**[China syndrome](https://www.dawn.com/news/1596983/china-syndrome)**

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IN 2011, the term ‘Asian Pivot’ first entered the American political lexicon. This was the name given to the US plan to refocus on ties with East Asian states and the clear subtext was to try and manage the rise of China. Arguably, it came a decade too late. Ever on the lookout for a potential global rival to bring down, America would likely have focused on China long before this if not for 9/11 and the wars of revenge (Afghanistan) and imperial hubris (Iraq) that followed, along with the distracting and costly engagements of what became known as the ‘war on terror’.

Granted, this resulted in a further expansion of US military power, but it also showed the limits of that power and the loss of blood, treasure and prestige resulted in a net gain for China, with the most crucial benefit being the breathing space afforded to Beijing.

In 2020, what started as a pivot is now a full-blown China containment strategy. In January this year, the Centre for a New American Security produced a report [*Rising to the China Challenge*](https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/rising-to-the-china-challenge) on the request of the US Congress, laying out the exact strategy and ideological basis for this containment. The latter is important because it frames China not just as an economic and military rival, but also an ideological one, and if on reading this you are reminded of the Cold War you’re on the right track.

The opening line declares: “The United States and China are locked in strategic competition over the future of the Indo-Pacific” and then goes on to paint a stark contrast between America’s “free and open” vision and the “closed and illiberal” future that the report sees China as envisioning. It then goes on to state that “managing the China challenge” should be the topmost priority of US foreign policy and that doing so will carry economic costs for Americans and require sacrifice and trade-offs. This makes it clear that the coming decade will be shaped by the US-China confrontation, with all the turmoil and scheming that this entails.

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There’s a lot in the report that is meant to alarm or goad US policymakers into action, in keeping with the standard policy of exaggerating threats in order to justify a massive response. To summarise, the report warns that “China is poised to surpass the United States in gross domestic product, while racing ahead to gain technological advantage in key areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and genomics,” and that the US response must then be to compete in the domains of “economics, technology, diplomacy, ideology, governance, and human capital”. Which pretty much covers all bases.

The report notes that the US has an advantage in the number of regional allies and partners it has, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and Thailand, and notably mentions India a total of 31 times. By contrast, the only mention of Pakistan is a hyphenated one, occurring in the context of the Indo-Pakistan border. And that brings us to exactly what the US intends to do for India in military terms with the aim of propping it up as a regional counterweight to China. In the report’s own language, this entails “supporting India’s efforts to pose military dilemmas for China, thereby providing low-cost means to complicate the ability of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to concentrate … on US strongholds in East Asia and the Western Pacific”, noting that while India “has the potential to contribute as a military counterweight to China”, its “structural impediments and resource constraints” have hampered it.

The report then spends a good amount of space on how to remove those impediments and relieve those constraints. It envisions an India armed with super and hypersonic anti-ship missiles along with the targeting systems needed to maximise the potential of these weapons. It also proposes making it easier for India to build and/or acquire more cutting-edge attack submarines. There is a focus on improving Indian military transportation infrastructure, allowing it to better redeploy forces on short notice. More crucially, it emphasises making “major investments in [Indian] electronic warfare, cyber offence and counterspace systems”, thus changing the Indian army’s approach from “territorial defence” to multi-domain dominance.

Interestingly, it also proposes turning a blind eye to Indian acquisitions of Russian defence technology so as to not corner Russia or inconvenience India. In that context, the report also proposes “removing barriers” to assistance to allied countries, which in this case means turning a blind eye to growing authoritarianism and Hindutva-led fascism in India. After all, principles are nice to have, but not at the expense of power. As for us, we know that while India may acquire capabilities against China, those capabilities will be first used against us. Will we be forced into a camp or can deft diplomacy reap us some benefits? Either way, things are about to get interesting, once again.

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