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Maneuvers and Manifestations

Edited by
Swaran Singh · Reena Marwah



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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific, for all its geographical amorphousness, is a geo-strategically spatial concept marked as much by the shifting centre of gravity, away from the Euro-Atlantic swathe to the continental expanse and maritime continuum straddling Asia, as by the incontrovertibility of the buccaneering and robust rise of China whose performance quotient is anchored, in quintessentially predatory and unmistakably pioneering dimensions of national power projection. The construct of the Indo-Pacific is as much riven by the preponderance of searing Sino-US global competition as by the substantive rise of a slew of middle powers navigating through novel processes of multilateralism, systemic multi-polarity, and trajectories of nifty and nuanced multi-alignment rather than ironclad old hub-n-spokes centrality. Increasingly, productive partnerships take precedence over the perpetuation and resurrection of ‘zero-sum’ alliances of reductionism. Preservation of liberalized commerce, sustainable integrity over multi-vectored connectivity, and pluralized harness of the global commons in beneficent equity, not predatory hegemony, remain ardent impulses and idioms for strategic stability. However, these enjoinders also underscore the stratagems of power-play militating across the Indo-Pacific, seemingly inundated by the overbearing presence of rising China, but, whose burgeoned footprint is equally a function of the irresistible opportunities, that portend, for sovereign peers in interchange with it (Weinhardt and Brink in *Review of International Political Economy*, 27:258–280, 2020). Communities reposed of sovereigns, have conventionally been constructed, coalesced around warding-off common threats, melding affinities of common identity, or partake of value systems. Notwithstanding, the strategic churn of complex interdependence that pervades equations and engagement across the Indo-Pacific, is leading sovereign actors to seek new hues of strategic networks, rooted in institutionalized-cooperation-sans-the-institutionalism, a high transactional incidence of play-it-by-ear engagement, pitching for supple minilaterals and efficacious plurilaterals, in flexible aggregation and disaggregation, from overarching cordon-sanitaire bulwarks. This chapter endeavours to decode the tenor and trajectory of such emergent networks in shaping conengagement frameworks vis a vis China, through alternative rather than confrontational narratives of normativity and performance outcomes, competing for mercantilist, connectivity, and commons governance sweepstakes, through higher-ordering praxis in sustainable, tangible outcomes.