

Natural partners in the Asian century

As we complete two decades of the 21st century, a paradigm change in the global power structure is taking shape. Technology and size are causing this change. The physical size of a nation did not matter during the 19th and most of the 20th centuries. Britain, Germany, France and Japan leveraged their Industrial Revolution advantage on technology for armaments to become world powers despite their relatively small size. Europe thus became the global centre till the late 1950s. Now, potential power is shifting to the two large nations of the Asian mainland, China and India, which are nuclear weapons states and with fast-growing economies. Together they represent 60% of the Asian mainland.

Asia already accounts for almost half of the world's population, half of the world's container traffic, one-third of its bulk cargo and 40% of the world's off-shore oil reserves. It is home to several fast-growing new economies with GDP growth rates above 7% per year, i.e. a doubling of the GDP every 10 years.

Asian defence spending (\$439 billion) is also much more than Europe's (\$386 billion). In a few years half of the world's naval fleet and combat aircraft with extended range missiles, supported by highly sophisticated communications networks, will soon be seen roaming in the Indo-Pacific region.

Also, since the late 1990s, China and India have been rapidly emerging as influential power hubs. Being two of the three most populous and largest GDP nations, India and China, both culturally akin, are socially structured on family values and associated social attitudes.

Potentially both are poised to fill the role of global powers. To achieve that potential, both require hardware, software and the clear mindset for exercising this power. As of now, China is ahead of India in reaching that level. We are concerned here with the question whether India can reach it.

India's China policy thus needs a re-structuring based on a fresh perspective that is relevant for the 21st century. This is because the global power matrix has undergone a paradigm change, from an exclusively Atlantic shores-based concerns to emerging Indo-Pacific ocean strategic issues. Thus India-China relations matter as never before.

The diminishing influence of Western powers in the region, and as of now the acknowledged rising power of China are the new global reality. In terms of hardware capability and mindset, India is at present only a regional power. Because of its present mindset, it is obsessed with the problem of Pakistan-trained terrorists entering Indian territory rather than asserting higher priority on global issues, and thus it is complicit in international attempts to hyphenate the two regional-minded nations, India with Pakistan.

This is the Indian myopia, because India has the capacity and the opportunity to rise as a 'responsible and influential global power'. As a collateral effect, this will easily fix Pakistan and its terrorist propensity.

Since 1971, Pakistan has already broken into two, and there are still fissiparous internal pressures. India therefore needs a new mindset: to look beyond Pakistan. Moreover, it depends on whether India's intellectual outlook matures enough to find acceptable accommodation with China for a partnership in Asian peace.

The U.S. has become a much friendlier nation for India, especially because the Soviet Union unravelled, and India's economy is growing fast to become an open, competitive market economy, the third largest in PPP terms. But the U.S. also is hesitant to put boots on the ground to fight terrorist establishments. Hence India can help the U.S. fill that growing void in return for the sophisticated military hardware that it lacks.

The world already is dazzled by India's prowess in information technology, the capability to produce pharmaceuticals at low cost, and the high quality of its trained manpower capable of innovation. But India does not exert this soft power advantage on the world scene commensurate with this potential or its size in Asia.

We are still on the international stage in a "petitioner" mode on vital national and international security issues — an unfortunate hangover from Nehru's diplomacy of the 1950s. Unless we take ourselves seriously, stop craving foreign certificates and acquire commensurate military hardware by reaching spaces vacated by the U.S., others will not acknowledge our global status and comply accordingly.

My prescription is thus short: the key for India today is to bond strategically with China. But this requires dealing bilaterally on huge pending issues. After my recent visit to China, I believe there is an unfortunate trust deficit that requires frank, hard-nosed bilateral discussion at a high political level and not between bureaucrats. China recognises India's potential and respects the same.

There is sufficient common ground to cement the relationship. The question for us is: do we want to be strategic partners with China and accept sincerely the concomitant commitments, and trust China to do the same? The answer lies in our relations with the U.S., and China's relations with Pakistan.

For that to happen, India has to completely reorient its strategic mindset. A change in strategic conceptualisation is needed, that is, from the colonial hangover of junior partnership for the sake of crumbs from the materialistic "Westward Ho" syndrome, to an Eastward ethos, concomitantly from the present land-focussed thinking to Ocean-centric articulation.

The Indian Ocean has now emerged as the epicentre of global power play in the 21st century. Gone are the outdated phrases like Asia-Pacific. Let us articulate and embrace the new concept of Indo-Pacific alliances that accommodates Chinese perspectives on a reciprocity basis. Hence we need to recognise this centrality and primacy of the Indian Ocean in India's global economic and military activism: the Indian Ocean is the epicentre of global power play in the 21st century. With Indonesian partnership, India can monitor the Malacca Strait through which over 80% of the freight traffic of China and East Asia passes.

My recent meetings with influential Chinese leaders and scholars convinces me more than ever before that China recognises India's potential to match Chinese reach and strategic goals.

Simplified, China would be more flexible in dealing with India if it is convinced of India's equidistance with the U.S. on China-U.S. disputes involving distant places such as Taiwan and South China Sea islands. Of course, we will require that China respond with similar nonchalance on Pakistan-India disputes.

As an important part of its diplomacy, India has thus to develop deeper cultural and civilisational linkages with China and the rest of Asia. India has to realise that it can't just be a spectator, or a mere visible participant, or even a 'pole' in the so-called multi-polar world. China has conceptualised and implemented the centrality of befriending all of India's neighbours and has brought them on board in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In the Chinese Communist Party Congress in the early 2000s, Hu Jintao, then President of China, had got adopted the goal of developing a “Harmonious Society”, of blending spiritual Confucianist and Taoist values with aspirations for material progress. This is similar to the Hindu values of placing on a pedestal intellect and sacrifice (gyana and tyaga). Since then China has proceeded systematically to bring countries of Asia under its influence with imaginative proposals such as the BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. India has been reduced to merely reacting to such proposals without any of her own to canvass as an alternative.

India, therefore, has to strive imaginatively to become a stakeholder in this new global power paradigm: to give up its reticence and passive diplomacy and learn to exercise power without being seen as a bully by our neighbours.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi we have at least conveyed to the world that we have arrived and are interested in carving out India’s due place.

To some extent, China too has made that clear already by writing into CPEC and BRI documents, since India objected, that the proposed road through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir would be subject to the “final solution” of the so-called Jammu and Kashmir issue.

In brief then, India is now poised to form a global triangle with the U.S. and China, and therefore the government must seize the opportunity, which requires a serious effort at reconciliation with China in a give-and-take mode without sacrificing our national interest.

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