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EVOLVING DYNAMICS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC BY AMB SUJAN R CHINYOY DG MP-IDSA

**ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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BY AMB SUJAN R. CHINOY
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India's core strategic outlook is to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity to ensure a peaceful and stable environment for achieving rapid economic growth and prosperity. India faces continental and maritime as well as twin nuclear threats. However, while emphasizing peaceful resolution to disputes, India is committed to using force in defence of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Internationally, there is a great realignment of influence, economic power, and balance of power towards the Asian landmass but the structures of the United Nations (UN), the IMF, and the World Bank remain unchanged since the end of World War II, leading to a mismatch between the two. The response, capacity, and capabilities of the UN and the existing multilateral structures have been weakened and they are not able to respond to the contemporary challenges. There is evidence of diminished multilateralism and greater initiative by countries around the world to maintain strategic autonomy or to engage in issue-based alignment in an era of multi-alignment.

Global Contestation

There is global contestation underway today among major powers. There are 7 Ts (Trade, Technology, Territory, Terrorism, Tenets, Transparency, and Trust) and 4 Fs (Food, Fuel, Fertiliser, and Finance) that impact all geographies. Trade and technology are being increasingly weaponised. However, trade is fungible and despite the differences and attempts of countries to derisk their economies from China, trade between them continues to grow. Technology, however, is more amenable to control since it is controlled mainly by Big Tech that tends to work closely with government and sovereign interests and is therefore subject to sanctions and export control regimes through legislation, making it less fungible. Territorial differences exist all over the world. Terrorism should be a uniting factor, but some countries tend to use it as part of their toolkit of engagement, and therefore, it doesn't lend itself to a broader consensus. It is possible to assess accretion in military power in terms of physical assets but it is difficult to assess the motivations and intentions of an adversary. There is mistrust between the nations because of the lack of transparency in their intentions. The 4 F's have impacted the world, notably the global South, on account of the disruption in supply chains and the protracted wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

A Disruptor China

China is a disruptor because of the manner in which it has risen in a very short timeframe without adequate conversation, dialogue, transparency, and nurturing of trust. China, while remaining part of the privileged global structures, also seeks to question those structures. It wants the world to adjust to its rise in power but itself is not willing to acknowledge the relative rise of others, thus providing cause for friction.

It seeks a One China policy but is not willing to reciprocate with regard to the concerns of others for their core interests. However, any military adventure by China at this stage with the United States and its allies over Taiwan, for example, could derail its growth trajectory and imperil the realisation of the so-called “China Dream”.

Key Challenges faced by China

China faces key challenges on account of its centralized, autocratic leadership, rise in corruption, an ageing population, slowdown in the infrastructure, stock, and manufacturing sectors. There is growing income inequality, growing backlash in the region to China's coercive and unilateral policies and deeper scrutiny and pushback with regard to its policies in Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, South China Sea, and East China Sea.

The Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is a much fuller, a more representative, a more democratic, and a more inclusive expression of the 21st century. Growth and prosperity in the 21st century are no longer the exclusive prerogative of China or a limited geography in east Asia. Today, the developmental impulse has radiated out to cover south-east Asia, South Asia, all the way up to the east coast of Africa. To deny the Indo-Pacific, as China and Russia tend to do, is to deny democracy and inclusivity and to have a kind of closed-door policy towards others. Therefore, the term used today should be one which is a more representative, inclusive, democratic concept and more in tune with the aspirations of a much larger geography and population. Some of the several choke points in the Indo-Pacific are threatened by piracy and, these days, by the Houthi's actions in the Red Sea in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict.

QUAD

Quad has gained fresh momentum and is witnessing convergence on many key issues like health care, critical supply chains, maritime domain awareness, critical and emerging technologies, etc. However, there is scope for Quad to grow in the future and also include some military issues, apart from catering to the region's economic needs.

The Taiwan Issue

The tensions in the Taiwan Strait have increased in recent years. The US is against the use of force for reunification. While China has not given up the right to use force, it is unlikely to do so and risk a war with the US over Taiwan as that will derail China's already slowed down economic growth and endanger the realisation of its broader strategic objectives of emerging as a powerful and modern nation by the middle of this century. Therefore, the likelihood of it happening soon is low. Also, if China uses force against Taiwan for reunification, the US will have to intervene militarily to maintain its credibility in the region and its posture in the Pacific region. In such a case, Japan will have to support the US militarily to maintain the credibility of the US-Japan Security

Treaty and also because if China succeeds in taking over Taiwan, then Japan would have to accept China's dominance.

The South China Sea (SCS)

China makes extended maritime claims in the SCS on the basis of the so-called 9-dash line and has constructed and militarised artificial islands in opposition to which the US conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS). But that does nothing to restore status quo ante in the SCS. However, SCS is unlikely to be a flashpoint for now because the ASEAN countries involved in the dispute are loath to take sides.

China's Perception of Indo-Pacific

China feels that the concept of Indo-Pacific diminishes its centrality in favour of a larger region in which others are also emerging as centers of economic growth and prosperity. It prefers the concept of Asia-Pacific which gives it primacy. China also harbours deep misgivings about the Quad and sees it as a potential Asian NATO which it is not. ASEAN centrality is an opportunity for China to shape outcomes in the Code of Conduct talks, however, it is also a double-edged sword because the ASEAN countries have become increasingly dependent on China, not only for their economic future, but also, as some of them perceive, for their security needs.

Chinese Naval Power

China's PLAN, now a Blue Water force, is the largest navy in the world, and growing. The likely intention will be to expand into wider oceanic spaces and if the Chinese were to spill over into the Indian Ocean, it is not alarming for India alone but also for the other major powers already present in the region, particularly the US and the UK.

India-China Relations

Chinese action in Galwan on 15th June 2020 fundamentally caused a rupture in bilateral ties. By its action, China could have been messaging to India that it is concerned about India's coming closer to the US, or a message for India's neighbours that India is not, after all, such a big power and China can actually contain India militarily. There could have been internal pressures in the run up to the 2021 party centenary and CPC Congress 2022. The Chinese now suggest 'Normal Border Management' in place of 'Emergency Border Management' without restoring status quo ante of April 2020. However, India insists on disengagement at the remaining friction points and peace and tranquillity on the border as precondition for normal ties. China should also be more forthcoming on clarification and confirmation of the Line of Actual Control.

China-Pakistan Nexus

Pakistan, for China, has become a lynchpin for containing the rise of India. Though, association with Pakistan does not come without its costs, China might keep Pakistan under its wings and keep arming it against India.

A Two-Front War?

If Pakistan were to enter any India-China conflict, India is more likely to hit Pakistan first, to Pakistan 's disadvantage. China, also, may hesitate to involve itself in any India-Pakistan conflict as there will be a great deal of pushback by other powers in response to any change in the balance of power, as also an unpredictable and independent escalation ladder. A two-front war is possible but not probable.