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DEBATE | GRAND STRATEGY: INDIA AND THE WORLD

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Armoured Light Specialist Vehicle (ALSV) during the 77th Republic Day Parade at Kartavya Path in New Delhi, January 26, 2026 | Image Source: Ministry of Defence, Government of India.

***Editor's Note:** In June 2026, India's World published an essay by its Editor, Happymon Jacob, arguing that India's grand strategy should be "de-Americanised". The essay contended that New Delhi has increasingly viewed the world through a strategic framework shaped by Washington and that changing geopolitical realities call for a reassessment of those assumptions. To broaden the discussion, India's World invited five distinguished scholars and practitioners to engage with Jacob's central argument. Published over the coming weeks, these essays offer diverse perspectives on the future of India's grand strategy. In this third contribution, retired Rear Admiral of the Indian Navy **Raja Menon** takes a broader view of India's grand-strategic challenge, examining the evolution of American and Chinese grand strategy before arguing that India needs a dedicated institutional mechanism and a long-term strategic vision to formulate and implement its own response.*

For many years, there have been doubts in India's strategic community as to whether the term "grand strategy" is a recognised concept in the higher decision-making circles of the Indian armed forces, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), and the Indian National Security Council. Such doubts exist in other countries too. Against this backdrop, Happymon Jacob's paper is a welcome contribution.

The academic world, bless its heart, entered the debate rather late, claiming that the earliest authoritative work was Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987), followed by Barry Posen and Andrew Ross's *Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy* (1997), and later John Lewis Gaddis's *On Grand Strategy* (2018).

However, this author, though unpublished on grand strategy, believes that the concept evolved in the US, when George Kennan's famous telegram arrived like a bombshell in a euphoric Washington, basking in the celebrations following the Allied victory in the Second World War. The Kennan Telegram, which characterised the Soviet Union's long-term strategy as an unending fight to the death between communism and capitalism, galvanised Washington into adopting what was, in effect, the first grand strategy, although it was not described as such. Gaddis acknowledges this interpretation in the work cited above. Post-Cold War histories dispute whether US grand strategy caused the collapse of the USSR, pointing out that the USSR's internal system was so rotten that US pressure only hastened an inevitable collapse.

The man who arguably did the most to hasten the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet receives little credit, was the great thinker Andrew Marshall. In 1986, he forcefully contested the CIA's analyses that the USSR was a robust, highly efficient state spending only a sustainable 6% of GDP on defence. Marshall's Office of Net Assessment (ONA) posited that the USSR's GDP was only around 30% of that of the US.

Confronted by ONA's data, the CIA revised its estimate of Moscow's defence spending, first to 13% and eventually to 20% of GDP. Marshall also advised the White House to force the USSR into a costly arms race through the Strategic Defense Initiative (nicknamed "Star Wars"), an approach later reflected in the declassified document *Asymmetric Cost Imposition*. By 1986, the respected Soviet military leader

Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov had already conceded victory to the US. More was to follow.

In the final two years of the 20th century, the ONA insisted that China would become the US's long-term competitor, even though its GDP was only US\$1.2 trillion and it was the world's sixth-largest economy. It took five years for the US government to accept this assessment, leading to a strategic reappraisal in which a rising India came to be viewed as a key strategic partner. Ashley Tellis played a major role in this process. This, in turn, led to the inappropriately named Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement, whose broader objective was to remove, or at least dilute, the anti-India sanctions mandated under US law following India's nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998.

A grand strategy must run concurrently with a 20-year strategic vision. The first step is to create an institution responsible for formulating and implementing that vision

The nascent partnership led to the initial formation of a weak Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in 2007, strengthened subsequently on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit in 2017. A formal military alliance was deliberately omitted. However, despite lacking a NATO-style Article 5 commitment and a joint command structure, the grouping developed significant military cooperation through a series of foundational defence agreements. These included the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), to facilitate logistical support; the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), to provide secure digital communications; the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), to provide for precision targeting and intelligence; and the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Industrial Security Annex (ISA), to strengthen Indo-US defence industrial cooperation.

These agreements led to India's acquisition of C-17 Globemaster aircraft, the C-130J Super Hercules, the AH-64E Apache helicopters, the CH-47F Chinook heavy-lift helicopters, the INS Jalashwa, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, the MQ-9B SeaGuardian drones, advanced communications systems, ocean surveillance systems, M-777 howitzers, Excalibur guided shells, Javelin anti-tank missiles, AN/TPQ-37 Firefinder

radars, LM2500 marine gas turbines, MK-54 torpedoes, Hellfire missiles, and GE F414 jet engines. Together, these acquisitions enabled India to source most of its high-end systems from the US, alongside Russia, France, and Israel.

Andrew Marshall reappears here. Beginning in 2005, he sent delegations to New Delhi for five consecutive years to encourage Indian strategic planners to adopt modern scenario-building techniques. New Delhi largely ignored his advice, particularly the MEA, which should have taken ownership of this methodology. This failure left India once again surprised by China's grand strategy.

China's grand strategy is not articulated in a single document, but can be inferred from the 19th and 20th National Congress reports of the Communist Party of China, the 2015 National Strategy Guidelines, *China's National Defence in the New Era*, and the Global Security Initiative. China's formal National Security Strategy has not been made public. This author has spent considerable time deciphering its politico-military component. Three broad observations emerge.

First, India finds no mention as a threat. Second, after being ejected from Latin America, particularly in Venezuela, China's grand strategy is to dominate Africa and Eurasia through economic dependence, manufacturing, trade, infrastructure development, military assistance, financing, side-tracking the dollar, and defending all friendly regimes at the UN. Third, this strategy depends on securing unimpeded access across these regions through the Indian Ocean, and the last is to tie India down south of the Himalayan border by provoking a meaningless long-term Indo-Pakistan escalation, to "shape the environment", and forestall an offensive Indian maritime strategy to thwart its westward sweep to dominate Eurasia.

Lastly, does India have a grand strategic response? Perhaps not. Although India's GDP is US\$4.5 trillion, it does not yet have the heft to execute a grand strategy involving all arms of the government. The prime minister's *Viksit Bharat* initiative and MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) are valiant attempts.

But a grand strategy must run concurrently with a 20-year strategic vision. The first step is to create an institution responsible for formulating and implementing that vision.

In conclusion, the absence of a dedicated silo for the military component of a grand strategy is a matter of acute concern. Developing one will require a national and military debate on the subject: “Are we falling prey to Beijing’s strategy of using Pakistan as bait to catch the Indian fish?” This debate should precede the announcement and implementation of theatre commands.



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