**The China threat**

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The US step to shoot down a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon over the Atlantic has strengthened voices which anticipate heightened tensions between the two countries in the days ahead. At the root of this act lies the Washington-led Western decision to project Beijing as an impending threat to its global dominance and outreach.

While addressing Asia Society in Washington last year, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken minced no words in declaring China as the most serious threat to his country and international order alike. Former British prime minister Tony Blair in a lecture in London went a step further to claim that it was not Russia but China that posed a direct threat to the West. Heads of various Western countries including Nato have echoed the same apprehensions on different occasions in the recent past.

The Western apprehensions primarily stem from Beijing’s firm belief in its value system and economic model to carve a place in the comity of nations. It has surprised those who predicted it would gradually eschew them as it achieves a certain level of prosperity and development. While supporting China’s entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO), former US president Bill Clinton had taken it as a reflection of Beijing’s willingness to import the Western value system and the economic model as well.

China’s astonishing growth and development in the last three decades, in particular, have led the country to second place in the global GDP rankings. As also underlined by Blair, it has in fact overtaken – or is at par with – even the US in certain areas of defence and technological development. It is, therefore, no surprise that Chinese President Xi, in his address to the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, declared his goal of moving his country to the centre stage of world affairs and warned that no one “should expect China to swallow anything that undermines its interests”. This was a reaffirmation of his ‘China Dream’ announced in 2013 to make his country a great power by 2049.

It should, however, not be overlooked that the present tensions between the two sides have been triggered by the US decision to shift its focus from fighting terrorism to countering Beijing as an immediate threat. It was in 2017 that it officially declared China a threat to its interests by updating its National Security Strategy. Subsequently, it developed strong partnerships and alliances to put a formidable military and economic challenge to China.

Under the Quad, it has for instance pledged to extend more than $50 billion in infrastructure aid and investment in the Indo-Pacific over the next five years to counter China’s economic clout in the region. Another alliance AUKUS is cropped up to help Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines to challenge China in the South China Sea, whereas Five Eyes is an intelligence-sharing arrangement among the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand for the same purpose.

Also, G7 leaders have unveiled a $600-billion plan to rival China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in developing nations. The Build Back Better World (B3W) is described as an action to help meet the infrastructure needs in low- and middle-income countries. But there is no doubt that the plan is intrinsically aimed at checkmating the Chinese initiative to connect the world through land and maritime routes.

While China has no history of global dominance or export of its development model and value system, the West still seems pre-determined to fritter away its emergence as a rival power. Relying on time-tested tactics, it is deliberately provoking it in the South China Sea and Taiwan. Through a heavy military presence in the region and the provision of highly sophisticated weapons to Taiwan, the US has practically started a cold war against China to test its nerves and drain resources. In February this year only, it approved a $100 million sale of equipment and services to Taiwan to upgrade its Patriot missile defence system.

To emerge as a counterweight to the US and other Western countries, China has to realize that it is not the economic or military prowess of a country alone but global alliances and strategic partnerships which determine the course of events in the world today. The role of the US and its allies in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is a testimony to this assertion. Notwithstanding many achievements in the battlefield, Russia finds itself engaged in a war of attrition at its doorstep because of US and Nato support for its adversary.

China is not a resource rich but a manufacturing country whose economy has largely thrived on the exports to the US and Western countries. Without striking a close strategic partnership with countries like Russia, it may, therefore, remain vulnerable to the US-led Western strategy of encirclement, and provocation in the South China region in particular.

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