

Out of the shadows of the Cold War

Last week at a conference in New Delhi, Admiral Harry Harris, the head of the US military's Pacific command, referred to China as a disruptive power in the Indo-Pacific and urged countries in the region to build their capabilities and work together.

When the US looks to Asia, it no longer sees the peaceful rise of China, instead it sees an economic and military rival that seeks to undermine the international liberal order that the US helped establish after World War II. Washington now seeks like-minded democratic free-market societies as allies and partners in upholding this rules-based order.

Indians believe in, and have long sought, acknowledgement by others of Indian primacy in the Indian Ocean region. At a time when the Donald Trump administration is seeking partners, it appears that New Delhi is finally ready to move beyond speeches and vision statements to play a role in the greater Indo-Pacific region.

South Asia was and will remain India's primary sphere of influence, with over 85% of the annual development budget of India's foreign ministry devoted to the immediate neighbourhood. New Delhi has also learnt that maintaining a sphere of influence is not simply a function of telling others what to do but being able to expend resources that deny space to competitors.

India's experience in Afghanistan and growing Chinese presence in South Asia, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have made New Delhi more receptive to initiatives like the Japan and Asian Development Bank co-sponsored Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure Initiative as an alternative to the BRI.

Under Narendra Modi's leadership, India views Japan as not only an economic partner but also a key strategic ally with whom it shares similar threats and challenges, namely the rise of China. Building on ties with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that were developed while Modi was chief minister of Gujarat, India views Japan as the key partner for development of infrastructure both within India and in its neighbourhood. In 2014, Japan offered \$35 billion investment in infrastructure projects in India, with a \$17 billion bullet train project being announced in 2017.

India's historical and civilizational ties with South-East Asia date back centuries, with the region hosting a large Indian diaspora. However, it is only in the 1990s that India adopted its 'Look East' policy, aimed at building closer economic ties with the region, and only in the last decade that a security dimension has been added to this relationship. Reflective of the new 'Act East' policy, for the first time in seven decades, on 26 January, the top leaders of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) grouping will be the chief guests at the celebrations on the occasion of India's 69th Republic Day. India's trade with the region stands at \$76 billion, with India a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Similarly, New Delhi has boosted relations with the Pacific Islands, again a region with which India shares civilizational ties and a large Indian diaspora. Since 2014, there have been annual conferences either in India or in the region itself and New Delhi has offered massive assistance, including annual grants-in-aid to each of the 14 Pacific countries ranging from \$125,000 to \$200,000. India has also set up a fund for adapting to climate change, capacity building of coastal surveillance systems and technical training and educational fellowships.

India's growing economic and security relationships and interest in the Indo-Pacific region are aligned with its deepening partnership with the US. Two years after signing the US-India Joint Strategic Vision of 2015, India is a member of the Quad (a strategic grouping of the US, India,

Japan and Australia) and there is talk about making the grouping something more than an annual talk shop.

From being “estranged” democracies during the Cold War, India and the US today share, in the words of US secretary of state Rex Tillerson, a “growing strategic convergence”. From having almost no military relations during the Cold War, India is today a ‘major defence partner’ of the US. From \$20 billion in bilateral trade in the year 2000, today that figure stands at \$115 billion.

Ever since 1947, Indian leaders have sought recognition for India, on the basis of its civilizational greatness, belief in India as an example to the world and the role it is destined to play on the global stage. The Cold War and American preoccupations with other regions of the world and Washington’s convoluted relationship with Pakistan prevented American leaders from understanding what India wanted.

Today, however, the US views India as a potential regional security provider and seeks to build India’s security capacity through commercial and defence cooperation between the two militaries.

When it views the Indo-Pacific, Washington sees India and the US as the two “bookends of stability,” in the words of Tillerson, and “natural allies” that share a commitment to “upholding the rule of law, freedom of navigation, universal values, and free trade”. The recent National Security Strategy, 2017 also spoke of America seeking to support India’s “leadership role” in the Indo-Pacific region.

What remains to be seen, however, is how Washington and New Delhi prepare the contours of this partnership.

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