

Smart-balancing China: a clear vision for regional order

How do you deal with an inscrutable, revisionist and rising superpower next door with whom you have had a historical rivalry and whose brazen inroads into your traditional sphere of influence leave you embittered, but whose trading relationship is important to you? There are no easy answers even though we often come across many 'simple and straightforward' solutions: ranging from military options to cutting off trade ties. The recent revival of the 'Quadilateral' (or Quad) and the consequent talk of an 'Asian NATO' have brought the India-China rivalry back to the limelight. Let's be clear: how to 'balance' China will occupy a great deal of India's strategic attention in the years ahead as China charts its course towards superpower status. Any such strategising by India needs to be prudently thought out.

For President Xi Jinping's new China, the days of "hiding capabilities and biding time" of the Deng era are finally over — it's time to become "a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence". If it utilises the power vacuum left by Donald Trump's 'reluctant superpower', China's superpower ambitions are bound to have a system-shaping impact on the Asian region. There will be China-led alliances, Chinese client states and the establishment of Chinese spheres of influence. The alleged China connection to the recent 'regime change' in Zimbabwe is perhaps a harbinger of things to come.

Quad confusion

Moreover, it would ensure that its access to overseas resources/markets and the oceanic trade routes are unhindered. In doing so, it is increasingly seeking to build military facilities overseas and offset the U.S.-led coalition in the region. In this big picture of Chinese grand strategy, New Delhi, seen increasingly aligned with the U.S., is a spoiler. Denying India entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group, repeatedly blocking UN sanctions against Pakistan-based terrorists, and ignoring India's sensitivity over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor are outcomes of this vision.

There are several sources of increasing Sinophobia in India. For one, Chinese revisionist claims in the land and oceanic space have been a major source of concern. Beijing's deployment of naval assets to enforce its claims across the South China Sea, construction of artificial islands in the region, and the rejection of a UN tribunal judgment on a complaint filed by the Philippines, last year have only strengthened this feeling. China has also been increasing its naval presence, including dispatching its nuclear submarines on patrol, in the Indian Ocean. Would this eventually lead to a more permanent Chinese naval presence in the region? It is in this broader context that China's revisionist statements on Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are worryingly viewed in New Delhi.

Second, along with military assertion, Beijing has also been stepping up its political and economic footprint in the region, dismissing New Delhi's protests. Third, and perhaps most importantly, what worries New Delhi is the ever-strengthening China-Pakistan military alliance and its implications for the country: the insecurity stemming from a so-called 'nutcracker' situation.

The current Indian strategies to 'checkmate' China seem more zero-sum and less efficient. To be sure, New Delhi has chosen to adopt an unequivocal U.S.-centric strategy to deal with Beijing, most recently the Quad. There are several problems with this approach: the U.S. is a quickly-receding extra-regional power whose long-term commitment to the region is increasingly indeterminate and unsure; U.S.-China relations are far more complex than we generally assume; and Australia is caught between the U.S. and China. While India may have shed its traditional reticence about a strategic partnership with the U.S., it would still not be what Japan is to the U.S., nor should it.

The second broad policy direction seems to be to compete with China for regional influence in South Asia. Let's be realistic: trying to match the powerful yuan, backed by vigorous political support from Beijing, with our humble rupee is a losing battle. Military preparedness to offset any potential Chinese aggression is something that India can and should invest in. But again, Chinese military aggression has really not been India's central concern, but a China-dominated region in which India is hemmed in and forced to play second fiddle. Military preparedness, in which we will inevitably lag behind China, alone cannot address such a concern.

Some have suggested that India should use its \$70 billion-strong trading relationship with China as a bargaining chip to check Chinese behaviour. However, doing so would hurt both sides. While it is true that India-China bilateral trade is heavily skewed in favour of China, let's not forget that China's exports to India comprise under 3% of its total exports (and India's exports to China is 3.6% of its total exports). Boycotting Chinese goods would also mean Indian consumers paying more to get them from elsewhere. Clearly then, trade as a bargaining chip *vis-à-vis* China is just a popular urban myth.

So what then are our options? Adopting a straightforward balancing strategy (which is what states normally do when faced with a stronger neighbour) may become costly, counter-productive, and not deliver the desired results. Bandwagoning (jumping on board the wave of the future, in this case, China), on the other hand, may be both undesirable and insufficient for obvious reasons. Neither of these two mutually exclusive options are ideal for serving India's current and future interests *vis-à-vis* China. Hence New Delhi would be better served by adopting a more nuanced balancing strategy, a strategy of 'smart-balancing', towards Beijing, one that involves deep engagements and carefully calibrated balancing, at the same time.

Let's examine some elements of such a strategy. First of all, it would involve co-binding China in a bilateral/regional security complex: that is, view China as part of the solution to the region's challenges (including terrorism, climate change, piracy, infrastructural/developmental needs) than as part of the problem, or the problem itself. Some efforts in this direction are already under way such as India-China joint anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. The two countries could consider initiating regular, structured consultations in this regard. In other words, enhancing security cooperation with China is a sure way of alleviating the persistent security dilemma between them. A mutual 'complex interdependence' in economic, security and other domains should be strengthened and front-loaded over zero-sum competition.

This security cooperation should most certainly be enhanced in the Indo-Pacific where India should, even while being part of the Quad, talk of cooperating with China. Language is important: talk about security community and joint efforts than containing China.

Second, India should cooperate with and trust China while at the same time keeping its (gun) power dry, for after all, in the anarchic international system that we inhabit, the role of military strength in guaranteeing national security cannot be underestimated.

Third, New Delhi's response to Beijing's refusal to act against Pakistan-based terrorists needn't be strait-laced. However, while Beijing is unlikely to make Islamabad politically uncomfortable by public terror-shaming, the more China gets involved in Pakistan, the less it can afford to ignore terrorism within Pakistan. Around 30,000 Chinese nationals currently reside in Pakistan (and over 71,000 Chinese nationals visited Pakistan last year) and these numbers will only increase over time which will perforce motivate Beijing to 'work with' Islamabad on the terror question. That is precisely where New Delhi should use its diplomatic skills to make an impact.

India urgently needs to develop a clear vision for a stable regional security order and work out what role India would like China to play in that vision and how it can nudge China towards that.

Keeping China out of the regional security order is not realistic, letting China dominate it is not desirable: smart-balancing China within such an order is indeed the optimal strategy.

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