

## **A Multipolarity, scripted by the middle powers - Japan, Iran, Turkey and India**

### **What is the issue?**

- Japan, Iran, Turkey and India, as middle powers, are well set to shape the emerging world order.
- In this context, here is an overview of the emerging trend in geopolitical, military and strategic ties among these and other nations.

### **What are the trends in the New Cold War?**

- **US-China** - It is clear that the U.S. continues to view China as its principal adversary on the world stage.
- The U.S. is likely to use the Quad to challenge China in the Indo-Pacific, possibly as part of a “new Cold War”.
- This new Cold War was given concrete shape during the Trump presidency.
- **US-Russia** - The U.S.’s hostility for Russia goes back to the latter’s war with Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea in 2014.
- This was followed by allegations of Russian cyber-interference in the U.S. presidential elections of 2016.
- Mr. Biden continues this hostility for Russia.
- **China & Russia** - U.S. animosity has encouraged China and Russia to solidify their relations.
- The two countries are significantly expanding their bilateral ties.
- Besides this, they have agreed to harmonise their visions under the Eurasian Economic Union sponsored by Russia and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- This idea has now been subsumed under the ‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’ to which both are committed.
- Both have condemned the Quad for “undermining global strategic stability”.

### **What role do the middle powers play?**

- The new Cold War is now being reflected in a new geopolitical binary: the Indo-Pacific versus Eurasia.
- The final shape of this divide will be determined by four nations, namely Japan, Iran, Turkey and India.
- These four countries, as “middle powers”, have the capacity to project power

regionally, build alliances, and support (or disrupt) the strategies of international powers pursuing their interests in the region.

- On the face of it, their alignments are already in place:
  - Japan and India are deeply entrenched in the Quad and have substantial security ties with the U.S.
  - Iran has for long been an outcaste in western eyes and has found strategic comfort with the Sino-Russian alliance.
  - Turkey, a NATO member, has found its interests better-served by Russia and China rather than the U.S. and its European allies.
- Despite the allure, the four nations are not yet prepared to join permanent alliances.

### **What is the case with Japan?**

- Japan has an ongoing territorial dispute with China relating to the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea.
- Thus, the security treaty of 1951 with the U.S. has been crucial for Japan's interests.
- But there is more to Sino-Japanese relations:
  - in 2019, 24% of Japanese imports came from China, while 19% of its exports went to China
  - Japan depends too much on the U.S. for its security and too much on China for its prosperity.
- The eight-year prime ministership of Shinzo Abe has instilled in Japan greater self-confidence.
- It can very well reduce its security-dependence on the U.S. and pursue an independent role in the Indo-Pacific.
- But these are early days and it remains unclear whether Japan will explore the wide oceans or confine its strategic interests to the East China Sea.

### **What are the priorities and challenges before India?**

- India's ties with China have been caught in a vicious circle.
- Threats from China at the border and intrusions in its South Asian neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean became sharper.
- So, India moved closer to the U.S.
- India's expanding defence ties with the U.S. from 2016 is evident from:
  - i. massive defence purchases
  - ii. agreements on inter-operability and intelligence-sharing
  - iii. frequent military exercises
  - iv. elevation of the Quad to ministerial level in September 2019
- These have likely signalled to China that India was now irreversibly in the U.S. camp.

- There is also the border stand-off at Ladakh.
- This is perhaps a reminder from China that India's security interests demand close engagement with China rather than a deepening alignment with its global rival, the U.S.
- **China has a point:**
- The Quad has made India a valuable partner for the U.S. in the west Pacific.
- But, neither the U.S. nor the Quad can address the challenges it faces at its 3,500-kilometre land border with China.
- So, India will need to manage its ties with China largely through its own efforts, while retaining Russia as its defence partner.

### What about Iran and Turkey?

- **Iran** - The crippling sanctions on Iran and the frequent threats of regime change make it a natural ally of the Sino-Russian axis.
- However, its strategic culture does not suit long-term security alignments.
- This will surely assert itself after sanctions are eased.
- Then, the Islamic Republic of Iran will seek to redefine its strategic space and exercise independent options.
- **Turkey** - The "neo-Ottomanism" of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan celebrates Turkey's glory through military and doctrinal leadership across the former territories of the Ottoman empire.
- This has been achieved through a steady distancing from its western partners.
- There is also an increasing geopolitical, military and economic alignment with Russia and China.
- But Turkey still wishes to keep its ties with the U.S. intact, and retain the freedom to make choices.
- E.g. Its "New Asia" initiative involves strengthening of east-west logistical and economic connectivity backed by western powers and China.

### How does the future look?

- The choice of alignment of the four middle powers will impart a political and military binary to world order.
- But they are reluctant to make this a reality.
- The Cold War advocates in home capitals and in the U.S. will continue to promote ever-tighter alliances.
- On the other hand, these middle powers could find salvation in "strategic autonomy."
- This is to be defined by flexible partnerships, with freedom to shape alliances to suit specific interests at different times.
- These four middle powers will thus make multipolarity, rather than a new

Cold War, the defining characteristic of the emerging global order.

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