India is Searching to Define its Role in its Rapidly Changing Region

The so-called Quad nations, the United States, Australia, India and Japan have just had a meeting in the United States. A rather bland statement was issued by the four following the meeting. It contained no surprises. What is a surprise and remains a puzzle is the presence of India in the quartet, whose intentions of its formulator, the United States, remains the construction of an anti-China alliance. It has to be noted however, that this element of the quartet was rather overshadowed by the announcement of the new trio of nations, the United States, United Kingdom and Australia as a new grouping.

Their intention is manifestly anti-China, which is no surprise to anyone. Its timing, and focus on replacing Australia’s $90 billion submarine deal for 12 French submarines with eight United States built submarines caused uproar and outrage from the French. They recalled their ambassadors from both the United States and Australia, with the latter being unlikely to be replaced any time soon.

The Indian participation in this quartet is a puzzle. India has long enjoyed friendly relations with Russia, and indeed have just completed a new deal to purchase more Russian fighter jets to add to its existing supply from that source. India (along with Pakistan) is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. They have just held a major
conference in Dushanbe, Tajikistan to mark the 20th anniversary of the founding of that group. That same group has recently welcomed as a full member the Islamic Republic of Iran which remains in a bitter stand-off with the Americans. The United States president Joe Biden notwithstanding criticism of Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal has done nothing about re-joining the group, and has maintained Trump’s policy of imposing sanctions on Iran. Again, this is a point of difference for the Indians who have maintained diplomatic links with Iran. The two countries are also coordinating a rail link with Europe. The Indian Prime Minister Modi has refusing to be drawn into the American sanctions against Iran.

It is true that the Indians have a long-standing border dispute with China, but that did not prevent the Indians from joining the SCO. It would be incorrect to describe China-Indian relations as warm, but the two sides have managed to reach a stability in their border dispute and the exchange of shots a few years ago that left casualties on both sides are in the past.

India has also shown a positive attitude towards the further extension of SCO membership. The SCO currently has eight members, including four “stans” of central Asia, three observer states, Afghanistan Belarus and Mongolia, and six “dialogue partners” of whom the most populous is Turkey. The total population of the permanent members accounts for nearly 40% of the world’s population.

There is talk about extending the membership even further, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia. India enjoys good relationships with all the observer states, dialogue partners and prospective other members. It is all the more puzzling therefore that it has affiliated itself with the Quad which apart from a manifestly anti-China orientation does not enjoy particular good relationships with any of the other actual and prospective members.

The latest meeting of the SCO was held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The leaders present at the conference adopted an extensive statement, part of which dealt with Afghanistan. They reaffirmed their support for the emergence of Afghanistan as an “independent, neutral, united, democratic and peaceful state, free of terrorism, war and drugs.”

The SCO meeting, representing as it does, the world’s two most populous nations and an increasingly important international body, received scant coverage in the western media. Pakistan, China, Iran and Russia sought accountability from the United States for leaving Afghanistan in a chaotic state. Although a total of more than $2 billion was spent by the Americans during their occupation there is precious little to show for the expenditure. The economy, post the United States retreat, remains a shambles, facing a profound humanitarian crisis.

All of the parties at the conference expressed a commitment to combating the “three forces” of terrorism, separatism and extremism. The SCO has since the conference carried out joint military exercises to increase the interoperability of the member states. On the question of security, India heightened its concerns about militance on its north western border. In that and shares a common concern among all SCO members that Afghanistan does not become a haven for terrorists.

Afghanistan was naturally a topic of major interest at the Dushanbe conference. Following the United States withdrawal there is a grave danger of utter chaos descending on the region. It will be interesting to see the extent to which China is prepared to come to the rescue.

India has made its concerns clear about the possible future development of Afghanistan. It has openly questioned the “exclusive” nature of the new government, publicly urging all its partner countries in the SCO to “think carefully and collectively while deciding on the legitimacy of the new political system in Afghanistan.”

India is also very conscious of the strong Pakistani influence in Afghanistan. The precise future role of Pakistan in Afghanistan remains to be seen. Pakistan’s role in promoting regional economic understanding will be very important, along with other interested parties including China, India, Russia and Iran.

When one looks at these developments by India’s neighbours and in organisations like the SCO in which it plays an important role, it is all the more difficult to understand the reasoning behind its membership of the Quad.

China’s only territorial disputes lie within the South China Sea which is physically remote from India. The country has been reluctant to get involved in that particular dispute. As far as Taiwan is concerned, India regards it as part of China and has little or no interest in United States posturing on the Taiwan issue.

India is unthreatened by China in its own international waterways and joining any American lead naval exercises to assert “control” over the Indian Ocean would be a pointless exercise from its point of view. India’s best interests clearly lie in being part of the world’s largest economic arrangement, the SCO, and joining the Quad seems to me to
be a pointless and ultimately self-defeating exercise.

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