

INDIA'S DILEMMAS IN AN ASIAN CENTURY

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Indonesian President Joko Widodo and U.S. President Joe Biden at the G20 Summit in Bali on November 15, 2022. | Photo Credit: PTI

If 2022 was a momentous year for India and the rest of the world, 2023 is likely to further sharpen the geopolitical fault lines set in motion by the previous year. Amidst all the tectonic shifts around us, what appears to be a certainty is the emergence of an Asia-centric century. But is that really good news for India?

The geopolitical and economic rise of Asia coincides with several regional and global developments which have the potential to undermine the stability and prosperity India had hoped an Asian century would bring. The withdrawal of the U.S. from much of continental Asia and the aggressive rise of China and the Ukraine war appear to have ended the great power concert in Asia, or what appeared as one for some time. Today, two major powers — Russia and China — are trying, though in varying degrees, to undermine the global balance of power, with several regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in tow. Asia may be headed towards more global prominence, but instability will be its possessive partner.

For India, the rise of the Asian century might turn out to be too steeped in harsh realpolitik for its comfort. A deeply status quoist, risk-averse New Delhi is inherently opposed to playing high-risk games of chicken that cross its own self-defined red lines. New Delhi might speak like a revisionist power, but don't go by what it says; go by what it does. Is it, therefore, prepared to deal with the harsh headwinds of the geopolitical contestations of an Asian century?

There can be no meaningful Asian century in a unipolar world. One alternative to a unipolar world is a multipolar world with Russia, China, Japan, India and other, smaller powers asserting themselves on the global stage. The other alternative is a China-dominated Asia. Herein lies the challenge for India. It is clear that a China-dominated Asia won't serve India's geopolitical interests. Would a multipolar Asia be useful to Indian interests? Not necessarily either. A multipolar world/Asia with new and shifting alliances; formal, informal, secret, open and in-between pacts; and competing coalitions vying for dominance will invariably take away from the relative 'stability' of the current world order where the power of the U.S. is on the decline and that of China is (still) on the rise.

More so, while multipolarity is desirable in theory, what kind of multipolarity are we seeing the emergence of? For India, multipolarity is one premised on the rule of law or peaceful

coexistence. In the words of former Indian foreign secretary H.V. Shringla in 2021, “India values a multipolar international order, underpinned by international law, premised upon respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, resolution of international disputes through peaceful negotiations, and free and open access for all to the global commons”. If anything, a multipolar world led by Asian powers for the most part is likely to be the opposite of what Mr. Shringla outlined.

One of the likely implications of a multipolar world in which Asia takes the centre stage would be a sharpening of opposition against the current global financial order. The so-called weaponisation of globalisation and trade, sanctions against Russia, and Russia’s attempts in turn at evading them with help from its Asian partners (China, Iran, Turkey, India, etc.) will pose serious challenges to dollar-based trade and Western payment systems such as SWIFT. The aftermath of the Ukraine war has led to a serious search in parts of Asia for alternative trading arrangements and payment mechanisms. India may have issues with dollar-based trade, but would it like trading arrangements centred around Yuan?

New Delhi has consistently campaigned for a multipolar world where key Asian powers have a place at the high table of international politics. Yet it may hesitate to engage the emergent Asian century for various reasons. For one, the Indian establishment has a deeply status quoist view of the world order despite its frequent calls for change. While it believes in a more democratic, orderly and rules-based world order, it recognises that major systemic changes could also be accompanied by chaos. New Delhi, therefore, likes slow, peaceful and consensual transformation of the system which, of course, is not what is happening today.

Second, New Delhi’s biggest fear would be an Asian century without stable multipolarity. Even if it emerges, a multipolar world is most likely going to be a passing phenomenon, to be soon replaced by a bipolar world dominated by the U.S. and China with the others bandwagoning, balancing and hedging. For India, a bipolar international system dominated by China and the U.S. is a bad deal. If such a world leads to bipolar rivalry, India, being a next-door adversary of China, could often be the target of Chinese ire.

Third, if a bipolar world leads to great power accommodation between the U.S. and China, India’s situation could be worse off. If the U.S. accommodates China as a peer, it could mean the U.S. accepting China’s sphere of influence. This could make India a casualty at the altar of great power politics. Put differently, whether the U.S. and China compete or accommodate each other in a bipolar world, India has reasons to worry.

But how real is the emergence of a China-U.S. G2? Look at it this way: the more the Ukraine war goes on, the more the U.S./West could attempt to choreograph a working relationship with China (we are already witnessing the early signs of it with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz reaching out to China). That China has not gone all out in support of Russia’s war efforts could encourage the West/U.S. to do precisely that. For China, an American offer of accommodation in a G2 format outweighs the utility of a closer strategic partnership with an embattled Russia.

Finally, there is little doubt that an Asian century will be a China-dominated one. China’s growing material power – both economic and military – is already paving the way for it, especially with the U.S.’s focus firmly entrenched in the Russia-Ukraine theatre. As far as our neighbourhood is concerned, we may be looking at a ‘post-Indian South Asia’ in the not-so-distant future, tucked away in the Chinese sphere of influence, though not entirely inimical to Indian interests. Perhaps this is an exaggeration, but I am evocatively emphasising a point that some of us may be conveniently ignoring. Imagine a South Asia which, in varying degrees, trades with China using Yuan, is deeply entrenched in the Belt and Road Initiative projects and its associated debt traps, is militarily closer to China, toes Beijing’s line on international issues, and maintains just a

minimum relationship with India? That looks like a post-Indian South Asia.

Navigating the emergent Asian century is not going to be easy for New Delhi, but being cognisant of its many vagaries is perhaps a good start.

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