

Foreword

For all their benign pretensions, the shadow of great power interventions has tended, on balance, to malevolence, often doing greater harm than any good that may be claimed or intended. The first two decades of the current century are testimony to the devastations wrought across the world by the hubris and folly of the world's 'sole superpower'.

There is a new bully on the block, now. China's emergence as an increasingly dominant economic, military and political force presents an open challenge to what Chinese commentators are fond of describing as the 'global hegemon', projecting both hope and fear across the world, but acutely in its own neighbourhood. China's rampaging growth and its translation into military power – a defence budget of USD 216 billion in 2021 – dwarfs the outlay of all countries in the world, with the exception of the United States – at USD 601 billion. After decades of strategic investment in the South China Sea and the Pacific region, China has established area dominance in its littoral regions and the Far East; its ambitions have now turned to the wider Asia-Pacific, with aggressive moves into the Indian Ocean Region. Critically, the future is likely to see this dominance rising, as China makes major technological advances. The country already accounts for 23 per cent of the global spending on Research and Development. Crucially, as the 'world's factory', China today has a depth and resilience that most of the nations of the world have sacrificed at the altar of quick profits.

It is crucial for the world, and particularly China's neighbours, to examine and understand the various components of the complex strategy of aggression and encirclement that Beijing is deploying. The military components of this strategy appear far more comprehensible than the insidious manoeuvres it employs in the spheres of economics, diplomacy, cyberspace, and lawfare, among others. The current volume contains two tentative explorations of China's widening intrusions into the Indian Ocean Region, and Beijing's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, as well as strategic moves in the South China Sea.

The collapse of the American 'mission' in Afghanistan has left behind a gaping vacuum, and the disordered powerplay to fill up the spaces is radiating instability beyond the country's borders. As the Taliban regime struggles to establish a modicum of order and legitimacy, the country has slipped into a gigantic humanitarian crisis which can only be addressed by a massive infusion of international aid. Unfortunately, while fitful flows provide some relief, the Taliban's own style of governance and failure to establish an inclusive system, and to concede minimal rights to women, continue to obstruct the possibilities of international recognition of the regime and a freer flow of aid.

Within the growing uncertainties of Asia, India has sought to project 'soft power', in the manifest dearth of capacities to explore any harder options. The Chagos dispute is one area where intercession by New Delhi has some potential to speed up resolution. Despite the International Court of Justice's non-binding advisory, to "complete the decolonization of Mauritius" by vacating the Archipelago, there is little movement towards removing the joint UK-US military base at Diego Garcia. It remains to be seen if a satisfactory *via media* is, in fact, attainable, and if New Delhi is able to play a significant role in securing it.

New and baffling realities are crystallizing across the world, and most national leaderships have demonstrated a persistent inability to adequately understand these, and to deal with them.

Asia has emerged as one of the most unstable regions of the world, riddled with existing and potential conflicts. If policy is to succeed in these exacting circumstances, it must be underpinned by strong research and analysis, rooted in the dynamic and rapidly transforming realities of the world around us. *Faultlines* continues with its endeavour to provide a realistic appraisal of the dynamics of an unstable and evolving world order.

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