting relationships is itself challenging. With each side hardening its position, Indian policy makers are already feeling the heat. Further, in order to counter a hegemonic China, India doesn't have sufficient economic and material capacity. Without an external balance, an assertive China could compromise India's regional interests. In order to maintain its present pace of growth, India is required to keep a strong military to ensure secure environment. However, with the present numerical and technological advantage with Beijing, an arms race may actually burn out Indian economy.

Bilateral Support Agreements

Regional balancing is the best bet for India to balance a rising China, without becoming a pawn in the Grand game. As a hegemonic China exerts its assertiveness, there are nations who wish to chart a non-aligned path towards peaceful development. India could lead by example by securing its national interests without joining any power bloc. With its large population and high growth potential, India could align with Japan and Australia, gaining from their technological prowess and large natural resources respectively. Such a regional alignment in the IPR could adequately balance China without potential concerns of containment.

However, this process needs active diplomatic efforts to overcome the inherent road blocks to identify core common interests. While all these countries have shown willingness towards formation of 'the Quad', their diverse regional interests and strong economic alignment with China has hampered its formal growth. A stronger economic bonding and strategic alignment, with defined red lines for the common adversaries, could serve the potential partners. As a strong economic and strategic union, they could dictate their interests to even stronger powers.

Conclusion

The inclusion of BRI in the CPC Constitution during the XIX National Congress signifies its pivotal position in overall strategic ambit of China to gain dominance in global affairs.³¹ It implies that BRI is not just an economic scheme but a strategic project for expansion of China. The initiative has already gained a strong foothold in the IPR and is now involving countries in Europe and Latin America. The operational control by Chinese firms of Haifa port in Israel and Piraeus port in Greece are reflection of Chinese strategic inroads through economic projects under BRI.

However, there are signs of resistance in countries where the high debt has affected the overall national economic and strategic policy. As with Sri Lanka, the new government under Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia is re-negotiating projects under BRI for their economic viability. The recent loss of President Abdulla Yammien in Maldives elections can be viewed under the same lens. However, even after the change of government, Beijing can utilise the high debt to maintain its sphere of influence, as evident in the case of Sri Lanka.

Further, Indian policy makers couldn't expect BRI to collapse under its own weight. There are immediate actions required to maintain India's regional superiority and emerging force in global affairs. India has to tread carefully to ensure its peaceful rise, without getting entangled in 'The Grand Game'. Through strong alliances with nations having common interests, India could contribute to maintain regional balance in IPR. Similarly, a security agreement with the US, without impinging on strategic autonomy, could provide India a better say in multilateral forums.

The path being adopted is best reflected in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at Shangri La Dialogue on 01 June 2018 wherein there is recognition of "shifts in global power, change in the character of global economy... of unsettled questions and unresolved disputes; contests and claims; and clashing visions and competing models". In these challenging times, India envisions a world, "when nations stand on the side of principles, not behind one power or other". Accordingly, India shares with Russia, its "views on the need for a strong multi-polar world order", while also maintaining "global strategic partnership with the United States", encompassing "shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region". Further, underlying Indian nuanced approach towards China, where Wuhan summit, "helped us cement our understanding that strong and stable relations between our two nations are an important factor for global peace and progress", PM Modi stressed, "Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other's interests". India's vision is thus described in one word – "SAGAR which stands for Security and Growth for All in the Region".³²

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