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# China's Approach Towards India: Recent Trends

Rameshwar Roy

Countries that are economically interdependent are disposed to behaving peacefully towards one another, more so than they would in the absence of such interdependence. This is the view that Immanuel Kant articulated in what has subsequently become a widely applauded thesis. When applied to China, the Kantian peace thesis holds that China's increasing integration with the global economy is placing the country in a situation of ever expanding economic interdependence.<sup>1</sup> The implication of the Kantian thesis for Chinese policy-making is that its leadership has little room for choosing options other than to seek compromise and agreement with its economic partner countries whenever there is potential of escalation to a major conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Two great civilisations, China and India, together account for nearly 36 per cent of global humanity and their conflictual past and forthcoming future threaten stability and long-term Asian security, despite the struggle to understand each other. This sentiment is often reflected when delegations from China visit various parts of India and vice versa. The Chinese often complain that Indians do not understand the Chinese culture, system and way of functioning. However, more often than not, they find that their comments are reflected back at them when similar sentiments are expressed by their Indian counterparts, including during

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the recent successive visits by the author to Chengdu and Kunming between 2016-17.

Going back a little in history, two things come to mind as initial raw impressions. Firstly, China's emergence as a Communist nation state in 1949, just two years after India's independence in 1947. Secondly, notwithstanding the fact that India chose to be a democratic country, and China a Communist state, both nations moved closer to each other with a view to cultivate better relations

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through the much publicised 'Panchsheel Agreement' signed on April 29, 1954, at Peking (now Beijing). But merely eight years later, China attacked India, which resulted in the violent conflict of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. This came as an unexpected and major setback for Sino-Indian relations whose dark shadow remains etched in the memories of Indians until this day – over half a century later. This, of course, was followed by a decade of the iron curtain until 1972, which China as a nation had drawn upon itself. These developments, combined with the fact of China being a Communist country with a state-centric approach to development, and India adopting a democratic, people-centric approach, rendered the two nations apprehensive of each other as far as their bilateral relations were concerned. In the years that followed, China propounded its 'peaceful rise' theory, in the shadow of which, it slowly started unfolding itself to the rest of the world. What came out clearly was a nation that had devoted itself wholly to the build-up of its Comprehensive National Power (CNP).

China has not been engaged in war since 1979, and its rise has, thus far, certainly been a peaceful one. A power shift on the scale of China's rise today has often led to conflict and even war. China's rapid

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economic and military rise continues to create uncertainty in the region about its intentions. China attaches great importance to the contemporary international order, even though national interests drive its increasingly active participation. As China is now the world's largest trading nation, the second largest host country of incoming Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and one of the largest home countries for outgoing FDI, international economic stability is critical for China's economic prospects.<sup>3</sup>

As its economic and military rise is changing the global distribution of power, does the Chinese leadership see a place for China within the current international order, or does it want to significantly shape and change the international system as it grows stronger?<sup>4</sup> Not only that, as it seeks to assert itself at the regional and global levels, without any reservations or inhibitions, the emerging 'new China' also seeks a correction in the course of history for all the 'wrongs' that were done to it. China has territorial disputes with several countries, including Japan, but these conflicts cannot explain the harsh Chinese rhetoric of recent years. Although many factors seem to account for these nationalistic attitudes, domestic concerns seem to figure prominently,<sup>5</sup> similar to what was adequately displayed during the Doklam standoff, wherein the *Global Times* went overboard to express national sentiments and patriotism. Beyond this, since 2009, the entire Indo-Pacific has become more volatile, with tensions and disputes arising in the Korean Peninsula, East China Sea and South China Sea. All of these security flashpoints have involved China and its heavy-handed security policy that has deepened the apprehensions of many regional states towards China. To the extent that by 2012, China's relations with the United States and much of the region were far worse than ever

in the last two decades. Not even its economic importance as an exporter of inexpensive goods, as an investor, or as an official aid provider could establish a stable foundation for a more benign and amicable image of China.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of the new generation of leaders entered the Chinese political elite in 2002 as members at the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) except Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang in 1997.<sup>7</sup> Bo Zhiyue believes that some members of the new leadership may be tempted to imitate Mao's disposition to being both nationalist and populist, and they could promote 'assertive' foreign policies.<sup>8</sup> Today, China still appears to be struggling with the age-old problem of corruption, in much the same way as most countries the world over do, though with a difference. The Xi Jinping Administration has managed to put the fear of God in its citizens as far as this menace is concerned. To the extent of hosting visiting delegations and scholars, when light conversations are made on who will foot the bill. Individual accountability is very high on the agenda, and although it seemed to have started with fear, apparently, the younger generation Chinese now appear to have adopted it as a matter of immense pride. Just to give an example, say, for timeliness, stories of World War II when the Chinese soldiers were never conscious of time—today, punctuality and value for time, even for the average Chinese, is like a national duty and habit.

A common unguarded interaction with the educated and professional Chinese indicates their general satisfaction with life, however, loaded with lots of reservations. The economic success that China has enjoyed over the past three decades, combined with its growing military strength, has

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caused nationalist sentiments in China to grow, as manifested in the anti-Japanese demonstrations of 2012 and the apparent popularity of ‘leftist’ thinking. As China has grown into the world’s second largest economy, and found itself with secure borders, there ought to have been a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction: the century-old dream of “wealth and power” had been achieved but rather than celebrate

this success, China continues to brood on the injustices of the past.<sup>9</sup>

It is apparent that China’s growing economy has not, or at least has not yet, generated the ‘harmonious society’ desired by the leadership; despite individual optimism about personal prospects, there is much dissatisfaction. Much of this instability is rooted in systemic factors and is, thus, not likely to diminish even if the Chinese economy continues to grow steadily, and a slowdown or other disruptions in the economy could well exacerbate these social tensions,<sup>10</sup> as was also observed during the author’s visits to China. The Chinese people have also developed their own higher expectations of the government’s ability to deliver on welfare and public goods. Growing economic expectations and the changing state-society relationship challenge the government, and the leadership remains preoccupied with social stability. Finally, the Chinese people expect their new leaders to take a stronger stand on foreign policy issues, one that reflects China’s new position as a great power.<sup>11</sup>

Despite having worked hard to be in a position where the basic necessities are being met, the Chinese find themselves constrained to fulfil what they consider ‘happiness’ for their families. Living on rather tight, shoestring budgets, the middle class in China remains dissatisfied. Even the well-to-do people walk on a thin line of financial management

and one can find shades of envy taking over in conversations with their Indian counterparts. Despite the fact that China's present leadership has gone overboard to sell its 'China Dream' that combines prosperity with power in terms of a moderately prosperous society by 2021 (that marks the 100th Anniversary of the CCP) and a rich and powerful nation by 2049 [the 100th Anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC)]. The leadership also tries to convince its people that China is finally moving towards attaining the position of the Middle Kingdom, placed between heaven and earth. Consider the role of security in relation to national sovereignty and prestige in shaping state behaviour in the economic sphere: many China watchers have strongly held beliefs in the realist tradition, that is, Chinese leaders will prioritise national security and prestige above economic interests, or, when the two are considered simultaneously, they will be reluctant to rule out conflict even at the expense of costly economic losses. These beliefs largely build on a historical argument that falls into two parts. One part of the classical realist argument contends that history has shown that rising powers will challenge the status quo and eventually get into direct military conflict with declining hegemonic powers. This is known as the "Thucydides' Trap".<sup>12</sup> Other historical examples from the 17th to 20th centuries are cited to bolster this general point, though the argument is structural and rests simply on the distribution of national resources and the consequent global balance of power.<sup>13</sup>

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Popular nationalism has become a more powerful voice in Chinese politics. Now, at a time when Xi Jinping's leadership faces significant and enduring domestic economic problems, which challenge the leadership's political legitimacy, it will limit its ability to constrain popular nationalism. Thus, the Chinese foreign policy has

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coincided with the growth of popular nationalism.<sup>14</sup> In a survey conducted by the *Global Times* in 2010, over one-third of the respondents noted that they would support the use of force to resolve territorial disputes.<sup>15</sup> Similar opinion pieces were published in China's state-controlled media, including *Global Times*, in abundance during the Doklam crisis with India also. Chinese leaders are conscious of the dangers of the growth of ultra-

nationalism and even xenophobia regarding domestic stability and foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> But they are also determined to use this nationalism to maintain the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party during a prolonged period of economic and social instability, including reduced Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, financial instability, spreading popular protests and the absence of a legitimating ideology. Xi Jinping seems particularly committed to joining his leadership with nationalism. He has personally promoted the phrase "China Dream". Moreover, the Chinese military, including Chinese naval officers, have argued that a "strong Army" and a strong Navy should be part of the China Dream. Xi's promotion of the China Dream encourages citizens to become more vigilant against challenges to Chinese sovereignty from regional states.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Chinese nationalism is likely to be inflamed by regional developments. Growing anti-Chinese nationalism in Japan, Philippines and Vietnam suggests the likelihood of future challenges to Chinese maritime interests in both the East and South China Seas. Thus, Chinese nationalism could contribute to repeated episodes of deterioration of relations between China and its East Asian neighbours.<sup>18</sup> The Chinese

dispensation still believes that the Party continues to be supreme, and not the nation-state. Hence, the feeling of nationalistic pride in the form of nationalism that the CCP is trying to develop, appears to be unrealistic. In any case, the youth remains in a state wherein they do not appear too concerned with the bigger issues of life beyond their immediate comfort zone. Besides, they are wary to either hold, or express opinions. What is striking in the society is an absence of gender sensitivity, most unlike India. The aged are too quiet, and kept in check to stay within the limits of the prescribed Party line and generally held beliefs. They look at India with a feeling of respect and envy, more than awe.

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The Indian Army has been holding the 'Hand-in-Hand' joint military exercises with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), for a number of years now, alternatively in each other's countries. The sixth one is due this year, notwithstanding the Doklam standoff and its eventual resolution. More significantly, these exercises are to check the levels of the interoperability of the forces. What has been observed during the 'Hand-in-Hand' exercises is that while in India's case, it fields cohesive units i.e. battalions, in the case of the Chinese, the PLA selects its best possible soldiers from different units and fields them against Indian units. This actually should be interpreted as lack of confidence in, and a weakness of, their organisational set-up. Others may view this as China's effort to give maximum exposure to its soldiers from different outfits. Either way, it

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does not augur very well for the kind of perception that is being conveyed regarding the PLA's capabilities. It can be concluded that the smaller units and sub-units may not have built-up tactical and operational level cohesion and understanding, and, more importantly, the confidence to undertake 'actions independently'. Moreover, the biggest farce appears to be the 'setting' of the exercise itself. The 'anti-terrorist operations' conducted are far too removed from the reality of actions on the ground. The use of force itself in these

exercises, is rather excessive, perhaps, to ensure larger and more viable participation from both sides.

On the cultural front, language, undoubtedly, remains one of the biggest barriers to the free flow of communication, besides other factors. Even though thousands of Chinese students have returned to China with degrees earned at American Ivy League universities and many of these 'returnees' fill important positions in Chinese politics and the bureaucracy, China's new top leadership is less internationally oriented than the previous generations of leaders.<sup>19</sup> The Chinese find the Indians' proficiency in 'English speaking' really very amazing. Most among the new generation Chinese dream of mastering the English language in the same manner as the Indians. Surprisingly, there is a Hindi-language department in Beijing University providing a platform for an Indian professor based there for a finite period as part of the cultural exchange programme through the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). In India too, the Chinese language teaching remains a pressing requirement

if one wishes to enhance people-to-people contact. It is often expressed by Chinese academics that the Chinese and Indian governments and their people are at variance on many issues, where words do not match the actions on the ground, with the border standoffs and transgressions being the tip of the iceberg.

There is also a growing desire and need for connectivity among the people at large on both sides. It has started well, with the business class in both countries leading the way, however, it needs to be picked up socially and culturally, for a larger effect to connect the people of both countries. The Chinese are enamoured by the Indian culture, the variety, and vibrancy of its social festivities. On closer interaction, there was keenness and enthusiasm on the part of the Chinese people to participate in such activities and programmes. However, this would need government initiatives and push from both sides. The Chinese expressed unequivocally that the resistance to such initiatives is from the Indian side. Owing to the remnants of the dark memories of the 1962 War, India is rightfully apprehensive of getting overwhelmed by the Chinese.

Although, to the world outside, it is felt that there are a lot of internal fissures within the Chinese society, however, on frequently visiting the country, especially the urban setting and big cities, these signs seem non-visible. Four basic sources of discontent and instability can be identified in contemporary China. First, the broad changes in state–society relations have loosened the omnipresent restrictions on life that began during the Maoist period, and created space for criminal activity that did not previously exist. Second, the stand in tension with a changing society—this tension has led to petitions, collective petitions and mass incidents. Third,

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fading ideological beliefs have created a new kind of political dissidence: not just the few who explicitly call for the ouster of the CCP but, and more important, those who shape the public opinion on both the ‘left’ and ‘right’. Finally, there seems to be a degree of regime insecurity and political uncertainty—both of which are admittedly difficult to define and measure—within the Party.<sup>20</sup> In the light of all this, the 19th Party Congress held in October 2017, could possibly have discussed, in a classified manner, the call for returning to the unfinished agenda of

Doklam as far as China is concerned.

In any case, things being stage-managed and state-managed by the state machinery’s overtly efficient perception management system are all pervading. But, what is markedly visible on the surface is a clear gap between the cities’ and the rural areas’ development differentials. In this context, the Chinese look down upon the gaps between India’s villages and cities with a lot of disdain, particularly the way it is projected through the electronic and print media. The impression is that Indians remain slow and lack discipline to accomplish things in a time-bound manner. Even when one tries to explain this through the complex working dynamics of being a democracy and free society, they seem to be unconvinced.

In China, the developmental model being followed is based on a centralised and tightly controlled policy framework, with decentralised development at the provincial level, and heavy accountability towards central rule. Chengdu, the sixth largest city in China had co-hosted the Chengdu Dialogue for business promotion and exploring new areas for cooperation in collaboration with the Research Institute of

Indian Ocean Economies in November 2016. Chengdu is considered the centre of excellence in China for economic and export-oriented activities, as also for science and technology. Besides, it has also been nominated as a start point for the ambitious Belt and Road mega project of China.

The domestic sources of China's heavy-handed diplomacy remain powerful elements in Chinese policy-making, and it is uncertain that the Xi leadership will be able to develop pragmatic Chinese policy-making.<sup>21</sup> The sources of China's more assertive diplomacy have remained powerful elements in Chinese policy-making. In 2013-14, China's announcement of its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) for the East China Sea and its land reclamation projects in the South China Sea contributed to another cycle of heightened US-China conflict. Protecting China's sovereign rights has become a nationalist *mantra* that Xi can use to justify his country's assertive behaviour.<sup>22</sup>

While China does express its intention to undertake greater international responsibilities, and would like nations in the region and outside to be partners in this endeavour, the fact remains that the Chinese maintain the Party line of exclusive ownership in whatever they do, or undertake. In most open discussions, one finds it very difficult to draw the Chinese into an unbiased logical conversation because everything becomes extremely repetitive, devoid of any objectivity, surrounded by complete bias towards a very narrow China-centric understanding of their own point of view. And, in the end, the impression conveyed is that the other side has failed to understand them and their vision clearly.

## Notes

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2. *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

3. Jo Inge Bekkevold and Robert S Ross, eds., “New Leaders, Stronger China, Harder Choices,” in Ross and Bekkevold, eds., n. 1, pp. 275-276.
4. Ibid., pp. 274-275.
5. Joseph Fewsmith, “The Challenges of Stability and Legitimacy,” in Ross and Bekkevold, eds., n. 1, p. 93.
6. For more details, see “Can’t Buy Me Soft Power: China’s Economic Might is Not Doing Much for its Popularity Elsewhere in Asia,” *Economist*, April 27, 2013; David Kang, “Paper Tiger: Why Isn’t the Rest of Asia Afraid of China?,” *Foreign Policy*, April 25, 2013.
7. Bekkevold and Ross, n. 3, p. 265.
8. Ibid., pp. 266-267.
9. Fewsmith, n. 5, p. 93.
10. Ibid.
11. Bekkevold and Ross, n. 3, p. 268.
12. Graham T Allison, “Thucydides’ Trap Has Been Sprung in the Pacific,” *Financial Times*, August 22, 2012.
13. Hveem and Pempel, n. 1, p. 197.
14. For more details, see Jonathan Saul, “Chinese Firms Drop Iran as Latest US Sanctions Bite,” *Reuters*, July 01, 2013; and John Irish and Michelle Nichols, “US, Russia Agree on Syria UN Chemical Arms Measure,” *Reuters*, September 27, 2013.
15. Robert S Ross and Mingjiang Li, “Xi Jinping and the Challenges to Chinese Security,” in Ross and Bekkevold, eds., n. 1, p. 250.
16. Global Times and Taiwanese Public Survey: “The Majority of People Across the Taiwan Strait Support Efforts to protect the Diaoyu Islands”, July 19, 2012.
17. Ross and Li, n. 15.
18. Ibid.
19. Bekkevold and Ross, n. 3, p. 266.
20. Fewsmith, n. 5.
21. Ross and Li, n. 15, p. 249.
22. Bekkevold and Ross, n. 3.