

A STRONG INDIA WOULD ACT AS 'COUNTERBALANCE' TO CHINA: U.S.

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

With days to go before its end, the Trump administration has declassified a sensitive document on the U.S. strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific' from 2018. The 10-page document outlines objectives and strategies with regard to China, North Korea, India and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

Maintaining "U.S. strategic primacy" in the region and promoting a "liberal economic order" while stopping China from establishing "illiberal spheres of influence" is the U.S.'s first national security challenge, as per the document. The other two challenges are ensuring that North Korea does not threaten the U.S. and advancing U.S. economic leadership globally.

With regard to India, one of the 'desired end states' of the U.S.'s strategy is for the U.S. to be India's preferred partner on security issues and for the two countries to "cooperate to preserve maritime security and counter Chinese influence" in South Asia, Southeast Asia and other regions of "mutual concern". Several sentences in the document — including in sections on India — have been redacted.

Border dispute

The U.S. aims to help India become a net security provider in the region, solidify a lasting strategic partnership with India "underpinned by a strong Indian military able to effectively collaborate with" the U.S and its regional partners. These objectives it plans to achieve via enhanced defence cooperation and interoperability; working with India "toward domestic economic reform" and greater leadership roles for India in the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus.

Consequently, the U.S.'s to-do list has on it offers of support to India via military, diplomatic and intelligence channels "to help address continental challenges such as the border dispute with China and access to water, including the Brahmaputra and other rivers facing diversion by China."

Last year, India and China were engaged in their deadliest border dispute in decades along the Line of Actual Control, in which 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers were killed. Just last week U.S. Ambassador to India Kenneth Juster had said that the U.S. cooperated with India to counter China's "aggressive" actions along the LAC, but did not get this cooperation.

Act-East policy

The U.S. also seeks to bolster common principles, including the peaceful resolution of disputes and the transparent infrastructure-debt practices (a reference to alternatives to financing by China's Belt Road Initiative, which has led to untenable debt positions in borrowing countries), as per the strategy. The U.S. aims to support India's "Act East" policy and "its aspiration to be a leading global power, highlighting its compatibility with the U.S., Japanese and Australian vision" of the Indo-Pacific.

"A strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, would act as a counterbalance to

China,” is one of the underlying assumptions of the strategy, which expects Chinese military, economic and diplomatic influence will continue to increase in the short term.

“China aims to dissolve U.S. alliances and partnerships across the region. China will exploit vacuums and opportunities created by these diminished bonds,” the document says.

On Russia, it says the country will “remain a marginal player” in the region relative to the U.S., China and India.

On North Korea, a stated U.S. objective is to, “Convince the Kim regime that the only path to its survival is to relinquish its nuclear weapons.”

The official reason for the early declassification of the document, 20 years ahead of time, was “to communicate to the American people and to our allies and partners, the enduring commitment of the U.S. to keeping the Indo-Pacific region free and open long into the future,” said national Security Advisor Robert C O’ Brien in a covering note.

“Frankly, the early declassification doesn’t tie the Biden administration’s hands,” Ankit Panda, a senior fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told *The Hindu* .

“I suspect it’s an attempt by some in the outgoing administration to make their mark on policy clear and public, but it’s not a document that speaks to tremendous strategic foresight,” he said.

“There’s a considerable bit of dissonance across this document, however, in its professed goal of spreading American and liberal values and the complete lack of any language on human rights. That again isn’t particularly surprising given how the administration has gone about things,” Mr. Panda wrote in a post analysing the document.

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