

Geopolitical Shift : Evolving Strategic Landscape

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Introduction

In his book 'World Order' Henry Kissinger identifies four great world orders in history: European, Islamic, Chinese and American; each shaping the destiny of their nations, regions and the world at large as per respective agendas. While Europeans strived for bringing about balance in the international affairs; Islamic states pursued expansion; Chinese sought tributes to the Emperor; America perceived itself as the beacon to the world for universal values. While true world order has never existed, what prevailed over a period was devised at Westphalia almost four centuries back.¹

From the ruins of the World War II, the international order that emerged was centred around the USA, the new superpower. For next four and half decades, globe stood trifurcated; the American-led West, Soviet-led Communist Block and the Third World – unrelated directly to the East-West rivalry. These camps were deeply divided from within and often chaotic. Hence, the concept of world order remained an illusion. The only notable achievement was avoidance of World War III. The dynamic process of geopolitical shift and resultant challenge to the *status quo* powers has invariably led to intense rivalry, contenders often falling prey to the Thucydides trap.²

Geopolitical Shift – An Overview

Epochal events towards the last decade of 20th Century; namely the collapse of Berlin Wall, demise of Soviet Union and emergence of the USA as the sole superpower triggered a chain of events; with cascading effect. The erstwhile ideology-based structures cast in stone stood obliterated. With geoeconomics driving the

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dynamics of international relations, it was the 'balance of interest' that trumped 'balance of power' dynamics.

Brief era of America as the sole power was in for serious jolt in the event of 9/11. The non-state actors employing terrorism as an instrument to challenge the very idea of nation state has redefined the basic tenets of national and international security, blurring the lines between the two spectrums. The ability of non-state actors to establish a caliphate – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has added new dimension to the proxy war. Given the complex international scenario, multi-alliances and partnerships are reshaping the global strategic architecture. The onset of new millennium also witnessed yet another wave of instability, wherein suppressed regional, national and ethnic aspirations came to the fore by way of Jasmine and 'Spring Movements' in West Asia, shaking up the authoritarian regimes in the region.

The phenomenon of globalisation which had created a complex web of interdependence between nations, corporations and interest groups paving for new alignments has come under stress; case in point being Britain's exit from the European Union. The nations today are increasingly engaging each other on a wide band; ranging from cooperation to competition and from containing to confrontation, in consonance with their national interests.

The global energy trade map is under makeover with the shift from traditional suppliers in Eurasia and Middle East, as the producers tap unconventional gas and oil resources from the waters of Australia, Brazil, Africa and the Mediterranean to the oil sands of Alberta.³ Most West African oil now flows to Asia rather than the US, as the energy demand heartland is centred around China, Japan and India. The biggest game changer has been the development of technology by fracking for the production of shale gas from the rock formations in the USA. With its crude oil production growing by 50 per cent between 2008 and 2013, the US is expected to emerge as an energy superpower. According to the International Energy Agency estimate of 2014, it is poised to overtake Saudi Arabia as the top oil producer in the near future.⁴ With steep fall in oil prices, all the nations relying on the hydro carbon revenues are facing a crisis situation. Reconfiguration of global oil and gas scene has resulted in diminishing the geopolitical leverages that some of the energy supplier group of nations wielded for decades, particularly in the Middle East.

While the West faced economic slowdown, there was a spurt of economic activity in Asia driven by China, India, ASEAN, Japan and South Korea. As a result, began the process of gradual shift in balance of power eastwards. Sequel to the strategic review undertaken by Thomas Donilon, former National Security Adviser to the US President, it became evident that there was a glaring imbalance in the American power projection posture which was biased towards to the West.⁵ This paved the way for Obama's Doctrine of 'pivot to Asia'. The key factor behind the US new Asia Strategy was the growing influence of China in the Asia-Pacific. Besides, with the wars in the Middle East winding up and new economic and security architecture shaping up in the Indo-Pacific, American strategic interests were deemed to be inextricably linked to the developments in the arc extending from Western Pacific - East Asia into the Indian Ocean Region.

Russia although a declining power, still has the potential to seriously challenge the existing order in Europe and even beyond. Kremlin's aggressive policy against Ukraine has been resisted by the EU by way of sanctions. On the other hand, China's ascendance and its impact on the US led international order has resulted in escalation of tension between the two. The US actions of building new alliances and partnerships with the nations on the Chinese periphery is seen by Beijing as acts of containment. Convergence of interests between China and Russia is paving for new alignments. The stage has been set for a fierce inter-power rivalry, with far reaching consequences.

Great Powers Rivalry

The three major current powers – the US, China and Russia are characterised by varying internal political dynamics and conflicting global aspirations. The US democratic system steered by two major political parties has intricate structure of checks and balances; based on the American values. In China, the Communist Party formally functions on the basis of authoritarian collective leadership. Russian system is highly personality oriented. The US strives to maintain *status quo* as the lone super power. Well aware of declining influence, America's policy now seeks greater involvement of allies and partners to pursue its national interests. Given its rapid rise, China on the other hand is all set to change the balance of power equations in favour of a bipolar model, thus posing a serious challenge to the American predominance. Russia

under Putin, whose delusional quest to regain the erstwhile super power status and Cold War strategic symmetry has upstaged the West; with a clear message, “bear may be down but is definitely not out”. Moscow, despite past differences with Beijing has gone out of its way to break fresh ground in pursuit of mutual interests. Besides the trio, the other emerging power centres like EU, Japan and India have the capacity to impact the strategic calculus in their respective regions.

However, it is the centrality of the US-China relationship which will be critical in shaping the future of Asia and the world at large. Given the complexities, the relations between the two competing powers have been on the roller coaster mode. While on the economic front the trajectory has been favourable, the geopolitical scene has been frosty. The key reason is the mutual distrust, arising out of clashing national interests.

America has always considered itself a Pacific Power. Post War II, it has maintained sizeable military presence in the Western Pacific, acting as a security guarantor to its allies. Deploying 60 per cent of naval assets in the Asia-Pacific region as a sequel to its revised strategy implies adopting a flexible military posture with both deterrence and punitive capability, in an event of crisis or conflict situation. Alongside, Washington has accorded priority to strengthening existing alliances and building new strategic partnerships. The ‘US-India Joint Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region’ issued in 2015, besides proposals like ‘US-Japan-India-Australia’ quadrilateral, are cases in point. The US core interests in the Asia-Pacific are to ensure regional stability, economic prosperity, unhindered access to the markets and freedom of navigation; while maintaining continued dominance through various regional initiatives.

As per Graham Alison, “The preeminent geostrategic challenge of this era is not violent Islamic extremists or resurgent Russia, it is the impact of China’s ascendancy”⁶ Late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, former PM of Singapore had observed that sheer size of China’s displacement was such that the world had to find a new order. The Communist leadership grand strategy encompasses four cardinal goals: maintain internal stability, sustain high economic growth, acquire great power status and ensure peaceful-passive neighbourhood. With Xi Jinping’s emergence as a paramount

leader, there is visible shift in the policy of 'hide and bide' enunciated by Deng Xiao Ping. Xi in pursuit of 'prosperous and powerful China' believes in employing all instruments of statecraft, including geoeconomic intimidation and rewards.⁷ Asia-Pacific is of vital strategic significance to China; perceived as its under belly. The crux of China's Asia policy is to prevent any competitor who could challenge its domination in the region. To this end, working towards diminution of American influence in the region, containing Japan, propagating concept of 'Asian Security by Asians' and gaining sovereign authority over South China Sea are Beijing's key objectives. China's new 'Periphery Policy' of extended neighbourhood and shift in maritime strategy from 'offshore water defence' to include 'open sea protection' is aligned to the attainment of the defined objectives.⁸

Due to shrinking economy coupled with aging population, Russia's geopolitical clout has waned significantly. Given its military power, Moscow still retains the capacity to pose credible threat to challenge the international order. Russia is very sensitive to the eastward expansion of NATO, right in its backyard. Its security strategy of defending the heartland by creating land buffers has a historical past. Even Catherine the Great had pursued the policy of defending the borders by extending them.⁹ Intervention in Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Crimea, part of Ukraine in 2015 are manifestations of old legacy. With Russia and the US involved in a Proxy war in Ukraine, possibility of a scaled down Cold War in Europe are rife. Even in Syria, the two are competing to safeguard their interests. While Russia presently is more concerned with its immediate periphery, Moscow and Beijing actively collaborating in Asia-Pacific remains a viable option.

There are other regional players who are seen as emerging power centres. Japan is the third largest economy. After almost two decades of stagnation, its economy is on the path of recovery. Tokyo is deeply concerned about Beijing's rapidly growing military capability and increasing assertiveness. Prime Minister Abe is determined to restore Japan's primacy. The reviewed 'defence policy guidelines' seek to re-craft the national security policy. Removal of one per cent GDP cap on defence spending is aimed to accord priority to modernisation of 'Self Defence Forces'.¹⁰ Besides being a US ally, Japan has taken pains to strengthen partnerships with nations of Asia-Pacific. It views strategic relations

with India in the larger framework of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia sees huge opportunity in the unfolding 'Asian Century' and actively supports the US strategy of 'balancing to Asia-Pacific'. It regards Indian and Pacific Oceans as one strategic arc. Alongside seeking trilateral partnership with the US, Japan and South Korea, Canberra takes cognisance of Delhi's growing stature and perceives India's special role in the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN has emerged as formidable economic block, with combined GDP of over US \$ 2 trillion. While maintaining centrality, these nations have enhanced relations with the US, besides India and Japan to cope with China's growing influence in the region.

India's potential as a growing regional power is beginning to be recognised by the global polity. It was glaringly obvious during the 'Senior Executives Programme' at Harvard where the author was one of the participants. In the US policy of rebalancing Asia, India is seen as a significant player in the evolving politico-economic and security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. India's 'Act East' policy alongside 'pivot to Japan' is indicative of its deepening engagement with the states of Asia-Pacific with a view to leverage its position. In the meanwhile, India has revamped its ties with Russia, restoring the imbalance. While building on existing partnerships in Europe, Africa and West Asia, Delhi has made efforts to carve out new architecture in the South Asia by giving fresh thrust to initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

The Evolving Strategic Landscape

Given the trends of on-going geopolitical shift and ensuing 'balance of power' game, global strategic environment is in a state of flux, marred with contradictions and ambiguities. Only certainty is that the pace of change is in for further acceleration. The recent outcome of the US Presidential elections coupled with the anointment of President Xi Jinping as the 'Core' (of Chinese leadership) are key factors that will significantly alter the course of future alignments.

With Mr Donald Trump soon to take over as the 45th American President, the US foreign and security policies are expected to witness a significant shift. 'America First' policy, the main plank of Trump's election campaign implies greater inward focus, while

curtailing its global outreach. The President elect in his statements has indicated that America will no more be the global policeman and a net security provider. This is matter of anxiety amongst the US alliance partners, both in Europe and Asia, on Washington commitments to post-war security arrangements. The allies will be required to pay more towards the cost of US troops deployed in the respective regions. Besides, these nations will strive to be self-reliant in their security stance, triggering a new arms race. Keeping in view Mr Trump's opposition to 12 nations Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); in case the US aborts the trade pact, it will sound death knell to Obama's 'Rebalancing Asia' strategy. Mr Trump has characterised ISIS as an existential threat to the US. He has expressed firm resolve to destroy it through extraordinary means. Whether the terrorism emanating from Pakistan will be viewed through the same lens – only time will tell.

Beijing, under all powerful Xi Jinping seeks a unipolar Asia and Bipolar world. China today is a key player in shaping the future world order. It is to be seen whether the Communist leadership only tinkers with the existing international structures or tries to wreck these to build new ones. Anticipated Changes in the US policies as brought out above will suit China to pursue its expansionist designs. Russia's although weakened, can act as spoiler to counter American designs in various parts of the globe. In case there is change in Washington's policy of not to completely isolate Russia but seek collaboration on shared interests like proliferation, terrorism, Arctic or West Asia, it could help obviate a possible Cold War. However, this could exacerbate the situation given Russia's conventional military edge in Europe. It will also face stiff opposition from allies like Germany and split the West.

India's strategic relations with the US are expected to maintain a steady course as the fundamentals are strong and there are no major contentious issues between the two. The US support for India's quest to the membership to the Nuclear Supply Group and the UN Security Council will be crucial. Given India's good rapport both with the West and Asia-Pacific, it is expected to play a greater role as an emerging power centre. The real challenge will be to manage the relationship with China, given the prevailing trust deficit and Dragon's growing influence around Indian periphery. Besides, maintenance of rapid pace of economic growth is critical for India to realise its aspiration to make it to the top table.

Traditionally, it is the great powers that have set the course of geo political shifts. In the current scenario, the US mindful of its limitations is likely to scale down the global footprint. While Russia is on the decline, China is only a quasi-Super Power. Therefore, emerging power centres like Japan, India and other regional groups, willy-nilly, are poised to play significant role in the realignment of geostrategic gyro.

Conclusion

Given the tectonic shift in the geopolitical plates that is underway, it is going to take time before the skyline of global strategic landscape begins to get defined. Going by the prevailing indicators, the design of future global architecture is in for a phenomenal makeover, major disruptions in Asia and Europe driving the process. The ensuing great power game is likely to play out on the unexpected lines, defying the past trends. With what legitimacy the key players employ power; which will be crucial in bending the curve of international order in the right direction, for a stable and prosperous world.

Endnotes

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