

## **Geo-strategic and Geo-political Opportunities for India**

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### **Introduction**

**T**he spread of the Corona virus across the world has seemingly brought life to a standstill. After the initial detection, the probable effect of the contagion was not only inaccurately gauged, the urgency to stem the spread did not manifest itself to some of the educated and economically well-established countries. The devastating impact of the virus ripped through Italy and the rest of Europe, into Africa and now threatens to bring the United States of America down to its knees. The origin of the Corona virus, also known as the COVID-19, has more or less been identified as Wuhan, a teeming industrial and commercial city in Wuhei Province of China. A hub centre of extensive commercial activity, it has always had a stream of businessmen and tourists passing in and out at a frenetic pace. The highly successful commercial centre with global business reach provided the ideal core which could spread an infection across the world, its human traffic acting as carriers, as they pursued their business interests across countries.

While conspiracy theories abound and continue to proliferate, about China having unleashed biological war on the world, history will record the findings and apportion the blame. It is not without justification that China is being blamed for the spread. The fact that after the initial

detection, its presence was attempted to be suppressed and once the spread started, the medium of transmission was underplayed which resulted in the escalation of the epidemic to a pandemic of colossal stature, wreaking death and debilitation to the people of every country. The fact that China and especially Wuhan, has recovered remarkably and is pushing to rekindle its economy while the rest of the world flounders, has alienated China in the geo-strategic and geo-political domains. The physical encapsulation of the public has restricted the quantum of work that can be generated without human presence, resulting in sharp strictures to industry and the consequent crippling effect on the economy.

### **Impact on the World**

As the effect of the Corona virus subsumed the economies of the countries afflicted, the plummeting stock markets painted a bleak picture for the future. The effect, which in fact has not played out fully as yet, has required the governments to tap into their monetary reserves to sustain the population, ravaged with a jobless horizon. The infusion of billions of dollars for sustenance and survival has been necessitated to get the economy to revive at a later date by preserving humanity. The economic crash will have its effect across all spectrums, including the military

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and its potential capability to sustain a conflict. There is no doubt that the world can only limp back to its platform and it will be licking its wounds for a long, long time.

What this huge pandemic and its enfeebling effect has surely ensured is that the world order will never be the same again. Globalisation and a unipolar world with the United States as its leading player is going to be a thing of the past. The driving power, the economy, and its growth, post such a turbulence, will determine who comes out ahead. The picture is becoming clear. While Russia seemingly has not buckled, China definitely has its feet on the ground and has started moving ahead. The countries that are likely to recover reasonably are Japan, South Korea, India and Israel.

### **Geopolitics and Geo-strategy**

Geopolitics, a Darwinian game of survival of the fittest, has no place for the weak and infirm. As the powers that be wax and wane, so also the sine curve of geopolitics courses through history. It is also a natural fallout of power balances that entities tend to secure themselves through friendships and alliances. There is no doubt that this will certainly happen, opening doors hitherto thought closed, offering succour to the needy and providing a supporting platform for revival. It has also strengthened the hands for some. The United States, for many years, had been wooing India. And for a reason. The far-sighted strategists realised that in Asia, with the strife torn Middle East and China steadily building its potential, India, as a non-aligned democratic nation provided a ballast. Thus, India's strategic tilt towards the United States in the last decade, from its old (Soviet)

Russia leanings, came as a windfall and consequently paid dividends in many spheres for India. The concerted drive to achieve a strategic relationship finally paid off, cementing a bond hitherto lacking which certainly has portents of a crucial union. The United States now has a friend sitting at the soft under-belly of a likely threat – China. Further strengthening the relationship, the United States has taken a huge step to re-name its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command. While this relates more to its areas of interest to include the Indian Ocean, India, as a major player in the region gains significance.

### **China's Strategic Posture**

China's relentless pursuit of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to develop connectivity across Eurasia, has now enveloped the Maritime Silk Road, a revival of its famous and historic commercial trade passage of ancient times, developed by the Han Dynasty. As the maritime equivalent of the overland routes, the Maritime Silk Road was the precursor of what we know today as the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC). Chartered in the modern era to cater to the draught of large and heavy cargo vessels, they are largely synonymous with those chartered thousands of years ago. The Maritime Silk Road is also designed for the far-east (mainly China) to carry out business and commerce with SE Asia, the Indian Sub-Continent, Arabian Peninsula and Europe. It necessitates transit through the Indian Ocean. Over 60 per cent of all the merchandise and trade in the world passes through the Indian Ocean, accounting for over 50 per cent of GDP of the nations in the region. Therefore, the SLOCs

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constitute the economic lifeline for the far east and the management and security of these take on vital importance for all stakeholders dependent on them. The Maritime Silk Road also passes through the South China Sea. China's economic and military potential has been steadily growing and surpassing that of most other countries, including the United States. This potential, with added exposure of the military to strategies employed by other major powers (through internet and exercises beyond their borders) has had a vital impact on future of their power projection. Restructuring the military with an added emphasis on modernising the Air Force and Navy, China is developing its military for autonomous deployed operations. Its power projection in the South China Sea (SCS) has caused significant discomfort to the US Navy operating in those waters and the newly improved Chinese Navy's (PLAN) forays into the Indian Ocean has raised a lot of concerns in the region.

### **The Indo-Pacific**

President Obama's 'pivot' in the (then) Asia-Pacific which rebalanced and realigned military forces to increase their focus to the Indian Ocean and the adjoining Pacific (which today constitutes the Indo-Pacific) was primarily to emphasise the importance of the region, which he (rightly) predicted as the economic and therefore strategic centre of gravity of the world of the future. Critics are of the opinion that the US' Air-Sea Battle Doctrine, rolled out at the time of the pivot, aggravated and energised China into upgrading its military and adopting an aggressive posture. History will decide whether President Donald Trump's reversal of policy was the right decision.

The consequent moves by China in the South China Sea and in the Indian Ocean definitely point to a more domineering attitude with a definite strategic intent. While Japan and the SE Asian countries felt the Chinese pressure in the area of the SCS, India started feeling hedged in and encircled on two counts. Firstly, to the north and west China started establishing itself with a tentacle of the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Secondly, China's access to a series of ports in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Djibouti (termed as 'String of Pearls') using its soft power modus operandi. There is no doubt in anybody's mind that China's growing footprint in the geopolitical space of the region and its aggressive posture are all directed towards power projection and attempting to establish itself at pole position as the world's primary super power.

### **The Quad and its Relevance**

The unsteady Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD), which included the United States, Japan and Australia, expanded its scope to include India (acknowledging its strategic relevance, with its strategic partnership with the US acting as a catalyst, no doubt) and renamed it the Quadrilateral Dialogue or Quad. The four countries formed a core group in the wake of the horrific tsunami which devastated large portions of SE Asia in 2004. Having been brought together to address a catastrophe, the purpose of the coordination was to create a resource group which would be able to effectively respond to any Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) contingencies that may arise in the future. The success of the 2004 coordination led to the

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suggestion of creating the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a grouping of nations with a common humanitarian purpose. The charter envisaged for the Quad was restricted within the bounds of regional issues, which would be possible if there were a free and open Indo-Pacific.

In the following eight years, the noticeable change in regional stability caused by China's territorial claims and off-shore infrastructural developments, the emphasis on the Nine-Dash-Line and a scant acknowledgement of a rules based system in the region prompted the Quad to reunite, of sorts. But the lull in this period was taken up by many bilateral and some trilateral dialogues and exchanges which kept the four countries engaged with each other, though not as a unified entity. Thus, the coming together to strive for a common strategic policy has been gradual and not really consistent. But in the back of everyone's mind it was evident that the areas of China's forays, which were creating contentious issues, were within the 'diamond' formed by the location of the four nations of the Quad. Predictably, China complained that the Quad was a move to contain China and started using its economic and soft powers to influence the nations within the diamond, especially prominent countries such as South Korea and Indonesia. It strongly emphasised the need and importance of ASEAN centrality, a major binding factor in regional geopolitics, suggesting a threat of dilution of the ASEAN with the introduction of the Quad in the same region.

### **Geo-strategic Tilt**

There are certain issues which could bring in a change in the geo-strategic and geopolitical

scenario in the region. Coercive actions by China have contributed to a heightening of tensions with respect to India. The Doklam face off was precipitated as a result of direct military coercive action. Intentionally blocking India from membership into the Nuclear Suppliers Group left an acerbic atmosphere between the two. China's coercive maritime moves in the vicinity of Japan's Senkaku Islands has heightened tensions in that area and the presence of Chinese warplanes also intruding Japanese air space has resulted in the Japanese Self Defence Force priming its military to higher states of training and readiness. The exposure of covert business deals in Australia involving high level officials has left a scar on China's business ethics and standing in the regional space. China's aggressive theatrics in the South China Sea have steadily increased and have now taken on dangerous portents. The aggressive nature of the Chinese to assert their historic boundaries up to the Nine Dash Line which impinges on the EEZs of other nation states and the upgradation of the PLA (Navy) with aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines has made the United States take a second look at the geo-strategic situation in the region. Efforts to introduce the F-35 stealth fighters into Japan and South Korea have been intensified as also the US naval presence in the area of the SCS.

The world is reeling under the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economies have taken a severe beating. Recovery from this is a long-drawn process, especially for the United States. Rapidly losing its pole position as the lone super-power, the US will have difficulty in managing its vastly spread expeditionary forces

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and make its impact on the world stage. With a weakening NATO in the post COVID-19 Europe, Brexit leaving the region in further turmoil, the scenario in the western world is not healthy. This is a time for the US to climb down from its pedestal and support alliances which could take the load off its shoulders. The changed geo-strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific offers an opportunity for the Quad to reinforce its dialogue and maybe consider a shift in its charter. While the Quad was not designed to ‘contain’ China in its basic structure, geo-strategic imbalance can surely be considered as a reason for rethinking the options. The early suggestions that the Quad may become an Asian NATO could actually become a possibility if China’s aggressive outlook in the region and its covert hegemonist ideas continue unabated. This is an opportune moment for India to assert itself in the Quad to take on a more responsible role. The present government’s diplomatic engagements have earned great respect for Prime Minister Modi and the country at large. Bilateral and trilateral engagements with members of the Quad have also brought recognition to the Indian Armed Forces.

### **Indian Ocean Region Concerns**

The sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) traversing the Indian Ocean, as mentioned earlier, constitute the lifeline to the East, inasmuch as they carry all the energy resources from the middle-east to the nations in east and south-east Asia. The importance of these SLOCs cannot be overemphasised and their importance and therefore security take on great significance. Since the SLOCs constitute supply lines for all countries, they

should be considered relatively safe but extraneous factors could prove otherwise. The countries inclusive in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have enjoyed a peaceful and cordial coexistence with relatively no threat to their status quo. While pirates have pillaged ships on the high seas from time immemorial, the advent of terrorists and non-state actors have added to the security concerns in the region.

Over the past few decades, China has slowly but steadily utilised its soft power diplomacy to acquire naval footholds in the Indian Ocean. Overtly but surreptitiously, they have not only established themselves but have their hosts committed in debt to ensure their continued presence. Notwithstanding capability, no country can afford naval vessels operating in the high seas for protracted periods of time. The need for rest and resupply are a paramount necessity. The periodic acquisition of ports in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Djibouti have ensured China a composite straddling or access to any part of the Indian Ocean for its Navy. Result, a steady stream of PLA (Navy) ships now operate in the Indian Ocean. This extra-regional presence has disturbed the status quo in the IOR and has emerged as a matter of concern. While China would also be concerned about the security of the SLOCs and their energy source, the presence of PLA (Navy) ships throws up concerns of militarisation of the IOR. From the time (then) Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh stated that India’s area of interest stretches from the Straits of Hormuz in the west to the Straits of Malacca in the east, India was committed to its participation in the goings-on in the Indian Ocean.

Taking a major stride in diplomatic strategy,

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India made its move in the Indian Ocean Region. In a speech delivered in Mauritius in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined what he described would be India's vision for the Indian Ocean Region. Under the acronym, SAGAR or "Security and Growth for All in the Region," he elaborated that SAGAR will provide a framework for strategic action. He went on to suggest five components which would constitute the charter of SAGAR as under:-

- (a) **Security.** Safeguard national territory and maritime boundaries and defend national interests. Use India's capability and resources to provide HADR in the region.
- (b) **Capability Building.** Enhance security and economic cooperation with nations in the region.
- (c) **Collective Action.** To deepen mutual understanding and strengthen regional mechanisms, there would be a need for collective action.
- (d) **Sustainable Development.** Promote greater commerce, investment and tourism, infrastructure development and protection of the marine environment.
- (e) **Maritime Engagement.** Create a climate of trust and transparency, be sensitive to each other's interests and resolve maritime issues amicably, while ensuring security from extra-regional interference.

It is not possible for India to push the agenda of SAGAR on its own. The collective support of all the representative nations would be necessary. The idea of SAGAR has been well received and provides an additional forum for dialogue in the

Indo-Pacific region. To promote SAGAR, a platform for interaction and dialogue has been provided in the form of the annual Indian Ocean Conference (IOC), initiated by India with wide participation from all rim countries of the IOR. Commenced with the inaugural conference in Singapore 2016, the essence of the conference is "to deliberate on building an institutional framework for managing the threats to regional peace and security through strengthening of multi-lateral cooperate, based on mutual respect, equality and supported by international law." The conference has found wide attendance and participation and provides leverage to SAGAR.

## Conclusion

The horrific and cataclysmic effect of the Corona virus on the world has crippled the economies of virtually every country, leading to the possibility of a world recession, the likes of which have never been seen before. 'Where' and 'When' this virus emanated has been identified but the 'How' and 'Why' remain unanswered. The uncanny effect on countries with certain profiles and status have led to many conspiracy theories which not only abound but continue to proliferate. Pandemics that rip through civilisations leave a trail of death and debilitation which, because of the work force being affected, tends to cripple industry and economies of states. Buckling under financial crises, having to pump in reserves for bare essentials to avoid regression into primordial existence, countries are floundering to keep afloat. Recoveries take an inordinately long time, especially when second and sometimes third waves are inescapable.

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Weakness of any form allows the predators to come to the fore and diplomacy is no stranger. Aggressive and threatening postures are always evident and certain elements, mostly non-state actors, unmindful of their own casualties, take undue advantage of the situation to perpetrate their crimes.

Historically, China has always possessed a long-term strategic outlook. For some years now, it has doggedly pursued its policy of securing or ensuring security of its energy sources transiting through the Indian Ocean. The route, reaching back towards mainland China also envisages the security of the transit through the South China Sea. The recognition and scaling up of the PLA(Navy) and the stretched-out forces of the United States has emboldened China to increase its assertiveness in the larger Indo-Pacific region. In both the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the status quo has been disturbed, raising concerns in democratic

countries of the region. China is seen to have extra-regional aspirations and there seems little anyone can do to stop them. The need of the hour is containment through regional partnerships and coalitions. While the stature of such coalitions, their charter and effectiveness can be deliberated and established, a common strategic ideal must be pursued. Post the pandemic and the crushing blow it has inflicted on the United States, there is no doubt that the US can no longer claim its position as top dog in the world order. The Quad and SAGAR provide opportunities for cooperation and coalition. While the basis must be for continued peace in the region, it must factor in a clause for possible military association for a stated purpose. As the strategic centre of gravity of the world in the next couple of years, the Indian Ocean will be the pivot for geo-strategic and geopolitical maneuvering and India has an overwhelming opportunity to cement a place for itself in history.

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