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## FROM INDIA TO THE AMERICAS: THE TRIALS & TRIBULATIONS OF A NEW PACIFIC ORDER

— M.J. Akbar

When 'Middle East' was introduced into the dictionary of geopolitics early in the 20th century, India was the east beyond the middle. India was British. London's strategic imperatives were to chain the Tsarist bear north of Afghanistan, and promote its growing economic and territorial interests in Arab regions of the Ottoman empire.

In 1882, Gladstone used Indian troops and treasure to seize Egypt. In 1914 the Indian army led the thrust into Mesopotamia through Basra, and fought Germans in north Africa's deserts as well as the Japanese in Burma during the second world war. Britain was deeply indebted to India after both world wars.

China, already a victim of Japanese aggression when Pearl Harbour changed the Pacific theatre, fought alongside America. But after 1945, strategic planning took another somersault. By 1950, America was staring at the prospect of a Red Europe and a Red Pacific, with two Communist behemoths elbowing forward on ideological biceps. China challenged the West in Korea, Malaysia [which included Singapore], Indonesia and Vietnam through the 1950s.

As the world leapt from topsy to turvy, India was the odd man outside the periphery of confrontation. On an ideal Pentagon map, Pakistan would meet the Soviet threat, and India firm up the ring around China. Pakistan obliged. India, inconveniently, finessed through non-alignment.

There was a brief moment, in October 1962 after India's defeat in the Himalayan war against China, when the American air force was ready to set up base in Assam against China, just as it operated in Soviet skies from Peshawar. But China ceased fire; the moment passed.

When India and Pakistan fought two fierce wars in 1965 and 1971, China refused to intervene on Pakistan's behalf, thus establishing the basis of an India-China detente in the 1980s.

There has always been too much water, and never enough of a bridge, between India and America. Washington and Delhi dealt with each other through the perspectives of a trans-Atlantic, trans-Eurasian, relationship, rather than a trans-Pacific one.

The Indian treaty with the Soviet Union in 1971 only strengthened this conventional vision inherited from the Empire era. The great democratic bonhomie between George Bush and Manmohan Singh raised hopes, which were frustrated by Indian caution and Barack Obama's preoccupation with problems of his own choice.

Alliance, with its certitudes, works better in wartime. Peace is more flexible, and immune to tensions of hurry.

China, seeking to reverse patterns of the past, has often declared that it wants to rise to great power status peacefully. The response from the region, and America, is equally nuanced.

The Indian navy began to discover the Pacific in the politics of peace. A new Pacific order is being shaped, but its contours are blurred by the competing needs of immediate interests.

India, for instance, is wary of being pushed into the hound lane by Washington only to discover America is busy chatting up the hare.

India, Vietnam, Japan and America, not to mention Canada and the Pacific countries of Latin America, have common purpose in the containment of China,

but this does not prevent bilateral economic relations. There is also potential for strategic cooperation where there is opportunity.

India, China and America should worry about the Jihadist explosion in the Muslim 'stans' between India, China and Russia, with its epicenter in Pakistan.

Simultaneously, India and China will compete for space vacated by the US in the region, possibly with Russia trying to play all sides against the middle. No one said foreign policy was simple.

China's peaceful rise has one major imponderable: how much peace China can ensure at home? To be stronger abroad than you are at home is to invite Soviet dysfunction.

In September, President Xi Jinping asked officials to watch documentaries on the collapse of the Soviet Union instead of spending too much time celebrating the 64th anniversary of the Communist Party's victory.

In 1992 and 1993, Beijing met an existential challenge with a classic Marxist ploy, with Chinese characteristics. It increased the hold of the party, rather than loosening it, and then expanded space for private enterprise through party diktat.

Twenty years of exceptional economic growth has not eliminated the worry of internal turmoil. Corruption has infected the party's vitals.

Only greater democracy can ensure China's desperate need for accountability, and political freedom has more dramatic consequences than economic dexterity.

*M.J. Akbar is the author of [Tinderbox: The Past and Future of Pakistan](#). He is a columnist and a fellow at the [Brookings Institution](#).*

