

SHAPING INDIA'S RESPONSE IN A GLOBAL HINGE MOMENT

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

India finds itself in an increasingly dangerous world, one that is fragmenting and slowing down economically. We are today in a new geopolitical situation, caused primarily by the rise of China, India and other powers — Indonesia, South Korea, Iran, Vietnam — in a crowded Asia-Pacific, which is the new economic and political centre of gravity of the world.

Rapid shifts in the balance of power in the region have led to arms races and to rising uncertainty, also fuelled by the unpredictability, disengagement and the transactional “America First” attitude of United States President Donald Trump. China-U.S. strategic contention is growing, uninhibited so far by their economic co-dependence. As China seeks primacy in a world so far dominated by the U.S., the world faces a destabilising power transition which may or may not be completed. It is a hinge moment in the international system.

What should India's response be to the new situation? Fear leads some to suggest alliances. Some Indians are so worried by what they see as an unstoppable China that they advocate that India enter into an alliance with the U.S. India is much greater and more resilient than these people think.

There is a common thread running through the foreign and security policies of successive governments of India until this one, irrespective of their various political persuasions: it has been the pursuit of strategic autonomy for India. If there is any situation in which India should retain the initiative and not get entangled in others' quarrels, keeping India's powder dry and free to pursue its own national interest, it is this disorganised and uncertain world. This is a world that calls for creative diplomacy and flexibility, adjusting to the fast-changing balance of power and correlation of forces around us. An alliance seems to be exactly the wrong answer.

The Doklam crisis of 2017 is only the most recent example that shows that no one else is ready to deal with India's greatest strategic challenge — China. It saw a tepid reaction from the rest of the world. To expect anything else is unreasonable.

China's rise is the foremost challenge which could derail India's quest. But it is also an opportunity. The big question, of course, is how to handle China. One possibility is to engage China bilaterally to see whether the two countries can evolve a new *modus vivendi*, to replace the one that was formalised in the 1988 Rajiv Gandhi visit. That framework is no longer working and the signs of stress in the relationship are everywhere.

The more India rises, the more it must expect Chinese opposition, and it will have to also work with other powers to ensure that its interests are protected in the neighbourhood, the region and the world. The balance will keep shifting between cooperation and competition with China, both of which characterise that relationship.

The important thing is the need to rapidly accumulate usable and effective power, even while the macro balance will take time to right itself. A calculus of interests suggests that India-China relations are more complex than simple narratives suggest, and indeed that there is room here for both sides to seek a new *modus vivendi*. This would require a high-level strategic dialogue between the two sides about their core interests, red lines, differences and areas of convergence.

The U.S. is an essential partner for India's transformation. But it is withdrawing from the world, less certain as to how it will choose to deal with China. Certainly, it will no longer be the upholder of international order, economic or political, and seems to have tired of that role. India must work with other powers to ensure that its region stays multi-polar and that China behaves responsibly.

We are living in a time when there is a deep sense of strategic confusion. In India's case, that confusion extends to it being not just about the ultimate goal India's foreign policy should pursue but also over the best means to achieve them. Indians seem to mistake controlling the narrative with creating outcomes, which is the real task of foreign policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has declared a goal of India to be a 'Vishwa guru', or world teacher, which is still a long way away when it is an importer of knowledge and technology. Nor is it clear that this status will actually contribute to transforming the lives of India's citizens, though it might satisfy the ego.

It is important for India to remain optimistic. It has a moment of double opportunity if it changes its ways. Tactically, China-U.S. contention — which is structural and, therefore, likely to continue for some time with a paradigm shift away from cooperation to increasing contention, despite temporary deals and "victories" declared by one or both — opens up opportunities and space for other powers.

Both China and the U.S. will look to put other conflicts and tensions on the back burner while they deal with their primary concern, the other. This effect is already perceptible in the Wuhan meeting between China's President Xi Jinping and Mr. Modi in early 2018, and the apparent truce and dialling back of rhetoric by both India and China, even though this does not extend to a new strategic framework or understanding or to a settlement of outstanding issues.

Today, India is more dependent on the outside world than ever before. It relies on the world for energy, technology, essential goods like fertilizer and coal, commodities, access to markets, and capital. When you add the new security agenda and the contested global commons in outer and cyberspace and the high seas to India's traditional state-centred security concerns, you can see why there is greater worry or a sense of insecurity.

India risks missing the bus to becoming a developed country if it continues business and politics as usual, or tries to imitate China's experience in the last 40 years, does not adapt, and does not manage its internal social and political churn better. The most important improvement that India needs to make concerns its national security structures and their work — introducing flexibility into India's thinking and India's structures. For change is the only certainty in life.

Shivshankar Menon is a former National Security Adviser. A longer version of this argument appeared in "India's Foreign Affairs Strategy", Brookings India Impact Series, May 2020

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