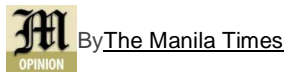


The Indo-Pacific needs an infrastructural alliance



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INFRASTRUCTURAL competition is one of the key issues in the Indo-Pacific region (also known as the Asia-Pacific region) as geography plays an important role in geopolitics. It is expedient for nations to convert political geography into a functional one in the age of infrastructural war.

In this globalized and interdependent world, the most connected power is likely to have the maximum leverage in international politics. China understands that and engages in the multitrillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), involving infrastructure development and investments across Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

The World Bank posits that infrastructure is the missing link in the Millennium Development Goals related to poverty, health, education and other objectives, and has formally included it in the Sustainable Developmental Goals.

According to an Asian Development Bank report, the Asian countries are desperately in need of infrastructure funds and requires \$26 trillion from 2016 to 2030 for infrastructure projects.

Ever since China unveiled its grand BRI, it has gained international attention from many across the world, including the Indo-Pacific region. Through the BRI, China wants to bridge its domestic goals and geopolitical ambitions.

The BRI poses several questions, particularly in terms of governance, transparency and the security implications of certain critical infrastructural projects. It also serves as a reminder that the initiative remains a major source of controversy due to China's strategy of asserting its influence abroad and saddling countries with unsustainable debts.

The BRI project has the potential to cause a significant damage to environment but despite all the criticisms, China arguably has managed to cement its status as the center of gravity of the global economy.

To counter the BRI, several proposals have been explored. Japan was the first country to have a connectivity strategy in the name of Partnership for Quality Infrastructure but its commitment was perceived paltry and costly as compared to the grand BRI.

The United States has also made some counter proposals, as reflected in the two pieces of legislation, that is, The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act and the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act, which could potentially allow Washington to channel up to \$60 billion in strategic overseas infrastructure investments.

India and Japan have coenvisioned Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and many have perceived it as a calculated effort to counter-balance the BRI, particularly in its outreach programs across Africa and the Indian Ocean Region.

The US, Japan and Australia have pledged a new partnership dedicated to promoting infrastructural investment in the Indo-Pacific. But the problem is that any infrastructural reform initiative in the region without the participation of India negates the very idea of Indo-Pacific.

And, gradually, it has become increasingly clear that no other country can match China's infrastructural spending, at least for now.

In order to effectively counter the BRI, it has increasingly become necessary to form an infrastructural alliance by the Quad members — the US, India, Japan and Australia — or through a Quad-plus arrangement involving France and the United Kingdom.

Such an infrastructural alliance will immensely benefit the region as a whole. The Quad countries, rather than engaging in bilateral or trilateral frameworks, should focus on the importance of working collectively in order to shield itself from China's salami-slicing strategy.

Though the Quad formation is still largely fragile, it is imperative that the members begin to engage in a collective strategy to restrict China's advances. Apparently, New Delhi is the least enthusiastic about the Quad's potential and more importantly concerned about a possible backlash from Beijing.

India, being the weakest link in the Quad, must shed its reluctance to join the infrastructural alliance. Last November, India decided to opt out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and, perhaps, it is now an ideal time to make an assessment of not only what has transpired since then but also ponder on what lies ahead.

Perhaps, joining the infrastructural alliance is the only way by which India can improve its economic and security relationship with countries in the Indo-Pacific region. From a geopolitical standpoint, such an approach could ostensibly enable India to kill two birds with one stone — economic and security benefits.

Moreover, an infrastructural alliance by these democratic countries can be more transparent and consultative, sustainable, with more private-sector involvement, and avoids debt burdens in its dealings with smaller countries.

Such infrastructural alliance could maintain higher environmental standard unlike the Chinese connectivity projects, which have not paid serious attention to environmental impacts, especially in their coal power plants around the world. Coal projects accounted for as much as 42 percent of China's overseas investment in 2018, according to China Global Energy Finance database.

The Indo-Pacific infrastructural alliance could also potentially shape the Chinese behavior in terms of providing infrastructure. Therefore, it is imperative for the Quad to institutionalize this alliance, which perhaps may not provoke China as it is not a security alliance.

The infrastructural alliance could eventually pave the way for a security alliance which is necessary as the Indo-Pacific region lacks a security architecture. The Quad must have a strategy under the premise that greater collective security will preserve the existing economic growth, trade relations and balance of power in the region.

It is the Infrastructure competition that will play a major role in defining the Indo-Pacific region in the 21st century and it is important that the Quad countries, particularly India steps up its strategic and security presence in the region.

BY DR. NEHGINPAO KIPGEN AND J. MOHANASAKTHIVEL

Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen is a political scientist, associate professor, assistant dean and executive director at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Jindal School of International Affairs, OP Jindal Global University. He is the author of four books, including The Politics of South China Sea Disputes. He may be reached through: nkipgen@jgu.edu.in or nehginpao@gmail.com

J. Mohanasakthivel is a research assistant at CSEAS and a graduate student at Jindal Global University.

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