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## India's Indo-Pacific Reckoning

Dr. Titli Basu



**U**S-China disorder presents a defining moment in international history. A fractured power structure and contestation over the rules of the international system have been sharpened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing's ascent in the international order and the ensuing disequilibrium in the balance of power between the United States and China at the global level, and China and India at the regional level, are making

policy elites in Delhi fiercely debate key strategic choices in pursuit of the national interest. Stakes are high with trade, technology, the fourth industrial revolution, and infrastructure all defining great power contestation in the strategic theatre of the Indo-Pacific.

### Disequilibrium in US-China-India Triangle

China frames its pursuit of power within the narrative of “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” anchored in an historical interpretation of the Middle Kingdom’s “century of humiliation” from the First Opium War through the Sino-Japanese War. Beijing’s path to primacy is anchored not only in military modernization and economic statecraft but also soft and sharp power instruments to advance grand strategic designs like the Belt and Road Initiative. With China’s rise, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks a renegotiation of the asymmetry that exists between the distribution of *power* and the distribution *benefits* in international society. Offering Chinese solutions to international problems, Beijing has challenged the US-led liberal order with alternative rules and norms, ideas, and institutions.

At the regional level, the growing

power differential in India-China relations is manifesting beyond contested Himalayan borders. Chinese checkers in Pakistan, South Asia, and the wider Indian Ocean Region further complicate geopolitics. In the last two decades, Beijing's defense spending has witnessed around a seven-fold increase, rising from \$39.6 billion in 1999 to \$266.4 billion in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The reality of China's economy being one-sixth larger than America's (in purchasing power parity terms) is upon us.<sup>2</sup> It is imperative for India to adjust to the profound impact of China's rise in the immediate neighborhood, and especially when it comes to addressing Chinese aggression along its land border with India. In recent times, India has managed incidents like Doklam, Chumar, and Depsang—but the Galwan standoff was the definitive moment when Beijing has “strategically lost India.”<sup>3</sup> In India, the debate over China is increasingly turning in favor of making the cost of unilaterally altering the status quo unsustainable for Beijing.<sup>4</sup>

## Beijing's Proposition of a Unipolar Asia in a Chinese Century

The narrow prism of analyzing India as a mere “balancer” in great power game is flawed. Sharper strategic articulation from Delhi is

positioning India as a leading power in a multi-polar world. Delhi's strategic quest for a multi-polar world was shaped amid apprehension of US hegemony in the post-Cold War years. India believes that a multipolar world should be anchored by a multipolar Asia at its core.<sup>5</sup> But today, the prospect of a *unipolar* Asia has become more pronounced with President Xi Jinping's “China Dream.” While India is seeking strategic equilibrium, China is relentless in its pursuit of engineering a hierarchical Asian order, with Beijing at top,<sup>6</sup> fueling its vision of a *Chinese* century as opposed to an *Asian* century.<sup>7</sup>

Judging from key policy pronouncements, India aspires to be a stabilizing power bringing its capacities to bear on the international system for the purpose of promoting the global good.<sup>8</sup> It wants to be a net-security provider rather than a disruptionist power in the Indo-Pacific. India's Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar has deftly articulated that today's multi-polar world reflects strong bipolar characteristics, with not all the poles being of the same size, and the United States and China being relatively more influential than other players.<sup>9</sup>

Shaking off “hesitations of history”<sup>10</sup> and debunking the

narrative of India as a reluctant power, Delhi aims to be a rules-shaper and not an abstainer – recognizing that “rule of force” underwrites the “rule of law.” At the Shangri-La Dialogue, India has argued that the Indo-Pacific should be anchored in rules and norms based on the consent of all and not the power of a few. Strategic conversations have urged for a New Delhi Consensus, characterized by a call for a more inclusive, equitable, and participatory world order.<sup>11</sup> The experience of the liberal rules-based order was “neither liberal, nor particularly orderly”<sup>12</sup> for all. History shows that great powers have often customized rules of the international system and have taken an *a la carte* approach in pursuit of their national interest and strategic ambitions. Rules-based order has at times been overriden by power-based order.

The rules of the international system need to be overhauled and India cannot afford to be a passive player. India largely has a rule-taker instinct. For instance, unlike Beijing’s disregard for the PCA’s ruling in favor of the Philippines, Delhi respected the ruling by a PCA-established tribunal in favor of Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal Boundary Arbitration. But India’s rising political capital as a rules-shaper makes it imminent for

Delhi to make tough policy choices and shape global conversations setting standards on pertinent issues, for instance, global trade rules, tech *rules* and digital governance.

## Dividends of India’s Doctrine

India’s search for solutions in managing differences and protecting strategic equities has renewed the debate on strategic autonomy versus alliances. The strategic assessment in Delhi is that “the more India rises, the more it must expect Chinese opposition.”<sup>13</sup> With the Galwan misadventure, Beijing has incentivized Delhi’s pivot to Washington, but the current border crisis might not fundamentally reorient Indian policy towards alliance, but it may rebalance some of its priorities.<sup>14</sup>

Sieving the conversation in Delhi shows that, while alliance continues to remain the “wrong answer” for India, greater “realism” is permeating policymaking. Political discourse suggests that while India cannot give any other country a veto over its policy options, there is a need to look beyond dogma and enter the real world of convergences.<sup>15</sup> Today, military alliances are neither being offered to nor sought by Delhi. The very discourse in India has pivoted to encompassing issue-based multi-alignments and coalitions in

pursuit of shared strategic interests and leveraging partnerships to further India's national interests. Indeed, this new discourse has echoes in India's history of trysts with various shapes and forms of alliances, all of which were influenced by the evolving nature of international threats.<sup>16</sup>

While the Trump administration has treated Delhi relatively more gently than Beijing and even some of its formal allies,<sup>17</sup> India is keenly aware that the United States has fed the rise of China and that a US-China "grand bargain" at some point is not impossible. To date, India's strategy of engagement-with-all without having to choose between rival great powers paid rich dividends in terms of sourcing capital and technology. "Balance of interest" has remained the guiding principle of Indian foreign policy.

## **Between National Interests and International Responsibilities**

India's Indo-Pacific strategy, while being a critical component of Delhi's China policy, also enumerates an open, inclusive, and cooperative construct to maximize geopolitical advantages and geo-economic guarantees in advancing India's global influence.

Maritime security is at the heart of Indo-Pacific construct. While the

geography extends from the "shores of Africa to that of the Americas," the India Ocean remains the primary theater for Delhi. Despite the natural geographic advantages in the littoral, India's policy elites have long had a continental orientation. But China's strategic ambition in the Indian Ocean, manifested in its expanding military footprint and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road projects, has compelled Delhi to reorient its focus. As such, island nations and smaller littoral states situated in the strategic geography across Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean, and even the Caribbean are gaining more attention in New Delhi's strategic thinking.<sup>18</sup>

Securing a stable maritime order - and the rule of law at sea - has driven Indian maritime diplomacy. To uphold rule of law and freedom of seas, Delhi is weaving a deeper security-cooperation network among Indo-Pacific stakeholders. This is taking the form of a growing number of logistics agreements, intelligence sharing arrangements, advancing maritime capacity building, maritime domain awareness, and strengthening interoperability between navies through joint drills like the Malabar exercise in key theatres. India has conceived the Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI), building

on the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine, in its quest for securing maritime global commons and present governance solutions to shared maritime challenges. In designing a rules-based regional architecture, India's IPOI rests upon the seven pillars of maritime security, maritime ecology, maritime resources, capacity building and resource sharing, disaster risk reduction and management, science, technology and academic cooperation, and trade connectivity and maritime transport.<sup>19</sup> This has gained traction with other maritime democracies like Japan and Australia, and also features in the India-ASEAN Plan of Action (2021-2025).

Strategic pursuit of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific is shaping India's issue-based alignments with various Indo-Pacific stakeholders, especially the United States, Japan, Australia, and France in addition to ASEAN and the European Union in bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral and "Quad plus" strategic geometries. While the Quadrilateral Security dialogue ("Quad") is anchored by a desire to keep maritime highways free and open, coordination under the India-Japan-Australia Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) is driven by the need to map and manage supply-chain

vulnerabilities in key sectors like pharmaceuticals, medical devices, semiconductors, automotives, and chemicals. India's recent involvement along with Japan in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing framework is designed to navigate tensions between law enforcement and the encryption policies of tech companies – another demonstration of Delhi's rising interest in forming global coalitions.

India accords primacy to advancing regional connectivity and infrastructure across the Indo-Pacific. Doing so not only connects the economic growth poles and advances regional economic linkages, production networks and value chains, but also acts as strategic leverage in the great power game. As host nations today have several financing options, including BRI, India advocates infrastructure projects underpinned by consultative practices involving local stakeholders. India's infrastructure outreach is driven by compliance with global governance standards, including respect for sovereignty, responsible debt financing practices, and ecological sustainability. As such, India has steered a Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and International Solar Alliance.

Infrastructure financing is a vital geo-economic instrument of statecraft and India is catching up by

tapping into the joint capacities of strategic partners like Japan and the United States to deliver on the shared responsibility of addressing the infrastructure gap. The Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Trilateral Forum aims to channel the assets and resources of the India-Japan-United States private sectors to address the infrastructure gap. Moreover, India is inching towards joining forces with the US-Japan-Australia-led Blue Dot Network (BDN), seeking to advance high quality infrastructure. Japan has emerged as India's preferred partner in third country co-operation with a few success stories to boast in the Bay of Bengal.

Beyond hard infrastructure, strategic competition also centers on technology and data. Given the vitality of digital connectivity and secured networks, India is coordinating with like-minded partners at the D-10 on strategic vulnerabilities and national-security challenges posed by critical technologies including 5G. The Open Radio Access Network (O-RAN) is driving the discourse and an O-RAN Policy Coalition is formed to advance open and interoperable solutions aimed at enabling innovation. Mutual interests could drive momentum on key verticals including artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, space technologies and in

strategic metals and minerals.

Revisiting the global economic order became apparent following Covid-19. The pandemic unleashed severe economic contraction across the world, and tentatively dialed down India's growth story. The disruption has made Delhi devise the Atmanirbhar Bharat strategy which has sparked a fierce debate on globalization versus economic autarky. To be clear, Prime Minister Modi's self-reliance policy is not about being self-contained or being closed to the world but is driven by India's determination to enhance its economic contribution to the global economy. India's exit from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) pact, which took place even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, underscores the domestic compulsions and urgent need to accelerate structural reforms and enhance competitiveness.

India's ability to economically engage with the region remains imperative since economic isolation is not an option. But the RCEP negotiations proved that the world is perhaps unwilling to accommodate India's interest despite the size of its market. India's target of becoming a US\$5 trillion economy is contingent on becoming able to withstand global competition and seize benefits from export opportunities

that external markets offer. Multi-lateral agreements create such expanded opportunity.<sup>20</sup>

## Walking the Talk

While the Indo-Pacific is dominating the political lexicon and strategic thinking in Delhi, the biggest challenge will be matching political intent with material and national capacity. The conversation on the Indo-Pacific gained traction with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's landmark speech in the Indian Parliament – “Confluence of the Two Seas” - capturing the dynamic coupling of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as seas of freedom and prosperity. India's “Look East Policy,” meanwhile, pivoted to “Act East” and subsequently the idea of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” If geopolitical churning in the major capitals of the world have positioned India at the heart of their respective Indo-Pacific strategy, India has, for its part, shed its

initial reluctance and is ready to step up to the challenge. Structural organization in the Indian foreign ministry (the creation in 2019 of an Indo-Pacific division) and institution of key 2+2 dialogues with major Indo-Pacific powers like the US, Japan, and Australia; elevating the Quad's profile; and the rise of Indo-Pacific trilaterals with India-Japan-US, India-Japan-Australia, India-Australia-France, and India-Indonesia-Australia – all of these developments demonstrate Delhi's quest to engage in a collaborative and cooperative framework to design a free and open Indo-Pacific. Without doubt, India is now walking the walk when it comes to Indo-Pacific order. ■

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## Notes

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