

US needs an India-centred outlook in Asia

The American outlook towards Asia has been, consciously or unconsciously, China centric.

JAGANNATH PANDA
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A rules-based order has never been subjected to test as much as it is today. China's assertive rise along with a fragmented power structure that threatens the region's stability, and the lack of a converging and coherent national outlook of the democratic world on global security issues, has raised doubts about the future of a rules-based order. Such doubts challenge the supremacy of the United States as a security guarantor in the current international system.

For almost 40 years, the US has engaged with Asia on the basis of American economic power and Cold War era commitments for promoting Asian security. But over the past two decades, both of these premises have lost their importance, only to be replaced by a consolidated China "containment" strategy vis-à-vis Asia. The Cold War ended suddenly and led to a new world order, one in which the US' foremost threat was no longer an ideology enshrined within the USSR, but China as a rising global power with immense economic prosperity. US economic dominance has waned, and the centre of power has shifted eastwards to Asia, harkening the beginning of the "Asian Century".

American outlook towards

Asia took a more active turn with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by the newly crowned Chinese President Xi Jinping. President Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" highlighted an official strategic "re-balance" of US interests from the Middle East and Europe to Asia. The US "pivot" to Asia was based on how to deal with a rising China and manage the North Korean problem of nuclear command and instability, factoring only the American interest. Consecutively, Donald Trump carried forward the legacy and made a negative outlook on Asia apparent, amplifying the trade and tariff tensions with China and reaching out to Kim Jong-un in North Korea, emphasising on the "America first" outlook.

Thus, a positive outlook never dominated America's worldview on Asia. On the one hand, the American view on Asian powers such as South Korea and Japan—its alliance partners—is still very much neglected and remains transactional. India's rise in Asia, the merits of a multipolar world that would strengthen the established rules-based order, connectivity and infrastructure programs that Asia's sub-regions require have mattered little to the American presidency. This calls for an introspection into America's grand thinking on Asia ahead of Donald Trump's maiden visit to India on 24-25 February.

The lack of coordinated ef-



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orts among the democratic powers has only facilitated weakening of the rules-based order. The current US-China rivalry, the fragility in India-China relations and an authoritarian Xi Jinping regime in China build context for the US to rethink its approach towards India vis-à-vis Asia.

Besides, the current age of technology with the lead of artificial intelligence must imbibe the character of a democratic alliance that the United States and India must not miss out on building. Such an alliance does not necessarily have to be military-centric. Rather, it should be based on a solid economic partnership, framing the collective national security interests of the US, India and "like-minded" countries in a highly contested strategic space of Indo-Pacific to defend the rules-based order

as a strategic necessity. Not to overlook, the American inability to connect its domestic economic growth and translate to a successful international economic partnership in Asia and beyond has weakened the rules-based order.

The durability of the US-led international system is heavily dependent on India's rise in Asia. A stronger partnership with India will only increase the American influence in the region, which has been subject to test with Xi Jinping's BRI. Building ports, strategic points and military bases have been core to Xi's BRI diplomacy. Such a grand Chinese design needs a concentrated and collaborative counter-effort, which is more economic than military oriented, by building credible partnerships in Asia and beyond. In such a background,

ensuring pro-democratic regimes across the region becomes strategic necessity and the US will certainly need India on such a mission more than any other power in the region.

The post-Cold War era witnessed India-US ties strengthening gradually, promising to adhere to a global partnership. Such a promise, however, is yet to address the perceptual gap in their perceptions on China, with the latter being one of the most significant motivating factors behind the progress of India-US security partnership. American thinking has been influenced heavily on the parameter that Indian foreign policy will not imbibe an overtly anti-China character. The US has failed to appreciate the meritorious rise of India in world affairs at present and remains non-committal to a multipolar world structure, while seemingly agreeing to a virtual bipolar world even though its tensions with China are mounting. Such a trust deficit in India-US bilateral relations facilitates China's rise, regionally and globally.

In other words, American outlook towards Asia has been, consciously or unconsciously, China centric. US must realise that Indian foreign policy has transformed from a non-aligned mode of engagement to an affirmative and action-oriented engaging foreign policy with strategic autonomy at its core. India's response to China in the

Doklam border stand-off to India's bold decision to withdraw from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a reflection of such a transformation that the US must view positively.

New Delhi, on its part, needs to convince Washington that having an overtly anti-China character is not always a judicious proposition. India neither completely endorses a US-led order in the Indo-Pacific nor backs a China-led regional order in Asia: New Delhi wants an "inclusive" Indo-Pacific and a multipolar Asia that is growing at an equal footing. A solid partnership with the United States, in Asia and beyond, is a strategic necessity for India and will strengthen New Delhi's global standing.

Donald Trump's visit to India must encourage both sides to revisit their mutual perception towards each other. Importantly, Trump administration's trade tensions with India come as a setback to the prospect of stronger India-US ties. An alternate mode of economic cooperation in the post-TPP and post-RCEP environment, factoring in a positive partnership model that is strategic, must be the immediate priority for both the United States and India.

Dr Jagannath Panda is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, and Series Editor for Routledge Studies on Think Asia.