

Global strategy

Three Strategic Challenges in the Asia Pacific Region States

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In this interconnected globalised system three major challenges confront Asian states and civil societies: (i) How to deal with the Sino-US competition as the US escalates military alliances like the AUKUS and QUAD (ii) Take a humanitarian position on the civil war that is brewing in Myanmar on account of the military coup and civil opposition. (iii) The security challenge from Taliban controlled Afghanistan.

Any Asian state that believes it can be isolated from these will be regrettably mistaken.

(i)The Trilateral Security Agreement of US, Australia and UK- AUKUS is embedded in the US-China rivalry, specifically the US's constant hegemonic and imperial desires. The US seeks enhanced resurgence (it never left) in the Asia Pacific termed the Indo-Pacific.

The US deep state from Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' through Trump's China phobia to Biden has aggravated threat perceptions about China's growing clout in the international finance and trade system. Since the US dominates militarily its tactic (similar to its approach to the Soviet Union) is to apply military pressure and threats. The US has crafted "Integrated Defence", a series of localised regional defence agreements at different levels (unlike the large NATO, SEATO), that centre the US as the hub and different allies as 'spokes' with differing utility.

This strategy will be buttressed by the 'US Strategic Competition Act of 2021' (under discussion in the US Congress) that juxtaposes US "preponderance of power" to be projected militarily, financially and technologically against three major enemies China, Russia and Iran. The method is militarization of space, land and sea; maintain nuclear strength, financially check the BRI, oppose RCEP; maintain the international role of the dollar; and retain the US irreplaceable edge in soft power.

On the other hand, China projects its 'peaceful rise' by increasing its financial, technological and infrastructure dominance in Asia. Its military strategy vis a vis the US is defensive, as opposed to US's offensive one. As a regional hegemon China's expansionist goals and offensive maneuvers are felt in the South China Sea and around the neighbourhood, especially by India, Taiwan etc.

China's global strategy envisages three stages: (a) achieving 'world class forces' (b) managing and deterring war and (c) maintaining a strategic balance. The US plays on underlying regional fears and rivalries to develop pacts like the AUKUS and QUAD. However this strategic balance is intrinsically unstable. The US has a much higher balance of forces and offensive capabilities, and the Indo Pacific is a real theatre of possible wars.

Russia as part of this Sino-US rivalry and an Asian power is now projecting its Far East, neglected for two decades, with the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) with collaborations-investments in hydrocarbons, minerals etc.

Russia's deep strategic alliance with China and opposition to NATO; strong alliances in Central Asia like Shanghai Cooperation Organization— where Iran is now a full member; the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and alliances in parts of West Asia, India and others extend its influence through the Asia Pacific.

The AUKUS Trilateral Security Pact, offers highly sensitive nuclear technologies to Australia to manufacture nuclear powered submarines, something that the US shared only with the UK. With this deal Australia surrenders an agreement on acquisition of conventional submarines from France to advance the agenda of the US nuclear industrial complex. It reveals the US perfidy with its NATO allies when it comes to inter capitalist economic competition.

AUKUS ensures that China will also follow in developing a nuclear submarine fleet, which currently it does not possess. It will badger the Russians for this technology and aggravate the nuclear footprint in this region.

The AUKUS deal will cost Australia billions of dollars at the expense of social expenditures; threaten the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and regime; increase the carbon footprint of the Australian Forces; nuclearise the Pacific; threaten the climate and security of the hundreds of Pacific Islands; polarise the Asian and specially the ASEAN countries.

For example Indonesia and Malaysia have officially opposed AUKUS. The Philippines has supported this while Singapore, Thailand with deep trade relations with China and Vietnam prefer negotiating with China do not wish to be forced into sides. Similarly India has remained ambiguous, even as some Indian strategists have expressed regrets about non inclusion.

After all the QUAD despite military exercises is a poor second, asked to focus on climate change and vaccines. Meanwhile India relies heavily on Russian arms and several deals are in the pipeline. New Zealand and the Pacific Islands have come together to oppose the AUKUS. The AUUKUS is disrupting regional groupings and potentially disrupting regional security.

In these circumstances the most vocal critics are civil society groups that expose the increased militarism of the Indian and Pacific Oceans that AUKUS will ensure; demand that the ASEAN Treaty on the Zone of Peace in Pacific be enforced; and ask that . ASEAN must push the Chinese to respect Exclusive Economic Maritime Zones and Rights.

The Australian CSOs are critical in this opposition and will question why the Australian Government is willing to alienate its allies in the Pacific and spend billions of dollars in nuclear security for its ships in the Pacific, when they are basically trading with China- their biggest trading partner.

(ii) In Myanmar, since the coup by the military against the elected government, civil resistance continues. Despite severe repression with over a 1000 civilian resisters killed, over 8000 imprisoned, many exiled, the economy contracting peoples, severe oppression from the military Junta and resistance from people continues. The ongoing resistance is led and joined by Buddhist monks, teachers, doctors, students and peasantry and ordinary civilians in towns and villages.

Currently this resistance has broadened and taken a turn as the united opposition- National Unity Government has called for an escalation of resistance, and a "peoples defensive war". Several ethnic minorities that were earlier excluded, possessing armed militia, seen as secessionist (Karens, Kachins, Rohingyas) when this very opposition- the National League for Democracy (NLD) was in power have joined the anti Junta coalition. The resistance movement now is thus both non violent, underground, civil as well as violent resistance which is being seen as a 'just war'.

It appears that the Military Junta is under pressure. Sanctions have been imposed on it, but

experience shows that sanctions hurt people rather than regimes. For the first time in ASEAN's collective history and principle of 'non intervention' in internal affairs of members, the chief of the military was not invited for the ASEAN Summit of October 2021, but replaced with a junior official of the murderous regime.

At the same time there are indications of the Junta leading a genocide of people in order to stay in power.

The question before both the world community of states and international peace, justice and democratic movements is about their support to armed resistance in Myanmar. The issue of just peace and liberal or humanitarian intervention has divided peace movements before and we need to think of how to build solidarity, across these questions.

(iii) After military interventions that led to several failed states and policies in West Asia including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, etc and spending over two trillion dollars (mostly on the US military and private contractors) the US after ten years of intervention and occupation in Afghanistan ultimately replaced the Taliban with the Taliban. The security situation remains unresolved as all regional powers take different positions on engaging with the Taliban as Afghan society festers with a growing humanitarian crisis.

In Afghanistan it was international civil society that opposed first the Russian and then US intervention and occupation consistently. NGOs have been part of peace building, keeping and maintaining exercises in Afghanistan since the 1980s. These efforts have come from across the world. Regardless of political differences. These need to be activated without compromising with the Taliban, once more with security guarantees from the Taliban government.

Civil society discourse on: collective security in this region and to: Oppose a geostrategic approach; No more interventions. Asks all nations to support and give dignity to Afghan refugees. Supports humanitarian aid to Afghan people and internally displaced. Opposes unilateral sanctions as these impact people and not ruling regimes. Supports the gains made by Afghan women and looks for ways to maintain freedoms for women in education, health, work place, public spaces and for choice. Opposes Islamophobia. Development assistance has been poured into Afghanistan. This should be conditional on the rights of people.

History has repeatedly established that peace and democracy is upheld and valued primarily by civil society. That civil society is the anchor of peaceful resistance, and for a just and sustainable peace.

Civil society spaces that grew since World War II are shrinking in our contemporary times, only 17% of people world wide live under conditions of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. And yet all kinds of resistances continue and coalition building between movements is taking place effectively. In this context peace and social movements keep re-assessing the major issues of peace and security.

Civil society pressure has seen successes from anti-Vietnam movement to anti-landmines, to TPNW all combined csos challenging hegemonic discourses and working on the ground. Ultimately, civil society's analysis is similar to the prophecies of Trojan priestess Cassandra, always correct but not believed. And yet like Cicyphus, civil society goes on.

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P.S.

- The Citizen. 22 OCTOBER, 2021:

- <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/21029/--Three-Strategic-Challenges-in-the-Asia-Pacific-Region-States>

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