
“Reflections on American Grand Strategy in Asia” By Ash Carter, October 2018

Aditya Singh

If the ground is soft, dig deep.

— Old Chinese proverb.

Ash Carter, an academic with considerable experience in the Pentagon as also United States (US) Secretary of Defence from February 2015 to January 2017, is a strategic thinker. This is evident from his treatise on “Reflections on American Grand Strategy in Asia”¹ which is easily one of the better essays on US President Barack Obama’s ‘rebalance’ and what should be done for its implementation. It is logically presented and charts the course to be followed to fulfil the medium and long-term interests of the US.

Whether the Administration of President Donald Trump follows it is not the question, however, what it seeks to put forward are the *“benefits of peace”* and how it can be achieved in Asia by *“the strategy of a principled, inclusive network”*. While written from an American perspective, the arguments are cogent and relevant for the growth and development of the continent. His considerable knowledge of Chinese thinking and actions leads him to conclude that there must be every

Lieutenant General Aditya Singh (Retd) is Former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief in Andaman & Nicobar Command and in Southern Command. He was also Member of the National Security Advisory Board.

effort at engagement. He argues that there are two competing strains in Chinese strategic thinking: one that values partnership and increased integration in global security structures and the other that leans toward unilateral action and refuses to acknowledge global norms when they are seen to inhibit China’s interests. With China’s continued growth and success, it is this second strain which now tends to dominate, hence, its actions of pushing forward and ‘*digging deep*’. In view of this, Carter argues that if this be so, it needs to be confronted, and balance needs to be ensured by a network of nations. To which, Carter pointedly notes that the US so far, has been pacifist in this regard.

Given the systemic changes at play, the key concern is attributed to China’s concept of the rejuvenation of the Middle Kingdom and demonstration that there is a proven alternative system to Western democracies to usher in a new world power. In addition, with centralisation of power, Chinese President Xi Jinping has acquired an ‘emperor’ status in the current times. However, unlike the USSR that wished to impose Communism, the Chinese are convinced that they can demonstrate to the world that their system, in which the state supersedes the individual, is the best. In doing so, the Chinese draw their assessments based on their great strength from history, and tyranny, which was intrinsic, and is glossed over. It is an autocratic system, far removed from liberal thinking which the most of the developed world follows. History has shown that it is such regimes that generate conflict, hence, the need for a 21st century approach to ensure peace.

This is more so as China is arming at a pace unseen in history. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has been reorganised and the scope of changes is far greater than in the Germany of the 1930s. While the Chinese profess a ‘peaceful rise’, the capabilities they are acquiring will give them an offensive capacity across all domains—a cause of worry for their neighbours. Also their growing power and confidence exhibit a regular show of strength which smaller neighbours cannot counter. This

acquiescence too, can be compared to what happened during the rise of Nazi Germany.

Carter clarifies that the cornerstone of America's defence is deterrence, which is ensured in Asia by 400,000 personnel of the US Pacific Command. The carrier groups are intrinsic to this and will remain so in the near future. According to him, the US has no objection to China's rise. However, what is worrisome is its needless struggle for supremacy and the fact that it undermines the principles of peace and stability which have brought growth since 1945. He, thus, stresses on adherence to these principles, primarily freedom of navigation and the rule of law.

While the US can take a detached view, this holds equal relevance for India. Free trade, which is essential for India's growth, needs open sea lanes. In this regard, any unilateral restrictions to the internationally accepted order, which then becomes unacceptable, must be countered. However, this does not appear to be so. There is a further paradox in that while Ash Carter seeks this, the US has still not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This suggests that the statements ring hollow and reflect the reality that powerful nations operate according to their own vested interests.

It is this truth that India must contend with. China's phenomenal rise and philosophy will drive it to push for benefits in every sphere. To which, an accommodative response will only encourage it further with resultant increase in tensions. While acting alone, no nation can face up to China; it is also true that except for North Korea and Pakistan, China has no allies. This, then, creates ground for other countries to get together and form a network, as Carter proposes. For a partnership or a network allows for greater flexibility than an alliance, more importantly, it can work towards the larger objective of the common good.

Ash Carter advocates that rather than deterrence by hard power alone, peace and stability can be ensured by multiple means and

highlighting other aspects such as the cost of conflict. The world is more interconnected than ever before and it is China which has much to lose from any unilateral or unprincipled action. Any change in the status quo is bound to invite reaction and approbation. It will also make other nations apprehensive in their dealings. India, with its size, shared border and history, thus, stands uniquely placed to exploit this aspect. The benefits of engagement far outweigh the negatives of war. This argument has to be presented from a position of strength and, with the support of others, could be most convincing.

Advantage could be taken, given recent examples of economic coercion by China such as those in Sri Lanka, Maldives and Eritrea. There is also a growing realisation that China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is likely to tie up countries in debt. All this has made countries wary and conditions for this network to ensure that everyone works in partnership are more favourable than ever before.

There is a further argument that initiators of conflict in the past century have never succeeded and given the complications, it has only resulted in further disharmony and mayhem. With an ever present media, even a small incident can drive negative perceptions and, hence, a nation has to be careful of even a spark. Conditions in some ways are similar to 1914 when one assassin’s bullet started World War I. Larger nations, with disparate elements, must ensure greater control. That is, the logic of ‘non-state actors’ or ‘radical anti-establishment elements’ has run its due course and cannot be accepted, at least not in India.

China’s development and prowess in the cyber domain too, have made the situation even more complicated. There is now the danger of ‘non-contact war’ which could also cover the financial and social spheres. The ramifications of this would be unpredictable and could lead to escalation and conflict. It must further be appreciated that this has the potential to create uncertainty in the nuclear realm. Half the world’s nuclear powers are in Asia and the two most unpredictable ones, Pakistan

and North Korea, are China's allies. While Carter does not mention the nuclear aspects, it is a concern that countries in Asia must take note of. Given the tensions, any cyber uncertainty also runs the risk of a nuclear conflict, the effects of which will transcend borders.

An additional aspect that needs to be considered is that the re-balance, along with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was put forward by the previous US Administration. President Trump has a different market-driven view. Under him, the US could become more isolationist. As mentioned by Carter, the sheer numbers of Asia will drive growth in the coming years. Hence, the current US leadership has to be convinced that for America's continued 'greatness', peace and stability of Asia require its continued involvement. Also historically, no civilisation can continue in greatness. Any neglect of the US security role in Asia will only hasten its demise as a superpower and allow China's rise in an earlier timeframe. There is also the possibility of an even closer Russia-China axis. All this constitutes a looming danger which the US and rest of the world need to take note of.

What lessons can India learn from all this? First and foremost, peace and stability of the region is foremost and the 21st century requires a new approach to ensure *Vasudhaiva-Kutmabakam*. Non-alignment must give way to partnership and a larger goal. This needs to be set down as a White Paper or national security strategy. It would not only tell the world what India seeks, but lay down guidelines for the defence forces and every other organ and institution of the state. A clear statement of intent could drive policy. Such a paper will set down the process of engagement and benefits of mutual cooperation as also how each nation, big or small, can play a part.

Next, within its stated policy of protecting its territorial integrity and sovereignty, India must strengthen its conventional and strategic deterrence. This must extend to the unconventional and emerging domains such as cyber. The shrinking of the defence budget needs to be

reversed. For a country with unsettled borders and two nuclear armed neighbours, which work in collusion, there remains no option. Border infrastructure has to be built up on priority.

Along with this, India must proactively work with every nation for the common goal of peace and stability and engage them at every fora. Given China’s importance, it must engage it as a partner in a spirit of mutual benefit. It must support China’s actions which are open, transparent and for the common good. At the same time, it must firmly oppose any unilateral violation or change in the status quo. To this extent it can stress on its historic legacy and outreach to Asia and how, for eons, it always spread the message of peace. This should include the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Building of trust, especially between the defence forces, is a must. It must continually and increasingly engage in bilateral and multilateral exercises with all nations. The potential of the QUAD needs to be exploited, and partners need to be built upon, such as Indonesia, which is missing, and will sooner rather than later, have to be taken alongside. As has been accepted, India must seriously work on building self-sufficiency in defence hardware and seek technology for developing modern weapon systems. There is no option. Further, given the fractured polity, any acquisitions from abroad will always invite mudslinging and consequent delays.

In keeping with the importance of ensuring open sea lanes for all, it must develop its Navy and work with other nations for freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. This must also extend to disasters and humanitarian missions. Development of carrier groups, in both the eastern and western seabords, is necessary as deterrents for the immediate future. Some will argue that given new weapon systems, these constitute vulnerabilities in any future conflict and may go the way of battleships. The fact, however, remains that in keeping with its location and size, such forces are a necessity. The budget for the Navy needs to be enhanced manifold.

India must take a principled stance in keeping with international norms and seek compliance. China respects only strength, and the recent draw down on the Dalai Lama will only encourage it to further pressurise India. It must also fulfil any obligations and commitments in this regard. This must extend to all aspects of the global commons, including space.

India must remain wary of the fact that in international relations, nothing is permanent and thereby, be prepared to adapt to changing scenarios. The policy of non-alignment was suitable during the Cold War. Since then, India's economic strength and stature have changed. It has to now adapt to be an equal partner. However, China will not like this, but it should be given no other option.

All actions should be driven from a position of respect and mutual benefit. The leadership must recognise that no nation has ever become great without sacrifice. If India has to be a part of the Asian story and achieve its rightful destiny, then firm resolve and action on its part are called for. The political leadership must understand that while there can be security without growth, there can be no growth without security. This change is needed now.

Notes

1. Ash Carter (2018), “Reflections on American Grand Strategy in Asia”, Belfer Centre Report, October 2018, pp. 1-33, at https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/ReflectionsonAmericanGrandStrategyinAsia_1.pdf.