

Foreword

The emerging new world disorder demands urgent attention. The global environment has become extraordinarily volatile, unleashing epochal uncertainties. In the sharp contestation that has been impelled by the rapid shifts in the equations of power across the world and within its regions, clear winners and losers will emerge over no more than the coming decade. Critically, unprecedented complexity – produced by dramatic technological transformations, by the shrinking of the world into an increasingly interlinked ‘village’, and by new and convoluted patterns of conflict that go far beyond the increasingly obsolete concept of hybrid warfare – adds limitless layers to the tasks of domestic and global management. Against this backdrop, leaderships and bureaucracies trapped in old ways of thinking and operating are doomed to lead their nations into the abyss.

Responding effectively to this strange new world will demand enormous capacity building, a leadership that has the will and the vision to chart out each nation’s future, and the urgent framing and implementation of the plans and programs to realize this vision. The nations that fail to achieve each of the three elements of this trifecta in adequate measure will inevitably face progressive marginalization, indeed, subordination to one or the other external power.

With the exception of China – and there would be many qualifiers here – no country in the world appears to be coping with the demands of the sheer pace of adaptation that these circumstances require. Indeed, before the unending COVID-19

pandemic commenced, the old, entrenched ways of thinking – a rampaging West imposing its decisions across much of the world, even as it relinquished the real substance of power, outsourcing virtually all industrial processes as well as their underlying technologies, overwhelmingly to China, under a faith-driven policy of ‘globalization’ – appeared to define the broad trajectory of future developments. The Donald Trump administration had, of course, begun to question the wisdom of the ‘imbalance’ with China even before COVID was unleashed on the world – including on a visibly unprepared US. A more fundamental geopolitical transformation, however, had to wait on COVID – China’s opacity and duplicity on causation and source, the supply-chain disruptions that followed, and the global dangers of inordinate dependence on a duplicitous, authoritarian, expansionist power, that rejected or subverted the authority of international institutions and law, eventually drove home the point in most Western capitals, and a rather messy and often contradictory process of ‘disentanglement’ commenced in earnest.

The war in Ukraine has substantially accelerated these processes, as well as the crystallization of a new pole – the China-Russia axis (with Russia relegated to a progressively subordinate role) – that seeks to impose Xi Jinping’s vision of a new authoritarian world order by corralling an array of rogue, weak, and failing regimes, and of floundering economies, across the world.

Confronting this rising challenge demands an intense and focused strategic response, one that appears increasingly difficult to achieve in the face of the receding current of strategic wisdom among political leaderships across the democratic world. Indeed, as crisis compounds crisis, most leaderships continue to fall back on broken systems and failed ideologies, largely ignoring the imperatives that new equations of power and new technologies have created.

India is no exception to these complex patterns of strategic incoherence, as the gap between ambitions and postures, on the one hand, and institutions and capacities, on the other, continues to widen, even as policies and practice undermine existing institutional strengths and systems. A sustained, reality-based, effort of analysis is necessary, if effective policies are to be devised to address the augmenting vulnerabilities of the system, both to global and domestic disruptions. *Faultlines* continues with such an effort of analysis in the hope that, at some stage, some elements of a rational strategic discourse may begin to find resonances in national policy.

Ajai Sahni
New Delhi,
April 15, 2023