

Happymon Jacob

12

China, India, Pakistan and a stable regional order

Three powers – China, India, and Pakistan – hold the keys to the future of south Asia. As the West withdraws from Afghanistan and US influence in the region declines, this triangular strategic relationship will become more complicated unless China and India – the two major powers – can define the parameters of a new regional order.

The strategic landscape of the sub-region is defined by the complex interactions between these three: a rising “superpower” with a commercially defined unilateral approach to the region’s strategic fault lines; a reluctant emerging power unwilling to commit political or diplomatic resources to stabilise the region or even to preserve the status quo; and a deeply dissatisfied revisionist power intent on redrawing the regional order, with the not-so-explicit approval of the rising superpower.

China’s engagement with the region serves as a good template for speculation on how its rise will change the international order. Will it begin to engage from a more normative and conflict-resolution perspective, or will it continue to approach the region from its unilateral, self-seeking, commercial and strategic positions? By reaching out to the Taliban, Beijing has demonstrated that it is not averse to sponsoring conflict-resolution processes, though this may be mostly aimed at safeguarding its own commercial interests in mineral-rich Afghanistan. Will China follow the historical trajectory of rising powers by attempting to dominate its “near abroad”? If so, how will India and other stakeholders in the region respond?

India's (in)security perceptions

For over three decades now, India's primary security concern has been Pakistan's attempts at destabilisation, be it in Kashmir, Punjab, or other parts of the country. Pakistan's inconclusive and unsatisfactory trial of the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai terror attack, and the intermittent ceasefire violations along the border, continue to dominate New Delhi's perception of its security situation.

Another of India's major security concerns is also linked to Pakistan – the issue of post-NATO Afghanistan, where Pakistan is attempting to control the Kabul regime through proxies, and where the Taliban is gaining ground. For New Delhi, the near-certain return of the Taliban to Kabul, in one form or another, brings back memories of the 1999 hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814 by a Pakistani Islamist group, when the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) government was forced to release high-ranking terrorists in order to get its passengers released from Taliban-controlled Kandahar province. Another BJP government is in power today, led by the more resolute Narendra Modi, and it has stated more than once that New Delhi will deal with Pakistani aggression with far greater resolve.

Thirdly, India's disputed borders with Pakistan and China continue to generate insecurity for the country. No comprehensive agreement seems to be forthcoming, despite 18 rounds of border talks with China, and there have been occasional Chinese military incursions into Indian-controlled territory, increasing political tensions between the two capitals. The border with Pakistan is far more complicated because sovereignty over an entire state (Jammu and Kashmir, J&K) has been historically disputed. Pakistan's attempts to directly and indirectly wrest J&K from India have not been successful, but it is unclear whether the Pakistani army has completely given up on its aggressive Kashmir policy. Finally, Islamic State (IS) poses a potential threat to India because it has the ability to gain an ideological foothold in the country and provide a rallying call for disaffected, though disparate, elements. The jury is still out on whether Pakistan and Afghanistan would be a fertile breeding ground for the group, given the anti-IS stand taken by the Afghan Taliban and by the Pakistani government.

For many decades now, India has expressed concerns about the clandestine strategic engagement between China and Pakistan, through which Beijing has provided a great deal of assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapon and missile programmes. In recent years, however, it appears as if New Delhi

has made peace with this, preferring to ignore the Sino-Pak partnership and strengthen its own strategic ties with the United States and various Western states, while improving its economic relationship with China.

What worries New Delhi today is the increasing Chinese presence in the Pakistani part of J&K, including Gilgit-Baltistan. However, on a positive note for India, China has been less supportive of Pakistan's Kashmir policy. Notably, it did not support its "all-weather friend" during the 1999 India–Pakistan Kargil conflict, either materially or politically.

The third aspect of contemporary Sino-Pak ties that bothers India is the strengthened three-way partnership between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. China is steadily increasing its influence in the region with its innovative "New Silk Road" strategy, and by offering economic and development assistance to Pakistan. Beijing is also increasingly engaged in regional "conflict management" initiatives, mediating between Kabul and the Taliban, and organising trilateral strategic engagements with Afghanistan and Pakistan. For example, in November 2014, representatives of the Taliban from its Doha-based office met in Beijing for talks. In February this year, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan initiated a new trilateral strategic dialogue in Kabul. Then, in July, Pakistan hosted a meeting in Murree, as part of the "Murree Peace Process", between the Afghan government and representatives of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani branch of the Taliban, which was also attended by representatives of China and the US.

India's policy of limited engagement

Indian responses to the above events and developments have been suboptimal and poorly thought-out. New Delhi is used to adopting a strategy of limited engagement when it comes to dealing with China – whether it is resolving border tensions or finalising an agreement on the disputed border. While on the one hand India seeks to engage China on the trade front, on the other hand it fights shy of engaging China on larger regional security issues. With Pakistan, New Delhi also shows a tendency to indefinitely postpone the resolution of the troublesome issue of Kashmir. Limited engagement, then, seems to be New Delhi's preferred policy option when it comes to dealing with complex issues.

New Delhi also avoids addressing various emerging threats, failing to recognise them politically. For instance, IS hardly figures on New Delhi's list of strategic priorities, and nor does the geopolitical transformation of Afghanistan. This

head-in-the-sand, inward-looking strategic posture is clearly not the exception but the rule in India's strategic thinking.

Policymakers in New Delhi also exhibit a tendency to deal with what they can, rather than with what they should. New Delhi's response, for instance, to the two-pronged problem that it faces with Pakistan and China has been to give disproportionate attention to Pakistan, attempting to shame and isolate the country rather than engaging in a sustained and high-level politico-strategic engagement with China to normalise the strategic triangle. A strategically wise leadership in New Delhi would have catered to Pakistani concerns in Kashmir and moved on to addressing bigger regional issues, rather than getting boxed into a never-ending action-reaction game of "*Tu Tu Main Main*" (a Hindi phrase for constant bickering) with Islamabad.

Finally, Indian diplomacy has failed to think beyond bilaterally engaging with its neighbours, or the great powers, for that matter. While India has engaged with Beijing on a variety of bilateral issues, it has not been able to join forces with China and other neighbours in fighting terror, stabilising Afghanistan, addressing the IS threat, or even bringing Iran into the mainstream. Modi's government has not yet brought pressing regional security issues to the table in its bilateral relationship with China.

A wider strategic perspective

India is uncomfortably placed at the heart of a geopolitical landscape – the India–China–Pakistan strategic triangle – that is beset with multiple strategic challenges. Even if one were to interpret China's attempts to engage in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan as commercially driven but benign, the perceived Indo-Pak rivalry in Afghanistan and the Sino-Pak partnership would effectively keep India out of the Afghan reconciliation process, hampering New Delhi's regional aspirations.

The question, therefore, is whether the Chinese leadership can think beyond the false necessities imposed by its partnership with Pakistan to consider the region as a security complex (i.e. acknowledging that the security of each state cannot be considered separately from that of the others), and manage its relations with India in a cooperative manner. Beijing's tacit approval of Pakistan's revisionist agenda could prove costly for China and may even hamper its rise. The Chinese leadership cannot ignore the need to pacify the region and stabilise ties with India while it pursues its global ambitions.

India, for its part, must view the region from a wider, long-term strategic perspective and avoid getting tied down in petty fights with Pakistan – for its own sake and for the sake of promoting a stable regional order. Such an order could lead to peaceful coexistence between India and China and conciliatory management of the region’s problems. It could even produce the first signs of a peaceful Asian superpower on the rise.

Finally, Pakistan needs to adjust its strategic priorities, in light of its growing inability to act as a modern, functioning state. Its deep-seated obsession with India, and the use of non-state actors as a tool of statecraft, need to end if it wants to get back on its feet as a viable nation state and contribute to a stable regional order.