

India's Quest for Strategic Autonomy

Opportunities and Challenges in the Emerging World Order[†]

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Good morning! General (Gen) Anil Chauhan, (Lt) Gen Bansi Ponnappa, (Lt) Gen Suchindra Kumar, (Lt) Gen Ata Hasnain, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great privilege for me to be invited this morning to be a part of the 5th General K.V. Krishna Rao Memorial Lecture. It is truly a great honour for me. I did have a chance to meet the legendary General in 1982, at a social event organised by Gen S.K. Sinha. It was the only time I met Gen Krishna Rao in flesh and blood, but I have heard a great deal about him and his outstanding attributes.

I also want to thank the Mahar Regiment and the United Service Institution of India (USI) for inviting me to share my thoughts with you on a subject that is extremely important. Gen Chauhan has already set the tone by giving you an overview of India's quest for strategic autonomy and opportunities and challenges in the emerging world order. I, therefore, think it is instructive to begin with an overall view of the context in which we are looking at India's strategic autonomy.

For me, the immediate context is that a great civilisation like India, in fact, was under a colonial yoke for many centuries and that the expression

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of “Swaraj” itself, the independence movement, was a search for that elusive strategic autonomy that had been denied to this great country. Therefore, I believe, there was a certain expression and realisation of that strategic autonomy inherent in our independence in 1947 as well. But the broad context in which we are looking at strategic autonomy is in the global order, and before we come to the emerging order, we must perforce take a look at the order that has existed for the past 80 years. That is an order that was created at the end of World War II and is, essentially, an order that has actually retained its inequities since then.

The global order was created by the victors of World War II, and as you all know, to the victors go the spoils. When the global order was created in 1945, India, though a founding member of the United Nations (UN), was excluded from taking a seat at the high table. It is that unequal structure that emerged from World War II, with permanent membership for a select few, that has continued to dominate the discourse over the past eight decades. That is an order in which India successfully achieved independence, surprisingly though through non-violent means. It is also an order in which, initially, Jawaharlal Nehru chose to follow the path of non-alignment, perhaps because within two years after the creation of the UN the world had already descended into a Cold War by 1947. In fact, independent India was midwived into existence during the early days of the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the Western bloc led by the United States (US).

I should say that while the global engines of economic growth and political power continued to stay in the West for a very long time, there has been a shift in the balance of power, especially economic power, in recent decades. New growth in the global economy is coming out of developing countries—especially out of Asia—and is contributing a great deal more to the destiny of the global economic situation than other geographies. The change in the balance of power is evident, but it has not proved sufficient to effect a fundamental change. India, in my view, has coursed through the past nearly eight decades as a country with a unique identity of its own. It is not a Western power, nor was it part of the power-sharing structure that was created by the victors, essentially the West, at the end of World War II. At the same time, India is not an anti-Western power either. It has always sought to have its own strategic autonomy in terms of identity, and that behoves a great nation like India.

Today, when we examine the existing order, we are reminded of the fact that its main pillars have largely remained unchanged in form and structure. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has not been reformed, except

once in 1965, when, after four years of negotiations, the non-permanent category went up from six to 10, increasing the overall number from 11 to 15. That is where it has remained frozen since 1965. Notwithstanding this, the balance of power has shifted in favour of other countries beyond the traditional major powers—not just the People's Republic of China (PRC) but also the Republic of India, and some other countries across the Asian landmass.

To my mind, this multilateralism that was created in 1945 stands greatly weakened today. However, India is not a country that seeks to deconstruct the existing world order; it is a country that seeks to enforce a genuine reform of the same. Unlike China, and unlike the Russian Federation or its precursor, the Soviet Union, India has never fundamentally challenged the West's imprimatur over the existing world order.

Today, multilateralism has been greatly weakened. There is a genuine drift towards multipolarity, and this should be welcomed. There is reduced multilateralism since the existing structures are not delivering in an effective manner, including at the UN. Multipolarity has created a situation in which it is not India alone that seeks strategic autonomy; in fact, in an era of globalisation, all countries seek a certain degree of strategic autonomy. The US, for instance, is mired today in efforts to seek strategic autonomy from economic overdependence on a single geography in East Asia. Over the past 35–40 years, the Americans have become completely dependent on China in terms of their imports and exports, and their economic dependence has snatched away a degree of strategic autonomy as well.

We can also see smaller countries doing the same. We have seen in our own neighbourhood, for instance, how the Maldives expresses its strategic autonomy in the face of binary choices involving India and China. The latest election results, in my view, are also an expression of its strategic autonomy. One discerns the same strategic autonomy when one looks at Nepal. It accepts the aid of Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) of the US for its infrastructure and connectivity needs and, at the same time, it is an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Strategic autonomy is not necessarily linked to non-alignment; it is not necessarily the purview or monopoly of a great non-aligned country like India. All countries, big and small, are seeking a certain degree of strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and issue-based alignment in an uncertain world. There is a rebalancing underway in Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

The definition of strategic autonomy is the ability to act independently; not necessarily as a linear function at all times, but when required, a country should be able to express itself independently and make suitable choices. The forces and the factors that promote strategic autonomy are numerous. For example, if India had that elusive and privileged status in the UNSC right from the beginning, it would have enabled us to express even greater strategic autonomy from inception. Overwhelming economic power of the type that the US once wielded—which the PRC is now rapidly acquiring—has predisposed a country to exercising greater strategic autonomy.

Robust military power, similarly, is a prerequisite. One of the foundational requirements of strategic autonomy is to possess robust military power, and also to have credible deterrence capability. In my view, deterrence capability and robust military power are not necessarily the same thing. North Korea, for example, exercises a fair degree of strategic autonomy *vis-à-vis* both China and its erstwhile patron, the Russian Federation, by following its own regional policies and going in for atomic tests and developing delivery systems. That flows from a certain deterrence capability that it has developed, even though it cannot be said to possess robust military power. Hence, in a world that is very unequal, possessing deterrence capability even at asymmetric levels helps develop a certain degree of strategic autonomy. Deterrence capabilities are usually less expensive to create, but robust military power makes for even greater strategic autonomy.

When we look at the pre-independence period—the period in which a great civilisation like India was yearning for its own strategic autonomy, which was realised only in 1947—we must keep in mind that India, in terms of formal structures, did not enjoy strategic autonomy as a political entity. We were led by the nose by the British before 1947. We, of course, take great pride in our participation and the great sacrifices that we made in World Wars I and II, in which our fine men and women participated with gusto, but we must remember that this was not of our own doing. India was a colony then. We were actually part of the British Empire. The use of Indian soldiers against Indians during the struggle for independence or earlier during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, for instance, shows that we were not really in a position then to be autonomous as a people, as a nation, even as a civilisation. Yet, Gandhiji as an individual, supported by freedom fighters around the country, expressed his own version of strategic autonomy through the non-cooperation movement for Swaraj.

As someone who has dealt with China for more than four decades, I am actually stunned by our own inability to understand how differently the

Chinese perceive the historical record of India's participation as a military power during China's century of humiliation. For example, about 8,000 Indian troops participated in the eight-nation punitive mission against the Boxer Rebellion. Indian soldiers—Sikhs, Punjabis and the Rajputs—were part of the first echelons that had entered Tianjin and Beijing in 1900 in order to quell the rebellion. Therefore, when our soldiers faced off with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) across the Namka Chu in 1962, I dare say the Chinese would also have seen us through the prism of history in which they equated Indian soldiers with that past century of humiliation. I believe we need to study these aspects in order to understand the Chinese psyche and motivations.

In many ways, I think Nehru decided on the policy of non-alignment as an expression of strategic autonomy because he knew that the alternative would be to pick from a difficult binary choice. He had concluded that India was neither a communist nation nor a Western nation. After 1947, India was a unique *sui generis* Asian civilisation, and a newly emerged power of sorts that had shed the colonial yoke. I think hosting the 1947 Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in March–April, even before achieving independence, was an expression of that kind of strategic autonomy that Nehru felt India should develop for ourselves. But, I think, he also wanted India to play a larger role in Asia in terms of Afro-Asian solidarity, in terms of the tide of anti-colonialism, in terms of the emancipation of a large number of nations at that point of time from the colonial yoke. And, he was careful, I think, as far as the Korean War was concerned, to ensure that India did not take sides and that strategic autonomy was maintained there because without being neutral in that war, India would not have been acceptable to the belligerent parties that included the PRC. It was clear that without the PRC's concurrence, India could never have chaired, as it did, the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission. So, that demonstration of strategic autonomy also came at a certain cost because India, at that point of time, was quite blind to the fact that the Chinese were pursuing their national interests, including rapid consolidation of territory in Xinjiang and Tibet and along the border areas with India. India, on the other hand, was pursuing the larger goal of exercising strategic autonomy from its own national interests as it were, by promoting the PRC on the international stage as Nehru did at the Bandung Conference, only to have our bilateral relations simultaneously deteriorate and spiral out of control in the 1950s.

In fact, non-alignment for India never meant complete autonomy. Even then, we were capable—as we demonstrated in 1962—of seeking sides. When

the Chinese attacked in 1962, Nehru wrote to President Kennedy asking for military assistance, no less. He sought entire squadrons of fighter aircraft with men and supporting equipment. A lot of it, of course, did not come; some of it came a little too late and the war had ended by the time even the automatic rifles came in and they were lying in the packed boxes when the war ended, their greasing untouched. So, we did seek assistance—and that is a form of alignment, a kind of issue-based alignment—under the overhang of non-alignment as a policy. India's Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971, when India felt the pressure of the Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal, is yet another example.

Some observers feel that India was closer to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. I personally do not agree with that view, but I do agree that India was largely perceived to be leaning towards the Soviet Union. However, that perception came largely from the fact that the US and the West tended to view camp followers in absolute terms. The US has always had this underlying philosophy that if you are not with us, you are against us. The Soviet Union did not have that philosophy. Even today, some observers feel that this approach is evident in the policies of the US.

One of the problems in our relations with the US in the past was the fact that the US itself had its own leanings and preferences. The leaning that the US had towards Pakistan led to the latter's participation in both Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). This was detrimental to our interests since Pakistan was seen as a frontline state in the fight against communism at that point of time. But, more relevantly, it came in our way of building better ties with the US even as the latter went about its grand rapprochement with the PRC in 1971, after Henry Kissinger paid a secret visit to Beijing brokered by Pakistan. The then foreign secretary of Pakistan was an ex-Indian Army officer affiliated to the royal family of Bhopal, the late Ambassador Sultan Khan. In the mid-1980s, he was in a sinecure, heading the local branch of the infamous Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), which collapsed some years later in the face of money-laundering charges. That 50-year strategic partnership between the US and the PRC, which unraveled recently, was a major influence on the US' perceptions of India. It did a great deal of damage during President Reagan's term as well, when, in the early 1980s, the Americans transferred considerable defence technology to China, including munitions manufacturing and other hardcore defence technologies. The Americans then were blissfully indifferent to the long-term consequences of what they were creating in China, that is, a military machine of the type that

would eventually rise like a Frankenstein monster and challenge a US-led world order.

Other aspects demonstrate India's constant striving for strategic autonomy. The most important perhaps is the peaceful nuclear explosion of 1974 and subsequently, the overt development of nuclear weapons in 1998. Long before that, the negotiations leading to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) were themselves a demonstration of India's strategic autonomy, since India was one of the main participants in the initial negotiations calling for a world free of nuclear weapons. India was one of the greatest proponents of general and complete disarmament, a world free of nuclear weapons, but, by 1968, it was very clear that these negotiations were going in favour of a select few. The same privileged powers that had created the UNSC were arrogating to themselves special privileges. It was clear that there would be two categories, of the haves and the have-nots, and India decided to walk out of these negotiations. By the time the NPT came to be signed and was brought into force in 1970, we were completely outside the tent.

India's neutrality in the Ukraine war is well established and much discussed, but there are other issues where we have shown capacity for going against the grain. Our policy towards Iran is yet another example. We have always had good relations with Iran and I am reminded of my time at the UN when Iran bailed us out at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 1994 when we were in a difficult part of the woods with regard to human rights resolutions being moved against us by Pakistan. Yet, in 2009, in sync with our growing relationship with the US in a new world, we made an issue-based choice and voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which, of course, did not go down too well with the Iranians.

The importance of carrying a big stick and possessing robust military power can be reiterated here. This is something that must always be kept in mind and, quite appreciably, the Government of India is currently pulling out all stops to provide whatever the armed forces need in order to develop that kind of power. The US President Theodore Roosevelt had said: speak softly and carry a big stick and you will go far. In fact, you will go far with your strategic autonomy as well. American strategist George F. Kennan had put it rather vividly when he said that you have no idea how much it contributes to the general politeness and pleasantries and diplomacy when you have a quiet little armed force in the background. So, it does give you a little bit of swagger in negotiations as well, and the US is one of the finest examples of having used that kind of power looming against the backdrop.

In a globalised world, it is very difficult to seek strategic autonomy all the time. But it is equally true that there is no single power today in a fractured world, in a world in flux, in a rapidly changing and evolving world, that can exercise its power on all issues in all geographies at all times. This gives nations around the world a chance to develop a degree of strategic autonomy. As it was made clear in the beginning, the US is developing its own independence from the critical supply chains emanating from China. So is India, through the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' policy which is a demonstration of that critical requirement of not being overly dependent on any single geography or source for imports. The European Union (EU), for that matter, is trying to be independent of the US today in many ways; and if President Trump comes back to power, in all probability, Ukraine will very quickly be reduced to a footnote and Germany and France will vigorously pursue their strategic autonomy in terms of developing even closer economic relations with the PRC.

There are seven 'T' factors today that can have impact on strategy. They have impact on all geographies. They impair the spectrum of choices and create friction. The first, 'trade', is today an integral part of the globalised world in which we live. It is fungible, it is very difficult to control, which is why efforts to decouple have led nowhere and it is now transiting into what we call de-risking as against decoupling. So, the emphatic idea of cutting loose from all trade dealings with the PRC has now been modified to mean de-risking, to be attempted only in areas where you can actually control things.

The fact of the matter is that tensions and friction with regard to trade are not enough today to result in a global conflagration or conflict between major powers. In fact, experience has taught us that trade is very fungible and there being a very high degree of interdependence in an already globalised world, and globalisation being a genie that cannot be put back into the bottle, there is always a tendency between contending powers to seek a *modus vivendi*. That is exactly what is seen today between the two major contestants, the US and China. We did see the outlines of a major trade war between particularly the Trump presidency and China, but we now see a moderation of that not only on the part of the US but also on the part of the EU, which openly acknowledges that decoupling is a chimera which may be impossible to achieve, as against the more feasible de-risking.

Contrary to expectations, in fact, many of the major economic powers in the West are deepening their trade and other engagement with China at this time. But it is in the field of technology that you are more likely to see a higher degree of conflict and that is basically through a regime of technology denial.

The Americans have rightly woken up to this threat, albeit a little late in the day, and are now engaged in systematically eroding China's technological ecosystem through denial, sanctions and export controls. The Inflation Reduction Act, the Science and Technology Act, the Chip Act, as well as friend-shoring and re-shoring, all these are aimed at denying technology to China. The aim is essentially to either freeze what little technology gap remains between the two countries, that is, the first- and the second-largest economic powers, or to try and see if that gap can be deepened in certain core areas, such as telecom, artificial intelligence and quantum computing.

It seems unlikely that India will get into conflict with China as a result of trade friction alone. In fact, we have seen quite the opposite. Even as Galwan took place and even as we, in our own way, tried to erode the economic dependence on China by banning Chinese applications, by revising our policies with regard to the government e-marketplace, by enhancing rules and regulations with regard to foreign direct investment, by insisting on declaration of ultimate beneficiary ownership of suspicious money coming into the Indian financial market through Hong Kong and elsewhere, essentially Chinese money, we in fact have seen a spike in our trade with the PRC over the past three years. There has been no plateauing of that. When you have a high degree of interconnectedness, it is very difficult to engage in conflict sparked off by differences over trade.

At the same time, the second factor, 'technology', is an area where you can control things a little better, an area which is not as fungible, which is not dealt with by the captains of industry but more by the corporations and by governments with greater control. Hence, in technology, we see on the one hand greater friction, a greater desperation for engagement, and yet, on the other, we see a desire to exercise degrees of strategic autonomy to develop specific ecosystems which can keep out certain countries. That is what we see playing out in 5G, 6G, open radio access network (open RAN) and artificial intelligence.

The third factor is 'territorial disputes', which limits choices. When we are up against the wall on territorial challenges, we sometimes have to compromise on strategic autonomy. It can limit or compel choices, as we have seen in the past from our own strategic engagement of great powers in times of need. The fourth factor, 'terrorism', is something on which the entire world should be working together. But a country like China, which itself is affected by terrorism, has ceased to work with others in a normal way to prevent terrorism. We have seen the roadblocks that the Chinese have placed at the UN in terms of the global listing of terrorists under the 1267 Al-Qaida

and Taliban Sanctions Committee, particularly with regard to Pakistan-based terrorist groups, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). That reduces the broad multilateral space in which India and China, despite their bilateral issues, would have been expected to work together. But that common multilateral space has shrunk simultaneously with the shrinking of space for bilateral cooperation, as a result of recent negative events.

The fifth factor, 'tenets', concerns narratives which divide the world today instead of uniting it. There is the Chinese model of state-led capitalism. The Chinese even claim that they practice 'whole process democracy' better than the democratic world. That is a joke, of course, in a country where the foreign minister and the chief of defence staff can drop out of sight in quick succession in a span of a few months. But it does not prevent them from claiming the superiority of their systems of governance, whether social, economic, political or cultural. There is, on the other hand, the liberal trading order, the democracies that are trying to come together in the context of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and other groupings with shared values. The sixth factor is 'transparency', or precisely, the lack of it. Transparency is very important when you deal with an adversary. You cannot exercise any kind of choice unless you know what that adversary's intentions and motivations are. Capacities are easy to read. You can do the bean counting about how many ships, how many tanks, how many guns the adversary has. And, if you have better intelligence inputs, you will get a proper fix on all that. But if you do not have clarity on intentions, it leads to situations where your own choices are limited.

Lack of transparency leads to lack of 'trust', the seventh of the seven factors. Trust, or the erosion of trust, is one of the biggest factors that impacts on India's choices today and it is occasioned by the great disruption caused by the rise of China. The economic rise and the transformation of that economic power into a coercive military power, demonstrably so on the part of PRC, has resulted in major disruptions in our geopolitical environment.

One could list many more disruptions apart from China. North Korea is a disruptor too. One could even mention Iran as a disruptor if it inches further in nuclear fuel enrichment. The failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) eventually could push it in the direction of becoming a major disruptor to the US-led global order. The spread of weapons of mass destruction—not just in North Korea—can result in disruptive situations. Pakistan, if it fails as a state, particularly if its weapons of mass destruction fall into the wrong hands, can also be a huge disruptor. So, there are multiple threats that have emerged, and a plethora of disrupting factors have come

together and weakened the formal multilateral system. The key point here is that the UN is the only structure the world currently has to deal with issues of peace and progress. It is a global structure that came on the heels of the abject failure of, first, the Treaty of Versailles after World War I and, later, of the League of Nations. The hopes of the international community in 1945 were pinned on the UN and its Security Council, but it has not been able to deliver even as much as it did at the height of the Cold War, when the two contending ideological and military camps had a broad understanding. Today, in this fractured and fragmented geopolitical situation, the die is cast in a very peculiar fashion. There is a total lack of cooperation and lack of sensitivity to each other's concerns, which is why I said that multilateralism has greatly weakened.

The other broad point is that the PRC, in fact, is riding two horses at the same time. On the one hand, it is a beneficiary of the existing global order that emerged in 1945, since it seamlessly inherited the mantle of the Republic of China when the latter was booted out of the UNSC in 1971. The PRC helicoptered into the UNSC as a permanent member as a result of the geopolitical expediencies of the time. It had already by then sealed its status as a nuclear weapons power in 1964. But China is also trying to ride another horse. Having realised that the existing order is essentially one created by Western powers, the Chinese have always been keen to curate parallel structures that are more in the likeness of the PRC and its own goals and ambitions. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the New Development Bank are examples. India is part of the AIIB and BRICS, including the latter's New Development Bank, as a founding member. India is part and parcel of all this, but then there is also the sui generis Chinese model of the BRI, driven exclusively by Chinese lending banks. And China also has announced the more recent initiatives of the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Cultural Initiative.

We have to keep in mind that forging a stable relationship with China remains a great challenge for India. It is important for us to understand the three key revolutions that have shaped China. For this purpose, China's history after 1949 can be divided into three 30-year periods. The first 30 years, from 1949 to 1979, was a period best described as 'Stand Up China', in which it undertook political consolidation, territorial acquisition and also faced domestic turmoil during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution while attempting to forge an intra-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) consensus on ideology. That is the Mao period.

The second 30-year period is the one in which China discovered a Midas touch through which whatever they decided turned to 'gold'. After the reforms and an Open Door Policy in 1979, they had a really great economic run all the way up to 2009. It was a period in which they became immensely rich, what we call the 'Get Rich China' period under Deng Xiaoping. Broadly speaking, Deng's policies were followed till then—particularly his cautionary maxim to 'hide one's capacities and bide one's time'.

The third 30-year period is the one which began in the aftermath of the two global financial and economic crises in 2008–09 and is fraught with ominous possibilities. This is the time when the Chinese realised that the Americans had taken their eye off the ball, that they had also made scarce their presence in the Asia-Pacific. The Chinese moved into that vacuum, for nature abhors a vacuum and the Chinese were quick to spot that opportunity. They went about engaging the world with deep pockets and followed very independent, strategically autonomous policies of their own, fundamentally different from earlier times. This trend has acquired even greater momentum after President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012–13.

We have to keep in mind that when we deal with our neighbourhood, and exercise our strategic autonomy and our choices, the Chinese continue to use their ancient stratagems against us. They were a country that dealt with encirclement in past history, but they are also very fine exponents of that policy of encirclement. Divide and rule is a policy that they have mastered, involving the weakening of contending forces and creating spheres of influence. However, China's fundamental objective today is to limit the extent of US power on core issues and particularly on its periphery. China is not yet a global military power. It is not quite the expeditionary power that it may one day aspire to be. But it is already a global economic power, the world's second largest.

As far as India is concerned, we have to deal with our strategic autonomy in the context of our goals between now and 2047. If China has a dream, so does India. India also has its 'India Dream', which we wish to achieve at the end of the 25-year 'Amrit Kaal' period between 2022 and 2047. The choices that we make, both domestically and internationally, are increasingly interrelated. We are building the necessary capacities for the major role that we seek for ourselves, aided particularly by our economic rise. We are not out to challenge the existing global order. However, we are seeking genuine reforms and changes that can make the global order more effective and efficient. That obviously means that a country with 1.4 billion people, with the kind of record that we have in peacekeeping operations and contribution

to the global good—whether it is the International Solar Alliance, or the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, or now the successful G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration—must be part of any rule-making structure. For that to happen, we must also have the necessary economic wherewithal to deal with our future environment.

India is increasingly seen as a country that is ready to take risks and play for higher stakes. That is evident in the cross-border operation conducted by India in 2015 against insurgents in Myanmar, followed by the cross-border land and air strikes against terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan in 2016 and 2019 respectively. It demonstrates the utility of robust military responses as a means of deterrence. In order to be credible, you do not need to be an equal or peer in military and economic strength. If that were the case, Pakistan should never have been able to possess any kind of deterrence *vis-à-vis* India because it is one-eighth or ninth of India in terms of its size and maybe one-tenth of India's economy. Yet, Pakistan has its own deterrence. In a situation involving two unequal powers with unequal comprehensive national strengths, it is still possible to bridge absolute gaps through asymmetrical means, gray-zone tactics and a 'field all you have got against the adversary' approach.

The US has often found it difficult to understand India's geographical predicaments since its own immediate neighbourhood did not generate threats from immediate neighbours. Otto von Bismarck once said that the US essentially faced no threats. Bismarck had stated tellingly that the US had no geopolitical view or threats because it had Mexico to one side and Canada to the other, and fish on the other two sides! That was, as is true today, not much of a threatening geopolitical environment. This was long before the US became a proselytising power under President Woodrow Wilson in the 1920s and long before it actually demonstrated its capacity or willingness to stage a military presence in different geographies. By 1871, when Bismarck united Germany, the US had emerged as the world's largest economy, but not yet as the world's foremost geopolitical or military power. The US emerged in military terms, and as a defence manufacturer, only during World War II.

Today, notwithstanding China's rise, the US still remains a hyperpower and still has many manifestations of the world's only superpower. It is still the world's largest economy. It is still the largest and most potent expeditionary military power that the world has ever seen. It is also traditionally given to a very high degree of exceptionalism. This classic concept of the US's exceptionalism is one which the Chinese are also trying to ape in their own way, through their own so-called Monroe Doctrine. India has a strong relationship with the US, with all the foundational agreements in place for

furthering military and strategic cooperation. However, it is not an alliance or treaty partnership, and the US will continue to have other regional interests. Sometimes those interests will trump the interest that they might have in working with India on a particular issue. The US uses its exceptionalism against friends and foes alike. We have seen that, for example, in its conduct of freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). Take a look at the list of countries against which the US conducts FONOPs. The list of target countries against the claims of which the US conducts FONOPs includes some very close partners and friends, such as the Philippines, with which it has a treaty-based alliance. It includes Indonesia, a country that is ripe for wooing in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and more tellingly, it includes India.

The US exceptionalism and its strategic interests in the current context will continue to shape its policy *vis-à-vis* China and Pakistan. India does not have a treaty-based alliance with the US. It may not be necessary to have one. Both the great wars were fought by coalitions that did not exist at the start of the war. Take a look at World War I. Take a look at World War II. In both, nations joined the fray depending on how their interests were affected. Hence, with reference to the Quad, the jury is still out. The Quad has great potential to flip over in any direction in the future, even though it is not a military alliance at present.

India is open to risk taking much more than before, and we have been able to balance ties between various contending powers as well, whether it is the US and Russia, or Iran and Saudi Arabia, and so on. So, India is capable of bridging the political divide. We are bridging the economic divide today in exercise of our own strategic autonomy. There are also many new opportunities when we exercise strategic autonomy. India's neutrality in Ukraine relates not just to acquisition of equipment such as the S400 air defence system but also the kind of energy deals that we were able to secure with the Russians. It saved us a great deal of money. In monetary terms, it is very significant for a developing economy to source energy in such quantities as we did at such cheap rates.

We need to keep in mind that we will have to continue to deal with China. To deal with China, we must have adequate deterrence capability. I do not think it is a wise idea to go toe-to-toe or have a cage fight with China. That is a mug's game because of the differential and asymmetry that exists in terms of economic power. But in a world that is much flatter today, even smaller powers are able to use asymmetrical means to bridge absolute gaps in comprehensive national power. India shows the lead in this regard.

Dealing with Pakistan is also a challenge. It is a very difficult relationship and will remain so for the foreseeable future. I do not see how we can really resolve our issues with Pakistan. A weak and feeble Pakistan is even more likely to act to our detriment in the future. Viewed in an evolutionary context, one can discern that China's stakes in Pakistan are growing by the day. But China may also regard Pakistan today much more as an albatross round its neck and a liability, given Pakistan's frail economic and political fabric and overdependence on China. One can say that the Sino-Pak tandem also constrains China's strategic autonomy in dealing with India.

A two-front war is not something that is so easily conjured up by a Sino-Pak tandem. Whenever a great power—in this case China—seeks to insert itself as a third party in a direct military contest, as, for example, between India and Pakistan, one can be assured that other great powers will also step in. Hence, it is not a very easy decision for China to exercise such a choice. In the past, we have seen that the record is clear. China did not exercise that choice either during the Kargil War or in earlier India–Pakistan wars, in 1965 and in 1971.

It is not in China's character to step forth and pick other people's chestnuts out of the fire. The proposition that Pakistan would come to China's aid in a bilateral confrontation between India and China is also not very feasible because India is more likely to hit out first at Pakistan and inflict upon it great damage, which will not be in Pakistan's interests. There is absolutely no guarantee that either China or Pakistan would achieve their full objective through a tandem in a two-front war with India. India should fully and adequately prepare to deal with each of the adversaries independently.