

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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