

SMART DIPLOMACY IN FIVE MOVES

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

The nature and dynamics of Southern Asian geopolitics are undergoing a radical transformation, slowly, steadily and in an irrevocable manner. One of the world's most volatile regions and hitherto dominated by the United States, Southern Asia is today at an inflection point with far-reaching implications for the states in the region, and for India in particular. Is New Delhi adequately prepared to weather the incoming geopolitical storm?

To begin with, there is a sharp, though often understated, great power competition in the region with the U.S. caught between its reluctance to part with its quickly fading glory on the one hand and unwillingness to do what it takes to maintain its regional influence on the other. And yet, when challenged by China and Russia in the regional geopolitical landscape, the U.S.'s superpower instinct is to push back, often leading to short-sighted decisions and confused policies. The resultant geopolitical competition for space, power and influence in the regional scheme of things is undoing the traditional geopolitical certainties in Southern Asia. Russia and China are jointly and individually challenging the U.S.'s pre-eminence and drafting smaller countries of the region into their bandwagon/s.

Despite our unease and traditional suspicion towards great power system shapers and managers, the simple fact is that a benign unipolarity or a balanced multipolarity with some amount of great power concert is generally better than unbalanced multipolarity. Unbalanced multipolarity when combined with a situation of power transition in the regional sub-system, as is perhaps the case today, might prove to be destabilising. We are perhaps at the cusp of such a moment in Southern Asia.

Then there is the emergence of the 'China pivot' in the region. Washington's role as the regional pivot and power manager is becoming a thing of the past with Beijing increasingly able and willing to assume that role. Regional geopolitics, from Iran to Central Asia and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean region, is increasingly being shaped by China. China is the new regional hegemon with states in the region jumping on its bandwagon without much resistance. When new powers are on an ascendance, its neighbours tend to recalibrate their policies and old partnerships and alliances. Regional holdouts and challengers such as India will need to balance themselves tactfully to steer clear of the rising hegemon's ire.

Yet another feature of the current regional sub-system is the presence of an extreme trust deficit among the various actors in the region. That India and Pakistan, or China and India do not trust each other is not news, but a trust deficit exists between even seemingly congenial partners such as the U.S. and India, Russia and China, and among traditional partners such as Iran and India, and Russia and India. The varying degrees of trust deficit when combined with other factors such as unresolved conflicts, misunderstandings or the occurrence of a crisis could easily push the region towards more conflict and friction, and obviously less cooperation and regional integration.

The rising war talk in the region is yet another contemporary feature of the Southern Asian regional sub-system. The possibility of a military conflict between Iran and the U.S. (a path the hawks in Washington are pushing U.S. President Donald Trump to pursue) which in turn would draw many more countries in the region into it leading to widespread instability, potential for India-Pakistan border skirmishes and possible escalation, an escalating China-U.S. trade war, and the many proxy and cold wars in Afghanistan and West Asia will keep the temperature high in the region for the foreseeable future.

In sum, a power transition in the Southern Asian sub-system, an extreme trust deficit and the escalating war talk pose ominous signs for the region.

This is not a pretty picture; certainly not for India, a country that is caught right in the middle of these tectonic developments and that habitually reacts to geopolitical developments with characteristic tardiness. And yet, true to its DNA, India is likely to adopt a slew of balancing acts. This is perhaps the most appropriate strategy to adopt under the circumstances provided it does so with a sense of clarity and purpose instead of merely reacting. There are at least five layers of balancing acts that India would need to adopt in order to weather the incoming geopolitical storm. At level one, it would need to balance its innate desire to get closer to the U.S. with the unavoidable necessities of not excessively provoking China both in the maritime and continental domains. Clearly, getting too close to the U.S. will provoke China, and vice versa.

The second layer of this balancing game should drive India's West Asia policy. Here it would have to take care of its energy and other interests (including the Chabahar project) with Iran and not alienate the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel by doing so. While Iran's share in India's energy imports is steadily decreasing, alienating Iran might not suit India's strategic interests in the longer run.

As a third balancing act, dealing with the Russia-China partnership will be crucial for India's continental strategy, be it with regard to arms sales, the Afghan question or checking Chinese dominance of the region. New Delhi should be clever enough to exploit the not-so-apparent fissures between Beijing and Moscow. A related concern should be the growing relationship between Pakistan and Russia which must be dealt with by smart diplomacy rather than outrage.

Yet another layer that requires careful balancing by India is the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China. While Pakistan is the revisionist power in the region, China, being a rising superpower and an already status quoist power in the region, could potentially be persuaded to check Pakistan's revisionist tendencies. This again requires a great deal of subtle effort from New Delhi to convince Beijing that it has great stakes in regional strategic stability. What must be noted is that both Beijing and New Delhi, despite their sharp differences and unavoidable strategic competition, share a stake in the region's stability. Therefore even a small measure of rapprochement between them, as it seemingly exists today, could stabilise the region to a great extent.

Finally, if India is serious about having a say in Afghanistan's future, it would need to enact several balancing acts there: between Russia and China, China and Pakistan, the Taliban and Kabul, and the Taliban and Pakistan. In a constantly changing Afghan geopolitical landscape, the contents of India's interests should also evolve.

New Delhi should keep in mind that it must, by all means, be careful to avoid getting caught in a nutcracker geopolitical situation in the region. Engaging in a delicate balancing game is undeniably the need of the hour, and let us remember that balancing such seeming contradictions is what smart diplomacy is meant to achieve.

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