

Walk like a great power

In a talk at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies on October 18, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson accused China of destabilising the global order while promising to deepen cooperation with India. He said, "China while rising alongside India, has done so less responsibly, at times undermining the international, rules-based order even as countries like India operate within a framework that protects other nations' sovereignty."

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson called this a "significant policy statement" which reflected "our shared commitment to a rule-based international order." This sentiment was reinforced during Tillerson's visit in which he said that India and the US are natural allies.

How should we view this latest attempt, which appears to rope India into America's strategic competition with China? An answer to this lies in understanding great power behaviour.

There are two theories in international relations - liberalism and realism. Liberals believe that high levels of economic interdependence, democratisation, and strong international institutions enhance cooperation and lessen the likelihood of conflicts.

Realists take a more pessimistic view and argue that the international system is anarchic. There is no hierarchical global authority which can enforce order in international affairs. Sovereign states are independent and will always put their self-interest before the interests of the international community. The stronger powers will covet more power.

As we look around the globe today, we see the powerful nations, including America, behaving in a realist rather than liberal manner. Only lip-service is paid to global cooperation and a rule-based order. In the last one year, the Americans have pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement and the Trans Pacific Partnership, UK exited the European Union and the Russians withdrew from the International Criminal Court. China has refused to accept the ruling of the UN Tribunal on South China Sea.

The media regularly carries stories of the US "Freedom of Navigation" operations in the South China Sea. Freedom of navigation is a principle of international law but the US is not a signatory to the Laws of the Sea. The compelling reason for these operations is that the US, with the strongest navy in the world, must retain its ability for power projection around the globe. It is a little known fact that freedom of navigation operations have been routinely carried out against friendly countries like India, against whom they have been conducted each year in the last 10 years.

The realism of American thought is reflected in their national security strategies. The 2002 strategy, at a time when American power was unchallenged, stated that the US should do everything to maintain its position as the sole superpower by maintaining a military capability far superior to any potential rival. The 2015 strategy, drafted when Russia and China were increasingly challenging the US, acknowledged that, "As powerful as we are and will remain, our resources and influence are not infinite."

It is a reality that a rising China is seen by the US as a competitor for global power. Both countries will jockey to limit each other's influence. In his book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John J. Mearsheimer, the author of the "offensive realism" theory, writes that one of the principal strategies used by great powers when facing a dangerous adversary, is buck-passing. "A buck-passer attempts to get another state to bear the burden of deterring or possibly fighting an aggressor, while it remains on the sidelines. The buck-passer fully recognises the need to prevent the aggressor from increasing its share for world power but looks for some other state that is

threatened by the aggressor to perform that onerous task."

I am not suggesting that India should look with suspicion at every proposal made by the US. However, it is important to understand the context in which great powers takes decisions in international relations. We must also be wary about the inconsistencies that we see in the Trump Administration. Obama's rebalance to Asia and Pacific has been laid to rest. In March this year, Acting Assistant Secretary of State Susan Thornton said, "Pivot, rebalance, etcetera - that was a word that was used to describe the Asia policy in the last administration. I think you can probably expect that this administration will have its own formulation. We haven't really seen in detail, kind of, what that formulation will be or if there even will be a formulation."

Asia today has two rising powers in India and China. Potential flashpoints in Asia exist in North Korea, East and South China Seas, the northern and western borders of India and in the scourge of terrorism emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan. How India navigates this uncertain geopolitical landscape will define the future trajectory of our country. There is no doubt that China will attempt to establish its hegemony in Asia and that India will resist this attempt. With China's overwhelming economic advantage and a rapidly rising defence budget, it is also obvious that India needs strong alliances and that the US is the only country which can keep a check on China's hegemony in Asia, now or in the future. Therefore an alliance with the US seems to make good strategic sense.

However, we also cannot totally engage China in a mode which makes her more suspicious about an attempt to encircle and check her. This could only trigger more assertiveness and tensions. The Americans look at the rise of China from a world stage where there is a competition for global superiority. India should look from the perspective that a conflict in Asia could hamper the natural growth of our country.

Robert D. Kaplan in *The Revenge of Geography*, writes, "As the United States and China become great power rivals, the direction in which India tilts could determine the course of geopolitics in Eurasia in the twenty-first century. India... looms as the ultimate pivot state." This will require a delicate balancing act, based on nothing but our self-interest. But that is how great powers behave and if we aspire to become one, and we have the potential, let us be unabashed about it.

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