

# Indo-US Strategic Partnership: Managing China's Rise

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## **Chinese Military Assertiveness**

India's foremost external security challenge in the 2020-30 timeframe will be to manage the rise of a militarily assertive China that is seeking to achieve a 'favourable strategic posture', and a nuclear-armed North Korea, its belligerent ally. Iran may add to instability in the Af-Pak region if its nuclear deal with the United States breaks down. Together with its strategic partners, India will need to make a substantive contribution to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

China's brazen violation of international norms in recent years, particularly its construction of military facilities on reclaimed islands in the South China Sea, and its growing military and economic power poses a strategic challenge to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including India, the US and its allies. Now that President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power base and China has completed its "four modernisations", it has discarded Deng Xiaoping's twenty-four-character strategy to "hide our capacity and bide our time" and has begun to flex its military muscle. It has also stopped using the phrase "peaceful rise" while referring to its military and economic growth. Given the gradual reduction in US force levels in Asia since the end of the Cold War, China senses the emergence of a security vacuum in the Indo-Pacific and is rushing headlong to fill it. As part of

its strategic outreach, China is rapidly upgrading the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy).

With its growing military power and preference for resolving territorial disputes through coercion and the use of military force, the possibility of China displaying militarily irresponsible behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region, including against India, cannot be ruled out. China could decide to intervene militarily in the South China Sea to establish its presence on some of the disputed Spratly or Paracel Islands (it has already been engaged in building airstrips on reclaimed land), or to occupy one or more of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands or decide to resolve the remaining territorial disputes, like that with India, by using military force. Though the probability is low, the reunification of Taiwan with China through the use of military force cannot be ruled out.

Also, China has deep internal fault lines. Its rapid economic growth, now slowing, has been fairly uneven and non-inclusive. There is a growing sense of resentment among the people against the leadership of the Communist Party for the denial of basic freedoms. The discontentment, simmering below the surface, could boil over and lead to a spontaneous implosion that may be uncontrollable. The crash of Chinese stock markets in July 2015 and again in January 2016 and their continuing volatility also point to the possibility of a meltdown. David Shambaugh, a well-known China scholar is the latest to have jumped on to the China-may-implode bandwagon.

Both the contingencies—implosion and military adventurism—have a low probability of occurrence, but will be high-impact events with widespread ramifications around the Indo-Pacific should either of them come to pass. Both contingencies will shake up the markets, result in millions of refugees and lead to a bloodbath. India and its strategic partners will need to cooperate closely to deal with the fallout and to manage the disastrous consequences if either of these contingencies unfolds.

Closer home, in South Asia, China is engaged in the strategic encirclement of India. It does this by making deep inroads into each of India's land neighbours. It has reached out to Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka and is acquiring port facilities and developing infrastructure through soft loans. As part of its 'String of Pearls' strategy, it is acquiring port facilities from which its Navy can operate in the northern Indian Ocean.

The growing China-Pakistan nexus for nuclear warheads, ballistic missiles and military hardware is a matter of concern not only for India but also for the region. In a grossly unfriendly act, in June 2016, China virtually vetoed India's

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application for the membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) on the specious grounds that the criteria for membership needed to be established first.

China is now engaged in developing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to link Xinjiang with Gwadar on the Makran coast as part of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. Involving an investment of US\$54 billion, the project is designed to give a fillip to the Chinese economy, create an alternative route for oil and gas supplies and counter US influence in the Indo-Pacific. The port may eventually be upgraded to a naval base as part of China's 'String of Pearls' strategy to dominate the Indian Ocean. China is also engaged in building its first overseas military base in Djibouti.

**Cooperative Security**

India must join the US and other strategic partners, such as Australia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam, to establish a cooperative security framework for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, for the security of the global commons and to deal with contingencies like those described above. If China is willing to join this security architecture, it should be welcomed. However, the experience has been that China prefers to plough a lonely furrow rather than cooperate with its regional neighbours. Its record in UN peace-keeping operations has belied expectations. China took over five years to join the international anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa. Even now, the PLAN limits its activities to escorting its own merchant ships and does not coordinate operations with the other Navies.

In this context, the India-US strategic partnership makes eminent sense as a hedging strategy for both countries. In more senses than one, it is India's "principal" strategic partnership, as former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had once described it. His predecessor, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had gone further and said that India and the US were "natural allies".

In its first National Security Strategy (NSS) document, released in December 2017, the Trump Administration has noted India's emergence as a "global power". In the past, "in 2015, in the Obama Administration's last NSS, India's role was described as a 'regional provider of security' and in 2010, India was termed one of '21st century centres of influence'". In 2006, the George W Bush Administration's NSS had termed India as one of "regional and global engines of growth" and

in 2002, it was viewed as a “potential great democratic power of the 21st century”. (Shubajit Roy, “Washington Unveils New Security Strategy”, *Indian Express*, December 20, 2017.)

**India must provide weapon systems to Vietnam and Afghanistan to strengthen strategic partnership.**

Whichever term is used to describe the relationship, clearly, the US cannot be expected to pull India’s chestnuts out of the fire, and vice versa. Only when the vital national interests of both are simultaneously threatened will the two countries come together and act in concert. For over a decade now, US officials have been calling upon India to take up its regional responsibilities as a ‘net provider of security’. India is gradually stepping up to the plate.

## **Defence Cooperation**

In order to counter China’s military assertiveness, India must increase its defence cooperation with its strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific. Because of its exaggerated claims over the South China Sea, China has been objecting to India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) prospecting within Vietnam’s territorial waters. Future ONGC operations should be backed up with support from the Indian Navy by way of providing point defence to offshore oil installations and conducting maritime patrolling in the South China Sea jointly with the US and other strategic partners.

Vietnam has often expressed an interest in Indian weapon systems. These must be provided on soft loans, including ballistic missiles that do not violate Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) guidelines such as the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, Prithvi I and II and Prahar Surface-to-Surface Missiles (SSMs). The indigenously designed and manufactured Pinaka Multi-Barrel Rocket Launcher (MBRL) should also be provided. Initial batches of these weapon systems could be gifted and training teams sent to provide *in situ* training assistance. Notably, in May 2016, the US lifted its 50-year-old embargo on the sale of arms to Vietnam.

Afghanistan has given India a wish list of weapons and equipment in accordance with the provisions of its strategic partnership with India. So far, India has given only non-lethal defence equipment, including a few utility helicopters. The other items required by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in order to improve combat capability should also be provided. The training assistance being provided to the ANSF should be stepped up by an order of magnitude.

If invited to do so by the Afghan government, India should be prepared to train ANSF personnel inside Afghanistan. The Indian training teams should

be self-sufficient and capable of organising their own local security, including limited counter-terrorism measures. The trilateral agreement with Iran and Afghanistan for India to develop the Chabahar port and link it with the Zaranj-Delaram highway, built by India in Afghanistan, to gain access to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and beyond to the countries part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), is a positive development.

It will also provide a suitable route for logistics support should India be called upon to send an infantry division to Afghanistan to support the operations of the ANSF if it becomes necessary. Similarly, India should reach out to Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore and Sri Lanka and other countries on the Indian Ocean littoral in order to minimise the negative impact of the overtures being made by China to them.

## **The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue**

In November 2017, senior officials of Australia, India, Japan and the US, meeting on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in the Philippines, agreed that a “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region and of the world at large.” This development has led to speculation that the idea of a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is being revived after a hiatus of ten years. It is expected that this will eventually lead to strategic realignment for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The ‘Quad’, as it has come to be called, had a short-lived existence in 1987-88 when Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pulled his country out. He did this after China, which perceived the Quad as an attempt to counter its rise, lodged a formal protest with all four countries. Now, in view of increasing Chinese political donations and China’s growing influence in its universities, Australia appears to have had a change of heart.

Though it will be a gradual and long-drawn process, a cooperative security framework may eventually emerge from the discussions now being initiated by the leaders of the Quad. Cooperative security does not necessarily require a formal military alliance. Cooperative security entails the sharing of intelligence; joint counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation efforts; upholding the rules and norms governing maritime trade; providing help to the littoral states to meet their security needs; helping to counter piracy, arms smuggling and narcotics trafficking; and, undertaking joint Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in the region.

## **Concluding Observations**

India's area of strategic interest now extends from the South China Sea in the east to the Horn of Africa in the west. In order to discharge its growing responsibilities towards regional security, India must upgrade its military capacities for intervention operations in the Indo-Pacific. Two rapid reaction-cum-air assault divisions backed by air support, air lift and sea transportation and logistics resources for 30 days each will be required by 2025-30. It will then be apparent to potential adversaries that India will not hesitate to intervene in conjunction with its strategic partners if its vital national interests are threatened in its area of strategic interest.

China's growing military and economic power poses a strategic challenge to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including India, the United States and its allies and strategic partners. China is too large to be contained effectively, but India can, and must, raise the cost for China's pursuit of its grand strategy to confine India to the backwaters of the Indian Ocean as a subaltern state. India should do this through conengagement – engagement, astute diplomacy and proactive defence cooperation with its strategic partners.

Defence cooperation, a key component of the Indo-US strategic partnership, must be taken to the next higher trajectory to enable the two countries to undertake joint threat assessment; contingency planning for joint operations; sharing of intelligence; simulations and table-top exercises— besides training exercises with troops; coordination of command, control and communications; and planning for operational deployment and logistics support. All of these activities must be undertaken in concert with Australia, Japan, South Korea and India's strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific.

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