India’s strategy towards Asia

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Indians have always looked East to see the nurturing sunrise and the light of opportunities. Now, as before, the East, or the Indo-Pacific Region, will be indispensable to India's future and our common destiny (1).”

Historically India has been a seafaring nation with extensive cultural and trading linkages particularly with modern day Southeast Asian region. Her ties with the region go back more than two millennia and actually extended up to the east coast of China (2). Forged in religion and culture, art and commerce, language and literature, these links have endured. India's North Eastern region which shares a 1600 km long land boundary with Myanmar is regarded as the gateway to ASEAN countries.

Indian civilization, one of the world's most ancient, dating back five millennia flourished along the coasts of her mighty rivers and three seas.  Attracted by her fabled wealth the European colonizers came via the seas beginning late 15th century and the Muslim invaders from India's north west, beginning early 8th century, took the land route.

India’ bonds with the outside world frayed during the colonial period which saw systematic exploitation and stripping of India’s riches and natural resources. According to Angus Maddison, the famed British economic historian, India accounted for 16.1% of global GDP in 1820 (3). It fell to mere 1% at the time of independence in 1947. A recent study estimates that the British siphoned out at least $44.6 trillion during their 200 year rule .(4)

India's Independence was blood soaked. Her western and eastern limbs were severed to create  present day Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively. India had also to deal with three land conflicts with Pakistan as also a major armed aggression from China in 1962 and an ongoing military standoff since May 2020.

Newly independent India tried to stay clear of big power politics and propounded the philosophy of non-alignment. Meanwhile the Indian leadership went about knitting the large and heterogeneous country into a unitary political entity besides combating massive poverty, hunger, underdevelopment and illiteracy to name a few. Defence and developmental imperatives led to concluding a Treaty of peace friendship and cooperation with USSR in 1971 which demonstrated political pragmatism notwithstanding stated position of “strategic autonomy”.

By 1991 sluggish economy growth, rapidly growing population and external conflict had taken their toll.  India was on the brink of bankruptcy and turned to IMF for a bailout. A blessing in disguise, India was obliged to introduce the first generation of economic reforms. In parallel the end of the cold war and breakup of Soviet Union, while depriving India of an anchor also opened up space to reclaim her heritage with her east.

India's economic growth picked up.  In 1988 relations with China were normalized.  India unveiled the Look East policy (LEP) in 1991 which was elevated to Act East policy (AEP) in 2014 as the relations moved into strategic space from a pure economic and cultural construct.  Ties with Japan and South Korea came to be regarded as two pillars of LEP.

Colonialization, partition and the 1962 conflict with China had impaired India’s self-confidence. In the 1960s we “were not sure how we would survive as a system, as a polity. -- We often allowed others to have a veto on our choices, because (we kept wondering) -- - what is safe, what is not safe…. we had ---- developed a theology of timidity---I think today, we are a self-confident nation. We have a polity --- we have a personality(2)---”.

World's largest democracy with a youthful and aspirational population;  a nuclear power having the world's third largest military force  and the potential of becoming the third largest economy by mid-2030s,  India has a sense of destiny.  She seeks permanent membership of the UN Security Council, notwithstanding the historic blunder of rejecting the US offer in early 1950s, to be inducted as one in the UNSC (5).

India is acutely conscious that the world is becoming multipolar, especially in economic terms. “I think it's very important we have a multipolar Asia (2). You're not gonna have a multipolar world if you don't have a multipolar Asia”. India has vital stakes in the Indo Pacific region (IPR) which are steadily growing. India thus insists on a level playing field shorn of coercion or roadblocks.

Again, freedom of navigation in IPR is sacrosanct as a bulk of India’s trade takes place with the region including 55% that passes through the South China Sea (6). PM Modi had spelled out India’s vision of IPR at the Shangri la dialogue in 2018 –“ It stands for a free, open, inclusive region ---( which has) ---a common rules-based order – (that recognizes) sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength(7)----”

Given India’s expanding footprint, stakes and challenges – economic, strategic, political, security and cultural - the old distinction between the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions has all but disappeared. “We have interests, which extend beyond the Indian Ocean, and therefore, that's how really the concept (2) of Indo Pacific came”. Over the last 75 years India has become much more Asian or Indo Pacific. IPR is an inclusive vision and has found wide acceptance except with China and Russia.

It may be flagged here that “India’s geography is open on three sides (6). The British Imperial legacy made it sea-blind”. India’s coastline is over 7500 km with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of about 2.37 million square kilometres that includes 100s of islands, the south-eastern most of which is barely 90 nautical miles from northern Indonesia. India thus needs to be mindful of her maritime security, besides being a net security provider in the region.

And that is the genesis of the quadrilateral grouping or Quad - comprising of the US, Japan, Australia and India - which first met at official level in 2007, was all but dissolved in 2008, but revived in 2017. It was elevated to the level of foreign ministers in 2019.  The Quad leaders met virtually in March 2021 and physically at Washington last September.  There is no denying that the elephant or dragon in the room is China and the raison d'etre of the grouping is maritime security in its broadest construct. However, unlike AUKUS it is not a military alliance or Asian NATO (at least as yet!) as alleged by China.

Truth be told India was quite reticent about the Quad in the initial years. However Chinese aggression and expansionism provided the impetus not just to India but also other member countries to come together. Chinese belligerence and ambition continue to grow in direct proportion to its economic might. China figured prominently in the discussion during the September summit. The leaders were particularly concerned at China taking advantage of open societies to acquire critical technologies by all possible means.

The leaders noted that the regional security situation had become ever-more complex, in just six months since the March meeting. That said the scope and agenda of Quad has expanded to providing one billion doses of India-made Covid vaccine to developing countries in 2022, combating climate change, safeguarding and promoting democracy, collaboration in critical and emerging technologies and launching a new Quad infrastructure partnership. Expansion of Quad is not on the drawing board at the moment yet France for one has all the credentials for strengthening the process.

China has launched an offensive against the Quad,  having been initially dismissive about it.  It dubbed it as a "closed, exclusive clique targeting other countries...(that) ....will find no support and is doomed to fail (8)." However notes Kevin Rudd “Beijing has concluded that the Quad represents one of the most consequential challenges to Chinese ambitions in the years ahead (10).”

China’s rise is the foremost challenge that could derail India’s quest. The more India rises, the more it must expect Chinese opposition, and it will have to also work with other powers to ensure that its interests are protected in the neighbourhood, the region and the world (6).

In 1988 when prime minister Rajiv Gandhi visited China, India’s per capita income was higher than the former’s.  India and China have a continental boundary of over 3488 square kilometres which is un-delineated.  The two sides had agreed not to allow the boundary dispute to stand in the way of building convergences where possible, while maintaining peace and tranquillity along the boundary called  LAC (Line of Actual Control).  A mechanism of special Representatives (Chinese State Councilor and Indian National Security advisor) was institutionalized in 2003 to address the vexed issue. 22 rounds of painstaking negotiations have taken place without any results with the Chinese side refusing even to exchange maps.

However, borders had remained tranquil since 1975. Two-way trade began to grow with China enjoying a huge surplus. Bilateral engagement at all levels increased remarkably. Prime Minister Modi and president Xi Jinping had met 18 times since 2014, including at two informal summits meant to deepen mutual understanding and enhance trust.

In the meantime Chinese economy,   military power,  ambition  and aggression continued to grow manifesting itself in  various theatres especially South China Sea and East China Sea. Incursions along LAC which used to get resolved peacefully started degenerating into standoffs especially since President Xi assumed office in 2012. In May last year China amassed tens of thousands of troops along the LAC violating the status quo.  On 15th June, 20 Indian soldiers where bludgeoned  to death, consigning four decades of confidence-building measures and agreements to flames.  Of course Indian troops paid back in kind neutralizing  twice the number of adversaries.

True to form, China blamed India for the aggression and refuses to restore status quo ante.  The reason for Chinese belligerence is not known till date except for the fact that its comprehensive national power vis a vie India has increased manifold. China has been unmindful of India's core interests while demanding that its red lines be respected. Beijing continues to lay claim on Indian territory, extends political, economic and military support including nuclear and weapons of mass destruction to Pakistan; protects Pakistan based terrorists targeting India and opposes India’s membership of UNSC and NSG.

There is no plausible explanation of Chinese military action in eastern Ladakh except a desire to embarrass India. It is moot if they have succeeded. India and China have had numerous rounds of discussions to defuse the situation since May 2020 at military, officials and political levels. Dr. Jaishankar has been encouraging China to “take the long view’ on the basis of the “three mutuals” – mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interests (10).

India believes that the center of global economic and political gravity is shifting and will continue to shift to the Indo-pacific region; and that there is enough room for every nation to grow peacefully. Prime Minister Modi had accordingly outlined the vision of SAGAR (security and growth for all in the region) in 2015. China in particular needs to assess it's approach; whether to be a responsible member of the international community or a threat and push the region into an infructuous contestation. President Xi Jinping who senses a window up to 2035 “to make China the world’s top economic, technological, and potentially even military power (9)” is more likely than not, to push ahead with its wolf-warrior diplomacy forcing the world to take necessary countervailing measures.

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