

A MULTIPOLARITY, SCRIPTED BY THE MIDDLE POWERS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The acrimony between the United States and Chinese delegations at the Anchorage conclave on March 19, followed by U.S. President Joe Biden referring to Russian President Vladimir Putin as a “killer” and Mr. Putin’s sharp riposte, and Mr. Biden’s reluctance to rejoin the nuclear agreement with Iran, are positions which make it clear that in respect of three crucial relationships, namely China, Russia and Iran, Mr. Biden is following in the footsteps of his much-reviled predecessor, Donald Trump.

Mr. Biden has also extended his firm backing for another of Trump’s priorities: the “Indo-Pacific” as an area of strategic significance for the U.S. and the associated alignment that gives shape and substance to this geopolitical concept — the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad for short. On March 12, [Mr. Biden convened an online summit meeting](#) of the four Quad members, namely, the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, at which the leaders affirmed their commitment to a “free, open, resilient and inclusive” Indo-Pacific region.

It is clear that the U.S. continues to view China as its principal adversary on the world stage and that it will use the Quad to challenge China in the Indo-Pacific, possibly as part of a “new Cold War”.

This new Cold War was given concrete shape during the Trump presidency when the ravages of the pandemic made the President and his officials demonise China. Then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on like-minded nations to curb China’s growth, reduce its influence in international institutions, and “induce China to change in more creative and assertive ways”, a clarion call for regime change.

The U.S.’s hostility for Russia goes back to the latter’s war with Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea in 2014, followed by allegations of Russian cyber-interference in the U.S. presidential elections of 2016. Mr. Biden continues this hostility for Russia.

U.S. animosity has encouraged China and Russia to solidify their relations. Besides significantly expanding their bilateral ties, the two countries have agreed to harmonise their visions under the Eurasian Economic Union sponsored by Russia and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This idea has now been subsumed under the ‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’ to which both are committed. Both have condemned the Quad for “undermining global strategic stability”.

Thus, the new Cold War is now being reflected in a new geopolitical binary — the Indo-Pacific versus Eurasia.

The final shape of this divide will be determined by four nations, namely Japan, Iran, Turkey and India, which, as “middle powers”, have the capacity to project power regionally, build alliances, and support (or disrupt) the strategies of international powers pursuing their interests in the region.

On the face of it, their alignments are already in place: Japan and India are deeply entrenched in the Quad and have substantial security ties with the U.S. Iran, on the other hand, has for long been an outcaste in western eyes and has found strategic comfort with the Sino-Russian

alliance. Turkey, a NATO member, has found its interests better-served by Russia and China rather than the U.S. and its European allies.

So, why the uncertainty? The main reason is that, despite the allure, the four nations are not yet prepared to join immutable alliances.

Japan has an ongoing territorial dispute with China relating to the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. Thus, the security treaty of 1951 with the U.S. has been crucial for Japan's interests. But there is more to Sino-Japanese relations: in 2019, 24% of Japanese imports came from China, while 19% of its exports went to China, affirming the adage: Japan depends [too much on the U.S. for its security and too much on China for its prosperity](#).

The eight-year prime ministership of Shinzo Abe has instilled in Japan greater self-confidence so that it can reduce its security-dependence on the U.S. and pursue an independent role in the Indo-Pacific. Hence its \$200 billion 'Partnership for Quality Infrastructure' that funds infrastructure projects in Asia and Africa, though Japan is also willing to work on BRI projects on a selective basis. But these are early days and it remains unclear whether Japan will explore the wide oceans or confine its strategic interests to the East China Sea.

India's ties with China have been caught in a vicious circle: as threats from China at the border and intrusions in its South Asian neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean became sharper, it moved closer to the U.S. It is likely that India's expanding defence ties with the U.S. from 2016, consisting of massive defence purchases and agreements on inter-operability and intelligence-sharing and frequent military exercises, as also the elevation of the Quad to ministerial level in September 2019, signalled to China that India was now irreversibly in the U.S. camp. With the border stand-off at Ladakh, China is perhaps reminding India that its security interests demand close engagement with China rather than a deepening alignment with its global rival.

China has a point: while the Quad has made India a valuable partner for the U.S. in the west Pacific, neither the U.S. nor the Quad can address the challenges it faces at its 3,500-kilometre land border with China. The 'revenge of geography' and concerns relating to the U.S.'s intrusive approach on human rights issues ensure that India will need to manage its ties with China largely through its own efforts, while retaining Russia as its defence partner.

The crippling sanctions on Iran and the frequent threats of regime change make it a natural ally of the Sino-Russian axis. However, its strategic culture eschews long-term security alignments. This will surely assert itself after sanctions are eased, when the Islamic Republic of Iran will seek to redefine its strategic space and exercise independent options.

The "neo-Ottomanism" of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — celebrating Turkey's glory through military and doctrinal leadership across the former territories of the Ottoman empire — has been achieved through a steady distancing from its western partners and increasing geopolitical, military and economic alignment with Russia and China. But Turkey still wishes to keep its ties with the U.S. intact, and retain the freedom to make choices. Its "New Asia" initiative, for instance, involves strengthening of east-west logistical and economic connectivity backed by western powers and China.

The four middle powers, whose choice of alignment will impart a political and military binary to world order, are reluctant to make this a reality. While Cold War advocates in home capitals and in the U.S. will continue to promote ever-tighter alliances, these nations could find salvation in "strategic autonomy" — defined by flexible partnerships, with freedom to shape alliances to suit specific interests at different times.

These four middle powers will thus make multipolarity, rather than a new Cold War, the defining characteristic of the emerging global order.

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