

# BALANCING THE POLES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

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<em>The writer, a former foreign secretary, served as the prime minister's special envoy for climate change.</em>

What began as a trade dispute between the US and China has now morphed into a full spectrum strategic contest which is unlikely to abate any time soon. The one point the two sides agree upon is precisely that they are locked in a geopolitical contest and that its resolution will have to be the unquestioned dominance of one or the other. Neither accepts that multi-polarity is feasible in the sense that a cluster of major powers could construct a loosely structured but stable international order as a contemporary version of the European order set in place by Congress of Vienna in 1815.

The new hegemon, it is predicted, will be a rejuvenated US, which has seen off the Chinese challenge as it did the Soviet challenge in the Cold War. Or China will overtake the US and emerge as the undisputed hegemon in the current millennium. The resolution of the contest may take time so there will be a bi-polar world in the interim. Chinese analysts envision a process in which China will initially establish predominance in the Western Pacific pushing the US out towards the outer oceanic rim and then proceed to establish global pre-eminence. It is no coincidence that in its first ever Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (ISPR) released by the US on June 1, it is explicitly stated that China is a revisionist power which "seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and ultimately global pre-eminence in the long term".

If an extended period of inconclusive contestation between the two countries is likely, how will it be different from the US-Soviet stand-off after World War II? China and the US are more evenly matched in economic terms, with China almost certain to overtake US GDP in nominal terms by 2030. China is also catching up with the US in technological prowess, with massive investments in new technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing and advanced electronics. Soviet GDP never exceeded 40 per cent of US GDP and its technological capabilities, though impressive, were no match to the US. Further, there were hardly any trade and investment relations between the two while China and the US are joined at the hip in a dense investment and trade relationship which will be difficult and painful to unwind for both.

China does not have allies and a string of bases across the globe like the US but the infrastructure being created through its Belt and Road Initiative(BRI) across the globe could be transformed into a security platform over time. Russia may move closer to an alliance with China and this could tip the balance in favour of the latter. Furthermore, the US-led alliance systems are under strain as a result of policies adopted by the current Trump Administration and its actions do not always align with the intent displayed in the IPSR.

Therefore, the progressive polarisation of US-China relations, interspersed with phases of remission, is likely to persist. There may be a stalemate overall at least over the next decade and beyond. Will this stalemate define the global order or will there still be spaces for other emerging powers like India to advance their interests?

While China and the US may find it in their interest to define the new world order as a binary contest between their competing visions and capabilities, the defining characteristic of the

current international trend is the steady diffusion of political, economic and military power rather than its concentration in this or that country. China's emergence is in itself the consequence of such diffusion inherent in the process of globalisation, which in turn is a creature of rapid technological advance.

Thomas Friedman's flat world is a reality though he himself has doubts about it now. The limits of coercive power have been made sharply apparent in failed and costly wars in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. China too confronts countervailing winds whenever it steps beyond a threshold of assertion. Therefore, the shadow of the US-China confrontation will not fall across all other relationships with the rigid harshness of the previous Cold War.

India should be successful in resisting demands to choose one side of the fence or the other, because the fence itself will be rickety and shifting. Appropriate to the diffused geopolitical landscape is a policy which enables promotion of India's interests through multiple circles of engagement. The old East-West, North-South divides have become progressively less and less relevant though they still influence our foreign policy perspective. We will have to actively seek partnerships which are more issue based and hold the promise of advancing India's economic and security interests. In this sense, some partnerships will be more valued than others but need not be exclusive.

India's relationship with the US will carry greater weight than relations with China which remains an adversarial power and is unwilling to change this equation. It would be natural for India to seek to compensate for its power asymmetry with China by strengthening its partnership with other countries which share its concern over the propensity of China to assert power unilaterally. China is not looking at India to be its ally. It is enough that India does not become an ally of its adversary. That should suit India.

In our contemporary world, most of the challenges we face are cross-cutting in nature and global in dimension. They cannot be solved through national efforts alone. Nations cannot be coerced into joining international responses directed by major powers. It is only through collaborative platforms based on consent and multilateral processes which respect the principle of equity that solutions are likely to be found to the looming threats of climate change, global health pandemics, the unregulated development of cyber, bio-tech and space capabilities and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Coercion will remain indispensable but not sufficient to enhance a country's influence. Leadership in mobilising international responses to such challenges may be more important.

As India grapples with a changing world, it would be wise to retain the internationalist spirit which marked its foreign policy in the early years after Independence.

*The writer is a former foreign secretary and is currently senior fellow, CPR*

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