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## **New Adjustments in the Regional Security Order in Asia**

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The world order that we had come to know since the end of Second World War is rapidly collapsing. With the rise of China as an economic giant, and several other states asserting their economic and military power, a multipolar world is emerging. And with that a quest for a new balance of power, particularly in the Asia Pacific region. Sino-US relations are going through a conflict-prone transformation, as the US now regards China as a “strategic competitor”, even rival. A new Cold War seems to be germinating.

Unfortunately, however, multilateralism is increasingly getting marginalized in the wake of US pursuit of its ‘America First’ policy. Narrow nationalism, laced with populism, is raising its head in many other countries as well. As Francis Fukuyama argues in his book ‘Identity’, nation, religion, sect, race, ethnicity, gender are the categories of identity that have overtaken broader, more inclusive ideas of who we are. Walls, helmets, are going up instead of bridges.

Yet, globalism is not dead. There are major attempts to keep the world inclusive and inter-dependent. One such area is the deepening economic cooperation between China and Eurasian nations through Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI seeks to connect over sixty countries through mutually beneficial economic and

commercial opportunities. Many in the US are not convinced. They blame China for practicing ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ to expand its presence in Asia. US officials allege that Beijing’s goal is to dominate Asia, though they have not yet provided much evidence for that. Regardless, the Chinese leaders seem convinced that globalism and connectivity would eventually benefit all and help build what they call a “community of shared future”. Many nations are responding positively to the Chinese call for connectivity. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is also emerging as an important platform for the countries of the region to address common challenges.

### **Are China and the US heading for a war?**

A summary of US National Defense Strategy released in January 2018 charges that China is pursuing a military modernization program that, “seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future<sup>1</sup>.” Responding to US’s National Security Strategy, China’s Foreign Ministry urged the United States, “to stop deliberately distorting China’s strategic intentions, and abandon such outdated concepts as the Cold War mentality and the zero-sum game....<sup>2</sup>”

A growing trade war has become the center-stage of US-China relations with direct national security implications for both countries. Leaders of both nations have stated that ‘economic security is national security’. US-China negotiations on trade have stalled and nationalistic rhetoric has increased.

Washington is also blaming China for forced technology transfer, intellectually property theft, cyber espionage, and other unfair trade practices.

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<sup>1</sup>US Department of Defense. “Summary of the National Defense Strategy of United States 2018.” Accessed June 14, 2019. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Xiang Bo, “China Urges US to abandon Cold War Mentality,” *Xinhuanet*, December 19, 2017. [http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-12/19/c\\_136838057.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-12/19/c_136838057.htm)



In recent months, the Huawei case has added a new layer of complexity. US and other western nations are opposing new technologies of Huawei in information systems on the grounds that it could give Beijing a backdoor into most sensitive Western defense and security systems. Meanwhile, Beijing regards these moves as less about security concerns and more about containing the rise of China as a great-power.

US leaders are now talking about re-orienting US military from fighting regional conflicts in Middle East and Afghanistan to prepare for great power conflict. In the recently revealed details of the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report at Shangri La dialogue in Singapore in June 2019, the US alleges that China was seeking to reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations. This, coupled with ongoing US China trade disputes could deepen the mistrust between these two leading world powers.

Several studies have emerged speculating that misunderstandings about each other's intentions could lead them into a deadly Thucydides trap, making war between them imminent, unless they take necessary and bold decisions not to let their conflicts reach beyond the tipping point where war becomes inevitable<sup>3</sup>. This demands mature leadership and prudent handling of the multiple bilateral crises that both nations are now embroiled in.

### **Asia Pacific – the focus of global geo-politics**

Seen in the backdrop of the complex geo-politics in Asia-Pacific, it is clear that the region is likely to remain, for the near future, a venue for global and regional geo-strategic and geo-economic competition between the major powers. There is no regional security order that could prevent conflict in the Asia-Pacific. There are multiple power centers/heavy weights within the regional settings which are more receptive to external influences, namely that

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<sup>3</sup>Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

of the United States.

Some broader trends common to the Asia-Pacific region are quite discernible.

First is the advent of US-China strategic rivalry referred to sometimes as the “New Cold War”. Within this context, Chinese neighborhood in South, Central and East Asia is being re-organized by the US to build a containment arc against China. China, on its part, is making its own counter moves in the form of economic outreach in Asia-Pacific (BRI policy) and strengthening its strategic power. Meanwhile, China is also open to dialogue and cooperation with US on select issues in Asia-Pacific e.g. North Korea and anti-terrorism policy.

Second, US seems to be trying to draw a wedge between China and Russia in order to prevent a joint China–Russia block against the US. Recognizing its strategic relevance, Russia is leveraging both the US and China to increase its regional influence, particularly in Central Asia and Middle East.

Third trend in the Asia-Pacific region is a convergence between the US, China and Russia on the issue of fighting transnational terrorism, especially in the Muslim World.

There are significant trends of transformations, continuity and adjustments in various sub-regions of Asian continent: South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia and the Middle East (West Asia).

Following region wise adjustments are worth noting:

***South China Sea:*** Chinese are deeply concerned about the US’s freedom of navigation operations (FONO) in South China Sea (SCS) and Western Pacific, which, the Chinese believe, violate Chinese sovereignty. Earlier this year, the quadrilateral network among US, Japan, Philippines and India



conducted FONOP exercises in the SCS<sup>4</sup>. The US is now encouraging a more active role for Southeast Asian countries like Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam to fight for a free and open SCS through which around US\$ 5 trillion worth of global trades passes. US is also enthusiastic about greater Indian naval engagement on the South China Sea front.

**South Asia:** The US is clearly building up India as a regional counter-weight to China. In this context, both the US and India aim to neutralize Pakistan as an obstacle to Indian rise by using a mix of lawfare, economic coercion and sub-conventional warfare strategies. Pakistan, on its part, is trying to balance the US and Chinese interests, without getting into anti-China camp. For the US and India, both China and Pakistan represent a challenge to their designs in the Asia-Pacific region. The US is using Pakistan's cooperation to cool down the Afghan theatre, which has become the longest war for the US. Other countries in South Asia i.e. Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan have largely adjusted their regional policies along the lines of Indian interests.

The major source of tensions in South Asia is the gross mistrust between India and Pakistan. As nuclear states, both have a shared responsibility to maintain strategic stability in South Asia. Unfortunately, time and again India has tested the limits of nuclear deterrence. India is feverishly arming itself. It is adopting aggressive war fighting doctrines like Cold Start, preemptive counterforce first strike, and appears to be shifting from its already vague No First Use (NFU) position. Of late, India has embarked upon a dangerous practice of threatening neighboring Pakistan with surgical strikes, like the one it carried out on 26<sup>th</sup> February this year. Indo-US nuclear deal has further emboldened India, which now has access to international nuclear market through 2008 NSG waiver, and nuclear agreements with UK, France, Japan

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<sup>4</sup>Special Correspondent, "Navy Joins Exercises in South China Sea," *The Hindu*, May 09, 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/navy-joins-exercises-in-south-china-sea/article27084481.ece#>

and the US. India and US have signed agreements like Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) which gives both countries access to designated military facilities, and which further enhance the logistical and communication capabilities of the Indian forces<sup>5</sup>. India is also embarking on nuclearisation of Indian Ocean by acquiring nuclear powered submarines, which gives it a second-strike capability. India is acquiring Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) technologies, and has recently carried out an anti-satellite test (ASAT)<sup>6</sup>.

The above facts clearly indicate that India is pushing ahead with its regional and global ambitions, with little or no regard for strategic stability in South Asia. Pakistan, on the other hand, is strictly adhering to credible minimum deterrence and would not like to indulge in any arms race. Pakistan believes that the two contiguous nuclear powers should behave in a responsible manner. For its part, nuclear Pakistan has focused on achieving highest standards of nuclear safety, nuclear security, strict export controls, and robust command and control. If Pakistan is pursuing its nuclear program with restraint and responsibility, then why is it that India feels the need to pursue such an ambitious nuclear and conventional program? Is it the desire to become a regional hegemon, or status-seeking global power, or is it simply an irresponsible conduct of a nuclear power? Or perhaps all three.

Part of the answer became evident in the post-Pulwama actions taken by India. While remaining below the nuclear threshold, India is increasingly instigating conventional confrontation with Pakistan. On 26<sup>th</sup> February 2019, Indian aircraft intruded in Pakistani airspace and dropped a payload in an

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<sup>5</sup> Ankit Panda, "What the Recently Concluded US-India COMCASA Means," *The Diplomat*, September 09, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/what-the-recently-concluded-us-india-comcasa-means/>

<sup>6</sup> Anjana Pasricha, "India Claims Successful Anti-Satellite Weapon Test," *Voice of America*, March 27, 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/india-claims-successful-anti-satellite-weapon-test>



empty plot in Pakistan. On 27<sup>th</sup> February, two Indian planes violated Pakistan airspace, which were downed by Pakistan air force and a pilot captured. What if Pakistan had responded in kind? Did India think of the consequences? In sharp contrast to this irresponsible bravado, which violated international law and norms, Pakistan acted maturely, and released the Indian pilot as a peace gesture and to de-escalate the dangerous situation. Further, Indian leadership, particularly Prime Minister Modi, continued to hurl threats against Pakistan during his election campaign.

The larger question is, should a nuclear state conduct itself in such an irresponsible manner? In the Nuclear Suppliers Group, India wants the international community to believe that it was a like-minded responsible state. Is what India did post-Pulwama by violating Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the conduct of a responsible nuclear state or an irresponsible nuclear state? The US and other world powers need to weigh in on India to act more responsibly and work towards peace and stability in South Asia.

**Central Asia:** Central Asia is a natural resource-rich region, with its strategic location as a Heart of Asia. Traditionally considered as Russian backyard, Central Asia today is reflecting the signs of US and Chinese ingress. China has lately been investing heavily in the region, as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), by linking these states with economies of Chinese provinces. Russia is cooperative to the Chinese outreach in the region. It has not been easy for the US to break the region away from Russian influence (Russia reversed "color revolutions" of 2004-2005). Russians are working with the existing regimes in Central Asia via anti-terrorism cooperation and energy sector reform policies to extend its influence.

Central Asian states are keen to diversify their energy markets southwards

towards India (via TAPI) and eastward towards China. The US supports these diversifications, possibly to reduce Russian influence in the region.

A major hotspot in this sub-region is Afghanistan, which remains in turmoil. Currently, a peace process is underway between the US and the Taliban. The breakthrough came when the US agreed in principle to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan according to a timetable yet to be firmed up. The Taliban announced their commitment not to allow their territory to be used for terrorism against any other country. This is an important step forward. However, the road to peace is still fraught with several serious challenges. First, all Afghan factions must agree to work towards a peace agreement. To that end, an intra-Afghan dialogue is essential. Moscow has lately been active in promoting such a dialogue. Second, Afghanistan needs a ceasefire that holds. Not only that, all parties must commit to a ceasefire, there must be an enforcement mechanism. Third, there should be a regional consensus whereby the neighbors of Afghanistan and others commit to give peace a chance in Afghanistan. For too long, Afghanistan has witnessed proxy wars by outside powers. Notably, the progress in the peace process being led by the US at this time is significant. It appears that the US, Russia, China, Pakistan and other countries are all supportive of the peace process. Though there are still some roadblocks, it is in the interest of the entire region that peace returns to Afghanistan. For its part, Pakistan, which has suffered the most from instability in Afghanistan, is facilitating the peace process as it regards a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan to be in its own interest.

***South East Asia, East Asia, and Pacific:*** It is this sub-region where the pull of US – China strategic rivalry is felt the most. There are multiple hotspots in the region, chief among them are: South China Sea, Korean Peninsula, and Taiwan. China's main thrust of response is also seen in this region. All three



hotspots have lately seen heightened military activities that have the potential to blow into a larger conflict. In addition to this, South East Asia hosts Malacca Straits, through which the oil and gas are transported to China, Japan and other countries.

The region is economically vibrant and has witnessed high growth rates. Whereas the overall global economic growth has slowed down, South East Asia has become a low cost manufacturing hub due to which the ASEAN countries are assuming a bigger say in regional affairs.

To the Far East/ East Asia, the US is trying to cool the North Korean front, with limited success thus far. On Taiwan, China has demonstrated its firm commitment to defend its One-China policy. The US often tests the limits of Chinese patience, but has not yet crossed the Chinese redline.

***Middle East:*** The Middle East remains turbulent. The Palestinian crisis is unresolved. Terrorism continues to afflict countries of the region. Iraq, Syria, and Libya are suffering political instability and violence. Yemen has become a venue for proxy wars. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are a matter of concern for the countries of the region. The recent standoff between Iran and the US has also kept the region on the edge. The US pullout of Joint Comprehensive Program of Action (JCPOA) has been a setback to international diplomacy. The continuing US sanctions on Iran have constrained Iran's economic and commercial interactions with the region and the world at large.

Russian influence in the region has increased, especially in the wake of the Syrian crisis. Though Middle East is not geographically linked to China, the latter is heavily dependent upon the energy supplies from energy rich Gulf region. This is the region where Chinese influence is minimum, and China looks keen to deepen its economic ties with the Gulf region. US and Europe

continue to enjoy significant influence in the region.

## **Conclusion**

From a conceptual lens, there are three determinants of regional security order. First is the relationships between major global powers or those major powers who matter in a specific region. Two, the response of regional powers to the major power politics and three, the ability of major powers to impact the decision making of regional powers. On all three counts, we see that new circumstances borne out of growing Sino-US competition would continue to pose serious challenges for the nations living in Asia. In the absence of a regional security architecture, all nations bear the responsibility to stay positively engaged and work towards regional stability in this important Continent.

In the context of the above discussion, there are three scenarios that can be envisioned, which will set the direction of regional security in the Asia-Pacific.

First is an inadvertent limited conflict between the US and China. The most likely venue for this limited conflict is South China Sea and Taiwan Straits as US and Chinese vessels have come dangerously close to standoff in recent months. Moreover, since political tensions are increasing in these areas, the US-led naval exercises, with its allies and partners, can become a precursor to a limited conflict that has the potential to expand quickly. China's focus would be diverted from development to conflict and the ramifications of this potential scenario will be felt for years.

Second scenario can be called as "Cold Peace" which would mean 'neither war, nor peace' state. This may resemble the current state of affairs where US-China tensions are manageable at the strategic plane. This would, however, mean that new forms of covert warfare would ensue in sub regions of Asia-Pacific. The regional powers in Asia-Pacific will be further pressed



to choose sides in this new form of conflict. India has had a head-start in this game as it escalates its covert war and terrorism as part of its campaign against Pakistan.

Third scenario can be termed, in Trumpian phrase ‘a new deal of the Century’, where strategic circumstances force the US and China to back down from current positions and negotiates their new role/share in the global balance of power. China has periodically signaled that it wants to work together with the US on global issues. That said, the history of great power politics has shown that hard negotiations and geopolitical maneuvering is required to establish such a working relationship. Some attempts were made in the past, but there was strong skepticism within both China and US. A major change in US domestic politics, or Chinese economy, or any other unexpected development could force this change.

There are other possibilities that can also be imagined. But the real crisis the world at large or the Asia-Pacific region faces today is the lack of an alternate narrative to thriving populist nationalism at the world stage. Till that emerges, we should be ready to embrace an unstable regional security environment.