

Strategic Partnerships and The Quadrilateral Initiative Military Considerations

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Strategic Partnerships and The Quadrilateral Initiative Military Considerations

If you want secured peace, always be prep for war.

— George Washington.

Abstract

Development of interstate partnerships, occasioned by the commonality of economic and political self-interests, has always been a normative practice among the global community. In more intense situations, military alliances are forged by sovereign states to secure convergent political—and ‘inter alia’ military—objectives. The contemporary term of ‘strategic partnership’ apparently signifies a ‘via media’, wherein substantial interstate economic, fiscal and technological cooperation, in bilateral or multilateral mode, is superimposed by political–military bindings, which yet remain short of classical military alliance.

Obviously, strategic partnerships are focused on the emergence of common political–military threats with the intent of dealing with such threats by enhancing the partners’ military capabilities. This purpose is to be met: first, by means of technological and industrial cooperation, training exchanges and trade of military hardware among the partners, and second, by projecting a joint political front against military arm-twisting.

The outburst of progressive activities in the Asia-Pacific Region stands greatly influenced by China’s ‘rise’ to a great power status. Purported to be a peaceful one, that rise is actually marred by China’s illogically and unilaterally conceived politics of territorial expansionism and commercial exploitation. These policies are founded upon a massive scale of aggressive military power and that leaves China’s neighbours, its *bête noir* India in particular, distressed about their sovereignty issues.

With the United States being the global stakeholder, it shifts to ‘America First’ policy and there is a pressing need for coalescence of strategic partnerships among the nations tormented by Chinese high-handedness. Point to note here is that: one, as against normative interstate partnerships, strategic partnerships must have a military aspect to it, and two, it must facilitate India’s defence modernisation.

WHITHER STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP?

Defining Parameters

In the so-described Asian Century, certain new configuration of geopolitical alignments in India's surroundings is in evidence. Many of these alignments are propelled by China's accelerating 'rise' to great power status, which, given China's hegemonic pretensions, brings in its wake, distressful churning in the region's political and economic order. The situation is no less exacerbated by the United States') reluctance to burden itself with what it finds as non-remunerative foreign commitments, and yet to continue to hold its sway over the Asian affairs. The call for forging common cause alignments among the stakeholding nations of Asia—'strategic partnerships, to wit'—is purported to act as a bulwark against such distressful churning.

It is fashionable to use the term 'strategy' to highlight the import of the initiatives and action plans that the nations pursue among themselves on economic, industrial, diplomatic and political issues. The new description of 'strategic partnership', however, implies an edifying congruence of national goals among like-minded nations and manifestation of that congruence through intimate bilateral or multilateral bonding, while yet staying short of committing to formal and rigid international groupings and alliances.

... 'strategic partnership' may be distinguished by an overtone of military cooperation with the implicit purpose of forming up to deal with any looming threat of military arrogation...

Besides the usual nation-to-nation engagements, 'strategic partnership', in a classical sense, may further be distinguished by an overtone of military cooperation, with the implicit purpose of forming up to deal with any looming threat of military arrogation. Indeed, such military cooperation might, in various forms, cover special terms of military-diplomatic exchanges, military sales, offer of defence research and technology upgrade as well as industrialisation, all packaged with civil aspects of engagements, such as trade, commerce, energy and so forth. The latter option may help in the diplomatic rendition of military solidarity and afford a more amenable facia to strategic partnerships.

Of late, in recognition of India's political forbearance and economic potential, many options of forging common-cause groupings in the form of one or more strategic partnerships, in bilateral and multilateral configuration, are coming India's way. Enslaved and exploited over the centuries, most citizens of sovereign India are readily adulated by such invitations and the geopolitical

salience that comes with it. That enthusiasm turns into enchantment when the developed and powerful world, while courting India's cooperation, intones regarding India's arrival at the regional, even global, high table and so forth.

The pleasing intones are factual to a great extent but many enthusiasts forget to be sombre in the knowledge that India's journey to stardom has just about begun. Indeed, there are many great accomplishments to be made over the coming decades before India can, in equal and rightful terms, enter into strategic partnerships and exclusive groupings with powerful nations who determine the world order. Furthermore, this caveat gets most pronounced when tested against the limits of India's military capabilities, stagnant as these remain against the imperatives of contemporary warfare.

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While India's great power attributes attain the expected fruition, India has to calibrate its approach to the calls of strategic partnerships, and so ensure that the military aspects of its burdens as well as returns remain on balanced keel.

India's Security Concerns

Strategic partnerships do offer attractions. To wit, it is a disconcerting reality that even if India wishes to be left alone to progress towards better, civilised living, and entertains no designs of undermining sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbours, it is flanked by two powerful neighbours—China and Pakistan—whose priority interest lies in destabilising the Indian nationhood. These two powers have convinced themselves in perceiving India as a threat to their national objectives—hegemonic objectives, obviously—and that conviction does not let them be satiated in peaceful coexistence. One of them is more or less a global military power and an economic giant, while both are nuclear weaponised. Both are bugged by aggressive instincts of territorial usurpation and are intent on enticing India's other neighbours to distance themselves from their deep-rooted cultural bonds with India for quick, short-term rewards in return. Liable to romanticise their 'friendship' in rather poetic terms, the two are complicit in undermining India in any way they can—including covert, overt and postured military aggression. That kind of obsessive animosity of powerful neighbours puts India in a situation to be very, very wary of.

Concern for India's national security is exacerbated by its deliberate policy of avoidance of investing in military power beyond what is but absolutely minimal. This policy of keeping the ultimate instrument of national security in a state of mere subsistence is arguably justified by the noble objective of raising the civil indices of national progress. Meanwhile, the said India-baiting alliance has been gathering strength. Presently, the China–Pakistan Axis has crystallised into an established practice in which provoking India's consternation does not trouble them in any way. Since it could take India a decade or more to build up its so far deprioritised military institution for it to confidently and effectively deter the duo's inimical schemes, the option of what is being referred to as strategic partnerships with common-cause powers assumes salience.

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The expectation is that such partnerships would give time for a range of Indian State's recently instituted initiatives on defence research, technological innovation, defence industry and military modernisation schemes to fructify while holding aggressive behaviour from the neighbourhood in check.

Scope of Discussion

The above-mentioned realism should caution us to exercise our wisdom in balancing the pleasing platitudes on India's power-potentials with the hard realities that confront India on its way to progress under a regime of peace and stability. The issue of 'strategic partnerships'—both of bilateral and multilateral nature, therefore, calls for astute balancing acts in which convergent as well as divergent interests of the partners are weighed with due objectivity against the implications and fallouts for India. In this context, it is proposed to discuss in this paper—to reiterate, from military point of view—as to what might make it desirable for India to enter into strategic partnerships with common stakeholding nations of the Asia-Pacific Region, and as to how the contributions to such partnerships be evened out with the gains.

... issue of strategic partnerships ... therefore calls for astute balancing acts in which convergent as well as divergent interests of the partners are weighed with due objectivity against the implications and fallout for India ...

Point to note here is that alliances or strategic partnerships have so far not been a serious issue of contention in India's policymaking system. Therefore, for the issue to be comprehensively dissected, it would be wise to let it sprout from the political roots of the parties concerned—intended strategic partners', India's own and that of the adversary's. Accordingly, the discussion is slated to be conducted in four parts, as follows:

- Part 1: The call for strategic partnerships.
- Part 2: China's innately domineering political culture.
- Part 3: India's National Defence Policy.
- Part 4: Considerations over strategic partnerships.

Part 1: The Call for Strategic Partnerships

A Clarion Call

For some time now, calling up India to scale up its contribution to the preservation of common rights over the natural assets in the Asia-Pacific Region has found prominence in the developed world's agenda. Clearly, the entire effort is directed at joining together to dissuade an increasingly assertive China from securing its outlandish claims over the open seas and neighbourhood territories, and thereby prevent destabilisation of the entire region, even the world. In 2012, a phase of adulation saw the then US Defence Secretary describing India as a 'lynchpin' of its 'Asian Rebalance' strategy. Accordingly, various partnership agreements—like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Defence Technology and Trade Initiatives (DTTI), Joint Working Groups (on naval, air, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, chemical and biological protection, aircraft carrier systems, counterterrorism, maritime security, special operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief) and reconstruction of Afghanistan—came to be in place.

Furthermore, the United States has been enjoining India, with the latter's 'Look East', later reinforced to 'Act East' policy, to take on a more active role in promoting stability and progress in South East Asia as well as Afghanistan—much to the chagrin of India's perpetually inimical neighbours. To that end, convergence of interests in keeping the Asia-Pacific Region free from unilateral and arbitrary impositions is coalescing into a 'Trilateral

Partnership' among the United States, Japan and India, the Malabar Naval Exercises being one of its manifestations. Similarly, the proposed 'Asia–Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC) is premised on the development of common Indian Ocean lines of communications—as distinct from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—to serve the purpose of trade and transit among east, South East, south and west Asian nations and Africa. The United States, the lead convener of global affairs, and its traditional Asian allies have thereby been furthering their mission to couple India in the region's security matrix.

In the past days of political parlaying, India had shown a marked reluctance, even inability, to undertake alliance commitments; that is, even when it has been frequently disparaged by successive military aggressions in the forms of conventional offensives, long-drawn proxy wars, territorial encroachments and terror strikes from one flank or the other. However, presently, a stage has come when the Indian Government is being intent on pursuing, to the extent practical, somewhat more active security-related policies and forging relationships with the United States, Japan and other victims of China's arm-twisting to that end. Admittedly, many of these relationships might not comply with the right qualification of strategic partnership, but prospects of such compliance in the future do exist.

With Vietnam, this intent is evidenced by joint exploration for oil against China's opposition, defence cooperation, including training and supply of certain defence hardware possibly the BrahMos missiles and the extension of \$100 million commercial credit line. Similarly, India has been engaging with Myanmar on issues of political solidarity, connectivity, infrastructure, harness of natural resources, military training and supply of a limited quantity of weaponry. Recently, India chose to stand firm at its treaty obligations to stall the Chinese forces from encroaching upon a strip of territory held and claimed by Bhutan. Then, there are partnership initiatives in a nascent stage with some of the East Asian nations such as Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and so forth.

...US, the lead controller of global affairs, and its traditional Asian allies have thus been furthering their mission to couple India in the region's security matrix...

Further, on the western flank of the geopolitical tinderbox, the US President Trump has stated that he wanted India to "help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development". Notably, India has so far pledged 3 billion dollars of

assistance to Afghanistan, besides undertaking to execute over 100 key civil projects in 31 provinces.

Recently, the incumbent US Defence Secretary conferred with his Indian counterpart over four key issues, as listed below:

- One, it was to boost defence partnership, the purpose to be met by means of upgrading the Indian defence technology and industry under the DTTI. Besides, certain weapon sales and joint training had been agreed upon the former still remain in hoover mode, while the latter stands commenced.
- Two, there was the usual censuring of ‘Pakistan-based terrorism’ to chastise Pakistan’s terror-consumed state apparatus. However, there has been little of concrete action in this regard—even the censure often stands watered down by the rather farcical rhetoric of ‘sacrifices made by Pakistan in curbing terrorism’ [sic] and the Pentagon’s deep relationship with Pakistan Army.
- Three, India was enjoined to contribute in preserving maritime security and peace in the broader ‘Indo-Pacific Region’—this term is apparently used in synonymy with the larger ambit of ‘Asia-Pacific’, but with emphasis on India’s centrality in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). With a shared objective of both the parties as well as many other stakeholders, this call could lead to a fair partnership but just to the extent of India’s present naval capabilities.,
- Four, wisely staying clear of the United States’ suggestion to be involved militarily, India opted to confine its commitments in Afghanistan to infrastructural development work. India also undertook to train the Afghan military and police personnel and supply some defence equipment. The United States appreciated the datum line, albeit with some disappointment.

In a cognisant fervour of engaging with India, an influential US think tank, the ‘South Asia Centre of the Atlantic Council’, went on to find another role for India in the security of the Indo-Pacific Region. It drew distinction between ‘counterbalancing’ and ‘containment’—clearly, a diplomatic attempt in assuaging China’s piqué—while proceeding to suggest India’s participation in joint maritime patrol of the Indian Ocean. It went on to encourage India to subscribe to a proposed United States–Japan–Australia–India strategic partnership, referred to as the ‘Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’ (Quad) and to ‘bring-in’ Australia into the Navy’s Malabar Exercises in the Indian Ocean. Then, it went further in ‘advising’ India to: one, establish bases in neighbouring countries ‘to impart training’; two, to ‘centralise’ its special forces; and three,

adopt a 'replication' of the US, Israel and Chinese national security architecture. The noble think tank is unlikely to be out of its wits; it seriously expects India to reinforce, if not surrogate, America's interests in this region. That seems to be the line of thinking in the US security fraternity as well.

The Quad Initiative

Meanwhile, pushed by China's relentless march to assume dominance over East and South Asia that can only be detrimental to its security, Japan has revived its quest for coalescence of a multilateral partnership among the other similarly affected nations. Senior officials of United States, Japan, Australia and India, therefore, met to prospect upon the aforementioned 'Quadrilateral' or 'Quad' Grouping with the purpose of 'upholding the rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific and respect for international law, freedom of navigation and overflight to keep the Indo-Pacific Region free and open', besides 'increasing connectivity, counter-terrorism and upholding maritime security'. No doubt, China's belligerent impositions on territorial and sea-connectivity issues, with subtly implied overtones of military muscle flexing, has pushed the beleaguered nations of the Indo-Pacific Region into fostering a sort of common-cause groupings in order to preserve their sovereign dispensation.

Apart from some of the bilateral strategic partnerships involving various combinations of United States, Japan, India, Vietnam and Singapore, and some more tentative candidates such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia, the Quad is the most visible multilateral strategic initiative in the Asian region so far. Indeed, the said exploratory meet of the Quad, with the obvious purpose of United States, Japan, Australia and India conferring on raising together a bulwark against China's destabilising rampage in the Asia-Pacific Region, has in itself many hurdles to contend with. The Quad nations' enormous investments and trade dependencies on China and the likelihood of China being provoked to retaliate economically and militarily must be an equally serious concern among them.

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Besides, there are divergences, even contradictions of interests among the intended members of the partnership. These contending interests would either have to be resolved or compromises have to be made before the definition of classical 'strategic partnership' among them is realised. There

is also the salience of keeping the partnership from being seen as a counter-assertive alliance. The silence maintained during the above-mentioned parleys on major contentious issues with China—like the United States’ ‘Freedom of Navigation Operations’ in the South China Sea (SCS), Japan’s concern for ‘connectivity enhancement’, and India’s wariness over ‘regional maritime security’ could thus be seen as an effort to maintain sobriety in the proposed Quad partnership. Apparently, the purpose is to package the proposed as well as initiated strategic partnerships as coalescence of political ‘solidarity’ rather than confrontationalist ‘alliances’, while its military aspects are focused on the defence capability-building rather than forging a military coalition.

Therefore, in the context of above-mentioned complexities, only the persistence of bullying and arm-twisting from the great dragon could cement strategic partnerships among the vulnerable nations into security collectives. That could indeed be the case since it might be futile to hope for any let-up in China’s innately hegemonic culture on the one hand and limited ability of individual nations to deter China from military posturing and even aggression on the other.

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Great Democracies: Greatest Militaries!

In another development in the backdrop of the 31st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the 12th East Asia Summits at Manila, the Philippines, the US President made very substantive propositions for Prime Minister Modi to deliberate upon. Thus, while discussing comprehensive strategic partnership between the United States and India and their shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific Region based on converging values and for promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in an increasingly interconnected region they share with each other and with other partners and so forth, President Trump, while pledging to enhance the mutual defence cooperation, produced his ‘trump card’ (pun intended) to opine that “two of the world’s great democracies should also have the world’s greatest militaries!”

India's Policy Dilemma

Given the advantage of economic as well as politico-military clout that China wields, and the fact that it would continue to expand that lead in the foreseeable future, India has little option but to strive to maintain a fine balance between expansion of trade, commerce and technical cooperation with China and assuage China's perceived threat from India to its regional supremacy. Concomitantly, India has to ensure that: one, India's interests in the IOR are respected; and two, China is deterred from trying to settle, through military means, the Sino-Indian territorial dispute. With comparatively modest sinews of military power and a priority need for economic uplift, striking that fine balance in the Sino-Indian relationship would be a humungous challenge.

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That challenge is further complicated by India's policy dilemma that has been triggered by the recent calls to join in the 'counterbalancing' partnerships in the Indo-Pacific—like the Quad—even when it would take India a decade or more to build up its economic and military power to a level when it could be a participant of equal status in such partnerships. A lopsided partnership, in which India is consigned to being just an economically and technologically dependent dump-market and a military handyman, maybe even cannon fodder for the developed powers, would not behove India.

Here, the moot point for India to consider is as to which substance could the above-mentioned partnerships gather and as to what extent would these dissuade, or at the least defer, China's burgeoning hegemony. Indeed, it is incumbent upon the Indian policymakers to adjudge the optimal depth and balance of the intended strategic partnerships. To do so, the indigenous capability and the contribution that India may make to such partnerships and the degree of security it could offer in return, for the Indian nationhood to progress unhindered, have to be factored-in.

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However, before delving further into India's similar contending concerns, it would be in order to refer to the core concern: China's political culture and its implications on India's neighbourhood.

Part 2: China's Innately Domineering Culture

Self-sanctioned Prerogatives and First Rights

It is a reality that the Chinese perceive themselves as heavenly ordained inheritors of pre-eminence over 'lesser nations' and are sanguine about their 'natural right of first claim' over whatever might fancy the Han mind—right or wrong is not the issue here, perceptions of a supercilious power is. The 'lesser' nations' repudiation of such self-awarded 'rightful territorial claims' causes the Chinese policymakers to be irked and disconcerted by an 'affront' which, in their perception, they 'tolerate but in fortitude'. Of course, the fortitude is exercisable just for the time being, till the 'intransigents' come to their senses, stop 'making trouble' and give up what China claims [sic], to be blessed with its pleasure in return. In doing so, the intransigent lesser nations are counselled to reconcile their disagreements with China's demands through bilateral parleys, thus foregoing the leeway of 'ganging up' with other 'troublemakers' as the victims of Chinese highhandedness are described. Of course, the outcome of such one-to-one parleys between a habitual, persistent and powerful claimant and a hapless quarry is but obvious.

China's claim of sovereignty over the common hub of international connectivity and bounties of natural resources—that is, the SCS and practically all the waters as existing up to the other littoral nations' sea beaches—besides a pompous declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, all these being international open waters, have no other answer but conjoined, summary rejection. The US Defence Secretary Mattis has already stated that China's militarisation of man-made islands that it has built to legitimise its claims on the SCS cannot be accepted. Equally astounding in profanity are China's claims over neighbouring nations' land frontiers as well as offshore islands. Then, there are the serial acts of politically and diplomatically haughty behaviour against its hapless neighbours which are combined with the conveyance of disparaging 'advice' for them to reconcile with China's impious demands—with clearly implied military consequences of non-compliance.

Benevolent Pretentions

Notably, while displaying assertive attributes of a claimant political–military power, China has also begun subscribing to certain winning attributes which

distinguish great powers from predatory ones. This aspect of China's 'peaceful rise' is reflected by its extension of technological and economic assistance to developing nations of Africa and Asia—an attitude of benign leadership that is necessary for China's status as a great power to be recognised. Various joint ventures are marshalled and capital-funded for the benefit of neighbouring and distant nations, and closer home, the BRI, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its proposed versions in Myanmar and Afghanistan, are some examples of China's excursion into a global leadership role. Pretensions of being the repository of Buddhist heritage, projecting the sublimity of Han cultural in Nepal and Sri Lanka, media splash of being a friend–saviour of Pakistan and the recently adopted role of mediator in the Rohingya crisis are some steps forward in that direction.

Of course, there has been some acrimony on the fiscal and behavioural equations between the venture partners and these differences have stoked hope among those who wish China's rise to stall. But then, massive ventures are not immune to serious differences between the proposing, receiving and the beneficiary parties, and more often than not, these get sorted out, in mutual interest, mainly in favour of the first named. These hiccups, therefore, are unlikely to stall China's massive transnational ventures, and its corollary, from gaining the status of regional principal.

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China's responsible and accommodative activities, however, are yet to wipe out its image of a habitual hegemon; memory of almost every neighbour falling victim at one time or the other during the past seven decades of the Chinese Communist rule remains alive. China's new-found good deeds too are ringed by the message of regional overlordship and backed up with disconcerting military overtones, if not assertions. That brings us back to reiterate the dictum that military deterrence must be the only recourse to earn China's respect of other nations' sovereignty.

A Pause in Belligerence?

Over the preceding decade, having prodded its quarries into forming-up to the raising of a joint buttress wall, there are recent evidences of China adopting a tactical pause in flashing its raider instinct. Apparent in this instance are signs of

China slowing and softening the execution of its expansionist pursuits, though it has not failed to make it clear that it has already ‘compromised enough on its historical rights’ and that there would be no retraction from its goal of ‘recovering all its lost territories’. Suggestions of that accommodative posture come from China working out some understanding with Vietnam to ‘manage the disputes’ through ‘friendly talks’—mainly over the ownership of Vietnamese islands and exploitation of oil and other natural resources in the adjacent parts of the SCS. Thus, it has softened its military posturing against Vietnam’s joint ventures to harness the latter’s sea resources. China has also slowed its massive construction works to formalise its occupation of certain disputed islands and even some rocky outcrops in the SCS—Fiery Cross and Swallow Reefs, and Paracel, Thitu and Spratly Islands—albeit after completing the projects (on account of its ‘One China’ policy, Communist China endorses Taiwan’s construction works on the Itu Aba Rock). Further, China has ‘allowed’ the ASEAN to engage in an endless and fruitless exercise of formulating a ‘Code of Conduct’ (CoC) over the SCS which, if ever finalised, would have to be put to China’s scrutiny—with well-anticipated results.

Looking deeper, there is a disconnect between the softening in China’s expansionist pursuits. In that, most of these ‘concessions’ are offered over such waters which, by international norms, fall in any case under legitimate rights of other contending littoral nations. All the while trying to deflect global consternation through assurances of peaceful intent, China persists with steady militarisation of its occupied SCS islands, even going to the extent of carrying out surveillance of maritime as well as air traffic, just as it has been doing in Tibet and Xinjiang. Therefore, the concern that remains is that whenever and whatever be the resolution of contending claims, it would eventually come down to all the neighbours more or less losing some of their sovereign assets to China.

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Another suggestion of a tactical pause in China’s belligerence comes from its display of ‘fortitude’ at the Doklam stand-off that occurred on the Indo-Bhutan–Tibet border. It is the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) usual ‘peacetime’ practice to advance through incremental territorial encroachments and hold on to whatever strips of ground it gobbles up in the process. Here, the stand-off was triggered by China’s consistent attempts

to extend its territorial control across a so far stable borderline. With India blocking the encroachment, China has ostensibly shown her fortitude to freeze the dispute. It is, however, certain that China would decide to resume its southward territorial arrogation soon enough; brisk preparations for that kind of military action are already evident. Here too, whenever and whatever be the solution, it could ultimately come down to India and Bhutan losing some of their sovereign lands—a sort of ransom from the weaker owners to recover what it can from a powerful usurper.

In the third instance, after emerging out of the period of Deng Xiaoping imposed ‘biding time, building strength’ and so forth—during which China laid low with its claims against other nations—the aggressive posture adopted hereafter to proclaim its territorial demands is sought to be packaged with acts of economic enticement. Besides dispensing technological assistances, economic loans, lines of credit and grants to some of the amenable nations in want, even the intensity of implied threats over what are viewed as Japanese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Filipino and Indian ‘recalcitrance’ have been slightly mellowed. Condescending ‘advice’ to subscribe to the BRI and the CPEC have thus mellowed somewhat, and terms of fiscal margins with Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and various Central Asian nations are somewhat eased. Even the virulence of the Doklam stand-off is sought to be smoothed with the initiation of mature one-to-one talks at the apex political level.

In another instance, China expressed its irritation caused by the coalescence of the Quad in such sober tones as urging the ‘reduction in tension over regional issues like the SCS dispute’. In the same context, the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang prophesied the maxim, “The wise expand common ground while the unwise aggravate differences”; needless to point out, the ‘unwise’ here does not refer to China. Bonhomie displayed between China’s top leaders and those of Japan, Philippines, Vietnam and United States during the recent meetings at Manila as well as the exchange of presidential visits too, offer hints of softening in China’s assertive behaviour.

The question is for how long will this stratagem of softening the belligerence be observed?

China’s Irresistible Expansionism

Notwithstanding the blow tough blow–soft posture, it is a foregone conclusion that China would strive to reset the region’s prevailing equilibrium to its overwhelming and hegemonic favour. By its stirring pronouncements over military modernisation and grand strategic objectives, it is also a certainty that China’s hegemonic ambition would

be backed up with the application of the military power in a manner considered necessary. Having adopted its predecessor Republican regime's promulgation of overambitious and impractical territorial claims, the Communist Party of China (CPC) would retract from its drum-beaten stance only at the peril of the hands of its internal and external detractors. Conversely, there is little chance that China's unrealistic and unacceptable border and island territorial claims, particularly over the SCS, and its urge to assume control position over the expanse of Asian lands and waters, with so many nations contending, could ever be consensually solved either in bilateral or multilateral mode.

China is, thus, irrevocably committed to the exercise of any of the following options in one way or the other:

- One, to await a favourable geopolitical situation when its overwhelming military and economic power might be brought to bear to favourably settle the territorial claims in mutual, if reluctant, acquiescence—China is yet some years away from gaining that stage.
- Two, as it has done with as many as 12 (out of 14) land neighbours, to 'settle' its claims by enticing the rest of the disputants (i.e. 2 land and 6 littoral) with some token 'concessions' mixed with subtly implied threats. Settlements could then appear to be 'give and take' rather than 'take and take' as these would really be and be sold as an achievement to its captive home audience.
- Three, as an extreme option, use its military power to, as it is liable to pronounce, 'counter-attack in self-defence' to 'reclaim lost territories' [sic]. This option could be exercisable when the other two are blocked or the Chinese leadership's throne is under threat. Only strong and demonstrative military deterrence can restrain China from exercising this option.

...there is little chance that China's unacceptable territorial claims and its urge to assume control-position over the Asian lands and waters, with so many nations contending, could ever be consensually solved...

China's wave of progress in any and all of the fundamentals of power—ranging from pure sciences, research, technology, industry and natural resources, down to skilled manpower and professional culture, all of which are backed up by untrammelled political focus, a strong military and irresistible expansionist culture—makes the exercise of any of the above-listed options,

singly or conjointly, a foregone conclusion—‘time’ is the only variable here. Thus, we may conclude this part by stating that in the foreseeable future:

- One, China will not be able to suppress its hegemonic instincts.
- Two, China’s neighbours would be naïve to expect relief from its irresistible usurping instincts.
- Three, the tormented nations’ individual or collective military capability to checkmate China’s aggression must be the only ‘constant’ factor in the right arbitration of their sovereignty.

...to reiterate the dictum that military deterrence must be the only recourse to earn China’s respect of other nations’ sovereignty...

Having discussed China’s political culture, inevitability of its belligerence and salience of military deterrence in cultivating peaceful and mutually profitable engagement with it, we may presently turn to see as to how India’s military capability would stand the test of China’s propensity to ‘teach a lesson’ when its piqué gathers mass.

Part 3: India’s National Defence Policy

Two Levers of Strategic Partnership

In weighing the pros and cons of the option of entering into any strategic partnerships at bilateral, trilateral or the Quad Grouping levels, it is imperative to take note of the fact that such partnerships are to be basically forged in order to seek security from China’s rising military power and its propensity to use that power to buttress its political and economic domination. Therefore, the said partnerships would have to be founded upon:

- First, the level of military contribution that the members of the partnerships can collectively offer to dissuade China’s compulsive high-handedness, and
- second, their ability to bear with China’s retaliatory political and economic sanctions.

In this context, military and economic prowess of the United States, and to much extent, that of Japan, are beyond doubt, while that of Australia and other East Asian nations are in moderately endowed range. Accordingly, the ability to receive as well as contribute to the ‘strategic partnerships’ in terms of these two capabilities, and the advantages accruing thereof, must be a key issue for India to consider.

However, before delving into such considerations, it needs to be clarified at the outset that India's military preparedness remains at a level when any aggression should be checkmated with prohibitive costs to the aggressor, maybe even repelled. However, astute statecraft requires that military engagements are undertaken only from positions of certain success and that kind of military prowess is well demonstrated to the adversaries as such. Indeed, to secure that stage, India needs to do much to build-up its military capabilities overtime, particularly when its antagonists are themselves engaged in relentless, purposeful military muscle-building. India's reasons—genuine in many ways, no doubt—which have so far impinged against that kind of military build-up are rooted in India's passive defence policy.

Orientation of India's Defence Policy

India's post-independence leadership understood that apart from the teeming millions clinging at the margins of subsistence and a dream for a place in the global order, India did not possess the basic foundations of great power status; centuries of native Indians' strategic coma, tunnel vision of Islamic dynasties, slavery of the British rule, and above all, the typical Indian passivity had destroyed that foundation. The leadership, therefore, had to focus on building up, from scratch, the nation's bones and muscles that would over time create that foundation for national power to rise. To accelerate that build-up, they committed all of our meagre national resources towards economic development and societal progress. To survive in a dogfighting world order, they opted to the espousing of peace, friendly diplomacy and a non-aligned policy, and banked upon the propagation of 'peaceful coexistence' to take care of India's national defence.

...partnerships would have to founded upon, first, the level of military contribution that the members of the partnerships can collectively offer to dissuade China's compulsive highhandedness, and second, their ability to bear with China's retaliatory political and economic sanctions...

In the process, instead of innovatively 'managing' the inheritance of a robust military institution within its constraints, as strategic wisdom demanded, the nation's state of military preparedness was consigned to gross neglect. Indeed, it was on account of Pakistan's October 1947 military campaign, within just 2 months into its creation, to seize the State of Jammu and Kashmir and the urgency of securing the State of Hyderabad from its anti-national militia, that

restrained the Indian State from pushing its military institution to atrophy. A policy of maintaining a 'minimalist' level of defence preparedness turned into India's State philosophy, thus that level of preparedness being left to be decided, arbitrarily, by non-professionals of political-bureaucratic class—that state more or less continues even to this day.

In the early 1950s, the military hierarchy was assigned to the role of thwarting Pakistan Army from capturing the Indian territory—and nothing more. In a similar vein and under a misplaced notion of its 'bloody villainy' against the principle of non-violence, a fairly competent defence industry was consigned to regression and its purpose confined to the production of just the minimalist replacement for mundane, in-service military hardware—and nothing else. Thus, as the military establishment confined its objectives to defend against Pakistan Army's territorial usurpation, the forces were consigned to the ever-growing obsolescence. Parallely, the defence research and production industries, having been released from the burden of attaining challenging targets and elevating to global standards, were left to repose in self-adulation. What little was accomplished in keeping the defence sector breathing was entirely left to individual interests rather than the State's requisition. Indeed, as subsequent events depict, India's overconfident leadership had gone too far in believing in the infallibility of the said posture of peaceful coexistence in dissuading a hardened marauder like the Communist China.

Schools of Conciliatory Convictions

Notwithstanding the preceding recount, there are knowledgeable opinions to argue that given the ingrained hostility of powerful neighbours and the opportunist politics of the developed world that has relentlessly undermined Indian interests—overtly, covertly, unjustifiably or instinctively—India has not done too badly in the overall context of national defence. Thus, notwithstanding many strategic miscalculations over the post-independence decades, and barring certain forgettable dark periods like the 1962 debacle (that cost us national prestige, besides huge tracts of territory), the post-1990 infliction of 'hollowness' upon the nation's military structure (that led Pakistan to venture into Kargil) and the past government's deliberate neglect of military preparedness (that has encouraged incessant pokings from China and Pakistan), India has still managed to protect its integrity with the least possible political and fiscal investments on building military power, the argument goes. Accordingly, the conclusion drawn is that the 'minimalist' policy of defence preparedness may be continued for some more years till technical and fiscal limitations against the defence sector are overcome.

Then, there is also the opinion that India has won its freedom ‘cheaply’ (apparently the casualties of the World War and partition massacres are not counted) and preserved it even more cheaply (soldiers’ and civilians’ sacrifices too are obviously not counted). Therefore, that opinion is not inclined to change track from professing full-throttle investment in economic progress, even if that means stagnation of India’s military capability. There is also an opinion which, acquiescing to India’s military limitations, is not inclined to lament upon the alien occupation over one-third of Jammu and Kashmir and some 38,000 km² of Aksai Chin. Finally, there are policymakers who are not alarmed by the fact that India’s military prowess has succeeded neither in deterring aggressive behaviour nor in preventing insurgencies from rising, even when these fragilities have inter alia undermined India’s economic progress—the overall costs of the four and a half wars that India has had to fight bears that out.

Arguably, it cannot be denied that against a virulently cynical Western power group, an unstable neighbourhood and an innately hostile China–Pakistan alliance, nuclear at that, India’s seven decades of minimalist investment on military power has earned quite satisfactory returns, so far—thanks to the bloody sacrifices undertaken by its soldiery and citizenry in compensating for the deficiencies of the war wherewithal. However, it is a different matter today when the compulsive predators have turned wise to India’s soft spots in the economic–military power equation and are closing-in to carve out their wants. Therefore, in realisation of the present realities, most proponents of the above-described passive ideals concede, if reluctantly, that in the contemporary regional order, continuation of India’s lucky turns should not be expected any longer and that robust military preparedness is imperative to the protection of India’s sovereign rights and interests.

Whatever be the lines of such arguments, either to repudiate or to endorse the offers of forging strategic partnerships, in our democratic environment, all shades of opinions are to be seriously addressed. The option of heeding to the gathering calls to join various configurations of ‘strategic partnerships’ with other Asia-Pacific stakeholders would, therefore, have to be crystallised according to its objectives, contents as well as the implications, thereof, for India.

Objectives of Strategic Partnership

Over the decades, independent India has sustained a steady march towards its rightful destiny. But then, starting from the depth of socio-economic disparity, illiteracy, regression of scientific and technological temper and rudimentary infrastructure that India inherited at independence, it is still at

the beginning of that journey. More disconcertingly, weighing the limitation of resources and opportunities against an ever-exploding population, one is not sanguine that the climb would be scaled any time soon. No doubt, the arrival of visionary governance has raised hopes but it may be too much to expect it to quickly and completely pull the nation out of the handicaps it suffers. Moreover, that brings in the 'bread or bullet' dilemma when, truly, both are needed for a nation of galloping population and limiting resources to survive among powers that would do anything to derail India's progress.

Having recognised the looming threat, the Indian State has initiated many far-reaching measures to strengthen the foundations of national power and build a robust political–military structure over it. However, while politics can be turned about quickly, it takes decades to resuscitate a long-neglected military institution. Conversely, recent years have been spent in getting past, though partially so far, the obstructive legislatures and regressive rules as well as practices that our politico-bureaucratic myopia had, over the decades, vitiating into the Indian system of military management. It will take visionary leadership, presiding over a proactive State machinery which, taking usual falters on its stride, remains intent on moving forward against opportunist interests, more than one governmental tenure to reorient national institutions towards building up the requisite military power that a nation of India's potentials needs. Substantially visible lift to the state of national security may be expected only after that period.

Therefore, no matter how assiduously the Indian State goes about building up its military power, it will take a decade or two before holistic modernisation of forces, procedural and managerial efficiency, indigenous defence research and design, defence technology and industry and 'Make in India' projects, duly padded up with imported acquisitions, and that within an affordable defence budget—all of which have found the Government's attention—start delivering. Only after such a build-up is achieved can the military establishment be certain of: first, deterring aggressive designs against India through various forms of military operations, and second, to defeat, it should be that deterrence not be heeded. That indeed would also be the right situation to engage in strategic partnerships—in equal terms and not under largesse—without India having to come cropper against adversities that the hostile opponents' military, economic or any other kind of aggression could inflict.

Strengthening Military Fundamentals

In view of the foregone inferences and notwithstanding the political–bureaucratic impulse of premature chest thumping, it would be foolish to

claim the sighting of the rainbow dreamt before it actually rises. Frivolous pretensions of military power need to be kept in check to prevent disorientation of popular perceptions and a consequent forcing of the Government's hands into trouble.

...while politics can be turned quickly, it takes decades to resuscitate a long neglected military institution...no matter how assiduously it goes about building up its military power, it will take a decade or two before holistic modernisation of forces... within an affordable defence budget...start delivering...

Instead, entering into strategic partnerships should facilitate India in accelerating its military modernisation, for it to be fully capable of defending its sovereign interests in protracted conflict situations—on its own. More than that, such partnerships should provide the right opportunity for India to mark its indigenous base for state-of-the-art design, production and innovation of military hardware. Of course, it would be impractical to go beyond that mark to demand access to frontier technologies or to take liberties against intellectual property rights. However, even within that mark, strategic partnerships could ease the management of India's fiscal burdens against its military modernisation schemes and hence fulfil a basic charter of national development.

A military force structure that would need a decade or more to be modernised in tune with the nuances of new forms of warfare and so impose more effective deterrence upon the adversaries, leads India to the exercise of the option of forging strategic partnerships with common-cause friendly nations. The purpose would be to harness collective partnerships to cover the lost decades of India's military modernisation and build-up, and hence makes it difficult for the inimical parties to subvert India's national interests. Strategic partnerships which gel from such sovereign considerations—whether the Quad or other bilateral and multilateral partnerships with the East and Central Asian nations—must therefore have prominent military overtones. Herein, the military aspects of force modernisation, technology transfer, design development, arms sales and defence industrialisation would have to be in focus. No doubt, upgrade of economic, technological and industrial relationships in the civil domain would also be incorporated into the structure of such partnerships.

...only after such a build-up is achieved can the military institution be certain of, first, deterring aggressive designs,...and second, to defeat it should that deterrence not be heeded...

Strategic Assets for Trade-off

There is no bounty to be expected in international partnerships. Therefore, for strategic partnerships to work on truly reciprocal footing, the equation of 'give and take' needs to be balanced out. However, in that context, civil (e.g. economic, engineering, education, etc.) cooperation that India might offer to the still-developing East and Central Asian nations, including Afghanistan, and such assistance that India might receive from friendly developed nations, need not—rather should not—have to be confined to classical parameters of strategic partnerships. Such engagements, perhaps, including low-key military exchanges such as training and defence trades, are equally well attended to in the normal course of international relationships in any case. Conversely, as indicated before, strategic partnerships signify deeper bindings among its members to help each other marshal their national strengths across all fields of enterprise, of course with military overtones at its core.

In the 'give and take' of strategic partnerships, interplay of conflicting self-interests among the partners, which might in certain conditions restrict their contribution to the partnerships, would also have to be taken cognisance of—issues faced in the Western Bloc coalitions in the Middle East is a recent example of such dilemma. Therefore, the terms of strategic partnerships need to be qualified, in that, it might not bind the members to commit to military operations unless specified circumstances call for it. Further, India being a nation that repudiates application of military force in furtherance of its national goals, deployment of troops for ambivalent or inconsistent purposes must have specific sanction of the Indian State.

In this context, India stands at some advantages as well as certain limitations. The assets it can offer in the partnership trade-off are:

- One, its large, if moderately capable, military forces;
- two, its domineering geographic location in a region where international power-jostling is assuming prominence by the day; and,
- three, a huge and deep-pocket market that attracts profitable trade.

In terms relative to partner nations who are better endowed to contribute militarily, economically and technologically, India's trade-off offer to the partnerships might have to be in terms of troops, military logistics and trade facilitation. However, to reiterate, the first option is ruled out more or less, barring instances when military operations are undertaken either under the sanction of global institutions or in pursuance of the nation's sovereign rights.

...strategic partnerships should facilitate India in accelerating its military modernisation...capable of defending its sovereign interests in protracted conflict situations—on its own—(and) to foster an indigenous base for state-of-the-art design, production and innovation of military hardware...while making it difficult, through collectivistic partnerships, for the inimical parties to subvert India’s sovereign interests...

Cognisance has also to be taken of the fact that no matter how sugar-coated these might be, goal-definitive China-wary partnerships would be obvious in their intent, and therefore, liable to provoke adversarial reaction from a powerful China. Given its own strategic equation vis-à-vis the United States and China, even Russia would be concerned about such goal-definitive partnerships. Therefore, care has to be taken to prevent India’s trade-off to protect its national security concerns from inter alia blurring the distinction between ‘strategic partnerships’ and military alliances, and thus turning it into an open provocation. Appropriate control and remedial mechanisms—through political, diplomatic and military engagements—should therefore be instituted to configure strategic partnerships in a manner as to dissuade aggression from China, while at the same sequence, distancing from any impression that might be construed as threat to China’s legitimate aspirations or that of Russia’s. Therefore, there are two conditions to be met:

- One, strategic partnership should not be construed into military alliance or pact and
- two, India should be able to weather through possible adverse reactions—for example, proxy aggression from disparaging powers, even diplomatic and economic coercion.

Indeed, strategic cards are to be played with extreme deliberations.

Part 4: Considerations over Strategic Partnerships

Discussion so Far

So far, following a recount of the occasions for forging strategic partnerships in Part 1 of this paper, we have seen in Part 2 of the paper that China connects its domination of the Indo-Pacific Region as the lifeline to its ‘rightful rise’ to global power. Having prepared itself over the past decades to establish that domination, China is now seen to be shedding its accommodative pretensions to take the next step to its ‘rise’. Indeed, the CPC has announced that there would be ‘no more’ concessions made over its territorial claims. It has also formally pronounced

that 'China faces no threat' but yet continues to make massive investments in military build-up. That allows the Chinese leadership to perpetrate unilateral and domineering policies, duly backed up with military force, either direct or implied.

We have also seen that it is the dismay borne out of China's outrageous behaviour that has pushed the potential victims of China's aggressive conduct to forge partnerships with the purpose of building what the United States has described as a 'principled security network to promote rule-based international order'. As stated, these partnerships could be in bilateral and multilateral mode—like the Indo-US partnership, the Quad Grouping and any other with one or more nations of the Asia-Pacific.

Further, in relation with India, we have seen above in Part 3 that to thwart any possible undermining of its sovereignty—more so when the attempt is in collusive mode with Pakistan and applied across a wider spectrum of hostilities—India's obligation of military preparedness would be better served by gaining membership in strategic partnerships. Indeed, India's singular purport in entering into such partnerships would be to manage its objectives of catching up with military modernisation and defence industrialisation, and meanwhile, cover the imbalance of the period of gestation. Conversely, we have also been cautioned to be realistic in our objective estimation of India's military and economic power-potentials to stand the test of strategic partnerships.

Presently, the stage is set to delve deeper into substantial considerations that must guide India's approach to the mechanism of strategic partnerships. We may begin with the situations arising from divergence of objectives that could prevail among the intended partners.

Goal Variations in Strategic Partnership

Any Indo-Pacific strategic partnership would aim at facilitating its members to go about their business of securing individual national goals without having to put up with China's high-handed inflictions over collateral issues—for example, China's brazen occupation and militarisation of SCS islands. The core purpose here would be to discourage China's unilateralism and also to find reconciliation of neighbourhood concerns, and not so much for actual prosecution of full-scale warfare or even hard military action. Herein, certain developed and powerful nations, along with like-minded stakeholders of moderate capabilities, could forge any combinations of bilateral, trilateral or quadrilateral partnerships in pursuit of their common-cause as well as individual goals.

Military conflict being avoidable to the progressive world, China included, strategic partnerships could actually turn out to be a stage for political-economic-military posturing and escalation control. Since individual national

goals would dictate the terms of strategic partnerships, the specific as well as divergent features of such goals should be relevant to consider.

In this context, the Indo-Pacific Quad could be examined as a representative case to see as to what could be the likely goals that might be eyed by its four likely participants—Japan, Australia, United States and India. Other partnerships and concerns, thereof, could generally be assessed in a similar vein.

Partnership Goals

Japan

In the Sino–Japanese context, economic interdependency between the two protagonists leaves very little scope for any major military confrontation to occur in the foreseeable future. Conversely, it would also be rather repugnant for a nation of Japan's status to be beholden to China's good humour to chart its sovereign course. To Japan, an Indo-Pacific strategic partnership would strengthen its freedom of transit through the SCS and East China Sea against China's adverse domination and possible blockade; it will also facilitate Japan in unhindered harness of sea resources. A target of China's—and Korean's deep-seated cultural antagonism, that kind of security would come as a major relief for Japan in realising its national objectives without hindrance.

Australia

On first reckoning with the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty in force, there seems to be no pressing need for Australia to join another strategic alliance to protect its interests. That could have been the reason why it backed out of the first Quad initiative in 2007–2008. However, unrestricted passage across the seas to China, Japan and East Asia, where most of its exports go, is important for Australia to sustain its economic status. China's attempts to impose its control over the Indo-Pacific Region could, therefore, be seen as an undesirable impingement upon Australia's sovereign options. Its long-standing alliance with the United States has obviously been another factor in Australia showing some interest in the US-endorsed Indo-Pacific strategic partnership or the proposed Quad.

China is Australia's major trade partner; besides, there are no disputes between the two. Australia would, therefore, not like to lock horns with China unless its core interests are threatened—either through China's undermining of United States' regional primacy or by direct imposition of transit restrictions. In the latter case, it is possible that to avoid military confrontation, Australia may even put up, to a limit, China's assertiveness—like declaration, but no

further, of another ADIZ-like restriction over the East Pacific or some similar dictatorial act. Membership of strategic partnerships could help Australia from having to concede to such eventualities which breach that limit.

The United States

For the United States, China's attempts to establish itself, first as the regional principal and then to bind Asia-Pacific nations into client status, directly threatens the former's pole position as a global superpower and all the advantages that go with it—advantages that contribute to its pole position in the first place. The biggest promoter as well as beneficiary of the current world order, the United States' disconcert is exacerbated on the one hand, by the rate at which China is gaining in all spheres of power, and on the other hand, its own compulsion of scaling down on international commitments, formal and informal, to promote a policy of 'America First' in its place.

Therefore, the American policy of entering into strategic partnerships with friendly countries of the Region is aimed at forging political–military security alliances to serve common security needs, facilitate the United States to preserve its lead status at a moderate cost, and at the same time, continue with commercial engagements with China and others under stable conditions. Profits from defence exports to partners would also be a significant gain from such partnerships.

Partnership's Defining Factors

Complexities

Under the circumstances discussed above, the dilemma faced by India has many complex nuances. These 'complexities' are borne out of the following defining factors:

One, keeping the Indian Ocean free from military competitiveness is a multinational, in fact, a global concern, particularly after China claims its stake on the pretext of securing its own sea lifeline. Since freedom of the vast and heavily sailed Indian Ocean cannot be left to any unilateral impulse, the stakeholders' security interests would be best served through the mechanism of multinational partnerships. Of course, its geographic centrality requires that India be the fulcrum of that effort.

Two, Japan and Australia are located at distinct extremities of China's intended hegemonic zones. Yet, their concerns would be focused on the waters closer to their home through which their shipping must transit before entering such zones. In other words, Japan and Australia's peripheral

geographic location does not absolve them of the need for unrestricted sea movement and freedom from hegemonic dictates over the seas near and far.

Three, China's aggressive posture along the Indo-Tibet Border must be India's priority concern, but perhaps not so much of the others—even if that would whet China's predatory appetite in subsequent instances. In practical terms, it would be banal to expect friendly nations, partners or not, to come to India's direct aid against China's military aggression across the Indo-Tibet Border. Political support and certain military supplies at best are what might practically be hoped for.

Four, the rest of the nations in China's periphery would be very chary of openly joining up to form bulwarks against China's usurpation of global commons, thus, invoking economic and military backlash upon themselves. Therefore, they would prefer to sit on the fence, unless they are forced to play appropriate roles in restraining China from denying their own sovereign options. Even to do so, these countries would need the husbandry of a binding force like the United States.

Five, with all its global stature and overwhelming military as well as economic power, the United States would remain as the fulcrum of all Indo-Pacific strategic partnership initiatives. However, India's past experiences with the United States' India-dismissive policies do not inspire the kind of confidence that robust strategic partnerships require. Moreover, past trends have shown that partnership with the United States could be contingent upon certain stipulations that might call for compromise of India's much preferred political singularity. However, at present, we need not be tethered to the past and weigh the contemporary considerations on merit.

Extreme Possibilities

There are certain 'extreme possibilities' which need more serious deliberations for appropriate responses to be reconciled with the scope of intended strategic partnerships, both in bilateral or multilateral modes. Briefly, these are:

The US administration has shown its preference for bilateral partnerships with individual nations. Arguably, as compared to multilateral alliances, this policy fits its purpose well. Delink from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are precursors of that policy—there may be many more on line. The Quad or similar partnerships would, therefore, have to factor an eventuality of the United States, or any other partner, retracing from a commitment on some individual consideration or the other.

Then, there is the possibility of one or more members of a partnership being enticed to swerve away from the line of the partnership commitments and to arrive at on-the-side bilateral understandings with the hegemon. In its extreme manifestation, United States and China may come to a mutual understanding to delineate their respective 'spheres of influence'—similar instances of Machiavellian politics are not unknown in the past after all. Such realities of the primacy of self-interests are liable to put any partnership in strain.

Of late, China has not been averse to crank its economic handle to put its trading partners to severe tests—for example, denial of rare earths to Japan and tourism restrictions against South Korea. China being a prime mover of international commerce could be a key concern for all those nations who are bound to China's trade regime.

China's continued bullying of its neighbours could be responded by some of the tormented nations going nuclear in order to find relief from China's military intimidation. No doubt, prospects of nuclear retaliation, even from weaker opponents, would be a grave setback for China's hegemonic pretensions; it could subdue the deterrence differential, derail China's superior-power ambition and even shake up the Communist regime. But even if nuclearisation could bring some relief to the Indo-Pacific Region, nations from China's maleficent shadow and the entire world would be worse for wear.

...Indian Ocean can neither be left to China's dictation nor should it be ascribed singularly as an Indian responsibility...it would be in multinational, not just Indian, interest to forge partnerships to deal with it...of course, its geographic centrality requires that India must be the fulcrum of that effort...

It would be imperative to reconcile the divergences and contradictions such as those listed above as these could mar any strategic partnership. Particularly with regard to the probability of nuclear proliferation, no nation, not the least China, may endorse that kind of fallout. Strategic partnerships short of military alliances could, therefore, be an appropriate alternative to 'counterbalance' China's assertive instincts and yet forestall the instigation of other equally dangerous situations.

Incentives of Reconciliation

Arguably, adverse situations many a times produce accommodative policies. Therefore, in the coming years, there could also be positive developments coming out of the coalescence of strategic partnerships. Interplay of China's aggressive posture on the one hand and counterbalancing measures adopted by

the strategic partner nations on the other could lead to finding fair and lasting redress of both the sovereignty as well as economy-related contentions. The Sino-Vietnam agreement on joint exploration over the disputed seabed is an example. Similarly, the Belt and Road Initiative could devise a more balanced approach—in terms of the locally focused rather than externally dictated schemes, discarding opacity in favour of full transparency, providing fillip to domestic economy rather than confining to the profit of external companies and fiscal settlements on more liberal terms instead of imposing onerous conditions upon the recipients of modest means. Even the proposed ‘Quad Grouping’ need not, as some hawks suggest, morph into an ‘Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)’, unless China fails to see the notice and triggers the formation of a military, rather than a business collective of Asian and European stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific Region.

Therefore, in summation, blossoming of a genuine strategic partnership could bring good turns to the Region. For that advantage to manifest, there are two conditions:

- One, each member’s contributions, gains and fallouts have to be judiciously reconciled and
- two, avoiding the pitfall of pompousness, the partnerships, in nature, must be essentially dissuasive against aggressive behaviour.

...it would be banal to expect friendly nations, partners or not, to come to India’s direct aid against China’s aggressive military action across the Indo-Tibet Border...Political support, and at the best certain military supplies, are what may practically be hoped for...

Check sheet of Bilateral Relations

India–Russia

There is some concern regarding the proposed Indo-Pacific partnerships, pushing Russia and China closer together in order to contest regional domination by a US-led front. However, Russia itself being no less concerned over a growingly strong China, its economic dependency on remittances coming from military as well as oil supplies to China and Chinese demographic encroachments across Far East Russia, it might prefer the United States to maintain its global dominance against that of China’s—at least till Russia can reclaim its lost power-perch. Russia’s friendly parleys with its long-standing adversary Japan and delimiting the antagonist stance in West Asia in an

otherwise tense US–Russia relationship could be the expression of that policy. However, in the Indo-Russian context, the equation would be more tenuous.

Even though India remains dependent upon the Russian military hardware for the times to come and while the US–Russia estrangement exacerbates, India's defence partnership with the United States will take some convincing to revive the faded Indo-Russia mutual trust. It would be a complex call to assuage Russia's disapproval of India partnering its *bête noire*, the United States, but it would be feasible nevertheless to heed that call through other forms of compensatory gestures, particularly, through astute diplomacy and attractive defence trade relations.

India–China

Many opine that the China-focused strategic partnerships would deflect China from making accommodating gestures towards India, and push it more in promoting Pakistan's destabilising role along the Makran Coast as well as in the Occupied Kashmir. China would also see the Quad as well as any other IOR and East Asian partnerships as attempts to 'surround' it—a usual paranoia among rising powers.

These arguments, however, have only secondary relevance since China in any case has, and continues to do, all that it can to undermine India's security interests. Moreover, there is no hint of China's release from that affliction. While expressing concerns about the LEMOA agreement and anticipating future presence of American forces on Indian soil, it has yet chosen to overlook Pakistan's 'front-line' alliance with the United States while pumping Pakistan with offensive arsenal. It has then crossed the rubicon by going ahead with inducting its troops into Pakistan's illegally occupied parts of Kashmir and now is in the process of militarising the Gwadar Port as well as establishing a new base at Jiwani on the Makran Coast, very close to the Indo-Iran Chabahar Port.

China's latest, and arguably the most destabilising act of hostility has been revealed in the form of hydrological imperialism over the Indus and Sutlej River waters. Of course, the Doklam incident has riled the PLA hawks and there is much to expect from the more and better-organised military muscle flexing along the Line of Actual Control. Alongside, the process of consolidation of its negative influence among India's neighbours continues to accelerate. To that extent, strategic partnership or not, there is no relief for India from the compulsive Chinese hostility—demonstratively strong military capabilities is the only antidote.

...Doklam incident has riled the PLA hawks and there is much to expect from the more, better organised military muscle flexing along the Line of Actual Control...process of consolidation of its influence among India's neighbours continues to accelerate... there is no relief for India from compulsive Chinese hostility—demonstratively strong military capability is the only antidote...

India–United States

India's past experiences with the formal Indo-US relations have not been favourable. Ill-advised over the decades by a traditionally India-cynical British establishment, the US administration has generally preferred to side with Pakistan in its India-baiting game. Moreover, the United States subscribes to the policy of attaching strings to the engagements that it proposes.

However, having been endlessly fooled by Pakistan's packaging of overt subservience with covert subversion of its interests and alarmed by the spread of Chinese influence over its sensitive backyards of the Asia-Pacific; presently, there seems to be a rethink among the American military policymakers. Manifestation of that rethink is apparent in its encouragement to India to join in strategic partnerships, though it will be some time before the pro-India rhetoric is translated into practice.

It is also quite possible that Pakistan's revised pantomime of serving United States' interests, that is duly catalysed by some kind of Machiavellian understanding with China, may cause a cooling of America's enthusiasm to 'strategically' engage with India—a possible repeat of Pakistan brokered US–China–Pakistan alliance of 1971. Whatever be the future possibilities, India has little to lose and some to gain.

Partnerships in Military Modernisation

India no doubt needs American support to modernise its defence sector. Therefore, going beyond the pleasantries of democracy, market, economy and so forth, India needs to find stronger and enticing prospects to attract meaningful and robust partnership with the United States. In that context, there could be four factors of mutuality that could bind America to India's, and of course its own, cause.

One, with humungous deficiencies and obsolescence in military hardware to be made up, India satiates the American crave for business—a sector that more or less drives the US Government policies. The challenge here would be to find mutually acceptable terms of defence production and sales. Since business runs America, that would be a mutually profitable arrangement to converge on.

Two, as against defence purchases, the most pressing need to preserve India's long-term national security is to modernise and develop an indigenous defence industry, and thus, to make India self-sufficient in defence production. Here, just the transfer of military technology would not suffice; development of indigenous research, innovation and design would be imperative. This would require a long gestation period, during which science and technology training, establishment of design bureaus, marshalling of Indian and foreign experts, undertaking of joint as well as purely native ventures and finding mutually accommodative fiscal provisions would have to be instituted. In other words, devising of a substantial 'military business model' would be the key to a strategic partnership with the United States and its other allies.

Three, India could offer to undertake some of the global policing and peacekeeping commitments, possibly of the non-controversial kind, to lighten the United States' military burden in, say, the Indian Ocean.

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Four, taking advantage of its geographic centrality in the Asia-Pacific, India could offer base and transit facilities for the United States', and other friendly powers' civil and military outreach. These facilities differ from 'bases', in a way that the establishment, operation and control over the services rendered would be in indigenous hands and paid for by the users. Accrual of industrial, fiscal and employment opportunities would offer secondary advantages to this option. This option, no doubt, would find storms of cynicism as well as genuine repudiation, and therefore needs careful foresighted deliberations.

THE LAST BET: TO BOARD OR NOT

Recommendatory Considerations

During its post-independence period, India has avoided joining any alliance with military connotations. Staying clear from getting sucked into vicious manipulations of intense rivalry among the two power groups had been a positive fallout of that policy. No doubt, there have been costs to pay for that freedom in terms of technology denial and military obsolescence, even political distancing, but arguably, it had overall been a good path to tread.

Currently, however, with superiority of the overall power added to China's innate hostility, India is faced with a situation that could not go any worse.

Today, India finds itself in strategically disconcerting situations that ferment, inexorably and in concert, to engulf its territorial crust—the Aksai Chin, Occupied Kashmir, Kashmir Valley, Arunachal Pradesh and across the expanse of the Indian Ocean. That situation is further exacerbated by China's acquiescence with Pakistan's covert war on India and its own allurements of India's close neighbours to vitiate the traditional Indo-centric relations.

With its past policies of overlooking defence preparedness and the time as well as expenditure it would hereafter need to overcome that debility, India finds itself much challenged in preserving the sanctity of its sovereign nationhood. India, however, does not find itself alone in this hot caldron—what with China, in company of the evil regimes of Pakistan and North Korea, causing consternation among the other stakeholders of regional stability. Therefore, as the time to check China's rising assertiveness approaches criticality, coalescence of strategic partnerships among the vulnerable nations must be a handy way out to deal with that problem.

Therefore, even if India has so far dealt with the situation with remarkable resilience, strategic partnerships like the Quad and so forth, could be an option to overcome that challenge. In fact, coalescence of such obvious China-focused partnerships could project a forbidding message against China's rampaging policies.

Politics of Economics

In reckoning, there is one question that bugs China-focused strategic partnerships, that of the adversities of economic fallout of enraging China. Economics has ever been at the roots of politics, while articulation of military power is but its political recourse. Economics, therefore, has mostly been the root cause of warfare; pleasant notions of harbouring economic relations to foster peace and friendship are only selectively true. In fact, as evidenced by majestic empires of the past and confirmed by contemporary examples of United States, China and now Russia, military power brings economic advantages, while the opposite is not always true—Japan, for example.

Thus, whatever be the case, China, already an economic giant, would strike back with sanctions to squeeze into economic helplessness against such members of strategic partnerships it disapproves of. The above-quoted cases of economic squeeze on Japan and South Korea are examples of such a situation. Conversely, it is also true that economic sanctions hurt both parties while it alone cannot alter a nation's manners. Strategic partners would do

well to consider these aspects and keep the character of the partnerships in the right balance between politics and economics, sovereignty and profitability.

Partnership Prerequisites

Considering the prerequisites from the Indian point of view, meaningful strategic partnerships should encompass within its ambit, full scope for all that India needs to contribute, and to gain from such partnership obligations. Thus, strategic partnerships should facilitate India's force modernisation, boost indigenous defence industry and inter alia help in achieving territorial security against conventional as well as proxy aggression. In simple terms, the partnership advantages should translate into:

- First, time-bound import of military hardware as well as transfer of core technologies, both at affordable costs, for indigenous manufacture to expand;
- second, co-opting India in defence research, design and indigenous defence production and
- three, the extension of due political support to India's campaign against territorial and terror vulnerabilities.

To compensate for possible negative impacts of India's entry into strategic partnerships, compensatory fulfilment of the above-listed premises might be mandatory—at least till India can become a self-sufficient military power.

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Partnership in Equal Terms

We have discussed that for the strategic partnerships to work well, India has also to consider the weight of contributions it can offer to the partnership—there is no grand purpose in joining as a sponsored member. We have also seen that the assets of relevance that India can presently offer to the partnership are: one, mutually profitable defence business; two, mutual development of the modern defence industry; three, a professionally competent military force that might be deployed in globally endorsed and uncontentious policing and peacekeeping roles; and four, provision for military logistic and control facilities to cover the Indo-Pacific lines of communications.

The first two offers, with appropriate terms and conditions, broadly meet common requirements. In the third case, India, to begin with, would have to hollow out a good part of its forces' inventories to shape its armed forces in a manner that it can operate at par with other members of the partnership. Meanwhile, high-scale induction of modern weaponry and equipment would also be needed to maintain compatible capability between the Indian military forces, that of the partners as well as the contending powers who too would upgrade. Such a level of military modernisation would require a scale of funding that would strain the Indian economy unless the strategic partners, instead of laying disparaging terms and conditions, come forward to assist in good faith and mutual solidarity—just as the Russians did in the past. India's recent pronouncement of 'Revitalising Defence Industrial Ecosystem through Strategic Partnerships' endorses that line.

Next, opening up its peninsular landmass to strategic partnerships for provision of logistic and control facilities to partner powers would open up new vistas of technology, trade and employment. However, it might also expose Indian territories to targeting by various means even when India may not be directly involved in hostilities. To counter that, high-technology, high-cost defensive shields would have to be fielded to cover India's vulnerable areas.

Obviously, unless these conditions are comprehensively addressed beforehand, India's entry into any conditional strategic partnerships—of the kind that would restrain China—could be troublesome.

A Season of Reckoning

The December-end 2017 edition of the US National Security Strategy, while warning of the approach of a contentious world order in which the United States faces rising threats from an 'emboldened' China (and Russia, as well as rogue governments of North Korea and Iran), has identified India as a 'leading global power'. It has then gone on to express its intent to 'deepen its strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in maintaining security in the Indo-Pacific Region'. In reference to China it states that "China seeks to displace United States in the Indo-Pacific Region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favour". Notably, United States and its allies insist that the China Seas and the islands, therein, ought to be governed by international laws and not by China's expansive imagination, and go about demonstrating that stance by the conduct Freedom-of-Navigation Operations (FONOPS) and repudiation of China's so-called ADIZ on behalf of the larger community of stakeholders. These promulgations could be a harbinger for many shades of India's strategic partnerships to blossom.

Global politics of the contemporary period requires, and nurtures, international relationships to thrive concurrently in multidimensional formats. It is, therefore, possible for nations to be antagonistic in some ways, while cooperating or even lauding each other in certain other matters of mutual interest. Thus, while India contends with two militarily aggressive neighbours who variously choose to be politically disparaging or militarily animus as it might suit their attitude, it can still try to keep their hostility in check, and engage with them in matters of congruous interests.

That has indeed been the objective of India's policies in the recent years, the only chink being in its military power—the ultimate arbitrator of international disputes—falling short in deterring its habitual adversaries from relentless use of overt and covert forces to undermine Indian nationhood. Overcoming that debility, timely and comprehensively, must be the objective of India entering into any kind of strategic partnerships. Indeed, robust strategic partnerships would help in incentivising peace and stability.