



Towards a New Asian Architecture India and Ideology

Jabin T Jacob

Research Fellow, IPCS, New Delhi

On 4 June 2008, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd called for the establishment of an Asia-Pacific Community by 2020. By coincidence, the Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM), Pranab Mukherjee, speaking at Peking University, on 6 June, called for the creation a new joint security framework with China in Asia, that he hoped would be “[a]n open and inclusive architecture, which is flexible enough to accommodate the great diversity which exists in Asia.” While opposing “sub-regional security arrangements that are narrow and ultimately ineffective,” he also pointed out that the two countries could not “transplant ideas from other parts of the world.”

India clearly seems to know what it does not want – “sub-regional security arrangements” (driven by China) and ideas transplanted from elsewhere – and believes that some of Asia’s regional mechanisms are “narrow and ultimately ineffective.” Meanwhile, what India wants is an “open,” “inclusive” and “flexible” architecture that would “accommodate the great diversity” of Asia. What do these terms mean?

The EAM’s proposal is an occasion to take a fresh look at existing regional architectures in Asia and see how far any of India’s interests or indeed the interests of the continent has been furthered. Clearly, in none of the region’s currently active institutions does New Delhi have a significant say.

However, the more important question that needs to be asked is if India’s lack of voice and visibility in Asia’s current structures is due to the lack of an Indian initiative or an Indian idea animating the security discourse on the continent.

I A QUESTION OF INCLUSIVENESS

Note that the EAM said “Asia” and not “Asia-Pacific.” Does this mean that India is making bold to strike out without looking for US involvement? Does India today have the capacity to take on China in the melee that is Asian politics? Does it believe that Asia can do without a US role in its regional institutions no matter that American presence in Asia is likely to remain an important factor for the foreseeable future, particularly amongst its many allies and friends in the region?

The US will of course make its own calculations about whether it should maintain a high profile role in Asia, but the question for India is whether US involvement in Asia while of obvious immediate-term benefits to India actually serves long-term Indian interests. While US presence in the region is currently useful for India to piggy-back on will this end up limiting India from building up its own expertise and resources on the region, particularly with respect to China in the long-term?

After almost 60 years of estrangement, India and the US have finally, it seems, begun to understand each other and are beginning to work together and this jeremiad about going-slow in relations with the US might seem out of place, but is nevertheless, well worth some consideration. Would India prefer a three player-driven Asia-Pacific Century to a two player-driven Asian Century? Is it clear about which is more advantageous and why?

A related question is whether it is in India’s interests to quietly go along with proposals for a new Asian architectures such as those articulated by the Australian Prime Minister without declaring its position except in the broadest terms or should it

take the lead in coming up with a complete package of its own? The choice will reflect India's current assessment of its own capabilities – diplomatic personnel, intellectual resources and most important of all, political will, which will be the most important driver in the process.

The kind of security architecture that would suit India's interests depends to a great extent on what India perceives its interests to be and how India chooses to engage with Asia. New Delhi must answer some important questions before it can back its economic emergence in Asia and globally with political ballast. A suitable take-off point this discussion would be the EAM's statement in June.

The first question that arises is one of inclusiveness. How does India define Asia? For example, would Central Asia and West Asia be part of the Asian architecture that India has in mind? Is the (easy) choice of leaving out these regions from an Asian architecture, the result of the Indian lack of influence and expertise in these regions, or should the choice be the difficult one of including them for precisely the same reasons, in order to give a fillip to developing expertise and resources on these regions? Next, how does India differentiate between an Asian architecture and an Asia-Pacific architecture? Should the outside great

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existing supra-regional body into a pan-Asian security system or be an entirely new and different entity? Does India have a long-term vision of what

it wants Asia to be, in which direction it wants the continent to head?

The third question relates to the scope/comprehensiveness of the model of the Asian architecture that India is advocating. Would it be a place where any and every issue might be brought for consideration and for solutions or would it be limited to a few specific issues such as security, trade, energy, and the environment? How would the architecture function in terms of its approach – will it be a forum that would tackle problems head on, attempting to find solutions to them by means of collective action, including by means of pre-emption or would it be instead a forum for confidence-building rather than actively seeking to consider or solve crises?

II THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY

The beginnings of an answer to each of the above questions lie in the idea that India will use to motivate its vision of a new Asian architecture. Clearly, there must be an idea or ideology that India must espouse to make the terms – “open,” “inclusive” and “flexible” – meaningful to the prospective members of this new Asian architecture. What then is the Indian ‘idea’ that will allow for openness, inclusiveness and flexibility in Asia? Democracy? If so, what is the ‘democracy’ that is referred to?

Democracy as a system of governance within national borders, or democracy in international relations? The former in its Western version is something China would object to while the latter could conceivably win China's backing. The US stress, meanwhile, is on denying a truly democratic international world order while pushing for democratic change within nations.

If India were to choose to go along with the concept of ‘Asian values,’ that is, go it alone without the US, this would also mean that India is espousing democracy in international (Asian) relations as the foundation on which the new architecture can be based. But, what exactly are ‘Asian values’? And what is democracy in Asian relations? Will relations among Asian nations lend themselves to a Western way of acknowledging and respecting the views of the weakest and dissent when it is voiced, of compromises and negotiated settlements?

This surely is what democracy in international

relations should be about, if there is to be no conflict or war on the continent. Asia is a mixture of non-democratic nations and democratic ones that are either prone to military coups and other forms of instability or are 'controlled' democracies. Exceptions like India with strong democratic institutions are few and far between and even Indian democracy is really 'democracy with Indian characteristics' – think continuing social exclusion, left-wing extremism and ethnically-based separatist movements. How therefore, will a democratic Asian architecture function when at home each nation practices non-democracy or 'democracy with Asian characteristics,' call it what you will?

In fact, it would seem that such a system would lend itself quite easily to domination by one or the other power, of a hierarchy being established, and if not a unipolar Asia, certainly a multi-polar region where the different regions would probably be engaged in an Asian version of the Cold War. It seems obvious therefore, that such an endeavour, as an exercise of democracy in international relations, seems impracticable. Can an "open," "inclusive" and "flexible" architecture in Asia be possible without it being a democratic structure and how can a democratic structure be sustainable if Asian nations do not vouch for the same system domestically?

It is often pointed out that China has achieved its economic growth and elevated world status without also becoming democratic as many had expected. So an Asian architecture could conceivably be democratic despite the contradiction of being based on a largely non-democratic base. Such an argument can be dealt with in two ways. First, is in the realm of facts. True, China is still largely a non-democratic nation by Western standards but its domestic systems of accountability are growing in strength, and it needs to be acknowledged that there truly is a Chinese system being developed in which the current Western model – of democracy, justice and efficiency, in that order – is being turned on its head – to read instead, efficiency, justice and democracy. "Current" because it could be argued that the capitalist, now-democratic West followed precisely the same path that China is following now.

Second, it is not necessary and is even wrong, to suppose that democracy must necessarily develop in this non-democratic or unjust fashion.

Thus, from India's point of view, the reason why it cannot and should not accept democracy in international/Asian relations without first calling for democratic change within nations is ideological. Unlike Western states, the modern state of India was born 'democratic.'

The non-democracy of colonialism was inflicted upon it from the outside and while the country continues to be blighted by the worst forms of inequality, its institutions have retained their democratic character since Independence, on paper, without doubt – and that in itself

is a big achievement – and very often in practice also. In its external relations too, India has by and large, stuck to a democratic framework, not interfering or staying neutral where it did not have the capacity to intervene, and often even when it did. It is for this reason that India can distinguish itself from the US and should have the confidence to chart a course all its own whether in Asia or the rest of the world.

III STRIKING OUT ON ITS OWN

An immediate problem that is pointed out is, of course, one of capability. India certainly is in many ways not ready to strike out on its own, and will conceivably need to depend on the US and other like-minded powers to smoothen its way to Asian and world prominence. This will happen of its own accord but the danger for India is of losing its way in the convenience of friendship or alliance. It is easy to take offence especially in international relations if one's ally does not come to one's aid immediately in a time of crisis, or is perceived as blocking one's aspirations.

Such situations have occurred usually in the military realm, but today not all nations have a realistic chance of achieving military dominance

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but every nation has the possibility of achieving high economic growth. It may be true that the US is today at the top of the heap because it is both militarily and economically dominant – it won World War II militarily and the Cold War because it was able to outlast the Soviet Union with economic might – but if it continues to remain at the top, it is because of its ideology of democracy that sustains American society as an “open,” “inclusive” and “flexible” society.

The recent fall from grace and perceived illegitimacy of US policy has precisely to do with the betrayal, so to speak, of the American ideology/ideal as witnessed not so much in its invasion of Iraq but in the Bush administration’s view that non-democratic means might be pursued in the interest of protecting American democracy. This has led to such atrocities as Abu Gharaib and Guantanamo Bay abroad, and wire-tapping and curtailment of other freedoms at home. An ideology that played an important part in the defeat of Soviet communism has now been shown to have feet of clay.

The only nation, today that grasps the significance of ideology over anything else, as a tool for world domination, is China. In point of fact, this is nothing new, the Soviets and Mao’s China sought to use ideology as a tool to win the world over, but they also sought to back it with the power of the gun and eventually, ideology itself took a backseat to power politics. It is frequently pointed out today that ideology is the one thing that the Chinese do not have – having sacrificed communism upon the altar of mammon – however, this is a fallacy that arises from an inadequate understanding of developments in a China that is undergoing not just economic reform but also attempting political changes, albeit in a gradual manner.

China is today seeking to combine the best of all its pasts – Confucian and communist – with the best of Western philosophy to fashion a new ideology that is distinctly Chinese. It has to be noted that this is first an exercise in strengthening domestic fundamentals that will in turn ensure external rise, not the other way around. This is a fact that most observers miss. China nevertheless, starts out with a disadvantage given its size and history of constantly having to prove itself to be benign both in Asia and the rest of the world. Its rise is constantly portrayed, whether fairly or unfairly, as threatening the stability of the world. India suffers from no such disadvantage;

unfortunately, however, India also puts forward no idea or ideology of its own – the surest way of losing its own moment in history

IV CONCLUSIONS

It goes without saying that current realities including the US presence in Asia as well as China’s global emergence will need to be addressed in any new Asian security architecture. For the new architecture to also acknowledge India’s rise and its interests, India will however need to provide something much more than military or economic might. There must be an Indian idea that can motivate the security discourse on the Asian continent.

Towards this end, India must ask itself some hard questions. What does India view as the foundation for its relations with other countries? Why for example, should any country consider India’s rise as benign in comparison to that of China’s and why therefore, should any country buy India’s argument that an open and inclusive system with the widest possible membership is the most effective and useful way forward for Asia?

It is about time India answered these questions and (re)examined the nature of its engagement with the world. No matter what its current limitations or perceived advantages, India needs to embark on an exercise of basing its foreign policy on strong domestic fundamentals, before it can truly rise in Asia and the world.



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B-7/3, Safdarjung Enclave, New
Delhi, India, 110029
Tel: 91-11-4100 1900