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(Photographs top to bottom)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping hold Delegation level talks during the Chennai informal Summit in Mamallapuram on October 12, 2019. Source: MEA

General Wei Fenghe, Minister of Defence of China, speaking at the IISS Shangri La Dialogue on June 02, 2019. Source: IISS/Flickr

The DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile made its first public appearance at the military parade marking the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Source: New York Times

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India-China Tensions Amidst Asymmetry: A Strategic Perspective

by

Arun Sahgal and Hemant Krishan Singh

Introduction

India-China relations continue to be tense and strained, despite Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping having met seventeen times, including at two informal summits held at Wuhan last year and more recently at Mamallapuram. Both informal summits took place against the backdrop of brewing bilateral tensions. The Wuhan meeting came after the Doklam crisis, when a major faceoff took place between Chinese and Indian forces in a third country, Bhutan. The informal Summit near Chennai was held amidst growing strains in bilateral relations over the abrogation of Article 370 in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and Chinese claims of India violating its territorial sovereignty in Tibet. It is clear China's hyperventilation on this issue and forcing an informal Security Council meeting on the situation in J&K were both attempts to weigh in on the side of its proxy Pakistan, which has been vitiating the regional situation over J&K. Interestingly, even the formal announcement of the Mamallapuram meeting was delayed upto the last minute, presumably on the pretext of a long planned Indian military exercise taking place over 100 Kms from the Line of Actual Control in India's Northeast.

It is clear that China continues to put coercive pressure on India to countervail India's regional and global status. It blocks India's entry in major international forums. Even India's entry into the SCO was forced by Russia as a quid pro quo to Pakistan's sponsorship by China. Fundamentally, China looks upon India's rise as a prospective challenge. In its perception, a rising India as part of a US-led containment strategy can create an adverse balance of power in Asia, especially as a period of strategic stability in Asia is ending and competitive turbulence lies ahead.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping hold Delegation level talks during the Chennai informal Summit in Mamallapuram on October 12, 2019.

Source: MEA

Under the circumstances, the broader Chinese aim appears to be to put in place a containment strategy against the most pivotal Asian power (India), whose economic and political rise will have a serious impact on China's regional and global influence, undermining its dream of Chinese dominance in an Asian Century. Thus, the challenge for India in developing a China policy lies in understanding the emerging contours of this geopolitical competition in Asia, and even more importantly, how the current asymmetry of economic and military power between India and China is being leveraged by China to delay and undermine India's rise. This paper examines these issues and concludes with some policy options for re-shaping India's China policy.

Emerging Contours of Strategic Competition in Asia

The international order is in transition. A great game is underway in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. Russia and China straddle the continental space, with China increasingly mounting a challenge for domination of the maritime space, where the four Quad democracies are major actors. As the US-China rivalry intensifies, both sides appear to be readying for protracted competition in which neither is prepared to lose. An amicable readjustment of great power equations appears increasingly remote.

The growing intensity of this competition is underlined by the emergence of US strategic doctrines indicating a major policy shift aimed at reassertion of US power and influence and creating favourable balances in the economic, military and technological domains to meet the challenge posed by a revisionist China. This is now discernible in the weaponisation of economic and military tools at its disposal, including a technology denial regime.

On the other hand, to counter this aggressive American stance, China is hardening its regional stance by signalling full spectrum confrontation with the US. China's posture was outlined at the Shangri-La Dialogue on June 1-2, 2019 where the Chinese Defence Minister pulled no punches in highlighting that Beijing will hold its ground, retaliate against any interference in its domestic affairs and continue its march toward shaping an Asia Pacific community in its own image¹.



General Wei Fenghe, Minister of Defence of China, speaking at the IISS Shangri La Dialogue on June 02, 2019. Source: IISS/Flickr

¹ Chinese Defense Minister Strikes a Defiant Tone at Shangri-La Dialogue, defense news June 03, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2019/06/03/chinese-defense-minister-strikes-defiant-tone-at-shangri-la-dialogue/>.

Chinese policy elites are coming around to the view that regardless of the progress in trade talks with the US, China should “lose all illusions of an affable relationship with the US and prepare for a protracted confrontation”.² China has begun to build strategic leverages for this scenario. First among these is growing Sino-Russian collaboration. This was most visible at the SCO Summit in Bishkek, where Russia reaffirmed the significance of the “Alliance of the East” as a counter to the US-led order. Equally, there is an attempt to create a “collective awakening” of the emerging economies, through calls for a fairer world order to protect their rights and interests. China has proposed a “New Type of Rules Based multilateral trade initiative” to counter US protectionism, no doubt based on Chinese characteristics. China is incrementally gaining influence in ASEAN, riding on the breakdown of the fabled ASEAN consensus and driven by political and economic influence gained from the BRI. A perception of the US being an “ambivalent power” that can do limited balancing but not influencing is helping China increase its regional salience.

Implications of Strategic Competition

It remains to be seen how this China-US competition plays out. Within the US, there is a bipartisan consensus that China is a revisionist power bent on displacing the US in the Indo-Pacific. China on the other hand recognises that relations with the US will be marked by both confrontation and cooperation, with little likelihood of course correction post 2021, whosoever be the new occupant³ of the White House.

It is important to underscore that China is a formidable peer competitor, which has developed credible military and political power, backed by economic and technological equities, to stake its claim as a predominant power broker and security provider in Asia. It will continue to pursue a strategy seeking accommodation of China’s regional interests through coercive influencing as well as BRI/MSR strategic projects across Asia.

Meanwhile, growing Chinese military power is creating a major asymmetry, at least among China’s regional competitors/potential challengers. It is building a strong dissuasive posture based on advanced technologies outlined in its “Technology Mission 2025” and showcased at its 70th Anniversary Military Parade. The PLA leadership believes that its Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) capability can deal with any American challenge, including in the Taiwan Straits. Similarly, militarisation of the South China Sea is part of a regional strategy for domination of critical SLOCs and to support the PLAN’s

² DPG China Monitor, Volume 2, Issue 5, May 2019, pp3

³ China at 70 – The Growing Pains of Rising Power, Prof Xie Tao, Diplomat Oct 2019.

“Look West” policy for future power projection in the IOR, deemed central to its resource security and trade. China is developing strong pivots that can be used as springboards for exerting military control over critical choke points in the Indian Ocean, such as Hambantota, Gwadar and Djibouti. China believes it has developed credible strategic and asymmetric capability to deal with American attempts at military coercion in any domain.

This implies that the stakes in the US-China competition are escalating, and the possibility of a military standoff, through miscalculation or otherwise, leading to a deterrence breakdown remains high.



The DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile made its first public appearance at the military parade marking the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Source: New York Times

India's Dilemma

The reality is that India is inexorably being drawn into this competition. It is seen by China as part of a US-led Indo-Pacific strategy whose explicit purpose is China containment. As the US-China confrontation gets aggravated into a full spectrum challenge, India will get entrapped in multiple directions. There can be little question that the US perceives India as an important partner and quasi-ally in meeting the Chinese challenge. It looks upon India as central to containing China's continental challenge, while also maintaining a credible

maritime balance in the Indian Ocean⁴. In return, India is being offered the most advanced US technologies that will help build India's dissuasive military capability, and more importantly integrate India into a US-led Indo-Pacific security system.

Even as India harbours concerns about an assertive China, there is a general aversion to adopting an openly confrontational policy. New Delhi also does not wish to be seen as a junior US partner or a counter weight to China. It is loathe to lose its strategic independence and manoeuvrability.

Chinese Strategy of India Neutralisation: "Deterrence without Competition"

Notwithstanding India's hesitation, China looks upon India as a second-tier power but nonetheless a player in the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, whose military capability is being supported by the US. Under the circumstances, India is regarded as a potential adversary whose unfettered economic and military rise can pose a challenge to China, particularly in the midterm and beyond. This is compounded by India's increasingly aspirational strategic outlook and growing alignment with power balancing partnerships in the Indo-Pacific like the Quad.

India's unique geographic location straddling the maritime space of the Indian Ocean exposes a vulnerability that can undermine China's attempts to dominate the IOR SLOCs. As India builds its Comprehensive National Power, displays growing confidence, and addresses its military asymmetry with China, this vulnerability will only deepen.

Realising this prospect, China has adopted a strategy of "Neutralization" of India, or "Deterrence without Competition". The involves soft balancing through engagement with India on all outstanding issues that bedevil the relationship, carrying forward the Wuhan spirit and underplaying the boundary dispute while maintaining coercive pressure through frequent and targeted border violations and intrusions, third country coercion through its proxy and blocking India in global institutions and regimes. The scenario is akin to the sanctions and technology denial regimes which the US is attempting to impose on its adversaries.

This Chinese strategy of coercion is far from subtle. Its contours include growing and open Sino-Pakistan collusion through major strategic, economic

⁴ CNAS Report "Imbalance of Power: India's Military Choices in an Era of Strategic Competition with China", October 2019

and military/technological support, with CPEC as the vehicle. It also involves leveraging Pakistan's nuclear capability in posing a two-front challenge to India. Other manifestations include the creation of strategic land bridges connecting South West China (Yunnan) with the Bay of Bengal through oil and transportation pipelines and corridors, and leveraging infrastructure investments under BRI to enhance China's presence in Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean, assistance in building Pakistan's naval capability, naval presence astride the Makran Coast near the critical waterways leading from the Persian Gulf to Indian Ocean, and inroads in Island nations are all part of a concerted strategy to project power and dominate the IOR. This incremental buildup is akin to the salami slicing tactics China has pursued in the South China Sea.

It is, therefore, important for Indian policy makers to understand that despite attempts at improving relations, China is likely to continue with its policy of external balancing through proxies and influence operations to assert primacy in our strategic neighbourhood. India's economic rise and military buildup will inevitably be seen as posing a strategic challenge to China.

India's Response

Despite a clear understanding of the looming Chinese threat, there is little consensus within India's policy discourse on how to meet the challenge. The prevailing thinking is that given the preponderant power differential, it is in India's interest to engage China, lower tensions and build a sustainable relationship. The policy objective thus is that despite China's coercive attitude, India must be driven by pragmatic considerations.

From Wuhan to Mamallapuram, the aim has been to maintain political resilience, while preventing differences from becoming disputes. There are three core objectives of India's China policy: one, the periodic sharing of perceptions and concerns to help maintain stability and viability of the relationship; second, prudent management of relations by building trust and sensitivity towards each other's concerns; and third, strengthening confidence building measures to maintain peace and tranquillity along the border while pressing for the resolution of the lingering boundary dispute.

Notwithstanding this commendable approach and continued attempts to develop a roadmap for deeper India-China cooperation, China's aggressive intent and overbearing posture undermine prospects for any tangible improvement in the relationship. Periodic informal summits help in clarifying

perceptions to prevent a deterioration in relations, but the objective reality is that strategic distrust persists. Take the example of the recent informal meeting between PM Modi and President Xi Jinping. A look at the broad outcomes highlights the differences in perceptions which are unlikely to go away:

- a. China asserts the need to maintain cordial bilateral relations from a long term perspective (100 year plan) in a clear signal of a step-by-step approach, without any commitment or impetus for resolving outstanding issues. Implication: bilateral relations will be tailored by China on its perception of India's rise and the growth of its comprehensive national power in relation to China's own military, economic and political interests.
- b. Trade relations and investments are seen as an important construct of relations; however, there is little or no attempt to bring about changes either in trade policies or the opening of China's markets to Indian goods and services. The result is that the trade imbalance persists in China's favour. Agreeing to establish a High Level Mechanism to resolve these issues is no doubt a positive development, but as we have seen in the case of the Special Representatives on the Boundary Issue, negotiations are strung along with little or no tangible outcomes. The concern is that this mechanism too will end up as an exercise in delay and obfuscation. India should draw lessons from the RCEP fiasco: China's preemptory rejection of India's concerns to push through a RCEP agreement that is neither fair nor balanced from our perspective. While remaining open to trade and improving trade competitiveness, we must ensure that Indian manufacturers are not exposed to unfair competition from a mercantilist China, including by regulating imports in conformity with domestic and international standards.
- c. On the boundary issue, even as both sides have reiterated the need to maintain peace and tranquillity on the border, there was nevertheless no commitment on the early resolution of the dispute, which is being used by China as coercive leverage.



Prime Minister attends the 16th India-ASEAN Summit in Bangkok November 03, 2019.

Source: ASEAN

In addition to the above uncertainties, India also has to be concerned about other issues which have serious bilateral repercussions:

- a. There is a clear shift in the Chinese approach towards Jammu & Kashmir, with China's leaders and diplomacy weighing in decisively on Pakistan's side.
- b. Opening up of a Ladakh front, with Chinese statements claiming that the new Union Territory impinges on China's sovereignty.
- c. The post-Dalai Lama scenario, an issue which is rarely discussed but remains a ticking time bomb, particularly against the backdrop of China's failure to manage its restive minorities in Tibet or Xinjiang.

India's China Policy

India clearly needs to be concerned about China's assertive and increasingly bellicose posture, despite India's attempts to maintain stable and co-operative relations. There is some emerging thinking among a section of India's national security establishment that China is unwilling to share strategic space with India and will continue its policy of coercive intimidation, backed by a military

buildup in Tibet and across India's neighbourhood, including by using Pakistan's military and nuclear capacities as leverage for India containment.

Taking cognisance of the fact that its current policy towards China has not really worked, India needs to develop a more robust approach based on two central pillars: enhancing its comprehensive national power (CNP) to develop a hard balancing posture; and leveraging external balancing.

A three pronged China policy is recommended. First and foremost is military capability enhancement to reduce the asymmetry by strengthening the overall defence posture, both in the continental and maritime domains. This needs to be a whole of government approach and not merely a defence issue. The lag in prioritisation of procurement policies and dithering on capital acquisitions must give way to developing a 15 Year perspective plan with clearly delineated time lines to meet the twin challenges of China and its collusion with Pakistan. Decisions on force upgradation and capability enhancement must be strategic and not process driven. The political leadership must weigh in to ensure there is no derailment.

Second, rethink military strategy vis-a-vis China. Our current strategy is based on what can be termed as a "credible defensive posture", based on territorial defence. It encompasses a quid pro quo strategy, wherein intrusions into Indian territory are proposed to be evicted or responded to by limited operations in prescribed areas, the essential element being managing escalation levels and preventing conflict. There is a case for a shift from the present policy to one of "Credible Response", based on denying the PLA the ability to project power, and raising costs of military intervention, akin to China's own "area denial strategy" in East Asia⁵. In short, India needs to develop a credible "dissuasive defence strategy", clearly establishing high costs for any military misadventure. Importantly, such a strategy will also act as dissuasive deterrence against Pakistan.

Thirdly, the policy of external balancing. It is important to recognise that China looks upon India's assertions of its Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific vision as an attempt to carve out a military role in concert with the US. There is a growing perception within China that India's grand strategy is to dominate the Indian Ocean in collaboration with US, European and Quad partners.

⁵ Brig Arun Sahgal (Retd), Indian Military in Transformation – Combat Potential and Military Capabilities vis-a-vis China, in ORF, Defence Primer, An Indian Military in Transition, Edited by Pushan Das and Harsh Pant, 2018, pp 66



India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting on side-lines of the UNGA Summit on September 26, 2019. Source: MEA

In the above context, India must further develop its strategic relations with the US as a counter leverage to Chinese designs to contain India. This is India's most consequential partnership, given the convergence in their outlook on the need to maintain stable balances in the Indo-Pacific. From the Indian standpoint, the core issue in the medium term is to build a strong "Indian Ocean and South Asian Deterrence Framework" that supports the buildup of strong military power deterrence. This will require an ideational realignment in US thinking from an Asia Pacific mindset to recognise the emerging challenges in the Indian Ocean⁶. The importance of this framework lies in preventing the hegemony of a single power and upholding a regional rules based order in the western theatre of the Indo-Pacific.

⁶ See statement by Admiral John Aquilino, US Pacific Fleet Commander, in New Delhi on October 29, 2019 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-a-threat-to-nations-in-indo-pacific-region-warns-top-us-navy-commander/articleshow/71809794.cms?utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=iPadapp&utm_source=email

Conclusion

Despite frequent interactions at the highest levels, China is manifestly reluctant to accommodate India's rise as a pivotal power, both regionally and in the broader Indo-Pacific. After 70 years, bilateral relations remain tentative, tense and mired in strategic distrust.

Clearly, India's approach of lowering tensions with China and building a sustainable relationship based on pragmatic engagement without compromising on its core interests has not worked.

While continuing to manage its relations with China prudently, the best course for India is to pursue a strategy of building its comprehensive national power to address the current power asymmetry, seek countervailing partnerships with the US and other like-minded countries, and put in place cooperative security architecture to uphold regional balances and a rules based order. China will no doubt complain, but the only currency it understands is that of muscular power politics. If India holds back, it will pay a heavy price for its traditional China policy which has failed to deliver.



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