“A NEW REGIONAL ORDER: EFFECTIVE ALIGNMENT THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS”

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RISE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC: STRENGTH IN COLLABORATION AND MINILATERALISM

THANKS:

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DISTINGUISHED GUESTS:

⇒ COVID-19 has emerged as a serious concern and is shaping the geo-politics of the region. Indo-Pacific powers are affected with the Covid-19 as any other powers from other parts of the world.

⇒ Indo-Pacific Powers are also witnessing a new concern, and perhaps a real threat, that is in China.

⇒ This period in history will always enter into record since many countries in Indo-Pacific were just anti-China on select issues; on select matters. For example, Australia and India. But the way Xi Jinping administration has approached some of the countries in Asia in recent pasts, particularly in the land and maritime domains, they are perhaps permanently turning to be an anti-China country.

⇒ India is an emerging case here. India was originally an anti-BRI country over the last one-decade. But the recent border conflict at the Galwan
valley during the Covid-19 crisis has made India somewhat an anti-China country in times to come.

⇒ I will start with the China-India recent border clash. The PLA’s Galwan Border incident is the most violent border clash to have taken place along the **India-China** border since 1975, and it certainly marks a strategic shift in India’s perception of China. For long, India has approached China judiciously and tried to promote a ‘developmental partnership’ that dictates cooperation through both bilateral and multilateral engagements, aiming to benefit from each other’s association as emerging economies even though India was always mindful of China being a ‘suspect’ power. Following the Galwan incident, India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has stated that this “unprecedented development will have a serious impact on the bilateral relationship” between the two nations. Now the question is, what impact will it leave in India’s China policy? How India will witness the Indo-Pacific environment?

⇒ Post-Galwan, a renewed thrust on India’s part to move away from its ‘**China Connect**’ paradigm can be expected. The conflict has emerged as a black spot in the India-China rhetoric and signals a growing discomfort, despite diplomatic redressals, in the ties between the two nations.

⇒ The conventional notion that China’s rise is ‘peaceful’ has fast receded in India. The People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) aggressive posturing during the recent India-China border dispute – especially the skirmishes in Galwan valley – even as the **Covid-19 pandemic** was raging has blunted the notion of China as a trustful neighbour in India’s strategic imagination. The conventional approach of managing a relationship with China under a ‘power-partner’ contention will perhaps witness a
permanent change: China is being perceived now more than ever as a power that threatens Indian security and sovereignty.

⇒ The Narendra Modi-led government has, since the Doklam stand-off between India-China in 2017, gradually realised that China’s strategic posturing is becoming increasingly hostile. In light of the latest dispute, this realisation can be expected to pave way for stronger defence and economic policy reorientations along nationalist lines. In other words, a combination of hard economic measures vis-à-vis China and the promotion of strong defence partnerships across the Indo-Pacific would gradually emerge as flagship points in India’s foreign policy.

⇒ India has gradually begun to shift away from its principle of strategic autonomy: a greater push towards security and defence cooperation with like-minded countries, such as the US, Japan and Australia (its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – Quad – partners) must be explored. India is already contemplating including Australia in the India-US-Japan trilateral naval Malabar exercise.

⇒ In the Indo-Pacific, India must continue to strengthen its strategic partnership with the US and its allies or partners particularly with Australia and Japan, without worrying too much about Chinese apprehensions of an Asian NATO. In view of improved ties with the US, its Comprehensive Global Strategic partner, India must now pay closer attention to the India-US alignment framework that would promote an alliance based understanding rather than promoting a power-partner contention with Beijing. This is likely to send a strong signal to China regarding the emerging regional and global environment.
⇒ Similarly, India must also strengthen its ties with China’s adversaries like Vietnam and the Philippines especially in an attempt to create stronger maritime connections in the contested South China Sea (SCS).

⇒ South China Sea is witnessing a new situation with an invisible intension from China. There are disturbing news are emerging for Claimant countries as much as for non-claimant countries. Given India’s continuous energy and economic interest in South China Sea, both India and ASEAN must have a renewed dialogue on how to manage the South China Sea dispute.

⇒ The new US position that is an outcome of yesterday leaves both claimant and non-claimant countries in South China Sea in a new situation. The Indo-Pacific environment should have a new channel of communication between the Southeast Asian claimant countries along with Taiwan with non-claimant countries such as Japan, India, Australia and obviously the US.

⇒ In the first week of July, two Chinese vessels intruded into the Japanese Maritime territory near the disputed Senkaku islands in the East China Sea twice within four days for 30 and 40 hours respectively. This marked the longest incursion by Chinese vessels since Japan assumed state control of the disputed islands (which are known as Diaoyu in China) in September 2012.

⇒ Chinese ships patrolling the waters around the Senkaku island is not a new occurrence. In fact, Chinese state vessels have spent over 84 days in the region now. The East/South China Sea is a highly contested region for China and tensions in the region have been rising for years. Tokyo and
Beijing both consider the islets to be vital to their strategic interests in the region and historically, a rightful part of their territory.

⇒ The defence outlook of major countries is fast changing amidst the COVID-19 crisis and China’s rising coercive military posturing in the Indo-Pacific. Japan’s changing stance on ‘first strike capability’, Australia’s ‘2020 Defence Strategic Update’, and India’s crafting of a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ with Australia while purchasing the S-400 Triumf anti-missile system from Russia amidst the Galwan border clash with China are key indicators of how the Indo-Pacific powers are continuously changing their defence outlook. What scope do these developments create for the Australia-India defence partnership and where does India fit in Australia’s new defence outlook?

⇒ Both Australia and India need to realise that their partnership is no more uni-dimensional. A multi-dimensional partnership will truly make their partnership ‘comprehensive’. The Indian market might appear to be a “complex” one but is equally a “very fast moving economy”, as Australia’s trade minister Simon Birmingham had reportedly stated recently. Even though India is the fifth-largest export market for Australia and is ranked as its eighth-largest trading partner, two-way trade is still unimpressive. Stronger defence cooperation could emerge out of stronger economic ties. Hence, the time has come when Australia needs to factor India much more seriously in its defence outlook, to foster a stronger market-oriented defence partnership.

⇒ New Delhi must revisit the One China policy along the lines of reciprocity. China has not only openly threatened India’s territorial sovereignty and maritime interests but also thwarted many of India’s
foreign policy objectives including the NSG and a prospective permanent membership in the UNSC. India for its part has been sensitive to China’s concerns about Taiwan and Xinjiang; in contrast, China has relentlessly pursued its claims on Arunachal Pradesh and has not kept Indian sentiments in mind in responding to the India-Pakistan border dispute.

⇒ In the post-Galwan and the post-Covid order, the anti-China sentiment in India will increasingly rise. It is thus the time for a government-wide push to move supply chain dependency away from China: Modi’s self-reliant India and Make in India has the potential to emerge as fitting mechanisms to face a rising Chinese clout. Deciding to take a stronger call on Chinese tech-giant Huawei’s inclusion in India’s 5G trials is another area of reconsideration post-Galwan. More importantly, it is now time for India to carry out reforms and modernisation in the armed forces, such as in the areas of defence technology, high-technology surveillance, logistics and defence imports.

⇒ Post-Galwan, India-China ties will undergo rapid transformation with the narrative of China as a partner taking a backseat in official parlance. The idealistic notions of Sino-Indian brotherhood will disappear and be replaced by more realistic perceptions of their ties that put India’s national security and sovereignty concerns over any economic or partnership-driven global interests. A confrontational approach towards China will no longer be a hesitant measure in India’s China policy. Rather, Indian foreign policy will imbibe the necessary characteristics to form new alignments of powers that boost India’s emergence as a power in the Indo-Pacific, inching more towards alliance frameworks that the US is aiming to promote in the region.
⇒ So, my conclusion here in this forum is:

⇒ For long, the fundamentals of Indian foreign policy have straddled “strategic autonomy” and “multi-alignment.” While the (self-reliant India) Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign may not necessarily lead to a big foreign-policy departure, it indicates India’s readiness to follow a renewed path or taking few radical steps in an uncertain time.

⇒ In the near future, India’s international outlook for economic engagement might transcend from multi-alignment to pointed-alignment with a set of countries that are critical to India’s economic and strategic interests in promoting an alternative supply-chain network, allowing it to move away from China.

⇒ Keeping in view this maritime disputes, border tensions and geo-political situations that China is fast promoting in the region, India must accord greater importance to ASEAN. India’s ties with ASEAN countries, particularly with Vietnam, Philippines and Singapore should witness new changes. In response, ASEAN should also see India in a new light.

⇒ Both India and Philippines must come closer before the regional environment goes out of their strategic grips. In a tightly contested geo-political environment, India along with ASEAN members should have a new strategy to embrace to the Indo-Pacific realities.

⇒ India-Philippines-Japan or India-Philippines-Australia, or India-Philippines-USA trilateral could be envisioned.

⇒ India-Japan-Australia Trilateral needs to be strengthened.

⇒ India-Japan-US Trilateral needs to be strengthened.
⇒ Friends: a new contest is fast emerging: this contest is not China vs. the rest. But a contest of a new nature. Can we move that ‘China connect’ or ‘China Appeasement’ approach. Hence, the contest is much more: moralistic and ethical in geo-politics. The contest is: The Indo-Pacific with active strategic motive vs. Indo-Pacific with passive strategic motive. Time has come to introspect Indo-Pacific, **build a broader and stronger coalition in Indo-Pacific**, actualize some of the strategic motives into action, **an active and action-oriented strategic Indo-Pacific needs to be promoted**, in order to face a strong and assertive China.

⇒ Thank You.

*This speech is based on author’s earlier publications in various forums such as Asia Times, India Inc. etc.*