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Strategic Trends in Asia-Pacific and its Implications for India

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Introduction

Events that are taking place in Asia-Pacific are a sub set of what is happening in Asia in particular and at the global level in general. While there has been an on-going shift of economic power to Asia, it is also quite apparent that most of the conflict spots of the world are in Asia. Rapid rise of People's Republic of China (PRC) and its fast tracked militarisation has created not only its own geostrategic dynamics in the Asia-Pacific but also has caused reverberations at the global level. America's response to China's assertiveness, seen in the recent years, and resulting Sino-US competition are largely dictating the shape of the strategic discourse in the Asia Pacific. China's neighbours are also looking for adopting both cooperative and hedging strategies to contend with the rise of China.

While economic trends remain an important aspect of evolving strategic dynamics, the developments in military sphere are also a crucial component of the ongoing flux. According to a report by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) released in March 2013, Asia overtook European members of NATO in terms of nominal military spending for the first time in 2012. The Asian nations not only have to respond to festering internal security challenges as the process of state and nation building is as yet not complete in most of the countries but also they have to deal with external threat perceptions.

In the backdrop of such an Asia centric geopolitical discourse and rebalancing of the world economy, there would certainly be a degree of recalibration of the global and regional power equations. Unlike the bipolar system that existed for almost 50 years, as the power shifts from the current power structure to new power centres, the transition may not be orderly and especially so in SE Asia and

East Asia sub-systems as they redefine their positions in terms of relationships with China, the US led alliance system and to an extent even with India.

The critical issue is whether this period of transition, until the new power equations settle down, will be a period of peace and stability or competition and conflict. Henry Kissinger aptly compared the current scenario in Asia to that of the European balance of power in the 19th century saying that each power will look at the other with a sense of wariness and competition while cooperating occasionally.¹ And as the recent events in South and East China Sea have shown, the potential for conflict and escalation of tensions and possibilities of miscalculations in the region remain high.

Broad Strategic Trends in Asia Pacific

Looking at the politico-strategic milieu in SE and East Asian region, five broad trends that have an impact on strategic dynamics can be discerned.

First trend is that after having integrated the regional economies and strengthening People's Liberation Army (PLA), China has become more assertive in its sovereignty claims that adversely impact the interests of a number of SE Asian and East Asian nations. There have also been increased transgressions by China across the Sino-Indian borders.

Second trend is that the U.S, fearing loss of its power and influence in Asia-Pacific and SE Asia, has been attempting to stage a comeback through its 'pivot' to Asia or rebalance to Asia strategy which has political, military and economic components.

Thirdly, SE Asian countries especially those which are at the receiving end of China's assertive policies are attempting to balance China through a variety of ways including political, security and defence cooperation with outside powers like the U.S. and others.

Fourthly, the SE and East Asian countries through multi-lateral structures like ASEAN are also attempting to engage China to address their security concerns.

And fifthly, other important powers in the Asia-Pacific region such as India, Japan, Australia and others are evolving their own responses to maintain a strategic equilibrium in the region.

China's Assertion and Approaches

While analysing the situation in the Asia Pacific, China's White Paper on Defence of 2013 observed that *"The Asia-Pacific region has become an increasingly significant stage for world economic development and strategic interaction between major powers. ... China has an arduous task to safeguard its national unification, territorial integrity and development interests. Some country (meaning the United States) has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser. On the issues concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some neighbouring countries are taking actions that complicate or exacerbate the situation, and Japan is making trouble over the issue of the Diaoyu Islands"*. The paper also talks about the PLA's task of *responding to and deterring any provocative action which undermines China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity; and firmly safeguard China's core national interests*. However, PRC's core interests have been expanding over the years in consonance with its expanding military prowess.

Earlier, the 2010, the White paper had described Asia-Pacific security as 'volatile' and noted that regional powers are increasing their strategic investment. PRC viewed the US as 'reinforcing' its regional military alliances and increasing its involvement in regional security affairs and by selling weapons to Taiwan, it was 'damaging' cross-straits relations. The paper also opposed the deployment of overseas missile defence systems 'by any state' (meaning the U.S and Japan). While the regional powers continue to explore ways and means to address challenges and threats to their security through cooperative efforts, Beijing perceives in some of these attempts as 'containment of PRC'. In fact, this has been another recurring theme mentioned in its White Papers on Defence (2008 and 2010).

Notwithstanding official explanations, the Chinese emphasis on protecting 'core interests' appears to be driven by their perceived fears on internal security challenges and their external dimension with respect to issues of 'sovereignty' and 'core interests'. For instance, PRC's budget for internal security for the third year in row i.e. for 2013 is more than its defence budget. The defence expenditure is slated to be US dollars 113 (740.6 billion Yuan) while domestic security budget has been planned for 769 billion Yuan². The popular opinion against corruption, abuse of power and many other governance malpractices in PRC has been building up and promoting nationalism through being aggressive on territorial disputes is seen as some sort of a palliative for domestic troubles.

Taking the case of China's strategy, it can be seen that since 2010 till today, Beijing's assertive behaviour in the region is being prominently witnessed on a variety of issues - US arms sales to Taiwan, US –South Korea joint military exercises in the Yellow Sea, ownership of Senkaku islands in East China Sea which are under Japan's control and sovereignty over the resources-rich South China Sea (SCS) island chain. China has also been consistently aggressive along the Sino-Indian border where it claims large tracts of Indian territory. Interestingly, the PLA Daily has described Japan's sharp turn to the right as one of the top ten hot spots of international security³ events in 2013 leaving out the troubles in SCS or for that matter its aggressive incursions along the Sino-Indian borders.

Declaration by China of a new overlapping Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over contested islands of Diaoyu/Senkaku in end November 2013 besides raising the tensions between Tokyo and Beijing have raised questions about China's intentions and its policy of peaceful development. While the new ADIZ may not have conferred any sovereignty rights over the disputed islands, it was surely an innovative way by China of advancing its claims. However, what is of interest to China's neighbours both across the land and maritime borders is how China would behave as it continues to rise. Does it really believe in a peaceful rise and harmonious neighbourhood or is it merely a slogan? As China spends more and more on military in order to reach some kind of parity with the US, in the long term would it disregard the interests of its weaker and not so weak neighbours in

order to realise its 'core interests'? The challenge before countries affected by China's assertive policies is how to respond to such policies.

Further, PRC has also expressed its intentions of declaring ADIZ in other contested zones. This apart, China also sent its Aircraft Carrier along with its escort frigates and destroyers to disputed SCS on its maiden voyage. Sure enough, there was a near miss between a US guided- missile Cruiser and PLA Navy's aircraft carrier Liaoning which was doing some manoeuvres at the sea. According to the Global Times, the USS Cowpens was tailing after and harassing the Liaoning formation. It took offensive actions at first towards the Liaoning formation on the day of the confrontation⁴. While both sides had some logical explanations of their actions all this is a recipe for an unintended incident to happen any time leading to regional instability. Added to the above was China's ordering of foreign fishing vessels to obtain approval from regional authorities before fishing or surveying two thirds of the SCS effective from January 1, 2014⁵. This is again seen as part of PRC's moves to slowly and steadily assert its sovereignty over disputed maritime territorial claims upping the potential for conflict and confrontations with its neighbours.

Interestingly, according to a survey conducted by the Global Times in November 2013, among 14,400 respondents from 14 countries, including the US, Russia, Japan, India, Vietnam and South Korea, China was described as 'belligerent' by 29.4 percent and 'arrogant' by 25 percent of those polled. Respondents from China's neighbouring countries had negative perceptions about China and were more likely to believe that they would have a competitive or confrontational relationship with China in 10 years.⁶ This is despite the fact that PRC's political and military leadership has been promoting that 'peaceful development is the core goal we pursue' and win-win development is the fundamental purpose we advocate'⁷. Earlier in June 2011, Gen. Liang Guanglie, the then Minister of Defence, PRC speaking at Shangri La Dialogue had explained their approach by saying that all concerned nations should "accommodate each other's core interests and understand each other's strategic interests" and that China stands for "shelving disputes and seek joint development" as well as pursuing bilateral cooperation and participation in regional and sub-regional cooperation.⁸

Last year, China unveiled a new diplomatic initiative to assuage the concerns of its neighbours. In early October, during his trip to Southeast Asia, President Xi Jinping proposed setting up an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to help facilitate regional connectivity. The bank would provide financial support for infrastructure construction in regional developing economies, especially the ASEAN members⁹. China's willingness to make large investments in ASEAN infrastructure is part of its financial diplomacy to address its economic and security interests.

China's growing engagement through economic and infrastructural cooperation, primarily through bilateral investments in SE Asia, trade and manufacturing hubs has provided it with considerable economic leverages in the region. China is the largest trading partner of SE Asia, with combined trade exceeding 400 billion dollars in end 2012 and estimated to go up to 500 billion by 2015, even as Beijing's direct investments remain limited resulting in huge trade imbalance. During the China-ASEAN summit of October 2013 and earlier at the China-ASEAN Expo, PM Li had projected a mutual trade figure of 1 trillion dollar by 2020¹⁰.

Further, the Chinese leadership has recently stressed on '*periphery diplomacy*'¹¹ that would address China's need for a stable external environment which in turn would be conducive to domestic economic reform. The goal of this policy is to enhance China's overall influence in its periphery, and counter the US rebalance toward Asia. However, PRC is unlikely to resile from underlining its core interests.

Rebalancing of the U.S. to Asia-Pacific

After President Obama took over in January 2009, his administration has been paying considerable attention to Asia-Pacific. Before 2009, there was general feeling among the SE Asian countries that America has withdrawn from the SE Asian region¹². The fundamental impulse of the shift to the Asia-Pacific and particularly SE Asia was the growing influence of China. Intertwined with this was an understanding that the centre of gravity of US national and economic interests was shifting towards Asia and thus there was a need to adjust US strategy and priorities.

Return of the U.S. was termed as the ‘pivot or ‘rebalancing’ towards Asia. The objective was to enhance the credibility of the U.S. as only super power despite the constraints imposed by economy. In the last quarter of 2011, there were a number of announcements by the US government which stressed that largely the ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific was a continuation and expansion of policies already undertaken by previous administrations including that of President Obama¹³. Notwithstanding the economic constraints, Obama said that the U.S. military presence in East Asia will be strengthened and made “more broadly distributed, more flexible, and more politically sustainable”¹⁴.

In March 2012, the U.S. came out with a new Defence Strategic Guidance (DSG) which expanded on the theme and gave a degree of substance to the evolving ‘rebalance’ strategy. The plans included additional deployment of troops from Australia to Singapore in a phased manner. Consequent to the DSG, the US military gave final shape to its evolving Air Sea Battle Concept¹⁵ to address to PRC’s Area Denial/Anti-Access capabilities. Further, Washington’s new Asia-Pacific strategy besides Asia-Pacific region also extended to Indian Ocean littoral. In any case, the area of responsibility of the United States Pacific Combatant Command (USPACOM) covers India and extends to the eastern areas of Indian Ocean. The military dimension of the pivot was as a response to growing military capabilities of China and its increasing assertiveness that has implications for freedom of navigation and America’s ability to project power in the region. Winding down of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq was seen as another enabler.

Added to the above is the American effort to forge cooperative defence ties with the SE Asian nations through joint exercises, supply of weapon systems and joint training. This is also being supplemented by America’s extension of political and economic support to the ASEAN members especially to those who are much affected by China’s assertive policies especially Vietnam and Philippines.

The US also wants its allies and partners including new players like Vietnam and Indonesia to adopt stronger military postures on their own core security concerns be it South and East China Sea, or growing Chinese influence or on issues such as North Korea, staying short of any military confrontation; such a policy from the US

point of view allows balancing of China, without appearing too confrontational, in terms of putting limits on its power and influence thereby holding China to 'peaceful rise'.

As an economic component of its rebalance strategy, the US has promoted Trans Pacific Partnership that excludes China, though in principle there is no bar against PRC becoming its member. TPP also includes some of the SE Asian countries (like Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore) while Japan joined the platform in July 2013. Apparently, TPP is in competition with Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which is based on ASEAN plus six format and attempts to consolidate FTAs already concluded in the region. Even while moving towards RCEP there were geo-politics involved when China was only keen to include ASEAN, Japan and South Korea (ASEAN+3) leaving out India, Australia and New Zealand. Japan, on the other hand prevailed upon China to forge the multilateral grouping based on ASEAN+6.

China sees the dispute in bilateral terms and would like to negotiate bilaterally with different stake-holders in particular Vietnam and Philippines. ASEAN on the other hand looks upon the dispute that affects majority of the SE Asian states save for members like Cambodia (or others not affected by the dispute) and prefers multilateral negotiations. It can be said that the ASEAN posture is largely driven by US presence and support. In the case of Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute and the latest controversy over China's new ADIZ, the US has followed mixed policies. While the American Bombers flew through the new Chinese ADIZ, later on it asked its civil airliners to obtain Air defence Clearance from Beijing and it remains equivocal on the issue of sovereignty of the islands. Largely, the US has been following policies which are a mix of engagement and competition without being seen as appeasing PRC.

The principle objectives as stated by the US administration are regional stability, freedom of navigation, the promotion of democracy and human rights. But the question remains as to how would the US manage dissonance arising out of Sino-US competition and resulting tensions. The challenge before the US over the next

decade plus will be to develop capabilities to exercise command of the sea lanes and the ability to operate in the contested zones with minimal risk and confrontation. In this task, US is seeking new partners such as India, Vietnam, and Indonesia among others.

Response of the SE and East Asian Nations

Countries in the region are attempting to rise to the heavy-handed tactics of China through political, diplomatic and to an extent through defence cooperation with outside powers. At the political level, while some of the ASEAN members whose interests are not immediately impacted have been accommodating China, on the other hand others whose vital interests are affected have responded with modernising their militaries, forming quasi-military alliances with the U.S. and obtaining defence equipment from a wide variety of sources. The ASEAN members also consider multi-lateral institutions as the best way to engage China rather than solve the problem of the SCS through bilateral mechanisms. China on the other hand, knowing its advantage, has preferred to deal with the maritime disputes on a bilateral basis. In fact, it has followed strategies that are aimed at breaking the ranks of ASEAN.

However, there is no unified response by the ASEAN as individual nations have their own interests and strategies. While Cambodia (as the Phnom Penh ASEAN summit of 2012 revealed where for the first time ASEAN Joint Communiqué could not be issued) and Laos have gravitated towards China because of their economic interests, Vietnam and Philippines both rattled by China's aggressive policies have been gradually moving towards cementing their defence ties with the U.S. The US and Vietnam had signed an agreement on defence cooperation in 2011 and in 2012, the then US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta was willing to take it further. Panetta had remarked that *"It will be particularly important to be able to work with partners like Vietnam, to be able to use harbours like this (Cam Ranh Bay) as we move our ships from our ports on the West Coast, (and) our stations here in the Pacific"*¹⁶. Both are holding regular Defence Policy Dialogues and there is a

deepening of US-Vietnam joint naval engagements; Vietnamese officers are also being sent to US staff colleges.

In last six years or so, Vietnam has been importing from Russia military hardware including six Kilo class submarines, four frigates, some Corvettes and some SU-30 MK2 and Su-27 aircraft. In addition, it has strengthened its defence relationship with India.

The Americans who had withdrawn from their Subic Bay naval base over two decades ago are now returning to the Philippines. A mini-Subic Bay naval base at Oyster Bay which is 550 KM Southwest of Manila has been planned. The Philippines also has revived plans to modernise Subic Bay air and naval base with an expenditure of \$1.8 billion. The U.S. is also helping to upgrade and modernise the Philippine military. Earlier in July 2013, US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel visited Manila and observed *"We are using a new model of military-to-military cooperation befitting two great allies and friends and looking to increase our rotational presence here, as we have done recently in Singapore and Australia"*¹⁷.

Around 600 US Special Forces troops have been deployed in the Philippines for over a decade to assist in the fight against a long-running Muslim insurgency on the southern island of Mindanao. Washington has stationed surveillance planes there and promised up to \$30 million in support for building and operating coastal radar stations.

So far as Indonesia is concerned, the defence relationship with the U.S. has been on an upward trajectory. On the side lines of Shangri La dialogue of June 2013, Defence Secretary Hagel after meeting his Indonesian counterpart Purnomo Yusgiantoro stated that "The two leaders reaffirmed the importance of deepening ties (and) reviewed progress made in recent years to increase exercises and training, as well as regular defence policy dialogues,"¹⁸ and discussed American support for Indonesia's military modernisation, including through US foreign military sales.

In August 2013, the US Defence Secretary during a visit to Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Brunei had announced a deal worth about \$500 million between

the United States and Indonesia to sell eight new Apache AH-64E attack helicopters and Longbow radars to Indonesia.

But Indonesia has also been maintaining its ties with China and Xi Jinping addressed the Indonesian Parliament in October and announced 20 billion dollars worth of trade deals.

Other countries of the ASEAN have also been modernising their militaries and cooperating with outside powers though their motivations for spurring their defence expenditures could be different. Myanmar, for instance, is becoming more open and its military has expressed intentions to increase defence cooperation with the American military. Similarly, Malaysia, Brunei and Thailand are moving towards upgrading their militaries due to a variety of impulses.

Following the American lead, countries like Australia, Japan and western nations such as France, the UK and Canada are also shoring up their defence engagement with some of the ASEAN nations. In addition, in its 'pivot to Asia' concept, the U.S. looks upon India and Japan, among others, as partners.

Further, India has also been developing its defence relationship with ASEAN as part of its 'Look East Policy' that pre-dates the unveiling of the American pivot to Asia paradigm. Though India does not wish to get involved militarily in the ongoing disputes in the SCS, it has been supporting the freedom of navigation and the UN Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS). Further, many countries in SE and East Asia want India to strengthen mutual security relationships and promote a stable regional balance of power

Engaging China Multilaterally

To address their security concerns, the ASEAN had established the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus Eight mechanism that includes China, US, Russia, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand besides ASEAN members. Overall goal was to explore areas of cooperation and minimize areas of dissonance in security issues. One of the major reasons for initiation of such a framework had been the transnational nature of threats that makes it very difficult for a single nation to deal with in isolation. Threats related to violent

extremism, maritime security, vulnerability of SLOCs, transnational crimes have a direct and indirect bearing on the trajectory of economic growth. Apart from this, the existence of territorial disputes especially on the maritime front plus the issues related to political differences and rise of China have added to the security dilemma in the region giving rise to areas of potential conflict.

ASEAN members envisaged that ADDM+8 could be a useful platform in diffusing security concerns especially when the potential for crisis exists. However, so far only non-conventional security issues have taken the centre stage on its agenda. Though its multilateral architecture could have a dampening effect on any aggressive or assertive member who may chose to take recourse to arms to settle disputes. It is perceived that ADMM Plus Eight could provide a platform for mutual understanding, military transparency, improving military to military relations, confidence building and dialogue to discuss most of the long standing issues. One such proposal in the concept paper of ADMM Plus Eight was to carry out joint exercises and training to facilitate understanding and friendship especially among the defence establishments of the respective countries. Lastly it seems that the inclusion of USA, Russia and even India to some extent is in consonance with the need to balance the assertive tendencies of Beijing especially in the SCS and elsewhere.

Here it is important to mention that during an interview, the Chinese Defence minister told the People's Daily that SCS cannot be on the agenda for ADMM Plus Eight and this particular platform will not be used to discuss the issue of SCS. This was in reference to the inaugural conference of the platform in 2010.

In June 2013, a joint military exercise was held in Brunei under the aegis of ADDM plus Eight (a total of 18 countries i.e. ASEAN plus six, Russia and the U.S.) that focussed on five priority areas of cooperation: humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), medicine, maritime security, peacekeeping and counter-terrorism. How far it has been able to build confidence between the militaries of member nations is another matter. But the fact of the matter is that China is more comfortable with bilateral engagement in addressing security issues or disputes.

In the 16th ASEAN-China meet in October, 2013 PM Li Keqiang proposed an exclusive ADDM-China mechanism to strengthen security cooperation in non-traditional areas but the ASEAN fraternity was cautious about such suggestions. Li also offered to discuss the signing of a treaty on good-neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation with the ASEAN. This policy is much in the same vein as what PRC has been doing with its neighbours wherein it endlessly continues to offer new confidence building measures without moving an inch on its version of the territorial disputes. Before leaving for China-ASEAN meeting in October 2013, Li had stated that *“The Chinese government is firmly committed to the path of peaceful development, and is unshakable in its resolve to uphold national sovereignty and territorial integrity”*¹⁹. Therefore, it can be seen that Beijing, capitalizing on its economic and military capabilities is unlikely to dilute its stance on territorial disputes. Though ADDM plus 8 is a positive step yet only time will tell whether it would be able to make a discernible progress towards addressing conventional security concerns in the region.

In addition, there are ASEAN Regional Forum (consisting of 27 nations in the Asia Pacific) and East Asia Summit where security and strategic dialogue is conducted but these platforms have not been able to forge a common approach to problems arising out of China’s aggressiveness in the region.

Response from Other Powers

India, Japan, Australia and other powers have been evolving their own responses to the strategic dynamics of the region.

Japan is in the process of shedding its pacifist outlook and is revitalising its defence capabilities. In mid-December 2013, Japan came out with a new National Security Strategy, new National Defence Programme Guidelines (NDPG) and a much improved Five Year Midterm Defence Programme (2014-18) which indicated that Japan was firmly moving away from its pacifist constitution. In its documents, Japan has expressed concerns about the changing security environment wherein China has been very assertive about Senkaku Islands and in SCS. Tokyo is strengthening its alliance with the US and has supported America’s

rebalance strategy. On the other hand, there is also thinking amongst America's traditional allies like Japan as to how far the US would go to help them if there is hot conflict with China. Thus, there is a move to strengthen Japanese Self Defence Forces as part of internal balancing. In effect, this would supplement the American capabilities to meet the challenges of Anti Access and Area Denial strategies.

Because of convergence of their interests, India, Japan and the U.S are engaged in trilateral dialogue to work towards peace and stability in the region. In fact, well before the unveiling of the American rebalance strategy, there was a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue initiated between US, India, Japan and Australia in 2007 and a joint naval exercise was also carried out off the shore of Okinawa that very year. Viewed by Beijing as some sort of a concert of powers being formed against China, the level and scope of the joint exercise invited a diplomatic demarche from the PRC. Australia under pressure disassociated itself from the initiative. India also clarified its position that the exercises were not designed against any country. But, of late, Australia seems to have corrected its policy and is becoming more aligned with the American interests. In its redeployment of troops, the U.S. has planned 2,500 marines in Darwin and is also discussing allowing greater access to Perth naval base of Australia. The U.S., Australia and Japan have also instituted a trilateral dialogue process the last meeting of which was held in October, 2013 at Bali, Indonesia on the sidelines of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference; the Foreign Ministers of Japan and Australia and the U.S. Secretary of State in a joint statement opposed any coercive or unilateral actions that could change the status quo in East China Sea and supported freedom of navigation in SCS²⁰.

While the US considers India as an important part of its rebalance strategy, New Delhi has not come out openly either in support of or against America's pivot to Asia though it offers a strategic opportunity to India to balance China. Return of the U.S. to Asia Pacific suits India's interests but historically, India has been averse to be seen as being part of some power bloc or the other. This is despite the fact that PLA's aggressive actions along Sino-Indian boundary and its nexus with Pakistan has shown that China has been least accommodative of India's interests

and concerns. Indo-US relations have been growing since the signing of the Joint Defence Framework Agreement of 2005 and civil nuclear deal of 2008. India and U.S. have carried out numerous joint military exercises and have ongoing strategic dialogue that covers a wide spectrum of relationship but there are still some areas of dissonance between the two. While India-China relations are complex enough, New Delhi's close partnership with Washington, notwithstanding some ups and downs, has raised the insecurity levels of Beijing. PRC remains wary of India's closer ties with Japan, Vietnam and the entire South East Asian region, in particular the emergence of trilateral mechanism between India – US – Japan. On balance, India has been endeavouring to follow a middle path while remaining concerned with China's not so peaceful rise and the direction it might take in the future.

India has been enhancing its engagement with ASEAN and East Asian countries for over two decades since it unveiled its Look East Policy (LEP) in 1992. Obviously, this pre-dates the unveiling of the American pivot to Asia paradigm. Dominant impulse of LEP was economic. However, it has now acquired strategic orientation. India has also been developing its defence relationship with ASEAN members on bilateral basis besides being part of the ADDM plus mechanism. Though India does not wish to get involved militarily in the ongoing disputes in the SCS, it has been supporting the freedom of navigation and the UN Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS). Japan has also sought India's support in principle that no country should unilaterally alter the status quo after China's declaration of a new ADIZ in East China Sea. India should be willing to extend its support to such a principle.

Implications for India

Beijing feels that the US pivot to Asia manifested through strengthening of its alliance system in East Asia, upgrading its military posture and intensifying its defence and security relationship with ASEAN and other regional powers like India and Australia are designed towards encircling China in the pursuit of a policy of containment. Chinese strategic analysts accuse the U.S. of pursuing a Cold war mindset and promoting unnecessarily a 'China threat' theory. On the other hand, Washington spurred by its long term objective of maintaining its global leadership

role feels compelled to ensure that *“international law and norms be respected, commerce and freedom of navigation are not impeded, that emerging powers build trust with their neighbours, and that disagreements are resolved peacefully without threats or coercion.”*²¹ The challenge before the U.S. and China’s neighbours is how to manage their relationship with a rising and aggressive power and how best to protect their interests.

India’s predicament is no different; it has to make difficult choices as to how far can it go to accommodate either China or the U.S. Would India be willing to join a concert of democracies or a coalition/grouping of Rim land powers to balance China? Realists in India may even suggest bandwagoning with the U.S. Alternatively; does New Delhi cooperate and engage Beijing in the medium term? Or for that matter does it accept a China dominated Asian order with some benefits accruing to it? For instance, an offer of favourable deal by China on the disputed Sino-Indian border combined with normalising its relationship with Pakistan rather than the current unadulterated anti-Indian stance of the Sino-Pak nexus.

India has long cherished its aspiration of achieving strategic autonomy even though it is still a work in progress because of relative weaknesses in its comprehensive national power. However, in the medium term, New Delhi is unlikely to bandwagon with the US though more likely it would continue to pursue a policy that supports its national interests. Similarly, India is unlikely to be well-disposed towards accepting a China led order in Asia; even countries like Japan, Vietnam or for that matter Indonesia could be unwilling to accede to such an arrangement despite compelling economic pressures. India’s objectives are likely to be best served by following interest based relationships with the U.S., China and other powers.

In any case, India is more inclined towards internal balancing, that is, strengthening its national capabilities rather than external balancing through forming alliances with other powers. Shoring up its economic and military capabilities in the coming decade and pursuing policies that avoid conflict

meanwhile would propel India towards achieving a degree of internal balancing. However, there is a need to ensure that capability gaps between China and India are not allowed to grow since adequate deterrence capabilities would be instrumental in preventing a miscalculation and conflict.

There is also a possibility of US and China coming to some sort of understanding to share power or divide areas of influence which may create more complexities. Possibilities of G2 or a condominium has been talked about earlier and Indian leadership remains uncomfortable with such ideas. China's new leadership under President Xi Jinping has also talked about a new kind of major power relationship with the U.S. which is tantamount to a Chinese version of G2 though Washington has so far been cool to this proposal. This further highlights the need for developing India's own capabilities. Indian leadership has often articulated that some of the concerns could be met by strengthening multi lateral security architecture in the Asia Pacific at a pace that is comfortable to all countries concerned.

The future course of events would largely depend upon how the US-China, US-ASEAN and China-ASEAN relationships evolve. While India has also been strengthening its politico-military relationships with the ASEAN and East Asian countries like Japan and South Korea (whose President visited India in January this year to strengthen strategic partnership with India), it is unlikely that it will proactively get itself involved in a possible military conflict in the SCS or elsewhere. However, while China has been over the years making forays into the Indian Ocean region, India needs strengthen its relationships with Pacific Islands nations to pursue its strategic interests.

Further, even though the USA has indicated its desire to return to Asia-Pacific, there are views that due to its economic constraints there might be a rethink. However, so far the United States does have a superior military which can support its geo-political aims in the Asia Pacific region. Therefore, countries in SE and East Asia who feel threatened by China's rising military capabilities would naturally gravitate towards America as a balancing exercise against China. While China realises that maintaining peace and stability in the region is important for

economic growth, it is also increasingly being impacted by rising nationalistic tendencies and aspirations fuelled by its economic and military growth. Recent years have seen expansion of China's core interests and a certain willingness to coerce the weaker contenders militarily.

In coming years, the Asia-Pacific region is likely to emerge as a keenly contested region between the United States and China. The U.S. has also been urging India to be more pro-active in its 'Look East Policy' as a part of US's hedging strategy against a rapidly rising China. While the U.S political and military leadership has described India as a major cog of its Asia-Pacific strategy, in the evolving strategic milieu India would have to find an appropriate role for itself and establish a mutually beneficial relationship with the SE and East Asian nations to realise its national interests.

Finally, as the recent events all along the periphery of China from South Korea to borders of India have shown that the strategic environment in the region is increasingly becoming volatile and risk prone as the rising power moves towards changing the status quo and as the existing power architecture responds to the same. Whether there would be a hot conflict in the coming years would largely depend on the choices made by China. Some analysts have talked about inevitability of war or conflict drawing a historical analogy with what happened in Europe a century back. However, Joseph Nye has argued in his analysis of present strategic situation being not strictly comparable with what prevailed in 1914 where *"Germany in 1914 was pressing hard on Britain's heels (and had surpassed it in terms of industrial strength), the US remains decades ahead of China in overall military, economic, and soft-power resources. Too adventuresome a policy would jeopardize China's gains at home and abroad"*²².

Image Source :

- <http://web.resource.amchamchina.org>
- <http://politicsinspires.org>

End Notes

¹ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Three Revolutions," *The Washington Post*, April 07, 2008, available at <http://www.henryakissinger.com/articles/wp040708.html>

² John Ruwitch and Ben Blanchard, "China Hikes Defense Budget, to Spend More on Internal Security", *Reuters*, Beijing, March 5, 2013 available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/05/us-china-parliament-defence-id...>

³ PLA lists Top ten Hotspots of International Security, December 26, 2013, available at http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2013-12/26/content_5707843.htm

⁴ Qiu Yongzheng and Yang He, "US Plays Innocent after near collision at sea", *The Global Times* 16 December, 2013 at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/832320.shtml>

⁵ For instance see Bill Gertz, "China Orders Foreign Fishing vessels out of Most of the SCS", *The Washington free Beacon*, January 07, 2014 available at <http://freebeacon.com/china-orders-foreign-fishing-vessels-out-of-most-of-the-south-china-sea/>

⁶ Bai Tiantian and Wen Ya, "Arrogant or Confident", *The Global Times*, 10 December 2013, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/831108/Arrogant-or-confident.aspx>

⁷ Lt. Gen. Qi Jianguo, Deputy Chief of General Staff, PLA at Shangri La Dialogue "New Trends in Asia pacific Security", 02 June 2013 available at <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2013-c890/fourth-plenary-session-0f17/qi-jianguo-a156>

⁸ General Liang Guanglie's address at Shangri-la Dialogue, Singapore, 5 June 2011, www.iiss.org

⁹ Pu Zhendong in Beijing and Chen, " Weihua Beijing Works to Spur Global Development", *China Daily*, 21 October 2013, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-10/21/content_17048276.htm

¹⁰ Premier Li Keqiang's Keynote Speech at 10th China-ASEAN Expo on 03 September 2013, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/808525.shtml>

¹¹ "Important Speech of Xi Jinping at Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference", 30 October 2013, China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, available at http://www.cciced.net/enciced/newscenter/latestnews/201310/t20131030_262608.html Xi Jinping repeatedly stressed that policy and strategy are the life of CPC and of CPC diplomatic work. To do diplomatic work well, we should consider both domestic and international situations. The former is the "Two Centuries" objective of realizing great rejuvenation of Chinese nation; and the latter is to struggle for sound external conditions for China's stable reform and development, maintain national sovereign, security and development interests, as well as keep world peaceful and stable and promote common development.

¹² For instance see remarks of ASEAN Secretary General during visit of Hillary Clinton, "Beginning a New Era of Diplomacy in Asia," press release, February 18, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/119422.htm>

¹³ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament," November 17, 2011, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Air Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenges", May 2013 available at <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf>. Some the US officials have been unambiguous about the purpose and objectives of ASB Concept. For instance, one US official has remarked "Air Sea Battle is to China what the [U.S. Navy's mid-1980s] maritime strategy was to the Soviet Union," Another one stated that "It is a very forward-deployed, assertive strategy that says we will not sit back and be Punished; we will initiate." See CRS Report by Ronald O'Rourke, "China's Naval Modernisation: Implications for U.S. Naval Capabilities-Background and Issues for Congress", September, 2013, p.109, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defence script, Media Availability with Secretary Panetta in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, June 3, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5051>

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defence News Transcript: Press Conference by Secretary Hagel and Secretary Gazmin in the Philippines, August 30, 2013, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5300>

¹⁸ "U.S. Pledges to Step Up Military Ties with Indonesia", The New Straits Times, June 1, 2013 available at <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/us-pledges-to-step-up-military-ties-with-indonesia-1.291260?localLinksEnabled=false>

¹⁹ "Li's written interview with media from ASEAN countries", Xinhua, October 08, 2013, available at http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-10/08/content_30235245_4.htm

²⁰ U.S. Department of State Media Note, Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement, October 04, 2013 available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/215133.htm>

²¹ National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon, "America is back in the Pacific and will uphold the rules", The Financial Times, November 27, 2011, The Financial Times available at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4f3febac-1761-11e1-b00e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2pzCjc77U>

²² Joseph Nye, "1914 Revisited", January 13, 2014, Project Syndicate, available at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/joseph-s--nye-asks-whether-war-between-china-and-the-us-is-as-inevitable-as-many-believe-world-war-i-to-have-been#FRkPFcpAa5OBqU7V.99>

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