

TIME FOR AN ASIAN CENTURY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: RCEP and India

In an irreversibly more equal world, the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#) has immediate geopolitical and economic implications, with the West adapting to Asian rules and marking the end of the colonial phase of global history. Will we see the world returning to the centrality of Asian civilisations sharing prosperity, with the U.S. adjusting to a triumvirate? Or will the Asian giants be irreconcilable rivals with the U.S. rules-based order maintaining peace and prosperity? India's challenge is in [securing an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'](#) in the emerging digital order, navigating the U.S.-China technology and supply chain clash.

The mega trade deal was led by ASEAN, not by China, and includes Japan and Australia, military allies of the U.S., all opting for the Asian Century as they do not see China as a threat the way the U.S. does. 'ASEAN centrality' rejects the current frame of the West setting the agenda. [RCEP's principles and objectives](#) allow individual countries to choose the scope and product categories for bilateral tariff schedules, and exclude divisive issues like labour and environment. The new frame goes beyond transfer of goods and services, focuses on integration and facilitating supply chains for sharing prosperity, requiring a very different calculus for assessment.

Also read: [Purveyor of promise: On Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan 3.0](#)

RCEP's new rules on electronic commerce could offset losses in declining trade in goods. 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' will leverage endogenous technological strength, data and population. Both China and India are breaking the monopoly of the West in wireless telecommunications, AI and other emerging technologies. India has also, in the UN, questioned Western domination calling for a "reformed multilateralism". The dilemma for the West is that sharing power will mark the end of its primacy in global affairs. The dilemma for the U.S. is more acute. With China having developed the capacity to bridge the technological gap, the U.S. weaponised interdependence by banning export of semiconductor chips and forcing sale of innovative Chinese technology. China's response is a 'dual circulation' strategy for self-reliance and military-technological prowess to surpass the U.S. The global governance role of the U.S. is already reduced. The U.S. Congressional Research Service report dated October 30 identifies four key elements of this role: global leadership; defence and promotion of the liberal international order; defence and promotion of freedom, democracy, and human rights; and prevention of the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia. The U.S. now exercises power with others, not over them. Despite its military 'pivot' to Asia, the U.S. needs India in the Quad, to counterbalance the spread of China's influence through land-based trade links. India, like others in the Quad, has not targeted China and also has deeper security ties with Russia. With the ASEAN 'code of conduct' in the South China Sea, both the security and prosperity pillars of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific construct will be adversely impacted.

No country has become a global power relying on others. India needs a new strategic doctrine and mindset. Strategic analysts ignore the severity of colonial exploitation that made the most developed country, India, among the less developed when they compare it with China. Military strategists' excessive reliance on Western doctrines and equipment ignores why the 4th Infantry Division, described "as one of the greatest fighting formations in military history", collapsed. We have drawn the wrong lessons on both the intentions and capability of China (the Henderson-Brooks Bhagat Report remains classified, but its conclusions are available). With the Rafale aircraft purchase, India has recognised that there will be no technology transfer for capital equipment. Military Theatre Commands should be tasked with border defence giving the

offensive role to cyber, missile and special forces based on endogenous capacity, effectively linking economic and military strength. The overriding priority should be infrastructure including electricity and fibre optic connectivity; self-reliance in semiconductors, electric batteries and solar panels; and skill development. Leveraging proven digital prowess to complement the infrastructure of China's Belt and Road Initiative will win friends as countries value multi-polarity.

The RCEP already includes India's priorities such as rules of origin, services and e-commerce. The time-bound upgradation of national capacity through 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' should enable agreements with individual ASEAN countries. RCEP members have expressed their "strong will" to re-engage India, essentially to balance China. There are compelling geopolitical and economic reasons for shaping the building blocks of the Asia-led order, which is not yet China-led, to secure an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', and place in the emerging triumvirate.

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like NRC

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