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Samir, you have had to wait a long time but I hope you will be able to jump in.

Samir Saran

I was thinking, should I respond to your question; or to what I have heard?

Douglas Paal

You are welcome to do either.

Samir Saran

First of all, I think our engagement with China is for ourselves. We are locked in a Himalayan face-off. We have close to about 100 000 troops, if you count both armies together, across the line of actual control. Therefore, the US does not have to motivate us to face-off against China. China does that pretty well by itself. It is China that has motivated us to face-off, in some sense, against it.

However, having said that, I think there are two interesting projects, trends, tendencies under way concurrently. The first, of course, is what you mentioned, Doug, at the very beginning – the US perhaps trying to shape the world into two camps – perhaps. I am not sure that US has the consensus inside it, so I do not think there is a US position that it is trying to preach in any case. I think you may find that the discord within the US may become louder as it tries to pursue that line, if it ever does. That is the first part.

Even if we were to assume that the US has some, the deep state has some great idea of carving the world into two camps, I think that is not new for India. We have faced that idea for a very long time and successive governments have pursued non-alignment, strategic autonomy, multi-alignment – choose the word you want – but, in many ways, it is not a new phenomenon. It is new for Europe, not for us.

In fact, now Europeans tell us, ‘How did you do that? Can you give us some secret recipe? We want to learn from India on how to be able to manage our own strategic affairs’. American design or European design, and making us choose sides, is not going to work with us. We do not work in the Manichean sense. For us, we work in grades – we love grades. That is the first project.

The second project is the Chinese themselves are trying to distort the character of Asia. The Chinese want a multipolar world, but a unipolar Asia – and that is what we are fighting against. Therefore, in a sense, we are rejecting the Chinese attempt to create a unipolar Asia. Why would we want a hegemonic world where a set of actors dominate it?

I do not think India is going to buy into either of the two projects. I think, obviously for us, a very good strategic outcome would be that we could partner with France and the EU and the US in ensuring that China is not able to carve up Asia as it wants, at one level; but also to ensure that the world is not forced into certain corners that the big two may want the world to resemble.

I think that is one answer. Now, let me respond to what I heard. What I heard is that my European colleagues are worried about what Asia might do; what Africa might do; what other parts of the world may do.

The truth is it is Europe which is the weak link in this debate. That is the reality. The lure of money, the lure of return, has made Europe incompetent and incapable of taking a unified position against China.

If you think you are going to see a Russia-style mobilization against China, we are all living in La La Land. Europe is the weak link for the US if it has to mobilize any sort of consortium against China. Therefore, please do not do whataboutery. I heard lots of people talk about how Africa does not want this; how South-East Asia does not want this – it is Europe that does not want it, let us be honest here.

All my European friends have told me they do not want it. They do not want to be in a position when the Germans are told, 'Stop selling cars to China'; or the French are told, 'Stop selling handbags to China'. Let us be very clear. It is your handbags and your cars that are dictating your strategic priorities – do not blame your own frailties on someone else. That is the first thing.

I think the question to be asked is that, if the China were to invade Taiwan, what would be the European position? I can tell you that. In fact, I just told you. That is the first thing.

The second thing that I heard, which is quite interesting, is about, in some sense, the relentlessness of the Chinese project expansion; economy; and partnerships – and I think that is a very frail assumption to base your future foreign policy on.

I would argue that the idea that China would be this 100-foot gorilla is exaggerated. I also would argue that the fact that they will continue to enjoy this balance of favorable trading relationships with these countries in the next decade is also to be seen.

In fact, I would argue that we may already have seen them peak; and now what emerges, in the coming years, may see a very different, more vulnerable and more messy China. In that sense, maybe this whole idea of mobilizing the world to take on this great monster may itself be a futile project and countries, through niche arrangements, collaborations, partnerships, can take them on in different sectors.



I think the idea that the Chinese are going to dominate the world and therefore we need to start worrying about it itself may be foolhardy in the first instance. I think the Chinese are quite good at destroying their own credibility, and economy, and integrity in the days ahead. You have to believe in your friends as well as your enemies.

I think you should give them a chance to do that. My simple proposition for many of us is that, if your neighbors want to hug China, allow them. Allow them to do it. Many of our neighbors did it, and they have realized the cost of that hug.

It does not end, geopolitics is not about the moment – it is about decades and centuries. I think people must make their own decisions, come to their own conclusions; and I do believe that this is a decade where we will see some sort of rethinking on the part of many countries that, today, we believe are in the red corner. I think even that is likely to change in the coming days.

However, our response to China is because we need to respond to China. We are not going to allow Beijing to shape Asia, the political map of Asia, to suit its purpose; and we will, of course, invite all of you to join us in that endeavor to prevent them from doing that. However, do not expect us to stand in the corner of Uncle Sam. We are happy taking on the dragon by ourselves and, of course, we seek partnerships as well.

Douglas Paal

Thank you very much for addressing the heart of the question.