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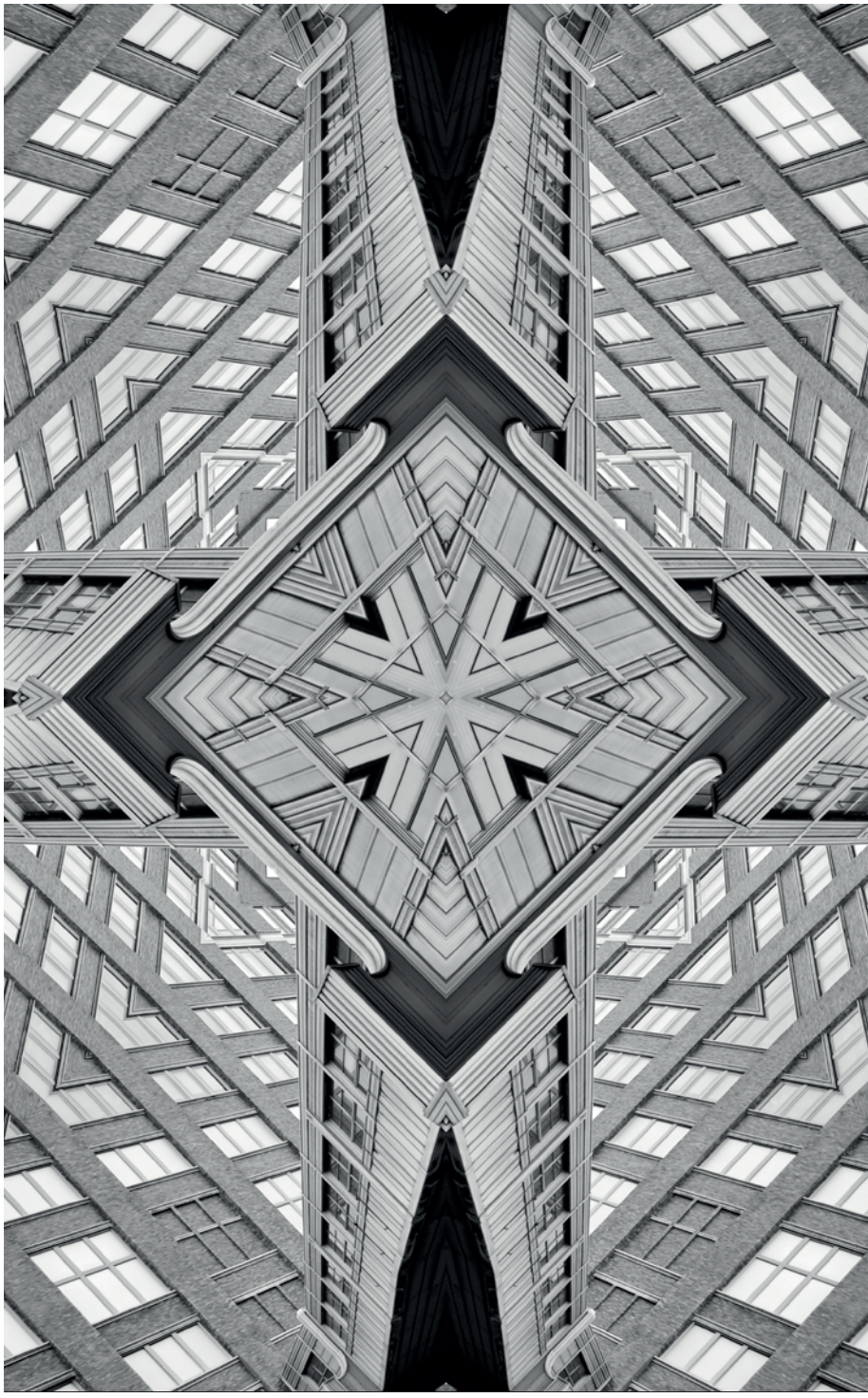

Challenges and Opportunities for India in the Post-Pandemic Geopolitical Landscape

Swagato Ganguly

Abstract

During the Cold War, India navigated its external relations guided largely by the doctrine and practice of non-alignment. In these contemporary times, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to inaugurate a period of heightened geopolitical rivalries, with the United States and China as the principal poles. India will be differently positioned in this post-Covid "new normal" than it was in the era of the Cold War and therefore will need different doctrines to mould its global engagements. While China used the window presented by the Cold War to begin crafting its dramatic rise, India too, will be presented opportunities by the "new normal" in the pandemic era.

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Introduction

How useful still is the notion of non-alignment—an article of faith with India's foreign policy establishment which has been questioned in recent times? In a discussion with strategic affairs expert C. Raja Mohan at the Mindmine Summit in 2020, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar set the cat among the pigeons: "Non-alignment was for a specific era and a particular context … We are to grow by leveraging the international situation. And you can't do that by staying away. The era of great caution and much greater stress on multilateral relations is behind us. We need to take risks."[1]

Indeed, the doctrine of non-alignment was framed with reference to the Cold War, seen to have ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Today the COVID-19 pandemic is giving rise to a "new normal", one of whose features – predating the pandemic but amplified by it – is likely to be an intensified geopolitical rivalry between the United States (US) and China. India too, is experiencing the tremors triggered by shifting geopolitical tectonic plates consequent to China's dramatic rise: armed forces are mobilised across both sides of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and customary manoeuvres along a disputed border led, for the first time since 1975, to fatal clashes in Galwan valley in the summer of 2020 and a continuing standoff since.[2]

How relevant is non-alignment in India's contemporary relations? Moreover, with the country now a frontline state, is not taking risks the biggest risk of all, as EAM Jaishankar has articulated? The notion that India played a marginal role in the Cold War due to its policy of non-alignment has been challenged in recent times. It has been argued, for instance, that "non-alignment" was less about the avoidance of global power politics, and more an attempt to influence the course of the Cold War itself, through means such as universal nuclear disarmament that India championed, or the propagation of a 'third way' that avoided the capitalist-communist binary. The latter, it turned out, also meant that aid and technology could be obtained both from the Soviet Union and the US.[3] Other observers have also argued that India kept up a more active engagement with the US than what is implied by the term "estranged democracies", and that India had a crucial role in mediating international crises such as the 1950-53 Korean war.[4]

'The week that changed the world'

Irrespective of which side one takes in that argument, it is clear that India's immediate environment was shaped by the Cold War, which has had significant repercussions on the country's security as well as the trajectory of its economic and political development. Pakistan signed the Mutual Defense Agreement with the United States in May 1954, and thereafter joined the US-backed Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as well as the 1955 Baghdad Pact which evolved into the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). While the US had its eye on the Soviet Union in forming these treaty organisations, Pakistan's focus was on India – and the substantial US military aid and equipment that came its way following these pacts would be deployed in wars against India. As US diplomat Strobe Talbott would write in 2004: "One reason that the United States and India were so at odds for so long was that each was on such good terms with the other's principal enemy."[5]

SEATO and CENTO would be dwarfed by subsequent developments, when Pakistan played a key role in the latter phases of the Cold War. Fatefully, Islamabad acted as a back channel in securing a rapprochement between the US and China, which included messages relayed by General Yahya Khan of Pakistan, as well as the appropriately named "Operation Marco Polo" where US national security adviser Henry Kissinger secretly flew to Beijing from Islamabad in a Pakistani aircraft to meet Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. The clandestine visit paved the way for then US President Richard Nixon's historic seven-day official visit to three Chinese cities in February 1972, which by most accounts normalised ties between the United States and China.[6]

Nixon described those days as "the week that changed the world"; indeed its consequences were momentous.[7] For one, it drove a wedge between the giants of the Communist bloc—the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. It enabled the rise of China, which fully leveraged US concessions to it and the trade and investment flows that followed.

The price was Taiwan's expulsion from the community of nations, and Washington's turning a blind eye to massive human rights violations by Pakistani armed forces in what was to become Bangladesh.[8] It must be one of the great ironies of 20th-century history that Mao Zedong initially split from the Soviet Union because he thought it was too soft on the United States and the Western world – the notion of "peaceful co-existence" with the West was gaining ground in the Soviet Union, a "revisionist" doctrine in Mao's eyes – but eventually Mao tilted in favour of the United States, thus shifting the Cold War balance in its favour.

What would be truly transformative for South Asia, however, was Pakistan's offering itself as a base for a multinational jihad in the 1980s, assisted by the United States and its allies as well as by China, to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan. Even as the move had global repercussions, C. Raja Mohan in his essay, "America, the Afghan Tragedy and the Subcontinent", delineates the range and depth of the transformation of South Asia that it triggered.[9]

General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq took Pakistan in an Islamist direction, and sealed an enduring compact between the military and Islamist political forces to the detriment of democracy in the country. A violent insurgency was stoked in Indian Kashmir, and Hindus were expelled from the Valley. As Raja Mohan notes, the rise of religious extremism was not confined to Islamist forces alone. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) began a massive drive to mobilise the Hindu community in India, and similar tendencies can be observed in the Buddhist communities of Sri Lanka and Myanmar. It could be argued that a Huntingtonian "clash of civilisations" broke out in South Asia and beyond, and that cauldron has been smouldering since, not only stoking tensions between nations but also reshaping polities from within and undermining the prospects of democracy and pluralism.[10]

Amidst the turmoil, even as Washington mired itself in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere and frittered away its energies, Beijing was steadfast in crafting its rise. As far back as 1967, then US presidential candidate Nixon had opined in an essay: "Taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates, and threaten its neighbors" – a view that culminated in his 1972 rapprochement with Mao.[11] Since then, Nixon's "long view" about engaging China has become established diplomatic wisdom in the West; and Beijing has taken full advantage to become today's superpower that challenges the US and the West across many domains.

> "Nixon's historic 7-day visit to China in 1972 drove a wedge between the giants of the Communist bloc—the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China."

The Gorbachev Spectre that Haunts China's Leaders

The Western narrative about the Cold War generally comes to a triumphant conclusion with the declaration of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and eventually the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Those events, however, had an impact within China as well, and looked vastly different when seen through the eyes of the Chinese elite. Gorbachev flew to Beijing for a symbolic Sino-Soviet rapprochement, but his planned reception at Tiananmen Square had to be shifted as students had gathered there to demonstrate for multi-party democracy. True to his image of wanting to bring the curtain down on the Cold War era, Gorbachev declared on the occasion: "We have come to China in springtime . . . . All over the world, people associate this season with renewal and hope. This is consonant with our mood."[12]

However, from the perspective of the Chinese government, the student-led demonstrations were an embarrassment: they disrupted an important state visit, besides the demands themselves being unacceptable. For the demonstrators, that very visit shone an international spotlight on their demands, and was insurance perhaps that they would not be treated too harshly by state forces. Such hope would eventually dissipate and there would be bloodshed: soon after Gorbachev left, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) cleared the square by killing many of the demonstrators. Glasnost was not on the menu that spring in Beijing.

Since the time of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, the Gorbachev spectre has haunted Chinese leaders. Deng backed the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, coined the phrase "hide your strength, bide your time" to ride out the international backlash that followed, and called for a halt to the creeping liberalisation of Chinese society.

Hu Yaobang, the general secretary of China's Communist Party who had encouraged the students and consequently been purged by the Party in 1987, was deleted from official history for 16 years after the Tiananmen Square massacre.[13] Hu's death was the spark that led to the Tiananmen Square uprising, and he would come to be known as "China's Gorbachev". Zhao Ziyang, another prominent liberal, was placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.[14]

China remained in a state of mobilisation, sustained till today and even enhanced in the time of President Xi Jinping. Xi, in a leaked internal speech soon after taking over as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, had the following to say: "Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse? An important reason was that their ideals and beliefs had been shaken … It's a profound lesson for us! To dismiss the history of the Soviet Union, to dismiss Lenin and Stalin, and to dismiss everything else is to engage in historic nihilism, and it confuses our thoughts and undermines the Party's organisations on all levels."[15]

The Gorbachev Spectre that Haunts China's Leaders

Therefore, while the West may have declared its own victory in the Cold War, defeat has never been conceded by the other side. Those geopolitical faultlines are manifesting themselves now in the Indo-Pacific region, as elsewhere. In response to joint military drills involving the US, Japan and France held in Japan's Kyushu region in May 2021, China warned that the United States will be defeated if the two superpowers go to war in the Pacific.[16] China claims sovereignty over Taiwan and almost all of the South China Sea. In what has come to be known as "wolf warrior diplomacy",[a] China has been aggressively pursuing those claims even as it makes incremental incursions on the LAC with India.

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a After the eponymous Rambo-style Chinese action film Wolf Warrior 2, whose tagline reads "Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far the target is." "Wolf warrior" diplomacy has been the name given to the aggressive and confrontational style of diplomacy adopted by China during the pandemic period, standing particularly in contrast to Deng's advice of "keeping a low profile" in the international arena.

Towards a Post-Covid 'New Normal': Beijing's High-Risk Strategy

The COVID-19 pandemic in the past year-and-a-half has ushered in a "new normal" that deviates sharply from half-a-century of rapprochement in US-China relations. The first meeting that the Biden administration had with Chinese officials rapidly turned into a sparring match, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Yang Jiechi, Director of China's Central Foreign Affairs Commission, publicly rebuking each other.[17] President Joe Biden has ordered an enquiry into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, amidst speculation that it could have come from a laboratory in Wuhan. Beijing has responded to Biden's call for investigation with heated rhetoric.[18] In 2020, it had imposed trade sanctions on Australia for calling for a similar accounting.[19]

To be sure, the West and China are not about to economically "decouple"; the Chinese economy is too vast and too enmeshed globally, including with India, for a decoupling to be either desirable or possible for the West or for India. The perceived imperative is to reduce dependency on China-based supply chains in strategically sensitive areas, and to restructure the security-open markets matrix with greater emphasis on security and stronger defences against China's weaponisation of trade—this will play a critical role in the "new normal". These moves include more stringent screening of China's foreign investments in strategic sectors, restrictions placed on Chinese companies such as the tech giant Huawei, controls on transfers of emerging technologies to China, adopting a "whole of government" approach to strategic competition with China, as well as a plurilateral approach with like-minded partners. The Biden administration, for instance, has called for an alliance of "techno-democracies" against "techno-autocracies" such as Beijing.[20]

The "new normal" is evident on the LAC as well, where more than 50,000 troops remain mobilised on each side in the eastern Ladakh sector, and there is little sign of restoration of the pre-Summer 2020 status quo.[21] Chinese tactics along the LAC have been seen to mirror those it adopts to assert territorial and maritime claims in the South and East China Seas – a version of salami slicing, or aggressive actions below the threshold of war that expand territory under its control.[22]

"The Chinese economy is too vast and too enmeshed globally for a decoupling to be either desirable or possible for the West or for India."

Indeed, Beijing has been asserting its claim to what it calls "indisputable sovereignty" over the South China Sea through devices such as the 'nine-dash line' – over the heads of protesting neighbours such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. Former Indian diplomat Phunchok Stobdan, explaining China's similar tactics across the LAC, has quoted a Chinese proverb: "'Kill the chicken to scare the monkey' – That's why smaller powers like India and Australia, who have aligned with the US, are witnessing a more aggressive China."[23] Just as Australia faced trade sanctions from China after calling for an accounting of how COVID-19 originated, pressure on the LAC could be a means of obtaining strategic leverage to ensure India does not get too close to the United States, through mechanisms such as the Quad. It would resolve, at least partially, Beijing's so-called "Malacca dilemma": an India perpetually threatened by the prospect of a two-front war with China and Pakistan on its northern borders would be overstretched militarily and forced to ease up on the maritime domain in the Indian Ocean.

If that is Beijing's strategy, however, it is a high-risk one, as it could end up accomplishing precisely the opposite of its objective and push India closer to the US and its allies. China does have advantages over India: it is five times wealthier, has a far more modernised military, has managed the pandemic more effectively, and is in a different league as a tech power as well as the world's 'manufacturing hub'. At the same time, the current geopolitical conjuncture presents India with certain unique opportunities.

The post-rapprochement "new normal" between the West and China, following the globally devastating pandemic and the demand for transparency from China, allows New Delhi room to manoeuvre. Given China's Leninist political character, more so after Xi took over, there is little possibility that Beijing will concede the Western demand for transparency on SARS-CoV-2's origins (or on economic and trade-related issues, for that matter). Meanwhile, Kurt Campbell, the White House's Indo-Pacific policy director, has given notice of the future: the period of US engagement with China has "come to an end", and the "dominant paradigm is going to be competition".[24]

Therefore, just as China shifted the balance of the Cold War with its rapprochement with the United States – coming soon after the bitterness of the Korean war and Mao's rejection of Soviet "revisionism" through "peaceful coexistence" with the West – India too, can benefit from the coming era of heightened geopolitical competition. It can tilt towards the West and craft its own rise through linkages with Western technology, capital, markets, and security arrangements such as the Quad. A growing India will help the West in balancing Chinese power, and such a grand strategic bargain would have the additional advantage that it would not require such a drastic reorientation of postures that the US-China rapprochement did.

In the past, New Delhi often found itself cast into the penumbra of the Washington-Beijing tango while Pakistan, its South Asian rival, found the diplomatic sweet spot between Washington and Beijing after bringing them together. Thus, for instance, Beijing transferred knowhow and materials for nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable missiles to Pakistan during the period the latter became a base for the anti-Soviet jihad even as the United States overlooked such transfers. This enabled Pakistan to benefit from US economic and military aid as well as Chinese military aid, both conventional and nuclear.[25] That security and diplomatic umbrella, in turn, provided Pakistan the wherewithal to pursue its policy in Kashmir, where an insurgency exploded soon after the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan was won.

> "The post-rapprochement 'new normal' between the West and China, following the pandemic and the demand for transparency from China, allows New Delhi room to manoeuvre."

Favourable Winds for New Delhi

Contrast that with today's more favourable diplomatic situation from New Delhi's perspective, when it revoked Kashmir's special status with little reaction from world powers. Other than expressions of concern over Kashmir's human rights situation, if one left aside some of the usual suspects – China, Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and Turkey who are themselves hardly exemplars of either human rights or conceding the right to self-determination – the move was largely treated as a domestic issue.[26]

The unfolding post-pandemic world will offer New Delhi plenty of opportunity. In order to seize them, New Delhi must be competitive, not just in an economic but also in a geopolitical sense. This implies, as S. Jaishankar has indicated, "taking risks" rather than being overly cautious. New Delhi throwing its weight behind the Quad is a step in the right direction, although by itself, participating in a few naval exercises is going to accomplish little. New Delhi can be open to more plurilateral arrangements, and overcome its fear of castigations from China with a more pronounced tilt to the West.

Islamabad's refusal to provide bases to the US for anti-Taliban operations in Afghanistan is an opportunity for New Delhi to step in and offer some bases of its own – after all, India has an interest in stabilising Afghanistan following US withdrawal.[27] If New Delhi is to think bigger, it can get into a closer relationship with NATO without necessarily becoming a full alliance partner, but cooperating on missions where it too has an interest. Moreover, if the "new normal" is about the interpenetration of economic and security issues, India can take an active role in shaping an alliance of "techno-democracies", and thereby benefit from technology transfers. It must also participate in free-trade arrangements with friendly nations and blocs – such as the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the US – which will require it to forego its current turn towards protectionism and build economic competitiveness instead.

Indian exceptionalism and complacency – as evidenced in the lethargic response to COVID-19 which turned it into a global pandemic hotspot – sit oddly with its aspirations of becoming a rising power.[28] Paradoxically, the belief that India is an ancient civilisation whose rise is foreordained could just prove to be its tallest hurdle. While New Delhi looks at external factors constraining it – such as Beijing's actions on the LAC or backing of Pakistan's grey-zone tactics – it must also pay attention to internal factors that could be more easily addressed.

Favourable Winds for New Delhi

Swagato Ganguly *is Consulting Editor, The Times of India and Research Affiliate, Lakshmi Mittal South Asia Institute, Harvard University.*

In economic terms, the "India story" which attained prominence in the first decade of this century lost traction during the subsequent decade – so much so that it came to be seen as the "lost decade".[29] This was so even before COVID-19 broke out, causing the economy to plummet further – even as China quickly resolved its pandemic issues and restarted its factories. The lack of state capacity witnessed during the pandemic could hold New Delhi back on other fronts as well.

There is also a democracy deficit to address.[30] Not only does this impose reputational and soft power costs – it is hard to insist on a rules-based order internationally if that is loosely observed at home – routinised demonisation of political opponents also inhibits necessary coordination across a vast and diverse nation such as India. As former Indian diplomat Shivshankar Menon has argued: "Today there is no distinction between internal and external … they are all a part of what kind of India we want to build."[31] Concurrently, given its rich diversity of cultures, New Delhi must find a cure for religious radicalism at home, else it risks falling victim to a "clash of civilisations" within.

> "While India looks at external constraints — such as China's actions on the LAC or backing of Pakistan's grey-zone tactics — it must pay attention to internal factors that could be addressed more easily."

From New Delhi's perspective, global geopolitical winds are fair at the moment, with the end of half-a-century of US-China rapprochement that placed it in the shadow. But the ship of state has sprung many leaks which must be repaired if New Delhi is to ride the favourable winds. It could just turn the pressure it faces from Beijing to its favour, as such pressure serves to focus its energies, activates the antibodies within its system, and "grow by leveraging the international system" as Jaishankar puts it.

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New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. **Fax :** +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org