

CLEAR SIGNALS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA-CHINA TIES AND THE NEW GLOBAL CURRENTS

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China's claim that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is aiming to create "an Indo-Pacific version of NATO", as the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, put it on March 7, is not new. Indeed, even as long as 15 years ago, during the first iteration of the now revived India, Australia, Japan, U.S. Quad, Beijing warned of an impending "Asian NATO", which, of course, never materialised. The latest statement does, however, assume significance in the current global context and amid the crisis in Ukraine. Mr. Wang, speaking in Beijing during the National People's Congress, accused the U.S. of "stoking geopolitical rivalry" by "forming exclusive clubs". He said by "strengthening the Five Eyes" intelligence alliance and "peddling the Quad, piecing together AUKUS and tightening bilateral military alliances", the U.S. was leading what he called a "five-four-three-two" formation in the region. The broader goal, he said, was "to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO".

In recent weeks, Beijing has repeatedly blamed NATO for the crisis in Ukraine. While claiming to stay neutral, it has moved to reaffirm ties with Russia, which Beijing on Monday described as "rock solid". When the two countries' leaders met for a summit on February 4, China backed Russia on its concerns on NATO's eastward expansion in Europe, and Russia returned the favour with both criticising the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Beyond their already deep political and economic linkages, these mirrored concerns on U.S. alliances are emerging as a powerful binding glue in the China-Russia axis. New Delhi will need to consider how this will impact its close relations with Russia. By explicitly equating the Quad, which is not a military pact, with other security agreements, China now also appears to be clearly situating India as a part of the U.S. "exclusive club". New Delhi has rejected that notion. Only last month, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said "interested parties" were making a "lazy analogy of an Asian NATO" and India was not a U.S. treaty ally. Indeed, some in New Delhi have come to view Beijing's aggressive moves along the LAC in 2020 as a warning sign to deter India-U.S. relations. India's firm, and correct, response has been to hold the line, and continue deepening ties not only with the U.S. and the Quad but also other Indo-Pacific partners to underline it will not be swayed. The other message from India has been that sensitivity to concerns has to be mutual, and cannot be demanded from one side when ignored by the other; China's relations with Pakistan being a case in point. Mr. Wang did acknowledge that recent "setbacks" in ties suited neither India nor China — a view New Delhi shares. The two sides will meet on March 11 for the next round of military talks to take forward LAC disengagement. As India and China continue to seek a much-needed *modus vivendi* to restore ties from the lowest point in decades and ensure peace on the border, they will also need to have a broader conversation about global currents that are reshaping their bilateral relations.

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