

The new bipolarity in Asia

The dichotomy in the rule-based global order is becoming increasingly evident with the passage of time. U.S. President Donald Trump, for instance, makes no secret of the fact that he believes in a world governed by self-interest, with little room for shared responsibility, or lofty ideas about the spread of democracy. In contrast, Chinese President Xi Jinping is taking the high road, disdaining the transactional approach favoured by the U.S. President. Instead, he is projecting himself as a firm believer in globalisation and free trade. Today, the former confronts major opposition to his policies within the U.S. The latter's grip on China is, if anything, stronger than before.

It is against this backdrop that there are signs of a new bipolarity taking shape in Asia. It appears freshly sculpted, given the steady rise and rise of China in Asia. It possibly seeks to replace similar attempts by the U.S. previously — such as the pivot to Asia — to counter China and its aggressive designs in the region. Implicitly, though not as yet explicitly, it seeks to create a coalition of all those willing to align with the U.S. against China's expanding ambitions and its inexorable march towards dominance in Asia.

In recent weeks, there has been some activity suggestive of action being taken to achieve this objective. For instance, a reluctant India is being gradually inveigled into a newly minted design of what many perceive as an anti-China coalition, though none of them are willing to project it as such. Talks held recently at the level of officials between the U.S., Japan, Australia and India (the Quadrilateral) are seen as an indication of this. It marks an important shift in India's attitude, and could be a prologue to what is in store. As China's expansionist attitudes intensify, more countries in East and Southeast Asia are expected to align with the Quadrilateral group of countries. Vietnam could be one such country, but quite a few other countries in the region could follow suit.

The recent Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings provided a further glimpse of attitudinal changes that are in the making. Mr. Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi made use of this occasion to announce that the two countries were prepared to work together for the future of Asia — an euphemism for what many see as keeping a check on China's aggressive designs in the region. It is, perhaps, for the first time that India has indicated a resolve to align openly with the U.S. to tackle broader issues in the Indo-Pacific region. Its implications go much further than mere deepening of the strategic partnership between the two countries or enhancing their cooperation as major defence partners. The reference that “two of the world's great democracies should also have the world's greatest militaries” is capable of being interpreted in several ways, including that it is aimed at China. What it does signify, unambiguously, is a quantum leap in their special relationship, with both sides committed to deepening their engagement in several directions.

Mr. Modi demonstrated a willingness on this occasion to go still further, asserting that India will stand by ASEAN in its quest for a rules-based regional security architecture. This can again be interpreted as implicit criticism of China's attitude and stance with regard to disputes in the South China Sea.

If China was the target of the U.S., India and other like-minded countries of Asia, the recent 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress signified that China is more than willing to accept the challenge. The Party Congress placed special emphasis on a strong military “capable of winning wars”. The deliberations left little room for any adjustment or compromise to accommodate the concerns of other countries of Asia, or for that matter the U.S. If anything, the deliberations of the Party Congress have further emboldened China to pursue its preferred course of action.

Several aspects of the Party Congress deserve to be carefully considered in this context. The

Congress reinforced Mr. Xi's status as the paramount leader, who in turn made no secret of China's ambitions to restore its global leadership and dominate the region. In his long opening address, he described China as a great power at least 25 times. Every initiative pronounced was attuned to China's global ambitions.

The Party Congress, and Mr. Xi in particular, adopted a hard line on many of the issues that have been bones of contention with countries in the region and beyond. A major preoccupation of the Party Congress was to build global combat capabilities to safeguard China's overseas interests. It mentioned that the Chinese Military had been reorganised and that more changes were promised in the next five years aiming to make China's military "world class" in every way.

The message emanating from the Party Congress is loud and clear. China is in no mood to compromise, and any attempt to contain or check China would be effectively met. The reality also is that apart from its massive military build-up, China is positioned most advantageously as far as economic aspects are concerned. It is today the most important trading partner for over 90 countries. It is a major lender across the world. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has caught the imagination of the world, including that of Europe. While the economic benefits of the BRI are still in dispute, most countries of Asia and Europe, including many of India's neighbours, do not seem to have a problem with the BRI.

Sustaining bipolarity and having one set of Asian nations ranged against China is, however, not going to be easy in the prevailing circumstances. There exist far too many imponderables at present. Latent concerns about Chinese expansionism have not prevented several Asian nations from endorsing and backing the BRI. Most Asian nations also show no inclination or desire to blame China for siding with Pakistan, which continues to shelter high-ranking global terrorists, including Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar. China, for its part, has embarked on a charm offensive to win the support of Asian nations through lavish aid offers and other financial inducements. Even Mr. Trump, during his recent visit to China, seemed to have softened his criticism of China, after China produced some attractive mega deals. All this only exposes the vulnerabilities of bipolarity in the extant situation today.

In Asia, India, Japan and, to an extent, Vietnam appear willing to endorse the U.S. initiative to build up opposition to China's designs. India has become increasingly vocal in this regard. It has lately taken up issues well beyond South Asia, such as North Korea and China's actions in the South China Sea. This was again manifest during the recent ASEAN deliberations. Currently, India is emerging as one of the countries in the region firmly committed to freedom of navigation and over-flight, and for unimpeded commerce based on the principles of international law, particularly the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This puts it in direct confrontation with China, as also in opposing China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific.

The Quadrilateral idea, which has since begun to take shape with India's implicit acceptance of the concept, is likely to further irk China. China has consistently opposed the idea viewing it as an example of anti-China consolidation. For the present, China has been circumspect in its opposition to the move, limiting itself to questioning its rationale and whether it is directed at a third party with the potential to disturb regional peace and stability. This may not, however, last for much longer.

As the outlines of a new bipolarity in Asia become clearer, and with the formal setting up of the Quadrilateral, China is certain to regard all this as an attempt to encircle it. This will pave the way for a new round of turmoil. China is almost certain to take effective steps to break this so-called encirclement, and use both force and inducements to win more and more Asian countries to its side. The consequences of this could be quite significant for peace and stability in the Asian region.

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