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China alone

Beijing's increasingly aggressive expansionism makes the Indo-Pacific's major democracies close their ranks

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In his most recent New Year's speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that 2020 would be 'a milestone.' Xi was right, but not in the way he expected. Far from having 'friends in every corner of the world,' as he boasted in his speech, China has severely damaged its international reputation, alienated its partners and left itself with only one real lever of power: brute force. Whether the prospect of isolation thwarts Xi's imperialist ambitions, however, remains to be seen.

Historians will most likely view 2020 as a watershed year. Thanks to Covid-19, many countries learned hard lessons about China-dependent supply chains and international attitudes toward China's communist regime shifted.

The tide began to turn when it was revealed that the Communist Party of China hid crucial information from the world about Covid-19, which was first detected in Wuhan – a finding confirmed by a recent US intelligence report. Making matters worse, Xi attempted to capitalise on the pandemic, first by hoarding medical products – a market China dominates – and then by stepping up aggressive expansionism, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This is driving rapid change in the region's geostrategic landscape, with other powers preparing to counter China.

Modi's change of course

For starters, Japan now seems set to begin cooperating with the Five Eyes – the world's oldest intelligence-gathering and -sharing alliance, comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. A new 'Six Eyes' alliance would serve as a crucial pillar of Indo-Pacific security.

Moreover, the so-called Quad – comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the US – seems poised to deepen its strategic collaboration. This represents a notable shift for India, in particular, which has spent years attempting to appease China.

Already, cooperation among Quad members is gaining some strategic heft.

As US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien recently noted, 'the Chinese have been very aggressive with India' lately. Since late April, the People's Liberation Army has occupied several areas in the northern Indian region of Ladakh, turning up the heat on a long-simmering border conflict. This has left Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with little choice but to change course.

Modi is considering inviting Australia to participate in the annual Malabar naval exercise with Japanese, American, and Indian forces later this year. Australia withdrew from the exercise in 2008 when it involved only the US and India. Although Japan's participation was regularised in 2015, India had hesitated to bring Australia back into the fold, for fear of provoking China. Not anymore. With Australia again involved in Malabar, the Quad grouping will have a formal, practical platform for naval drills.

The Quad's closer ties

Already, cooperation among Quad members is gaining some strategic heft. In June, Australia and India signed the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement to increase military interoperability through bilateral defence activities. India has a similar pact with the US and is set to sign one with Japan shortly.

Japan, for its part, recently added Australia, India and the UK as defence intelligence sharing partners by tweaking its 2014 state secrets law, which previously included exchanges only with the US. This will strengthen Japanese security cooperation under 2016 legislation that redefined Japan's US-imposed pacifist post-war constitution in such a way that Japan may now come to the aid of allies under attack.

Thus, the Indo-Pacific's democracies are forging closer strategic bonds in response to China's increasing aggression. The next logical step would be for these countries to play a more concerted, coordinated role in advancing broader regional security. The problem is that American, Australian, Indian and Japanese security interests are not entirely congruent.

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For India and Japan, the security threat China poses is much more acute and immediate, as shown by China's aggression against India and its increasingly frequent incursions into Japanese waters. Moreover, India is the only Quad member that maintains a land-based defence posture and it faces the very real prospect of a serious conflict with China on its Himalayan border.

Ways to stem Chinese expansionism

The US, by contrast, has never considered a land war against China. Its primary objective is to counter China's geopolitical, ideological and economic challenges to America's global pre-eminence. America's pursuit of this objective will be President Donald Trump's most-consequential foreign-policy legacy.

Australia, meanwhile, must engage in a delicate balancing act. While it wants to safeguard its values and regional stability, it remains economically dependent on China, which accounts for one-third of its exports. So, even as Australia has pursued closer ties with the Quad, it has spurned US calls to join naval patrols in the South China Sea. As its foreign minister, Marise Payne, recently declared, Australia has 'no intention of injuring' its relationship with China.

If China continues pursuing an expansionist strategy, however, such hedging will no longer be justifiable. Japanese DefenCe Minister Taro Kono recently declared that the 'consensus in the international community' is that China must be 'made to pay a high price' for its muscular revisionism in the South and East China seas, the Himalayas, and Hong Kong. He is right – the emphasis is on 'high.'

As long as the costs of expansionism remain manageable, Xi will stay the course, seeking to exploit electoral politics and polarisation in major democracies. The Indo-Pacific's major democratic powers must not let that happen, which means ensuring that the costs for China do not remain manageable for long.

Machiavelli famously wrote that, 'It is better to be feared than loved.' Xi is not feared so much as hated. But that will mean little unless the Indo-Pacific's major democracies get their act together, devise ways to stem Chinese expansionism, reconcile their security strategies and contribute to building a rules-based regional order. Their vision must be clarified

and translated into a well-defined policy approach, backed with real strategic weight. Otherwise, Xi will continue to use brute force to destabilise the Indo-Pacific further, possibly even starting a war.

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