

Mapping the Chinese century

Each succeeding week brings fresh evidence of how anarchic the international global order has become. Quite a few nations, including many of the newer ones, are seeking a new salience in the affairs of their region, aiming to establish their dominance. This is one cause for many of today's turmoils.

The unfortunate aspect is that while there is greater clarity on the new challenges that nations face, the international system is unable to come up with sustainable solutions to deal with these multiple challenges. For instance, currently the U.S. is seen to be incapable of playing a balancing role in Asian affairs, and to have ceded ground to China. China appears unrivalled in Asia at present given its military might and economic power. The only opposition to China today comes from India.

India and China both adhere to a rules-based international order, but a wide gap separates their perceptions of what constitutes the international order. This has more than ordinary significance today even as global powers are beginning to shift their stance, and a 'balance of power' approach is no longer the norm. For Asia, this is proving to be a destabilising development, affecting peace in the region as the U.S. is no longer willing to take on responsibilities for peace.

Setting the rules

It is China that is now beginning to set the rules in accordance with its interests and values. China is enlarging the scope of its ambitions, being aware that no country in the Asian region, with the exception of India, can possibly stand in the way of it fulfilling its ambitions. The Belt and Road Initiative is only one manifestation of its growing ambitions. All signs point to China seeking avenues for global dominance, exploiting the weaknesses and inequalities that currently plague the international system.

A Himalayan balancing act

There is, thus, almost a surreal quality in the statements and announcements put forward by other Asian nations on how to limit China's vaulting ambitions. The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, and the seeking of an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea at the ASEAN Summit in New Delhi fall into this category. It may have been intended to buttress ASEAN's position on their dispute with China, but is unlikely to have any impact.

China, for its part, is busy turning the South China Sea into its 'military outpost'. It is setting up several military installations despite opposition from other claimants to rights over the South China Sea. The Spratly Islands have been transformed into a major stage for military manoeuvres, with the transformation of previously barren reefs into military installations. None of the other claimants — or for that matter even the U.S. — is in a position to check China's activities. This reflects the measure of Chinese ascendance over the region.

The recently concluded Chinese 19th Communist Party Congress (October 2017) and the developments that immediately preceded it should hence be of special significance for countries in the Asian region, especially India. If the Party Congress marked a return to the Mao era, what should be of even greater importance is that it made little secret of China's intention to achieve global leadership. Accompanying this was a declaration of intent to make its military 'world class', one that is capable of 'winning wars'.

At the Party Congress, Xi Jinping, now the undisputed and unquestioned leader of both the party and the state, declared many times the dawn of a “new era” — an era of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Mr. Xi further talked of China’s pre-eminence in the east and described its rising “comprehensive national power” as leading on to global status. Not explicitly stated, but intrinsic to China’s belief, is that it is a big country with extensive economic, military and political might, and that it expects other smaller countries to accept its leadership.

An expansionist power

China is thus poised to set its compass to become an ideologically revisionist and an expansionist major power — one that aims to create more strategic space that would compel regional powers (India not excluded) to defer to, and accommodate, its wishes. The current People’s Liberation Army strategy of moving out into peripheral areas vacated by the U.S. fits in well with such intentions. China has already fired its opening salvos shifting focus from the East and South China Seas to the Indian Ocean. It is steadily enlarging its concept of ‘expanded strategic space’, viz. from land to sea. More of this is on the anvil.

A new plateau: on India and China's bilateral ties

If continuity of policy is dependent on the vision of one individual — in this case President Xi — the party statute is set to be amended to ensure continuance of Mr. Xi as President for further terms beyond 2023, so as to ensure strong and stable leadership until the middle of the 21st century. India has every reason to feel concerned and be on its guard.

China is evidently working to a set plan, and in the belief that the conduct of a nation is critical to ensure the outcome of any geo-political or geo-strategic conflict. For the present, its intentions seem to be to convince nations in the Asian region about its intrinsic superiority and exalted status, based on notions of ‘exceptionalism’ and ‘uniqueness’, paving the way for its leadership in the region.

Relations with neighbours

Simultaneously, it has consciously set about damaging India’s relations with neighbours, including most recently Nepal and the Maldives. India’s relations with some of its other neighbours have also suffered due to China’s machinations, mainly through the provision of economic incentives, promises of infrastructure development, and certain ‘unseen benefits’. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (which provides China an opening to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean), for instance, has both an economic and a strategic imperative.

Doklam (in Bhutan) during 2017, and the Maldives this year are test cases in China’s determined bid to enlarge its ‘strategic space’. The Doklam standoff, notwithstanding India’s claims, has created a degree of uncertainty about India’s ability to match China’s ambitious inroads into India’s neighbourhood. The Maldives imbroglio has led to the distancing from India of a long-term dependent ally, viz. the Maldives, which seems to be moving into China’s orbit. China already has a lookout in the southern-most archipelago of the Maldives and is currently seeking to establish a ‘joint ocean observation station’ in one of the northern atolls, giving China a vantage point overlooking the main shipping lanes in the western Indian Ocean. There are also reports of increased deployment of Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean Region, and reports of frequent underwater movements of Chinese submarines to designated ports in the Indian Ocean Region apart from the establishment of naval bases in Djibouti and Gwadar.

In the meantime, China is offering ‘a new choice’ or model for developing countries to follow. This posits a direct challenge to the democratic model followed by India which emphasises a more

liberal order. Alongside systematic moves made to diminish India's image in the region, and its resort to 'salami tactics', China hopes to strike a blow against India without engaging in an open conflict. Consequently, India needs to urgently come up with a pre-emptive strategy to prevent China from succeeding in its efforts. India should position itself suitably, ideating an alternative model that is much less threatening to countries in the region. The attempt should be to counter China's vision of international relations — that puts a premium on expanding and flexing its military capabilities and provides dubious economic benefits under the rubric of trade and market access — with an alternative model. It must also restrict China's present ascendancy in regard to port infrastructure and maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean that is giving China an advantage in regional affairs.

The only bulwark

India is the only bulwark in Asia to counter Chinese designs and expansionism. It alone can prevent a further expansion of China's 'strategic space' and a Chinese takeover of the entire region.

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