



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## DPG POLICY BRIEF

### India and Multipolarity in Asia

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**Delhi Policy Group**

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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*Presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden at their Virtual Summit on November 15-16, 2021. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*

*Prime Ministers Yoshihide Suga, Narendra Modi and Scott Morrison with President Joe Biden at the White House during the Quad Summit, September 24, 2021. Source: Prime Minister's Office, India*

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## India and Multipolarity in Asia

by  
Anil Chopra

Amongst the Indian strategic community, it almost appears to be an article of faith that a multipolar order would be best suited to India's interests in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Whilst such a dispensation undoubtedly has considerable egalitarian appeal, the supposition that multipolarity in Asia would be beneficial to India needs to be examined through the prism of the prevailing geo-strategic balance, and must be anchored to India's current comprehensive national power (CNP). What is most opportune is always a function of time and circumstance, especially in matters relating to Westphalian power dynamics.

Though much reviled, unipolarity has had its uses in the past, as observed in the relative global peace facilitated by Pax Romana and Pax Britannica. However, given the distinct equitable and multi-lateral thrust of the modern era, it is unlikely that any further unipolar moments can or will appear on a planetary scale. Relatively cheap, all-pervasive technology and distributed manufacturing supply chains have been the great levellers of our times, and also tend to dissipate power and dilute hegemony.

Global security will therefore likely oscillate between a bi-polar or multi-polar balance of power. On the other hand, regional dynamics are more likely to see the emergence of unipolarity rather than multiple poles, as could be the case in Asia should China's inexorable rise continue unchecked. In the absence of a second pole, it is highly unlikely that China would acquiesce to being one among several nodes, at least in its present avatar.

History has indeed recorded that regional multipolarity has mostly been unstable and short-lived, with the poles constantly jockeying for advantage by way of opportunity and subterfuge, driven by the prospect of acquiring the mantle of great power. The failed efforts of the Greek city states, and later, of the Italian maritime republics, and even of the Concert of Europe, are illustrative in this regard. It is, therefore, debatable whether the many 'major' powers of Asia can keep the peace and advance prosperity through the complexity of multipolar mechanisms. A bipolar balance is perhaps more stable and conducive to furthering peace and prosperity in an Asia living under the shadow of a powerful and aggressive China.

While New Delhi could clearly be a second Asian pole in times to come, most would agree that as of the moment, only the US, or at a long stretch Russia, can fulfil that role. Not so long ago, the vast eastern expanses of the former USSR,

and the friction between the two communist giants, served as the strongest check on Chinese expansionism. Driven by the realpolitik dictates of its own long-term national interests, Moscow is, however, now partnering with Beijing, leaving only the US as a possible bipolar contender.

The Indo-Pacific is thus presently witness to classic balance of power arrangements, wherein overall peace and stability in the region is being maintained by a coalition of powers, short of an alliance, opposed to the naked aggressiveness of the PRC. Loosely stitched together by the US, this balance is clearly bipolar in its essential nature, although the members of this coalition may prefer to see themselves as nodes in a multipolar combine.

The parallels to the more formal coalitions which arose to contain Napoleonic France are too numerous not to deserve a mention. Without delving over-much into history, suffice it to say that Bonaparte's spectre over Europe was only exorcised through the leading efforts of Britain, the then dominant power, fashioning a bulwark of nations whose interests were all threatened by the ambitions of the Gallic Emperor. We just need to substitute the US for Britain, and Xi for the Corsican, to conclude that history does indeed repeat itself.

Although there is increasing unanimity regarding the dangers posed by Communist China, the United States is also often seen or portrayed by many as unreliable, distracted by a deeply polarised domestic polity, and ever-willing to sacrifice allies and partners in the naked pursuit of its own interests. It can, however, be argued that such a description of the US would be applicable to most noisy and divided democracies abiding by Lord Palmerston's dictum of national interests always being supreme, with friends and enemies transient.

Be that as it may, the United States is still the world's pre-eminent power, and the only one which could diffuse China's aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific. If the US, for any reason, were to cease being an effective countervailing power to China in the near or medium term, Asia would become increasingly prey to hegemony, with Beijing likely being in a position to dominate the region both economically and militarily. Such an outcome would hardly facilitate a multipolar order. The prevailing Russia-China entente would only facilitate such paramountcy.

Should the United States dilute its stakes in the region, or reach a "G2" understanding with Beijing, or lose its appetite for the price to be paid for global power, or get 'defeated' as it were, by a Russia-China combine, the Asian world would almost certainly see the Son of Heaven in the Forbidden Palace dictating the terms of engagement. In such a circumstance, there would be little choice

for New Delhi but to accept a contemporary version of Chinese suzerainty, and accommodate the interests of the Middle Kingdom through a mixture of acceptance, appeasement and unequal trade, until such time as it could reasonably rival China's CNP.

Some will argue that this may be preferable to a conflict, and India's future is best safeguarded by a Pan-Asian synthesis, even despite the People's Republic being its leading light. However, any outcome in which China becomes the preponderant power in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, without tangible and well-knitted opposition, cannot be good for a rising India in the long term, nor commiserate with its sheer size, population, potential, values and civilisation.

Alternatively, as optimists underscore, perhaps with some justification, that a brittle authoritarian regime, such as that imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), would eventually collapse by virtue of its inherent contradictions, and would not indefinitely be able to suppress the will of the people and the desire for individual liberty. India has to but patiently await this near-certain eventuality. Others rebut this contention by arguing that the will of the people may well be reflected in the prevailing social order engineered by socialism with Chinese (read capitalist) characteristics, never mind the excesses of the surveillance-police state. Moreover, the regime is still in complete control. It would thus be foolhardy to indulge in wishful thinking of the demise of the CCP and predicate strategy on the waning of Chinese power.

By its recent actions, intended or otherwise, Russia is facilitating Chinese ambitions in more ways than one. By upping the ante in the Ukraine and Europe, Moscow is forcing the US to re-focus on the Atlantic, and pivot back west, endangering the balance in the Indo-Pacific. In Asia, Russia is turning a blind eye towards Chinese transgressions across the region, and may not be able to contain China's assertiveness and aggression even if it wishes to do so, as may well be in the case of India and the Himalayan border.

Despite the recent exponential growth of the PLAN, and revitalisation of the Russian Navy, both China and Russia seem to have recognised their relative weakness in the maritime realm, due to the maritime geography and experience/ethos of both these essentially continental powers. They now seemingly seek to drive the contestation with the West landwards, through the Eurasian Heartland-- Mackinder's World Island, if you will-- and into Europe. By virtue of its geography, cultural links and religion, and its strong ties to China, Pakistan will be in a position to play a greater role in such a continental grand strategy, relative to India. There is little doubt that Islamabad will be

firmly drawn into the Russia-China axis. The forthcoming visit of the Pakistan PM to Moscow is yet another pointer of this reality.

Russia has long been India's supporter and a valued source of arms during times when other powers were not too forthcoming by way of modern weapons and platforms New Delhi sorely needed to confront local threats. However, even a modicum of discernment would reveal that this support and generosity was rooted as much in the geo-strategic interests of the USSR in the Cold War, as it was in India's interests to align with a then superpower which was accommodative of Indian concerns.

The geo-political and geo-economic compulsions of contemporary Russia are very different from those of the USSR, as also its relative CNP. It does not help India's cause that a significant portion of its polity views India-Russian ties through historical sentimentalities bereft of clear-eyed analysis. Interests of even two reasonably friendly powers will not always converge, and indeed may well be at variance. New Delhi must continue to seek good relations with Moscow, but not depend on it to be able or willing to confront or influence Beijing, at least not just yet.

On the other hand, at the current juncture, the interests of the United States and India converge in respect of China, as well as in the maintenance of stability in the maritime commons of the IP in general, and the IOR in particular. This convergence, however, may well be fleeting, given the many distractions that could dilute the intensity of America's concerns about China.

Many underline the massive size of the Indian market as a more permanent attraction, which could always be leveraged. Clearly, in common with other nations, including Russia, China, and European/Asian states, the US also has great interest in the humongous consumption potential of the Indian populace. However, the lure of market demographics may not always compensate for excessive hedging and geo-political ambiguity on the part of New Delhi, especially in view of an overtly regulatory environment, with inadequate draw for external capital and trade.

Besides the obvious benefit of dissuading Chinese adventurism, the most significant advantage India has to gain by the US presently being a strong pole checking Chinese power in Asia, is that it buys New Delhi more time to build CNP until such time that India can take its place as the second pole in broader Asia, or until it is fully regarded and treated as an influential node in any multipolar arrangement. Without appropriate hard power and CNP, nations are relegated to the periphery, having to be satisfied more with optics than substance.

In the long term, a country of India's size, population and potential can only realise its aspirations through acquiring the requisite CNP, and not depend solely on leveraging alignments and converging interests of other powers to catapult it into relevance. India's CNP can only be strengthened through exponential and sustained economic growth over the next few decades. Until this is realised, any desire for multi-polarity is premature, and the prevailing bipolarity is better suited to India's long-term interests.

The Indian economy will require private investment, innovation and enterprise on a large scale for sustained growth, which would also address the issue of job creation for a massive youthful population. Regrettably, there is as yet inadequate consensus within the polity on this most vital issue, and the discourse in India gets mired in postulations about redistributive justice and social engineering, perhaps only to be expected in a developing nation with a significant population below the poverty line.

The merits or otherwise of the welfare state apart, distributive and populist politics and state-run enterprises can only result in a stagnating economy with the attendant negative impact on rapid CNP growth, and the resultant lack of influence in the international arena. Nowhere has this been more starkly evident than in India's defence industrial base (DIB), a critical element in any nation's thrust for autonomy. Again, until broad political consensus is built on the nature of state-driven autarky and the continuing primacy or otherwise of an inefficient, but politically useful public sector, the current bipolar nature of the Indo-Pacific is in India's interest.

There could be other circumstances which would make multipolarity in Asia attractive for India. A detente between Russia and the West would clearly lead to isolation of China in the global sweepstakes, and would probably make Beijing more circumspect, less aggressive, and inclined to accommodate the rules of international law, imperfect as they may be. It may be bizarre to even mention such a possibility at a time which is witness to a huge Russian military build-up on its borders with Ukraine, with the West threatening stringent sanctions and assorted other actions against Moscow.

Nevertheless, an eventual convergence between Russia and the West is a distinct possibility, predicated on a shrinking Russian economy and demographics, coupled with likely cracks in the Sino-Russian alliance on account of its inherent contradictions and conflicts of interest. Not so long ago, the Trump administration advocated a drawing down of tensions with Moscow, recognising Beijing as the principal challenger. There are many in Moscow who also see more advantage in the future by underscoring Russia's

European/western identity as opposed to its Asian one. As 'cold warriors' on both sides of this divide fade into history, a combination of economic compulsion, and friction in the east, may well nudge the West and Russia to be more accommodating of each other.

Another outcome which would make multipolarity attractive for New Delhi is the always lurking possibility of a regime change in China precipitated by an economic free-fall, large-scale social disorder, a destabilising power struggle or some combination of these factors. Though the regime in Beijing has apparently examined and analysed the collapse of the Soviet Union in very great detail, it may not be able to evade the logic of history, and the human instinct for liberty and freedom from the power of the state. The pandemic and the debt-traps being experienced by many of the beneficiaries of Beijing's largesse through the BRI thrust, has severely eroded its soft power, and this does not bode well for the continued exponential increase of the Chinese economy, which is central to the success of the CCP.

Given the realities of its overall geo-strategic imperatives, it does appear that India currently has much to gain from the bipolar competition between the US and China in Asia and the Indo-Pacific, which is likely more conducive for focus on growth and development, than would be the case if New Delhi were to be subjected to the continual distractions and intrigues of complex power-sharing architecture. It must utilise the strategic opportunity offered by focusing attention on the economic front, as well as fashioning a DIB which can actually deliver. Concurrently, by active participation in the Quad and other initiatives addressing Beijing's high-handedness, and by accepting the tensions and re-alignments that may ensue, India is furthering and establishing its identity as a potential peer competitor to the Middle Kingdom. At this juncture of time and circumstance, it may be premature and unwise for India to dissipate its energies pursuing the case for multipolarity in Asia.

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