

MAYANKOTE KELATH NARAYANAN

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Now, I will give the floor to our great friend of the WPC, Mr. Narayanan, who particularly in his long and impressive career, was the National Security Advisor to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The position of India is particularly important these days, not only vis-à-vis China but also the current Ukraine war and many other issues.

Mayankote Kelath Narayanan

By way of introduction, I would like to say that India generally hews to the view that the Indo-Pacific is 'a connected geo-political space' rather than an artificial construct. Today, the strategic community in India views the Indo-Pacific as the primary zone of strategic competition – Ukraine notwithstanding. The Indo-Pacific scene, meantime is seeing greater contestation and debate, not just over what the rules of international order ought to be, but also which countries should be allowed to write the rules.

Consequently, it is hardly a surprise, that despite its allergy to alliances, India could be persuaded to become a member of the Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), whose other members are the US, Japan and Australia. This was projected as an effort to strengthen democratic forces in the region, without, however, specifying that it was directed at any one nation, viz., China. India did not initially subscribe to the view that QUAD was a kind of defense alliance, but of late, it would seem, India has begun to see things rather differently.

This can be inferred from the way India has recently enlarged the scope and ambit of its defense diplomacy, which is masked as multi-alignment. India's Malabar Naval Exercises, now include Australia and Japan. With both Japan and Australia, talks between India and the two countries now follow a 2+2 format. This includes their Defense Ministers alongside their Foreign Ministers.

Notwithstanding the existence of the QUAD, US, Australia and UK have put in place a separate defense pact (AUKUS) in the Pacific. This is quite separate and distinct from the QUAD. All three members of AUKUS are treaty partners, and the objective of AUKUS is, hence, all too clear. What is uncertain, though, is whether either QUAD or AUKUS would have any impact in limiting China's aggressive designs.

From India's standpoint, it is the rapid pace at which China is pursuing its version of the Revolution in Military Affairs, largely driven by Artificial Intelligence Systems, that is cause for

real concern for countries in the region. China's emphasis on its 'escalation domination matrix' (in terms of nuclear weapons, new forms of hybrid warfare, and cyber), also greatly enhances the level of the threat posed by China. China's disregard for international covenants, as also its willingness to use force to achieve its objectives in the South China Sea, are the reasons compelling India to revisit some of its earlier options.

China-Taiwan tensions have not figured very prominently in India's security discourse till now. Nevertheless, given the warm relations that exist between India and Taiwan, and China's oft repeated threats to invade Taiwan using force, India does recognize this issue as being of strategic importance for all nations in the Indo-Pacific.

A matter of concern for India, though seldom expressed in public, is that few, if any of the countries in the Asian region are willing to stand-up to, or engage in a conflict, with China. India views this as indirect encouragement to China to act with impunity, and disregard the views of its Asian neighbors.

I would conclude by affirming that in reading China correctly lies the key to the relevance of the Indo-Pacific as a 'geo-strategic construct'. No one in Asia has any doubt that China is the 400 pounds gorilla in the Indo-Pacific as of now. Yet, I would urge that caution should be exercised when dealing with China. There is a need to avoid what may be termed as a 'military overreach', at least for now. In this connection, I would suggest to those present here to carefully read the message emanating from the recently concluded China's 20th Party Congress. The conventional view is that the Congress has given a green signal to China to embark on a more expansionist course – and displace the US as the world's No.1 power. A closer reading of the 20th Party Congress proceedings, does not seem to support this view.

It is my assessment, that Xi Jinping's thrust on this occasion was much less on China's external aspects, and more specifically, on internal issues. The essence of his remarks at the Congress was that the primary task for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) today is to maintain its 'ideological purity' so as to avoid the situation that overtook the Russian Communist Party, some decades back. Ensuring internal consolidation and enabling the CCP to retain its dominant position in the affairs of China, required the Party according to him, to further strengthen itself. Not mentioned, but nevertheless apparent, were the current concerns felt by the leadership regarding the loss of momentum in terms of economic progress, its declining population, and some of its other travails. I would think that all this severely inhibits China from launching a war to displace the US as the world's leading power.

There are, however, clear redlines that must not be crossed, viz., Taiwan and the First Island Chain. Hence, my overall assessment is that the situation in which China finds itself, inhibits the leadership from resorting to a war, or aggression, as of now. From my perspective, hence, the relevance of the Indo-Pacific as a geo-strategic concept, is linked to the above assessment.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much for this very interesting presentation. I think that one dimension of international politics that is missing for the Europeans in particular, is digging more into understanding the others in depth rather than considering that their own paradigm prevails over the rest of the world. I think your explanations illustrate that very well.