

EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION

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ABSTRACT

Geopolitical developments in a covid-impacted world point towards heightened strategic brinkmanship between the 'Great Powers' over domination of locations, resources, trade, technology, and political influence. This strategic play is panning out in the Indo-Pacific - the center of gravity of global power shifts. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and economic overdrive posit a scenario of China-centric economic order. The US on the other hand is continually upgrading its Indo Pacific vision and revamping the East Asian security alliance system; with a focus on the QUAD, AUKUS and Five Eye intelligence sharing tie-up etc. Ukraine conflict has galvanized NATO as well as the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Amidst this great power contestation, what emerges is hedging, aligning, and balancing by the Middle Level /Small Powers to protect their respective national interests. In the meanwhile, unprecedented developments have taken place in Eurasia viz, Talibanization of Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These geopolitical developments are bound to alter the strategic security landscape of Eurasia and re-fashion the security architecture of Europe. In the evolving 'New Cold War' milieu, the events in Eurasia and Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked and therefore merit a holistic examination.

Geopolitics of Indo-Pacific

The strategic community generally agrees that the Indo-Pacific has become the center of gravity of the global power shift. The Indo-Pacific region has an immense strategic value which puts this region into the limelight in the calculus of major powers. The region is populated with more than half the world's population, majority of mega cities, bulk of the world's economic growth, eight largest militaries, five nuclear powers and rich panoply of civilizations. Whether you gauge by demography, geography, economy, military or any other metric, the salience of Indo-Pacific stands out. The region serves as an interconnecting space to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, from a security and commerce perspective. The European countries have handsome commercial and strategic stakes in the Indo-Pacific Region which make Europe and Indo-Pacific account for over 70 percent of global trade in goods and services, and 60 percent of global foreign and direct investment flows.

Strategic brinkmanship in this critically important region has heightened in last decade, in the wake of America's 'Pivot to Asia' and China's strategic forays in the form of her much-touted BRI and other economic initiatives. Strategic play in the region devolves around a mix of competition, cooperation, and competition. This era of managed combative competition was punctuated by the arrival of President Donald Trump at the scene. Enthused with 'America First Policy', he described Russia and China among other countries in adversarial terms. Trade and technological wars between the US and China intensified. Trump's impetuous behavior coalesced Russia – China tactical alignment into a strategic embrace. At the same, abrasive approach of President Trump caused fissures in the Euro Atlantic alliance and NATO. Strategic pundits were quick to posit a strategic scenario in terms of 'Cold Peace' or the 'New Cold war'. The world in their view was heading towards amorphous multi-polarity in a

VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) environment. Amid a fluid strategy milieu, the rise and belligerence of China led to a revival of QUAD. On the ideological front contours of contestation between the concert of democracies and autocratic regimes started taking shape. And, then came the most debilitating Covid pandemic strategic shock that jolted the emerging paradigm of strategic realignments and put the process of globalization in a deep freeze. Sagacity should have dictated the need for global collaboration to tide over this unprecedented humanitarian crisis, but what we witnessed is the accentuation of the New Cold War in Zero-Sum Game mindsets. China exploited Covid induced chaos to consolidate its claims in the South China Sea, resorted to military coercion against Taiwan and use of force to alter the status quo at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India. Mishandling of Covid Pandemic took the sheen off Pax Americana and caused disdain for Pan-Sinica. Unanimous view now is that the world has plunged into a 'New Cold War' characterized by domination for resources and locations, contestation over ideological narratives, trade and technology and military brinkmanship. The protagonists in the 'New Cold' war are the reigning hegemon - the US, and belligerent challenger – China.

3. With the election of President Joe Biden, the imperative of balancing China gained traction. In fact, there is a bi-partisan view in the US to checkmate and balance assertive China. Joe Biden's slogan of 'America is Back' seeking to revive America's leadership in protecting the extant world order. Pronouncements such as 'Build Back Better World (B3W)', ~~Bluedart~~ initiative, mending East Asia and Euro Atlantic security alliances, strengthening NATO, revamping QUAD and the very creation of AUKUS are aimed at balancing China's ascent in the Indo-Pacific. There is a renewed focus on QUAD; the US has articulated a new Indo-Pacific vision which in most of its elements finds convergences in similar visions espoused by India, Japan, Australia, UK, Germany, and France. The collective vision of democratic construct is steeped in free and open Indo-Pacific, respect for rule-based international order, and collaboration in domains of health, climate change, trade, diversification of supply chains, infrastructure development, technology, and comprehensive maritime security. These developments are viewed by Russia and China as inimical to their strategic interests. In contrast, China's Indo-Pacific Strategy has three prominent prongs; one, creation of a China-centric Asian economic order through BRI, RCEP, and alternate economic institutions such as AIIB, follow a Two Ocean Anti Access and Anti Denial (A2D) military strategy, concomitant with strategic coercion of Taiwan and other Indo-Pacific littorals and using North Korea and a nuclear wildcard. Russia – China joint military exercises in the East China Sea are part of a continuum to countervail the America-led security alliance system. What we are witnessing is the era of Multi-Domain Warfare and Grey Zone conflicts that are far more complex and pernicious than classic state to state conflicts. The geopolitical contest between the major powers has put smaller countries on the horns of strategic dilemmas; ASEAN Indo-Pacific vision is rooted in neutrality and, likewise, other smaller countries are seen hedging, aligning, and balancing their security and economic interests.

Comment [Office1]: Points 1. And 2. Are missing?

Comment [Office2]: Blue Dot Network?

Eurasian factor

4. Eurasia, the Mackinder's heartland, has recently witnessed unprecedented geopolitical developments that have altered the balance of power in favor of Russia and China. After the unceremonious exit of the US from Afghanistan, its influence and image in Eurasia has significantly dented. Under an orthodox and unrelenting Taliban

regime, Afghanistan remains isolated and is in the throes of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The mere fact that despite being in control for nearly one year, the Taliban regime lacks legitimacy and diplomatic recognition. There is no multilateral dispensation in the offing to bring peace and normalcy in Afghanistan. Therefore, a Talibanized Afghanistan will remain a source of regional security conundrum. The Great Game in Afghanistan will affect the great power relations in the Indo-Pacific in one way or the other. China and Russia hold sway in Central Asia in the economic and security spheres respectively. China's trade with the region has exceeded \$30 billion and it has embarked upon several projects under the rubric of BRI, thereby, increasing the economic dependence of these countries on China. Russia on the other hand continues to be a net security provider in Central Asia,+++++ as was seen by its intervention in the garb of CSTO in the recent political turmoil in Kazakhstan. Light contours of Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey strategic alignment are appearing on the Eurasian horizon. However, the most significant development that has impacted the balance of power is the ensuing Ukraine conflict. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, tacitly supported by China, is bringing about a new paradigm in the balance of power. The recently concluded Xi Jinping - Putin Summit during the 'Winter Olympics' has led to further consolidation of their strategic interests vis-à-vis the US and NATO. On the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to the consolidation of the NATO and Euro Atlantic alliance. The world is in the throes of a heightened confrontation between the West on one side and Russia -China's strategic nexus on the other. In Ukraine, the likelihood of simmering National Resistance, supported by the Euro-Atlantic alliance and debilitating economic sanctions will embroil Russia in a prolonged conflict. Recently held, Joe Biden - Xi Jinping telephonic conversation points to an unsavory scenario wherein contenders are likely to adopt strident positions on their perceived core interests. The dice seems to be loaded for a prolonged confrontation. In the ongoing toxic milieu, India - a key QUAD partner is beset with strategic dilemmas. India's heavy arms import dependence on Russia and other diplomatic factors, particularly the China factor, have made it abstain from voting at various UN resolutions moved against Russia. Nonetheless, Moscow remains somewhat skeptical about India's cozying up to QUAD, or for that matter signing a slew of security related fundamental agreements with the US. India's voting behavior at the UN has raised eyebrows from its QUAD and other Western partners. While partner countries have exhibited some understanding of India's difficult choice, but their lurking disappointment cannot be ignored. No wonder President Joe Biden in a recent statement called India a shaky QUAD partner. How India navigates these choppy geopolitical waters is a big politico-military challenge?

Crystal-gazing Indo- Pacific

5. In the Ukraine crisis, there has been a similarity in the approach of India, Pakistan, and China vis-à-vis Russia. Whether there is a possibility of some thaw in vexed relations between the three countries needs to be seen? India would assume the chairmanship of the SCO. There may also be a renewed attempt to use the BRICS forum for some dialogue between India and China. As far as the reaction of the Western countries is concerned, the role of India could be viewed as a dampener in furtherance of QUAD prospects. India views its QUAD ambition in the light of the Pakistan-China military nexus and its manifestation over the contested border with the two countries. There is an ongoing debate in India's policy circles as to what extent an external balancing in the Indo-Pacific can ameliorate its security challenges in the

continental space? For the time being, the US has abstained from invoking CAATSA against India for the import of the S-400 air defense system from Russia. The US has also shown empathy towards India for its decision to import fossil fuels from Russia at cheap rates. But for India, it will be an uphill task to continually ignore US-led West expectations, lest it is branded as an outright Moscow supporter. Russia, in turn, will expect India to render unstinted support in the hours of future reckoning. The shadow of Ukraine conflict will loom large on the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Concerns are afloat regarding China upping the ante on Taiwan and demonstrating more assertive behavior in the Western Pacific. There are expectations of a more robust response from the US to stand by its security alliance clauses and shed off its strategic ambiguity on Taiwan. An opinion poll reveals that more than 70 percent of the population in Taiwan are ready to pick up arms to resist China's military invasion of Taiwan. There is a growing propensity in North Korea to test more nuclear missiles and demonstrate its intent to target Japan, South Korea, and American military bases in the region. Ukraine crisis has once again established the efficacy of nuclear weapons in the strategic calculus of countries as an effective tool of deterrence. Growing nuclear threat may raise the pitch for extension of the US nuclear umbrella by Japan and South Korea or may even nudge them to take the nuclear weapon route. These developments are bound to alter the strategic military balance in the Indo-Pacific, trigger arms race and hasten the pace of dangerous military maneuvers. Western Pacific is studded with volatile flashpoints, viz Taiwan, military muscle flexing in South China Sea; East China Sea and nuclear saber-rattling by North Korea. Propensity to undertake dangerous military maneuverers in an environment of historical animosity, deep strategic mistrust, hyper-nationalism may lead the contesting parties to misread signals and miscalculate responses. An accidental clash may take the contestants up the escalation ladder and across the spectrum of conflict into a major military confrontation under a nuclear overhang.

Finally

6. The risk of the New Cold War descending into the Third World War is fraught with consequences beyond human imagination. God forbids! that will be the real end of history. It will take decades to build a new world from the wreckage of human induced catastrophe. A dooms day scenario must be averted at all costs. In the interest of humanity, sagacity demands that diplomatic options be explored to find a new 'modus vivendi' in Eurasia and end Ukraine conflict. As far as the Indo-Pacific, dialogue must commence in earnest to avoid unintended military encounters and to institutionalize mechanisms such as the 'Declaration of Parties' and 'Code of Conduct' at Sea and air. To this end, the formulation of a concert of middle-level and small powers is a strategic imperative to provide a balancing nudge rather than remain mute bystanders in the tug of war between behemoths. It goes without saying that enduring peace and stability is a 'sine qua non' to harness great economic potential of this resource-rich Indo-Pacific region forwards co-prosperity and shared development in a win-win paradigm.

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