

What Irks China?

by Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal

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It is significant that India is finally beginning to get noticed by China, but there is an even more revealing flip side to this growing attention. India is also in the cross hairs of a sustained and escalating campaign of coercive threats, outright intimidation and national disparagement at the hands of the CPC's mouthpiece *Global Times* and Chinese spokespersons. It is a different matter entirely that these stock instruments of the Chinese propaganda machine are mainly designed to impress domestic audiences and evoke resonance among overseas Chinese. The rest of the world is largely indifferent, while India is mostly unimpressed by these pronouncements which are typically shorn of diplomatic niceties. This is all the more so as China routinely blusters and reacts testily whenever it finds that it is not getting its way.

Let us pause for a moment and reflect on what it is about India that is really irking China? As a rapidly modernising, stable and consolidating democratic power with a strong leadership, India is well placed economically and geo-politically at a time of widespread global turbulence and shifting power equations. With its robust economy and energized diplomacy, India is making its presence felt both regionally and globally and its profile among the comity of nations is rising. As a pluralistic democracy with a civilizational heritage as old as that of China, India also exudes a soft power appeal that outshines the currency of material power.

So far so good. But the problem for China is that India is also increasingly steadfast in standing up for its "core interests", to borrow Beijing's terminology. It firmly resists China's boundary incursions designed to create new facts on the ground, demands respect for its sovereignty and where needed, speaks truth to China's power. Thus, India upholds a 'One China' policy but calls upon China to equally respect its 'One India' expectation. And finally, India is resisting mercantilist China's exploitation of regional trade pacts in negotiations for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

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In keeping with the growing dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues.

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
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In sum, the steady rise of democratic India is perceived by a risen communist China as a major challenge to its big power ambition of Asian dominance.

Little surprise, then, that after pursuing various targets in East and Southeast Asia, India is the current focus of China's salami slicing tactics of regional assertion.

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Chinese official spokespersons on a host of issues, from bilateral relations to regional initiatives, global issues to strategic concerns. On the unilateral assertion of Chinese interests, the tone is overwhelmingly one of coercion. On accommodating India's interests on global issues and regimes, it is one of evasion and obstruction. And at the national level, there is arrant belittlement of India. The overall message is clear. China is a great power and India is just an inferior power which must learn its place in the Asian pecking order, behave "appropriately" and hold its peace.

Consider the following statements from the *Global Times*:

- “If New Delhi ruins the Sino-India ties and the two countries turn into open rivals, can India afford the consequences?”¹
- “If China engages in a geo-political game with India, will Beijing lose to New Delhi?”²
- “If the Indians indulge in the obsession of intruding on the territorial integrity of China, China will not sit still.”³
- “Even the US would have to think twice before it messes with China on such sensitive problems, so what makes India so confident that it could manage?”⁴
- “India stands out as a provocateur.”⁵

- “US backing adds the biggest impetus to India's ambition.”⁶
- “Western world is giving too many thumbs up to India, but thumbs down to China. India is spoilt.”⁷
- “Since modern times, the Indians have enjoyed unity bestowed by the British.”⁸

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This is the language of a neighbourhood bully, hardly that of a self-confident super power. China appears to have mistakenly convinced itself that India, its democratic leadership and its 1.3

billion citizens can be easily browbeaten and subjugated. The answer to that expectation lies in fact with India, but there is clearly insufficient awareness in China of India's determination and resilience. The Indian Government does not need a “Great Firewall” to protect itself from its citizens.

China's grand strategic vision for Asian dominance

China's grand strategic vision of its “rejuvenation” as a major Asian and global power, which underlies its concept of the “Chinese dream”, has the following components:

- The redressal of “past humiliations” and “recovery” of so-called “lost territories” by the CCP's centenary in 2021.
- Creating a neo-tributary system along its strategic periphery, which the Chinese term as their “strategic frontier”. This strategic frontier also includes a maritime dimension.
- Completion of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategically-oriented geo-economic initiative by the country's 100th anniversary in 2049, shaping China's political and economic frontiers to its strategic advantage and firmly establishing China as a major global power.

China's leaders realize that to achieve this ambition, which is essentially aimed at establishing and perpetuating China's regional hegemony, three conditions are necessary:

- China will need to effectively control both continental and maritime domains from Eurasia to the Indo-Pacific rimland. OBOR is designed to progress this goal.
- China must neutralize all possible rivals, either through military and political containment or a “neo-tributary system” in which they acquiesce to China’s power and prominence.
- To impart legitimacy to Chinese power, hegemony must reflect a benign character.

Seen in this context, the following objectives become important for the Chinese leadership as critical components of China’s strategic future:

- Militarisation and control of the South China Sea, expansion of Chinese influence in ASEAN as well as along China’s South Asian periphery. Thus, the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean Region constitute a seamless whole in the Chinese perspective.
- The goal of neutralizing rivals, where China faces challenges as this is dependent on a number of scenarios essentially linked to the nature of future US commitment to allies and strategic partners in the Asia Pacific, as also the nature of burden sharing among various coalitions of major and significant Asian powers. A “concert of powers” scenario with the US as a resident power or an offshore balancer can upset China’s ambitions.
- On the issue of “legitimacy” of Chinese power, China faces obvious constraints. Its only regional

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allies are an unstable Pakistan and an unpredictable North Korea. Besides, the Chinese tendency is to prioritise “leadership-to-leadership” over people-to-people contacts; that is where

its charm offensive rests. At the same time, China is fully exploiting its considerable economic leverage to create strong internal lobbies among elite groups and businesses, which it mobilises to direct national agendas to favour China.

Impact of Emerging India

An analysis of recent Chinese statements and commentaries reveals a high degree of paranoia and an attempt to coerce India from progressing strategic partnerships which enable India’s rise, among which India-Japan and India-US relations are of greatest concern to Beijing. The presently

ongoing barrage of Chinese tirades can also be attributed to their leadership’s belief that the current strategic environment is favourable, particularly as the full contours of the Trump Administration’s Asia Pacific policy as they relate to India are yet to emerge. As a country with no formal alliance relationships, India is perhaps seen as the weakest link in the chain among major powers neighbouring China and hence a suitable candidate for coercion.

It would also appear from Chinese statements that India, which was by and large ignored as an internally inchoate and economically and militarily weak nation, has come to be seen as a potential challenger that can undermine Chinese ambitions as India begins to shape its own regional and broader Asian strategic environment. That India, with its growing economic heft and military as well as strategic power, can leverage partnerships with the US, Japan, Australia and others, is clearly disconcerting to the Chinese.

China has to deal with yet another potent factor: a dynamic and self-confident Indian leadership which enjoys strong public support nationwide and is also firm about upholding India’s strategic interests. India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly emphasized to his Chinese counterparts that “to ensure durable bilateral ties and their steady development, it is of paramount importance that we respect each other’s aspirations, concerns and strategic interests.”

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Despite its long-term vision, China is largely tactical in action. The Chinese leadership believes that given the asymmetry of comprehensive national power, China can overawe India and make it fall in line. But by opposing India’s rise and presence at the global high table, China is in fact using up its ultimate leverage. That this game plan does not appear to be working with India, which can still access broad-based global support and has even been

treated as an exceptional power by the NSG, is a source of consternation for China.

China is unlikely to relent on its coercive pressure upon India, even though it may lower the ante once in a while through conciliatory statements and gestures, before returning to the familiar pattern.

However, China’s preferred tool today is its capacity to shape the opinions and discourse among India’s strategic community. In the recent past, China has relentlessly pursued inducements through think tank dialogues to cultivate this community and influence the public discourse in China’s favour. The most recent example is its campaign to induce Indian think tanks to register for “Belt and Road” related initiatives and enjoy access to China-sponsored junkets.

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We can only hope that the Indian strategic community will not fall for the bait. It would be a mistake to underestimate India’s own capabilities and become unnecessarily defensive. The key questions that we would like to pose to our counterparts are whether Indian policymaking should be subordinated to Beijing’s interests, and whether the response to unwarranted Chinese criticism should be

even greater deference to China. That has been the favoured default option of our traditional China watchers in the past and has brought no dividends.

Suggested policy response⁹

Indian policymakers need to bear in mind that China respects only the strength and consistency of power. China’s pursuit of “core interests” cannot be influenced or mitigated by economic or other extraneous considerations.

India seeks neither rivalry nor confrontation with China. It has pursued comprehensive engagement with China based on the belief that there is enough strategic space in Asia to support the phenomenal rise of China and accommodate the accelerating rise of India. India must continue to enhance its diplomatic and political engagement with China while at the same time unequivocally upholding India’s interests and establishing clear red lines.

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Giving refuge to His Holiness the Dalai Lama (HHDL) in 1959 remains among the most significant humanitarian actions by independent India, worthy of its ancient heritage. That the Chinese seek to create artificial controversies around HHDL’s religious and spiritual activities and visits to various states of India is regrettable. If we value our sovereignty, under no circumstances should we be beholden to China for allowing us to exercise the normal functions of a sovereign state within India’s constitutionally defined territory.

India has already taken a resolute stand in opposing Chinese projects in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and the Northern Territories, including CPEC. On “Belt and Road”, we must continue to seek greater clarity on China’s political, economic and security objectives, which has so far not been forthcoming.

India needs to take urgent steps to check the growing asymmetry with China in terms of military power. Even as we work to narrow the gap in conventional power, there is need to enhance India's strategic deterrence to restrain aggressive behaviour.

“India needs to take urgent steps to check the growing asymmetry with China in terms of military power.”

“...India must redouble efforts to progress strategic and security partnerships with the rimland states of the Indo-Pacific ...”

Finally, apart from strengthening its own strategic periphery, India must redouble efforts to progress strategic and security partnerships with the rimland states of the Indo-Pacific and play a

proactive role in the pursuit of a cooperative regional security architecture and rules based order.

Endnotes:

¹ 'India's use of Dalai Lama card tactless', *Global Times*, April 6, 2017

² *ibid.*

³ Xu Liang, 'Tibet meddlers must face consequences', *Global Times*, February 9, 2017.

⁴ Wen Dao, 'New Delhi overreaches to meddle in China's core interests', *Global Times*, December 21, 2016.

⁵ Yu Ning, 'New Delhi will suffer losses if it plays Taiwan card', *Global Times*, February 14, 2017.

⁶ 'Delhi's NSG bid upset by rules, not Beijing', *Global Times*, June 28, 2016

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Xu Liang, 'Tibet meddlers must face consequences', *Global Times*, February 9, 2017.

⁹ The authors' suggestions on India's response are limited to the context of this Policy Note and not intended to be comprehensive in their coverage of India-China relations.

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