

The new Asian game

The 19th Chinese Party Congress, and the emerging shape of a US response, sharpens the edges of diplomatic confrontation in Asia. The Party Congress left no doubt about Chinese ambition and assertiveness. The Congress reaffirmed China's place in the world. The markers around China's territorial interests were clearly laid down. It was a call to rejuvenation. It left no one in any doubt about the distinctiveness of the Chinese political model.

The Communist Party will remain firmly in charge, demanding increasing ideological purity, but buttressed by its claims to inheriting a 5,000 year-old civilisational legacy. Xi Jinping's political theory gets recognition in the constitution and the centralisation of power continues. Economically, China will chart a distinctive trajectory. Socialism with Chinese characteristics remains the mantra, where the market will remain firmly embedded in the needs of the state, and reform will mean a better state rather than handing over China's destiny to anonymous market discipline. The Chinese model asserts China's exceptionalism, but also hints it is a model to be emulated. And China has a development plan: Through the One Belt One Road (OBOR), to stitch Asia in a new set of interdependencies.

The Congress acknowledged China's challenges, including uneven development and corruption. But the script was, not surprisingly, choreographed to paper over areas of brittleness in the Chinese development model. The need to impose ideological conformity, and the turn towards greater authoritarianism within China is a sign of those vulnerabilities. But it is hard to see those vulnerabilities posing a systemic threat to the Chinese model.

There will, doubtless, be crises. But so long as there is elite political unity, the state structures respond in unison, and enough nationalists rally around the party, it will be hard to envision change. The Congress was, if anything, an emphatic reassertion of the capacity and resolve of the Chinese state. The combination of greater authoritarian resolve, nationalism, faith in one's development model and immense ambition will make for a more assertive China. This is a diplomatic reality for Asia.

The strengths and weaknesses of Rex Tillerson's speech to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) should be seen in this larger context. In India, the speech was, with some justification, welcomed as a vindication of India. India and the US are cooperating more on terrorism; the commitment to an "Indo-Pacific" order is music to Indian ears, as is deeper defence cooperation. India's stand on the OBOR was vindicated. India was declared a more "responsible" power and a key element in Washington's apparent desire to build a coalition against China. The speech was a sign of India's handling of the Donald Trump Administration, which has been, under the circumstances, deft.

But the euphoria over the American embrace needs to be tempered. The nature of leadership matters. Trump's credibility and reliability is, to put it mildly, still an open question. The timing of Tillerson's speech may be a coincidence. But in a status-conscious global order, it is not difficult to interpret this speech as one where the US decides to fire a salvo on China using India's shoulders, just to coincide with the Party Congress.

China's assertiveness may drive India to seek a deeper partnership with the US; India may have its own reasons to up the strategic play with the US. But it is risky for India, if India's choices are consistently framed by the US in terms of a US narrative. This, in a sense, risks hijacking India's choices for American purposes and makes Indian power projection more difficult. It is one thing to combat China for your own reasons, and to even seek partnerships to do it; it is another to be mischievously co-opted in a narrative of Sino-American competition in Asia that is not your own.

The triumphalist and public ideological framing of an India-US entente does not help.

Tillerson's speech hinted at alternative financing mechanisms to counter the OBOR. But there is no sign that the US is actually going to devote more resources to counter China's development strategy. The OBOR is rightly criticised for being more a series of bilateral deals, put together in an ambitious Chinese framework and on terms that may not exactly favour the beneficiary countries in the long run. But the OBOR arose in a context where global development priorities paid short shrift to the centrality of infrastructure, and global institutions were increasingly rendered irrelevant. There is very little evidence that the Trump administration has the commitment or wherewithal to renewing or creating new kinds of multilateral institutions that can give countries credible development options.

India is doing the right thing by trying to team up with countries like Japan, but without an invigorated multilateralism on development, it is hard to see it countering China. It is not clear the US will be an ally in this endeavour. China's infrastructure financing remains important for the world (just ask how much of Digital India depends on it). The best hope of avoiding polarising conflict in Asia is to give China its intellectual due on the OBOR, while bringing it in a multilateral and collaborative framework. But this looks like an increasingly tall order.

The Iraq war was the first strategic windfall for the Chinese. Trump's election has been the second. Xi Jinping was clear that China is also playing an ideological game. At the moment, the democratic model is on hard times. The decaying quality of democracy, both in the US and India, makes them less robust competitors in the ideological space. Freedom has always been a hypocritical currency in world politics, and sanctimonious grandstanding on democracy can be counterproductive. But by largely turning their back on values of human rights and humanitarianism (for example, in Myanmar), India and the US are letting China define the terms of engagement. It is a measure of how far the US's credibility has fallen that when Xi talks about China being more the custodian of an open global order, and a custodian of "nature's laws," these words sounds less implausible.

Greater cooperation between India and the US is desirable. But as heartwarming as Tillerson's words were to Indian ears, we should recognise their hollowness as well. They were the words of a power that has no conviction in its own values, and used a proxy to make a point. They are the words of a power that is not demonstrating the steadiness of a mature power. An authoritarian, assertive China is a big challenge for India. But it is premature to jump to the conclusion that the US will be the saviour in the Asian Game.

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