

HOW DEMOCRACIES CAN COUNTER THE CHINA SYNDROME

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What challenges does Beijing present?

China sees America as a nation in decline and, in its quest to emerge as the pre-eminent global power, has subverted international norms, conducted cyber espionage, and forced foreign MNCs operating on its soil to part with intellectual property and technological know-how. Its state subsidies to firms and questionable currency and trade policies have powered its exports. China under President Xi Jinping has wielded military threats and sanctions to bend its neighbours and has intimidated capitals in far off places. Its rising global influence, if left unchecked, could devour many civic, economic freedoms that we so cherish.

What kind of coalition is Biden talking about?

Biden is contemplating an alliance with liberal democracies across globe to compel China to change its behaviour. US President Donald Trump's diagnosis of China as a revisionist, predatory power was accurate and his trade and tech war, barring Chinese companies such as Huawei from supplying 5G telecom equipment or accessing American software, rattled Beijing. However, his propensity to bully allies and the "America First" call dashed any hopes of a coalition against China's expansionism. That could change under Biden, who may forge a coherent strategy against China predicated on values of democracy and openness.

Where does India figure in this whole scenario?

India would be an important part of any coalition to counter China, given its liberal political culture. Besides, Beijing has sought to exercise leverage over India's neighbouring countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh through its debt-trap diplomacy, even as it refuses to budge from the Indian territory it has occupied in Ladakh.

Can such a coalition ever fructify?

It is not difficult to forge such a coalition, especially after the coronavirus that first emerged in China and soon swept the world. Global opinion, from Brussels to Canberra and New Delhi has turned against China. Beijing's draconian national security law, which it imposed on Hong Kong, has raised alarm bells. However, the real question is whether such a coalition would endure and if Biden would stay the course. Also, how many Asian countries can withstand the bruising economic sanctions that China can slap?

What does the future look like?

China's rise looks inevitable. It has been able to swiftly curb the virus and is set to be the only major economy that would expand this year. It is expected to leap past the US to become the world's largest economy in 2028, five years earlier than previously estimated. This rise won't be peaceful, though. We will see increased militarization and a bid to dominate resource-rich South China Sea. It will spike tensions, as about \$3.4 trillion of global maritime trade passes via the Sea. The free world has little option than to confront China.

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