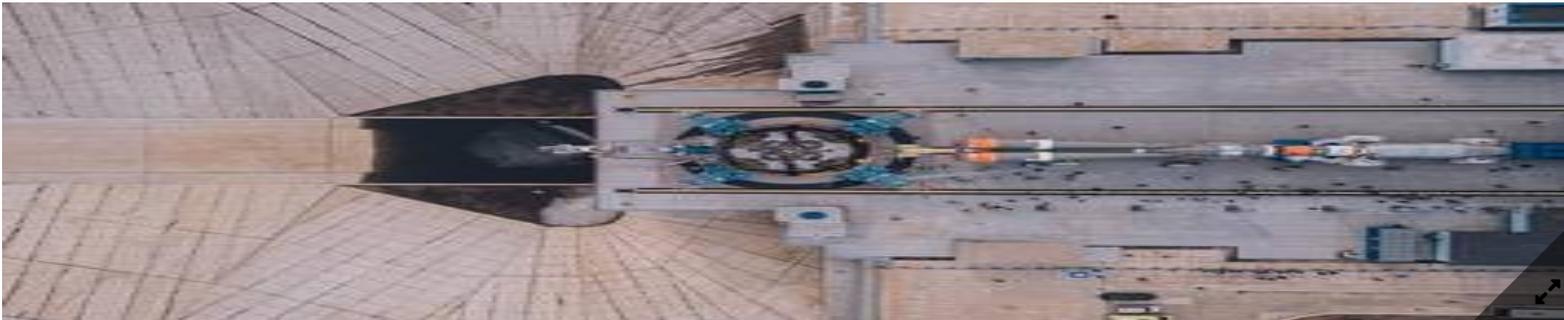


The great game

Sukumar Muralidharan | Updated on April 23, 2021



How does India benefit from a partnership with the US after it pulls out of Afghanistan?

***Russia and China are now part of a hyphenated relationship in US strategic doctrine"**

***The US seems prepared to challenge China on the sea and Russia on land"**

*** A US exit from Afghanistan would deprive it of vital strategic leverage at the crossroads of the Eurasian landmass**

Following an insult hurled his way by US counterpart Joe Biden, Russian President Vladimir Putin last week withdrew his ambassador in Washington DC. A few days later, his officials persuaded the US ambassador in Moscow to leave his post and return home for "consultations". It left the embassies of the two countries unstaffed at the top as mutual rancour grew.

Undeterred by western warnings, Russia moved troops towards neighbouring Ukraine, torn by internal strife since seeking a berth in the western alliance. It showed a new willingness to bare military muscle, asserting an intention to block the US and UK from sending warships into the Black Sea as a gesture of support for Ukraine. And by tightening the restraints around Alexei Navalny, the jailed pro-western dissident, Putin showed that he is willing to brazen it out, rather than yield even a symbolic moral victory.

In recent testimony before the Senate, the US Director of National Intelligence spoke of Russia and China as the main threats the country faced. Not since the erstwhile Soviet Union and China, ostensible socialist allies, broke up in the 1960s and fought a brief but bitter border war has this manner of a hyphenation been part of US strategic doctrine. In the 1970s, when the US was reeling from defeat in Vietnam, torn by internal political discord, China's assertion of territorial prerogatives had prevented a Soviet-Vietnamese strategic consolidation. Unable to return to the Asian theatre with all its bruises, the US had reason to thank China for the attack on Vietnam that ended in stalemate but was sufficient statement of intent to deter Soviet strategic expansion.

Set back in the east, the Soviet Union ventured into Afghanistan in 1979, seeking to incorporate the crossroads of central Asia firmly within its sphere of influence. It was a misadventure that led to the terminal Soviet crisis of 1991. China meanwhile embarked on its “four modernisations”, emerging in the 1990s as a global player and rapidly consolidating its status as the manufacturing hub of the world. Fuelled by large hard currency hoards, it has since increased its geostrategic clout, winning friends and influence all over the world in a growing challenge to US hegemony.

The US has oscillated in its attitude since the 1990s, typically corresponding to the order of succession between the two major parties in the White House. Democrats have spoken of managing an “orderly rise”, scarcely concealed code for recruiting China into the wider cause of sustaining US hegemony. Republicans, as typified by the recently lapsed Trump administration, have sought to confront and subdue China. Donald Trump also added a variation of his own, for reasons that may have something to do with his business dealings, by triangulating the relationship rather than recognise the growing strategic bonds between Russia and China.

As the US wavered in its strategic focus, Russia managed to push back in vital battlefields like Syria and Libya. The Biden administration has now embarked upon its global strategic outreach with a focused effort at neutralising both Russia and China. Within two months of the Biden inauguration, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin flew to Japan and South Korea to bolster those lines of defence against Chinese expansionism. In an op-ed written for the Washington Post, just ahead of the trip, the two spoke of “the Indo-Pacific region” — a relatively new strategic construct — as “the center of global geopolitics”. The “combined power” of the US and its allies made each “stronger when we must push back against China’s aggression and threats”.

Austin went on from that leg of his trip to Delhi, where he underlined the value that the US attached to India’s participation in the security of the Indo-Pacific. Blinken meanwhile went on to a meeting with Chinese counterparts, transforming the opening media availability into an occasion for issuing a strongly worded *démarche* that had his Chinese interlocutors fuming and insisting on a scathing rejoinder.

Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov travelled to India soon afterwards. In talks with the Indian side, he is believed to have suggested that the strategic construct of the “Indo-Pacific” is one without merit or substance, that India would be wise to dissociate from. India for its part, insisted that Russia should break free of its growing strategic proximity with China. It was a moment of stress for an alliance that has come a long way and weathered many storms. A new coolness was underlined when Lavrov left Delhi without meeting PM Narendra Modi and stopped off in Islamabad for talks with Pakistan.

India evidently sees the US as the indispensable ally to dispel the growing Chinese shadow over Asia. But there seem to be certain fundamental differences in strategic thinking. The US has a plan to challenge China through overwhelming maritime power. In the process, it seems willing to accept the geographic reality that China and Russia will be dominant over the Eurasian land-mass. That perhaps was the unwitting admission of the US plan announced early in April, to retrench once and for all from Afghanistan before the twenty-year anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, which was the origin of its current phase of engagement.

A US exit from Afghanistan would deprive it of vital leverage at the crossroads of the Eurasian landmass. The plan evidently is for the US to challenge China in the East and South China Seas, and confront Russia in the erstwhile Soviet sphere of Eastern Europe.

Works on military and imperial strategy from the late-19th and early-20th centuries have spoken of the relative efficacy of land- and sea-based strategies. But the world has come a long way since then and it is far from clear that an absence on the land can be redressed through dominance at sea. More unclear yet is any gain that India may have, with its concerns being almost entirely land-based, from a partnership with the US in the new, emerging 'Great Game'.



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