

Asia needs a new road map as Trump tears up the old one

China and India must find ways to manage their differences while Asia puts guard rails in place to secure its future.

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Mr Donald Trump's return to the White House is reshaping America and the world. The swift reimposition of tariffs, including on key Asian economies, signals that the United States has radically discounted the value of normative geopolitics, unleashing a deluge of uncertainty.

All this is outside the comfort zone of conventional diplomacy. It is about deglobalisation and economic coercion. "America First" recalls a 19th century geometry of power, with unilateralism holding sway. Where have you gone, Pax Americana?

For Asia, this is a pivotal moment. The post-World War II assumption that US power would underwrite regional stability no longer holds. This is not a call to reject US presence in the region. America will remain a vital player. But we are faced with a harder question: If Washington is recasting its strategic priorities, then what does the future hold for the Indo-Pacific?

The answer is to be found among us, as Asians. And at the heart of the matter is the relationship between two of its

largest powers – India and China.

INDIA AND CHINA: THE TEST CASE FOR ASIAN MATURITY

Today, there is a fragile equilibrium between India and China. However, despite wide differences – on borders, trade imbalances and competition for regional influence – both countries must avoid letting their rivalry derail the broader Asian project.

India and China are seen as opposites – rivals, competitors, strategic adversaries. And yet, in strategic terms, they are also uniquely similar. Both are continental and maritime powers, with blue-water navies, vast coastlines, critical island outposts and growing commercial stakes in Asia's sea lines of communication. India's geographic presence – from the Himalayas to the Andaman Sea – offers it leverage over both land corridors and oceanic choke points. China, too, stretches from continental Central Asia to the Western Pacific, with expanding maritime infrastructure and a blue-water naval footprint.

Together, India and China form the twin pillars of Asian geography. But instead of shaping that geography together, their

differences have grown increasingly rigid, confirming the prescient words of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru that the basic challenge between India and China "runs across the spine of Asia".

Asia cannot afford this deadlock.

If India and China can find a way to manage their differences peacefully, they will do more than reduce bilateral tension – they will provide the region with a foundation for long-term strategic stability.

A truly multipolar and stable Asia requires balance between continental and maritime theatres. Peace in one cannot be sustained without restraint in the other. This dual responsibility places India and China at the centre of Asia's geopolitical future.

Both must lead by example: maintaining high-level political dialogue, pursuing military disengagement and de-escalation with transparency, and ensuring that their competitive coexistence remains bounded by mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest.

RETHINKING THE INDO-PACIFIC

Originally modelled by the US as a strategic arc of like-minded democracies, the Indo-Pacific was meant to uphold a free and open order, girded by trust and trade. The US now pursues a zero-sum approach to economic

competition, untethered from the principles it once championed. With this factor, and with China being too large to exclude, Asia needs a new Indo-Pacific architecture: a flexible, inclusive, rules-based structure built on six foundational pillars:

First, we need strategic restraint. Flashpoints – from the Taiwan Strait to the India-China border – must be governed by clear guard rails: de-escalation protocols, military hotlines, and no unilateral changes to the status quo. The goal is not resolution but astute diplomatic engagement and the management of tensions.

Second is the need for maritime security. The Indian Ocean, Malacca Strait and South China Sea must be governed by regionally developed norms that ensure open sea lines of communication and prevent the escalation of maritime boundary disputes in the South and East China Seas. Naval cooperation – that does not exclude any country in the region – must prevent incidents and guarantee open sea lanes.

Third, infrastructure, digital trade, and green energy transitions must be coordinated without geopolitical exclusion. Asia should move towards interoperable economic platforms rather than rival, politicised supply chains.

Fourth is the need for balance. India, South-east Asia and East Asia, including China, were, through history, creators of the living bridge of peoples who designed the Indo-Pacific. Their centrality should continue to ensure that continental and maritime perspectives are balanced – and that the region does not tilt towards any single pole.

Fifth, one must recognise that a viable regional order needs to bring China in – not to dominate, but to be bound by rules. Asia must shift from containment rhetoric to curated inclusion: engage China but constrain excess through multilateral structures.

Finally, Asia must secure its technological future. We must build regional norms on data governance, the ethics of AI and cyber security, and safeguard critical sectors like semiconductors, digital infrastructure and green tech from monopolisation and geopolitical manipulation. A free and open Indo-Pacific depends not only on open seas but also on an open, secure and trusted framework of technological

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MANAGING U.S.-CHINA TENSIONS

The US-China rivalry defines the maritime dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. This rivalry could fragment the Indo-Pacific into exclusive blocs, undermining the very stability it seeks to preserve. Asian powers must rally around a shared objective: ensuring that US-China competition remains bounded, predictable, and subordinate to regional peace.

Asia has no sides to pick in this struggle. Countries like India, Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam and South Korea must maintain strategic autonomy – not neutrality, but agency. An Indo-Pacific that is a theatre of forced alignments is bartering its future away. Inclusive institutions like the East Asia Summit, Asean-led platforms and others must serve as diplomatic buffers – forums where the US and China are present, but not dominant. Coalitions of restraint, such as mini-lateral and issue-based partnerships – on maritime security, supply chains, climate cooperation, or data governance – can create a dense web of shared interests that dilutes the risk of great-power confrontation.

Within this architecture, Taiwan remains a sensitive test case. For

decades, Taiwan has survived in a zone of strategic ambiguity – caught between de facto autonomy and the "one China" principle, between American protection and the looming presence of Beijing.

With the erosion of American predictability, Taiwan now confronts a different kind of ambiguity – one where it can no longer take even economic goodwill for granted. The solution is not dramatic unification or independence, but structured coexistence between China and Taiwan. Taiwan must retain its autonomy. Beijing must reaffirm the "one China" principle without pressing for timelines. And both must keep open the channels for dialogue, trade and maritime safety.

Asia wants a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question and strategic breathing space. It wants preventive stability – a structure that deters conflict, upholds the status quo, and protects the core interests of all sides: Beijing's political position, Taiwan's autonomy, and the region's peace.

The real endgame is not finality, but restraint and forbearance – a framework of coexistence, supported by direct communication, strategic restraint and regional consensus.

If the United States may no longer be the system-builder it once was, China must be under no assumption that the resultant vacuum is its to fill unilaterally. Asia's strategic task is not to contain China, but to bring it into a regional structure where it is influential but not dominant, constrained by rules and committed to peace.

This is a delicate balance, but not an impossible one. It reflects what Asia truly prefers – not bloc politics, not superpower rivalry, but a multipolar order grounded in restraint, cooperation, and regional autonomy.

At the centre of this new architecture must be India-China restraint, the management of US-China tensions, maritime discipline, and institutionalised multipolarity – not defined by great power rivalry, but shaped by Asian choices. This is a future that must be built, deliberately and inclusively, on Asian terms.

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