

India-China-US: It Takes Three to do the Tango in Asia

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The increased pace of top-level interaction between India, China and the United States – Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s summit with President Xi Jinping tomorrow will be his fourth with the two powers in less than a year – is happening at a time when there has been a significant shift in the balance of power and influence in the Asia-Pacific, and in economic weights in the world economy. And this transition has been achieved peacefully, despite the logic and weight of historical precedent, largely because the policies of the dominant power, the US, have consistently facilitated the rise of China.

That shift in the balance is also evident in the Indian Ocean. Since 2013, Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) deployments to the Indian Ocean region have become normal, (as they have become in the Western Pacific beyond the first island chain since 2010). The PLAN have been engaged in counter-piracy in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. And in 2014 a Chinese ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) entered the Indian Ocean for the first time, followed by two more visits the same year.

There is talk, (by John Garver, for instance), of a “weak triangle” of India-US-China. Here I think that we are getting ahead of ourselves. None of the three powers think or act in these terms. The asymmetries of power and in the relationships between them are too great for us to speak of a triangle and for it to be operationalised. India and China are each more comfortable working with the US than with each other. Each faces West. For good reason, because the West is critical to their prosperity and is where they seek markets, technology and global public goods. Public opinion also faces West in India and China. A 2014 Pew poll found that only 30% of Chinese and 31% of Indians have a favourable view of the other country. As against this, 50% of Chinese and 55% of Indians have a favourable view of the USA.

Despite the state of public opinion, to my mind there is a strong case for India, the US and China to begin a three way conversation on some of the harder security issues that divide and affect them — maritime security, cyber security, outer space and military doctrines and behaviour — and that this should be done now, while capabilities are being built and deployed rather than later, when we are set in our

ways. While India and the US have announced a Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific region during President Obama's January 2015 visit to India, this still needs to be translated into a broad and inclusive security architecture that China participates in and respects.

This is necessary now because since 2008 India-China relations and the world order as a whole have been going through a period of turbulence and readjustment. The response in the neighbourhood has been rapid. Consultations, defence cooperation and heightened political coordination between powers on China's periphery, particularly India, Japan, Australia, and the USA have revived after a period of dormancy. India has doubled down on her strategic partnership with the US, inviting President Obama to the Republic Day parade this year, the highest state occasion to which a foreign guest is invited.

The question now is whether the factors that led to three decades and more of steady development in India-China relations, and peace in the Asia-Pacific as a whole, continue to operate today.

It is my feeling that some of them may no longer be valid due to rapid shifts in the regional and sub-regional balances that have kept the peace in the Asia-Pacific (and which have yet to find a new equilibrium).

Consider today's situation:

First, both India and China have strong leaders whose primary appeal is to rising nationalist feeling in their countries. During Xi Jinping's September 2014 visit to India, the PLA in an unprecedented show of force (over 1000 troops) entered into one of the areas where there are differences in perception of where the Line of Actual Control lies, Chumar. Unlike in May 2013, when a similar incident before Premier Li Keqiang's visit was settled and the status quo restored within two weeks and before the visit, this time the Chinese took their own time. The timing of the intrusion and its duration made clear that it was deliberate — a signal at the least that China could embarrass the new Indian government when it wished, and that it was not so preoccupied with Japan and the South China Sea as to be unable to adopt a more robust posture on the India-China border.

Second, the external environment is not what either expected. For Xi, the attempt to use China's economic weight in the international system to build alternative connectivity and financial arrangements outside the Western liberal order is still at very early stages. It remains to be seen whether China has the capacity and the

willingness to make the sacrifices required to sustain an alternative order, even in the economic aspect where she is strong. She has got US allies to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank despite perceived US opposition, but what the bank will do, and on what terms, remains to be decided. We hear less Chinese talk of the moment of opportunity in the international situation now than we did a few years ago.

The signs of the new Chinese approach are visible elsewhere in Asia as well. Since 2014, the Chinese have been explicit in opposing US alliances in Asia, “Asia for the Asians” as Xi said CICA meeting in Shanghai in May 2014. China opposes the deployment of THAAD in South Korea vociferously, even more so than when the system was deployed in Japan and Taiwan. While China used to push for a “new international economic and political order” until 2011, that phrase is no longer mentioned. Instead the Chinese now say that we should push for a “more just and rational international political and economic order”.

Chinese scholars speak of a strategic shift in China’s policies two years ago towards using strategic economic means to project China’s power, while continuing the buildup of military power — thus moving away from the 2008-12 forms of assertion to a new form of assertive power projection to shape China’s external environment. There seems to be a higher Chinese willingness to accept risk, as the intention to invest \$46 billion in an economic corridor passing through a highly unstable Pakistan shows. The new geo-strategic push seems to be the Chinese response, asymmetric again, to the US “pivot” or rebalance to Asia. Opinion on the efficacy of the US rebalance and whether it is resourced is clearly mixed in the US and in Asia, as the US remains deeply preoccupied and entangled in Europe and the Middle East. In the meantime the newly forceful Chinese geo-economic initiatives are evident not just in China’s periphery but throughout the Eurasian landmass and up to the Arctic.

Both India and the US follow parallel but independent policies and declare similar goals towards China — engaging her while defending their interests and hedging against the future. India and the US have parallel decisions to make. The decisions will naturally differ in their nature due to asymmetries of power and differing geographical situations, but will be similar nonetheless on how to deal with the emerging situation. That they have announced a common vision for the Asia-Pacific during President Obama’s January visit suggests an increasing congruence in Indian and US views and actions.

China, too, has significant choices to make. In the long term I have no doubt that the Chinese goal is to replace US primacy in Asia and the world, first as an equal, ('a new type of great power relations' is the phrase *du jour*), and then as "Number 1". This is what she regards as the historical norm. In order to do this she will need more friends than North Korea and Pakistan — or at least positive abstentions from more powers. This is why she is willing to invest and pay a price for groupings like BRICS and to build alternatives like the NDB and AIIB and currency arrangements brick by brick. She will need to decide how she relates to and changes the existing global order. It also remains to be seen how far she will moderate her behaviour to achieve primacy.

We are at a moment when events could go in either direction — towards a set of major power accommodations or towards conflict. The choices that the US, China, India and other powers make in the next few years will be critical. There is never a dull moment in the Asia-Pacific.

(This article is the third and last in a series of articles on China written exclusively for thewire.in)

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