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The US-China-India Triangle: A New Tripolar World Order?

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Guest Column by Prof. B. R. Deepak

The September congregation of the two Asian giants in the US has given off a few definite indications about the emerging world order in the new eco system that is witnessing re-globalization after a brief lull or the de-globalization in the wake of 2008-09 financial crises. It appears that Samuel Huntington's 1999 prophesy of the Uni-multipolarity where the US would be in the core and various other countries extending diplomatic, economic and military support for its initiatives; and India-China's aspirations about a multi-polar world is fast eroding and paving way for tripolarity centred on the US-China and India.

The US, according to all indications will continue to be a top powerhouse of the military, economic and technological prowess, and China and India closing in the gaps; for example within a decade the respective GDP of the US, China and India at present growth rate will reach to \$25 trillion, \$19 trillion and \$5 trillion respectively. However, if India does well in its infrastructure, education and health sectors, innovation and technology driven India is likely to push the figures for India further more.

Over \$40 billion business deals signed between China and the US that include purchase of 300 Boeings; \$3 billion deals between India and the US, the meetings of President Xi Jinping and PM Narendra Modi with the top US technology honchos; both promising to deepen the reforms and creating an investment friendly environment, and in turn the US high-tech companies committing to invest in two of the world's largest markets, is a pointer to this unfolding tripolar symmetry.

This all is taking shape in a new geopolitical and economic eco system, where three unique forces of the US driven re-globalisation, and Chinese and Indian globalization processes are coming into terms with each other. China has been the largest country in the world that has benefitted and uplifted over 600 million people from poverty in the shortest period of time in the history of mankind, implying that it adjusted

extremely well to the forces of globalization prior to 2008-09 financial crisis. India on the other hand appears to have muddled through during the deep globalization uplifting over 100 million people from poverty, could have done better but somehow did not make proper adjustments vis-à-vis domestic socio-politico-economic drivers and the globalisation.

The re-globalisation of the US in terms of its New Silk Route strategy, 'pivot to Asia' and 'Trans Pacific Partnership' (TPP); Chinese globalisation namely 'One Belt One Road' Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area (FTAAP) besides various other FTAs, establishment of the AIIB and BRICS New Development Bank; and the Indian globalisation steered by Modi 's high profile 'Make in India', 'Start ups in India', India's 'Act East policy' 'Bharat Mala and Sagarmala' projects etc. are trying to adapt amidst various geopolitical pulls and pushes, which at times has heightened the tension in the region. Will these processes accommodate each other or unleash forces of conflict and confrontation?

I believe all three are the defining relationships of this century. As far as bilateral relations between the trios are concerned, all have reached some sort of consensus as to how to handle and take their relationships forward. The consensus between the US and China avoids war, conflict and confrontation; it is the consensus for peace, growth, prosperity, and win-win cooperation. In the same vein, India and China have reached a consensus for economic cooperation and not let the border issue become a hindrance in developing a comprehensive strategic partnership. If the US-China relationship is a hard reality, India developing an increasingly strategic and economic relationship with the US is an aspiration, and there is a consensus for such an aspiration on both the sides.

However, India must be aware that at present there is a huge asymmetry in terms of its economy and military power in this tripolarity. The US and China has a trade volume of over \$555 billion, whereas India's combined trade volume with the US and China is not more than \$170 billion. The kind of deep engagement the US and China is having is clear from the hundreds of dialogue mechanisms that exists between the two at various levels cutting across economic and security fields. There are about half a million Chinese students studying in the US, and around 4.3 million Chinese and Americans flying across the Pacific every year. Will India achieve this kind of scale and magnitude in a decade? There are opportunities provided India responds well to the domestic as well as global drivers.

Therefore, if India wishes to be viewed as a pole in this trinity, its role would be determined by domestic economic and political drivers. If PM Modi wishes to become the rock star of the domestic audience as well, he must unflinchingly and rightly diagnose the health of Indian economy. If he wants globalization initiated by India succeed, he needs to put various things in order, e.g. the taxation, bureaucracy, infrastructure, governance and handling of the projects, labour force reforms, capacity and skill development etc.

Various strategic circles have been advocating an 'arc of containment' as regards our strategic rivals; I believe it would be too immature to act upon such ideas, for India neither has that raw power nor the economy to support and charter such a course. Moreover, neither the US, nor China considers India a serious geopolitical player at present, in order to have that status it is time for India to implement Deng's 'hide your capabilities and bide your time' dictum, and uplift over 300 million of its people from poverty by becoming the largest beneficiary of the present re-globalisation process.

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