

## A pivot in Asia

The National Defence Strategy (NDS) and the National Security Strategy (NSS) released recently by the U.S. showcase the country's strategic priorities and the way forward. As the two documents lay considerable focus on the 'Indo-Pacific', they will serve as crucial policy indicators for India and the region. The previous Obama administration too laid considerable focus on Asia-Pacific under its 'Rebalance to Asia' strategy.

The NDS is reflective of the changing geopolitical realities in Asia. China's territorial and maritime overtures in the Indian Ocean, regional instability due to North Korea's nuclear and missile tests, and the salience of Asian economies in international trade and commerce has brought the region into prominence. The U.S. administration has shifted its focus from the Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific as a reference point of its maritime strategy. With its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the U.S. is looking for multilateral economic engagement with Asian economies. On the strategic front, apart from building missile defence systems with Japan and South Korea to checkmate North Korea, U.S. President Donald Trump has shown keenness to align with the 'Quad' to counter China's rise.

With India as America's 'major defence partner', the NDS seeks to further expand defence cooperation between the two countries with particular emphasis on military purchases. However, being an emerging economic and military player in the region, New Delhi has its own national interests and regional concerns and addressing those goes beyond mere defence deals. Besides traditional security concerns like China and North Korea, the region faces non-traditional security threats such as piracy and terrorism.

India's neighbourhood is demonstrating changes under China's influence. Chinese infrastructure and loan diplomacy have impacted India's immediate neighbourhood. There has been a constant Chinese strategic presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). At the multilateral level, India is checkmated by China on the issues of terrorism and membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Over the last three years, India has worked to secure a major diplomatic engagement to secure its relations with its immediate neighbourhood as well as further its relations with ASEAN under the 'Act East' policy to counter China. However, there is little tangible evidence of any significant outcome of the engagement so far.

China has invested significant capital to push ahead its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its economy will be dependent on the success of the BRI and cooperation with other states, so China will not want to destabilise the region. As no single country in the Indo-Pacific region can rise to the challenge posed by China and other security concerns, there needs to be a building of unity. India can be that 'consensus builder' in its neighbourhood before moving ahead with its role as 'net security provider' in the region.

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