

## Building a firewall

**China's rise brings with it strategic challenges for New Delhi**

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In 2015, India and the United States of America subscribed to a shared strategic vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. This established a security link between what were still considered separate regions. The term, Indo-Pacific, has now gained currency, suggesting that the region spanning the Indian and the Pacific oceans is now being viewed organically as one in security terms. The India dimension is prominent in the new formulation, unlike in the term, Asia-Pacific.

In fact, India had been conceptually and practically excluded from Asia-Pacific fora initiated earlier. The Asia-Pacific concept essentially covered Asian countries bordering the western Pacific, Australia and New Zealand as Pacific countries, and, of course, the US as a principal Pacific Ocean power. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum set up in 1989 excluded India and still does so. The Asia-Europe Meeting that followed Apec in 1996 also excluded India initially. This anomaly was rectified later. How Asia's second-largest country, one that has left an enduring civilizational link, far more than China's, on Asia as a whole could be excluded from any concept of Asia may appear bizarre. But India was not perceived to be eligible for membership earlier as a powerhouse and as an economy.

The Asia-Pacific formulation gave place to China with which the US had begun building a major economic relationship on top of the strategic opening to it during the Cold War years. Japan followed in America's wake by building a massive investment, technology and trade relationship with China. Tokyo was also opposed to India's Apec membership. For a time, the US and its allies believed that as China grew economically it would not only become more democratic but would also develop stakes in the US-built international order and not subvert it. China, too, claimed that its rise would be peaceful and lulled the US and others into believing it. Having grown economically spectacularly, with humongous financial resources at its disposal that have enabled it to also build impressive military capabilities, China has now begun to flex its muscles by asserting territorial and maritime claims,

defying international law, becoming more authoritarian at home, rejecting democracy and repudiating western values. It is now presenting its own political and development model for developing countries to emulate. The Belt and Road Initiative represents its geopolitical ambitions through the economic route which, if realized, would establish its hegemony in Asia. China has begun to challenge US primacy in the western Pacific by destabilizing the region through its actions in the South China Sea, causing dissensions in the Asean and developing a powerful navy that can change the balance of power in the western Pacific and enable it to break through the first island chain. So long as China remains bottled up in the western Pacific by US naval power and its alliance system in the region, the former will not be able to establish a powerful presence in the Indian Ocean. Its maritime silk road strategy - of building at first commercial ports in key countries like Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Pakistan and then using them in due course for naval purposes - is apparent, more so if it is viewed from the perspective of the maritime strategy China unveiled in May 2015 with emphasis on a build-up of China's 'Blue Water Navy' and 'Open Seas Protection' to protect its overseas assets and its sea lanes of communication. Its naval base in Djibouti is a precursor to other such plans, including Gwadar at the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz.

China's aggressive rise has now begun to cause concern to the US, Japan, Australia and even major European countries. India is now seen as a growing power that can significantly contribute to balancing China's ambitions in Asia and beyond. The rationale for India's role in this extended region is being established through the Indo-Pacific concept. Even though India has independent interests in countering China's hegemonic plans, this concept has some obvious deficiencies from its point of view. It is focused on sea-based security although China's threat to India is principally land based and will remain so for several years. China is confronting India directly on land, claiming its territory, creating incidents on the border, constantly improving its military infrastructure, bolstering Pakistan and disregarding the legal status of the part of Kashmir under Pakistani occupation through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. A holistic view, and not a restrictive one, of the threat from China should be undertaken. On sovereignty issues, the US has not taken a position on either the Senkaku Islands or the Scarborough Shoal even though China's territorial aggrandisement in the East and South China Seas affects its alliance relationships in the western Pacific and the reliability of its security commitments. In the case of India, it has no obligation to support us on our sovereignty issues with China as we are not allies. Donald Trump's inconsistency on China, his transactional approach, his abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the possibility that China may manipulate the North Korean issue to extract support for the BRI and other areas of accommodation, have to be factored into our strategy in establishing Indo-Pacific partnerships to control China's conduct. The US, Japan as well as Australia have far stronger economic ties with China than we have with them individually. This reality cannot be ignored while shaping our strategy. India's quandary is this: how far should one go with these partnerships on sea without any *quid pro quo* on land threats we face from China and its ally, Pakistan? China is using land connectivity projects as a vehicle for its geopolitical ambitions. Japan is joining hands with India to promote connectivity projects towards the east that will reinforce India's 'Act East' policy as well as connectivity to Africa through the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor that will give the African countries and others an alternative model of infrastructure development based on sounder finance and economics. But Japan is also signalling a readiness to join the BRI on land as an incentive to China to batter down on North Korea. China has begun hectoring Australia to express its objection to the Quad in the making, as Canberra is seen as a weak link. Russia is expressing its reservations about Quad and supports an Asean-centred, inclusive regional security architecture in Asia on the agenda of the East Asia Summit, which we too support, as we have in the most recent meeting of the Russia-India-China forum at New Delhi. But we also have strong

trilaterals - US-India-Japan and India-Japan-Australia - in place and have taken a step towards a Quad forum.

India has to face the strategic complexities surrounding China's rise by continuing to engage with it bilaterally as well as in the RIC, BRICS and SCO fora while cultivating available options to curb its hegemonic ambitions in collaboration with the US, Japan and others, even as we understand the limitations of this approach, as each country will look at the China threat from its own vantage point and the reality will be a differentiated policy of engaging and ring-fencing China.

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