

# The Increasing Assertiveness of Xi Jinping in Chinese Policy and its Implications for India

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The 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was held from October 18-24, 2017, in Beijing, People's Republic of China (PRC). Not surprisingly, it generated a lot of interest in the world media and in diplomatic circles in many countries. As expected, the General Secretary of the CPC's Central Committee Xi Jinping, who is also the President of the PRC, was re-elected as the CPC's Party chief for a second term, and also remained Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), of which he had earlier been Vice-Chairman from 2010-13. Wearing the three most important hats in China, he has become virtually China's 'supreme leader' or 'paramount leader', and his re-election has made him the current Chinese strongman.

Though he had been elected as a compromise candidate in his first term, his leadership in his previous term, in which he coined his term "the Chinese Dream", appeared to resonate favourably with the Chinese people. His anti-corruption drive against the systemic corruption which had engulfed the Chinese economy and the bureaucracy, was a necessary step in his attempt to strengthen China, which meant bringing both the economy and the bureaucracy back into line.

The decentralisation of the previous three decades, while it undoubtedly gave a boost to the economy, also created a culture of mass-scale corruption at all levels of the bureaucracy and within the CPC itself. A continuing decrease in the rate of growth of the Chinese economy needed central intervention to control, and to steer towards reform on the supply side. This requires a bureaucracy that is compliant and honest. Also, his not cracking down on corruption would have threatened the Communist Party's legitimacy, and, eventually, the stability of the present Chinese system.

As the new and undisputed Chinese strongman, Xi Jinping has been able to add his name to the new thought process that has been enshrined after the 19th Party Congress: "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era". The two strategic goals, termed the "two centennial goals" that he has propounded are:

- wiping out poverty by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC; and
- turning China into a fully-developed nation by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC.

The second goal is to be achieved in two stages, whereby the first stage is for the CPC to lead China to "basically realize socialist modernization" by 2035, to use Xi Jinping's own words, and a second stage from 2035 to 2050, wherein China will become a leading global power. In his own words, "The Chinese nation will stand with a more high-spirited image in the family of nations."

It is expected that, continuing the process of increasing international activity shown by China during Xi Jinping's first term as Party Secretary, the PRC will become a more proactive international player. This is likely to be in all fields of activity, whether commercial, at multilateral fora as on climate change, or military, such as in the establishment of military bases around the world. Already, China is financially supporting regimes abroad, such as Pakistan, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, building a new capital for Egypt, and a new canal for Nicaragua. Though primarily intended for China's own financial gains, the vision of the two new great transportation links, intended to connect China to Africa, Central Asia and Europe, the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" and the "Silk Road Economic Belt", will increase Chinese economic presence over a large part of the world. Together also known as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), it is the largest transportation and economic project ever attempted.

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How is all this likely to impact India? Attempting to answer this question needs to take into account another major parallel development in China: the recent major military reforms and their attendant timeline. Xi Jinping as the Chairman of the CMC has been personally instrumental in ramming an ongoing series of reforms down the throats of the

People's Liberation Army (PLA), the name for the entire armed forces of the PRC. Since these military reforms have been the subject of many seminars and some articles in the Indian military and its publications, these need not be gone into detail here. But the timeline is worth noting. Though this modernisation started in the 1980s, the stated purpose of the current comprehensive restructuring is:

- becoming a 'Great Power' by 2049;
- with an aim of enhancing its regional preeminence;
- by investing in power projection capabilities;
- while strengthening deterrence through its PLA Rocket Force, the renamed erstwhile "Second Artillery".

China's military aim for the period up to 2049 is undoubtedly an assured second-strike capability against the USA, for which it is developing long-range precision strike weapons. The PLA's strategic culture is offensive, embracing not only direct kinetic force weapons, but all possible technological means. It will employ strategic 'chequerboard' moves, along with surprise and deception. Its present doctrine, as has been stated in the recent Chinese White Papers, is: "Limited War Under Conditions of Informationization". Within this, all the tactical objectives are considered to be 'strategic', and short, lightning wars are advocated. Great emphasis is being laid on modern mobility for power projection around China's periphery.

The implications for India of the military modernisation is the threat inherent in the emerging new profile of the PLA. Its new ability to prosecute 'local wars' with maximum synergy and jointness among all elements of military power, along with its proactive stance, poses a serious threat to India. Even though overtaking the USA's military power may be the PLA's long-term challenge, given its doctrine and policy, decoding China's intent in specific circumstances has become a serious challenge for India.

The second factor that India needs to take note of is that Xi Jinping has shown no tendency to be impressed by India's present Prime Minister's warm approach

to China, and has shown that he is quite willing to allow the PLA to stage military confrontations whenever it feels necessary. Incidents of military standoffs in 2017 have occurred on the undelimited Sino-Indian border area in Ladakh, as well on Bhutanese territory near the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction on the Doklam plateau. That the latter was seemingly resolved without

force was probably more a temporary reprieve for India, a mutual withdrawal creating a better diplomatic gesture just before a Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) Summit being held in China from September 03-05, 2017.

A third factor that has implications for India is China's disregard for international conventions that do not suit its own views. China's 2016 rejection of the decision of the International Court of Arbitration on the Philippine's complaint regarding China's building of artificial island bases in the South China Sea is a case in point. As China makes itself stronger, its actions show that it mostly believes in the principle of 'might is right'. In the South China, East China and Yellow Seas, China is trying to seize islands and close off international water.

A fourth implication is China's double standards in criticising India's military and strategic relationship with the USA, while it makes no complaints regarding Pakistan's military relationship with the USA. Carried to extremes, China could use this as an excuse to start outright hostilities with India at a time and place of its own choosing, even for the reason of diverting its own public from internal problems.

The last and most serious implication is China's fairly new emphasis on its so-called 'historic' claim to Arunachal Pradesh, which it renamed in 2006 as 'South Tibet' (*Nanzang*, sometimes also transliterated as *Zang Nan* and *Zangnan*). It has recently, in 2017 itself, renamed some of the place names in common use with new ones in Mandarin. According to China's state-run *Global Times* tabloid: "The Chinese Civil Affairs Ministry had 'standardised in Chinese characters, Tibetan and Roman alphabets the names of six places in *South Tibet*, which India calls 'Arunachal Pradesh', in accordance with the regulations of the State Council." The PRC continues to issue diplomatic notes objecting to the visits of senior political functionaries to the state on official visits. Visits by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to his own lamaistic Buddhist followers for religious ceremonies draw the PRC's maximum ire.

The Chinese claim to most of Arunachal Pradesh is based on its contention that Tibet has 'historically' been part of China, of which supposedly all of

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Arunachal Pradesh is part. There is no doubt that in the Kameng area, the local Buddhist monasteries sent financial contributions to the ecclesiastic Tibetan government at Lhasa, and that there were Tibetan priestly and some lay officials. But this was only in the Kameng region, not all over most of Arunachal Pradesh. In stating specific dates, it claims that Tibet has been part of China since the Yuan Dynasty, which ruled China from 1271 to 1361 CE. The Yuan Dynasty, however, is the name for the first foreign dynasty which conquered and ruled all of 'mainland China', i.e., the Han heartland, right down to the South China Sea. In other words, during that dynasty, China had itself been part of a foreign empire, that of the Mongols. The Yuan Dynasty was specifically the period of Mongol rule over all of Han China. Tibet was only part of the Mongol Empire of the time in a limited way, because the Emperor, Kublai Khan, the grandson of Chinghis Khan, had adopted Tibetan Buddhism himself and made it the state religion. He had declared a 'priest-patron' relationship between his Sino-Mongol Empire and the priesthood of Tibet, declaring himself to be the 'protector' and 'patron' of Tibet and of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibet remained self-administered by its non-secular monk-run government during the entire period. During the Ming Empire which ruled thereafter, from 1368 to 1644 CE, Tibet was not part of China, as is shown on Chinese Ming-era maps. The 'priest-patron' relationship between the Chinese Emperor and Tibet was again revived when the foreign Manchus of Manchuria conquered all of Han China, since the Manchus themselves were followers of Tibetan lamaistic Buddhism. The Manchus were the second foreign dynasty to conquer all of Han China, and named their Chinese-Manchurian Empire as under the Qing Dynasty, which ruled from 1644 until 1911. It is clear, therefore, that Tibet was in a limited way, an appendage of the only two foreign dynasties to rule all of China. That Manchuria itself is no longer a 'foreign' country for the PRC, since it was absorbed into China by force during the civil war between the Guomindang (or 'Kuomintang') Republic of China and the CCP, which lasted from 1927 to 1950, is besides the point. Tibet was never part of any Han Chinese government.

What, then, could be the best course for India to follow? Since China respects only hard power and not soft words, India will be wise to invest a higher percentage of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in increasing its military capabilities, particularly in the air and at sea. The gradual decline in actual combat power in the air, as the number of combat squadrons declines, needs to be addressed urgently. Though it is a fact that not all of the PLA Air Force's combat strength of 2,100 aircraft can be brought to bear at any given time against India, primarily

due to problems of logistical basing in Tibet, declining Indian capability is, nevertheless, a worrying factor. Even more worrying is the neglect of Indian-made combat aircraft production capability and the continuing dependence upon foreign imports. China has, by reverse-engineering and otherwise, built up its own design and production capability of all types of necessary Air Force aircraft, from fighters to military cargo aircraft. It is not dependent on imports of foreign military aircraft.

China has also gone in for a rapid and massive expansion of its naval fleet, and is expected to have made major progress by 2020. It hopes to be able to win an “informationised war” at sea by 2025, with its aim of both quality and quantity in its rapidly expanding naval combat fleet. It is expanding both its surface combatants and its submarine arm, and 75 percent of its destroyers are now modern warships. Its total tonnage is a good indicator of its current blue water capability, and this is where India needs to keep up, because of its implications for India’s naval situation in the Indian Ocean. China’s aircraft carrier arm is gradually being created, and since aircraft carriers are still the major combatants for power projection, India will need to carefully keep track of this development. There is still a window of opportunity for India in the maritime arena, since an aircraft carrier arm takes a number of years to operationalise. It will still be some time before any India-China military confrontation along the mountain interface can be influenced by the presence of Chinese naval aircraft off the Indian coastline.

Strategic reach in the Indian Ocean is another area which needs improvement. China has embarked upon a policy of naval bases abroad, with Djibouti and Gwadar being examples. India would be well advised to think of a land-based strategic bomber arm with the ability to reach, without mid-air refuelling, the Straits of Wetar and of Ombai (together, the Straits of Ombai-Wetar, off the northern coast of East Timor), the only straits connecting the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean through which nuclear submarines can transit submerged. Based in southern peninsular India, such aircraft would be able to reach not only Ombai-Wetar, but also the Straits of Bab-el-Mandab and Hormuz. Such strategic bombers will need to be supersonic, to reach the required areas fast enough. They will also need to be equipped with the latest in avionics for 360 degree situational awareness, and armed with over-the-horizon, beyond-visual-range weaponry of both anti-shipping and anti-submarine capability.

Lastly, and most critically, India needs to improve its defensive capabilities along its disputed mountain frontiers with China. The so-called ‘boundary

dispute' is only an external symptom of a deeper disease, which is the conflicting territorial claims of the two countries. Since China claims most of Arunachal Pradesh, this is the main disputed region, while the disputed Aksai Chin region in Ladakh is already mostly held by China since the 1962 War. The Kameng region, which comprises three districts of western Arunachal Pradesh, including the monastery town of Tawang, which China makes a prestige issue of, is perhaps well-defended. But the rest of Arunachal Pradesh needs more attention, including Upper Assam which is the logistical rear area for this large region. The rear depth area in Upper Assam would perhaps be better administered logistically by the recreation of a logistical formation headquarters for this region, which had earlier existed during World War II. This headquarters would, of course, come under the Corps Headquarters controlling the specific corps zone.

A realisation of the implications of Xi Jinping's assertiveness in the geopolitical sphere, and urgency in creating the necessary hard power safeguards would stand India in good stead in the years ahead.

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