

## Dark clouds across Asia

What awaits the Asia-Pacific in 2018? Prospects appear, if anything, bleaker than was the case in 2017. More disorder, coming with increasing signs of a breakdown in inter and intra-state relations, is perhaps on the horizon. The Asian region is nowhere near achieving the kind of equilibrium that the Concert of Europe brought to 19th century Europe.

The region is today an area of intense geostrategic and geo-economic competition. China is the rising economic and military power in Asia today — the second most important economic power after the U.S. and having the second or third most powerful military. In seeking dominance over Asia, however, it not only has to contend with a strong military and economic U.S. presence in the region, but it also cannot afford to ignore the competition from Japan and India. In mid-2017 in [Doklam](#), India had demonstrated that it was more than capable of standing up to China's bullying tactics.

Much of the speculation about the extent of China's rise is based on the common presumption that the U.S. under President Donald Trump had surrendered its global leadership role. The reluctance of the U.S. to embark on 'new wars', especially in Asia, does not, however, undermine its geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic pre-eminence. It is not China's rise, but the breakdown of the institution of the state, as is evident in Afghanistan and Syria, that poses far more pressing problems for Asia.

Undoubtedly, East Asia will remain a troubled region for much of 2018, with the leadership of North Korea intent on playing increasingly dangerous games and engaging in nuclear sabre-rattling. It is unpredictable at this point whether this would lead to a major destabilisation of the region, with far-reaching consequences for Asia and the world.

The future of the rest of the Asia in 2018 is again dependent on how the strategic triangle of state relations between China, Pakistan and India plays out, as also the extent to which events in West Asia deteriorate. The situation has become more complicated as China and Pakistan have further strengthened their axis, which is inimically disposed towards India. Fragmentation of already difficult relationships does not hold out much hope for any improvement in 2018.

As it is, options for an improvement in relations in 2018 between China and India appear limited. The 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (October 2017) essentially highlighted China's quest for global leadership and the means to achieve it, including making China's military 'world class', one capable of 'winning wars'. It contained few hints that signified a possible thaw in India-China relations.

In 2017, India-China relations had steadily deteriorated. China is clearly peeved that India refuses to participate in its [Belt and Road Initiative](#) that straddles Asia and Europe. The stand-off at Doklam in mid-2017 was possibly intended by China to be a 'shot across India's bow', to send a message to India. More such situations will, in all likelihood, be repeated in 2018.

China can also be expected in 2018 to resort to other pressure tactics against India. Backing Pakistani intransigence in 'needling' India is certain to be one. Additionally, China can be expected to intensify its moves to displace India as the major partner in relations with many of India's neighbours — 2017 had already seen China moving in this direction *vis-à-vis* Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. As it is, China has succeeded to some extent in denting India's long-standing relationship with Russia, having established a strategic congruence with that country.

India would again need to be on its guard in 2018 as China consolidates its takeover of Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) ports. Together with China's establishment of a base in Djibouti (on the Horn of Africa), India could find itself at the receiving end of China's 'Wei-Qi tactics'.

As India grows closer to the U.S. in 2018, the India-China equation could further worsen. The most recent National Security Strategy of the U.S. refers to China as a 'rival', while welcoming India's emergence as a 'strategic and defence partner'. This is certain to ratchet up the rivalry between India and China in the Asia-Pacific region, likely to be further compounded by India's association with the Quadrilateral (of U.S., India, Japan and Australia).

Again, 2018 holds out little prospect of an improvement in India-Pakistan relations. The last year ended with a serious ceasefire violation along the Line of Control in the Rajouri Sector, in which army men, including a Major, were killed. In 2017 there was an over 200% increase in ceasefire violations, with infiltration touching a four-year high.

This year began with a major terrorist attack by Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) elements on a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp in Avantipur (Pulwama district) in which five CRPF men were killed. The treatment meted out to the family of Kulbhushan Jadhav (currently incarcerated in a Pakistani prison) and the fake news that followed their visit provides an index of Pakistan's cold, calculated and consistent hostility towards India. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) continues to remain in cold storage. Pakistan has also not refrained from persisting with its proxies like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the JeM in its war with India.

In its neighbourhood, India must be prepared during 2018 for a further deterioration of the situation in already disturbed Afghanistan. The Afghan state is in real danger of imploding, and this situation could worsen. The latest attack by Mr. Trump on Pakistan's duplicity in dealing with terrorism could well result in Pakistan adopting a still more perverse and disruptive role here, and providing further encouragement to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network.

The current peace talks may well collapse as a result. Any possibility of exerting greater military pressure by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and allied forces may prove futile.

The situation in West Asia in 2018 could well turn out to be far grimmer than in 2017. West Asia is at the crossroads today. The entire region is in turmoil. Syria has almost ceased to be a state. The war here entails major powers like the U.S. and Russia, proxies for certain West Asian countries, a medley of non-state actors, apart from terrorist outfits such as the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda.

Intrinsic to the Syrian and West Asian imbroglio is the ongoing war within Islam featuring, at one level, intense rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, and at another, the spectre of a split down the line between the Arab and the non-Arab and the Sunni and Shiite worlds.

In addition, there are other forces aggravating an already complicated situation, viz. the war in Yemen, the disruption within the Gulf Cooperation Council, the nascent upheavals in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the spectre of de-stabilisation that hovers over much of the region. None of these issues is likely to find resolution in 2018, and could suck in more states of the region.

If the U.S. were to follow through with its announcement to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, it might well ignite new tensions across the entire Arab world. This will further inflame radical Islamist ideas and tendencies across the region, paving the way for a new round of conflict.

This year could also see a resurgence in terrorism. Both the IS and al-Qaeda seem to have acquired a new salience lately. The collapse of the so-called Islamic Caliphate and its territorial

demise has hardly weakened the terror potential of the IS. In much the same manner as the Afghan jihad in 1980s and 1990s exacerbated insurgencies across parts of the world, retreating IS members returning to their homeland could provide a new narrative of terrorism in 2018. Existing cells across many parts of the world could well be re-vitalised as a result. The wave of attacks seen recently in Afghanistan can be attributed to this vanguard of retreating IS fighters.

Given such a scenario, it is difficult to be optimistic about a better 2018.

*M.K. Narayanan is a former National Security Advisor and a former Governor of West Bengal*

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