



China, India, and Their Strategic Future



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By virtue of being the two most significant players in Asia, India and China display a peculiar mix of competition and cooperation. The complexities of Sino-Indian geopolitics display a convergence of interests that are deftly matched by an equally, if not more vital, strategic divergence. Till about few years back, it was often argued that at the strategic level, it appeared that China appeared to be maintaining stability with India. However, in the past 5 years in particular, have witnessed a string of geo-strategic developments involving India and China, regionally as well as globally, which have emitted rather ominous signals for the Sino-Indian relationship.

The major determinants that are shaping the expanding fissures of strategic tensions between India and China crucially include the following:

1. China's relationship with Pakistan especially

as it evolves in reference to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and its impact on the evolving conventional military deterrence scenario in a potential two-front situation for India;

2. Impact of China's 2016 military reforms on the border regions shared with India;
3. China's quest for increasing influence and gaining long-term strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean Region, and;
4. Diplomatic wrestling between China-India globally at the Nuclear Suppliers Group

Exerting Pressure on Land Borders

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor C(CPEC) puts on displays China's march towards making a bid for regional primacy by virtue of its expanding economic and military clout in South Asia. India is

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facing growing complexities and pressures while ensuring continuing and survivable deterrence at varying levels. The presence of China and Pakistan, jointly, is becoming progressively compelling in so far as planning and achieving deterrence at operational levels is concerned. While the actual number of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops present in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (PoK) has been a subject of debate, what can no longer be doubted, or debated, is that China has firmly perched itself in PoK alongside the 772-km long Line-of-Control running between India and Pakistan. A unit of PLA soldiers has been stationed near the strategically located Khunjerab Pass. Chinese military officials often frequent the Field Command Office of Gilgit, which happens to be Pakistan's military headquarter in the region.

These are vital pointers towards a pervasive Chinese intent of establishing its military edge in India's northern sector. The first joint patrolling undertaken by the Chinese and Pakistani troops along the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) border in July 2016 was propped up considerably by Beijing and Islamabad. By means of sponsoring and investing in numerous 'infrastructure development projects' inside the Gilgit-Baltistan region, the Chinese Construction Corps—a highly organised paramilitary force, has successfully managed to establish its permanent presence in the region.

Due to the ongoing Chinese economic investments in the CPEC, it could well be possible that Beijing's motivations might well get modified and that military portends of the CPEC cannot be denied entirely. And thus, the CPEC might just not merely be an 'economic' corridor as is being projected by both China and Pakistan.

More significantly, the direct offshoot of this premise can be seen in a very tangible form with the unleashing of a near military overhaul when Xi Jinping, the current General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, introduced defence reforms in January 2016. The

erstwhile seven military regions (MRs) have ceased to exist and paved way for five theatre commands instead. The new unified Western Theatre Command opposite India holds grave ramifications for India's security and stability, and will reflect critically on the overall Sino-Indian strategic equation. China's political and military leadership, for long, has often been discussing and forecasting future conflicts becoming more localised, along China's Periphery.

Before ushering in of the 2016 defence reforms and consolidation of MRs to Theatre Commands, the erstwhile Lanzhou and Chengdu MRs (that were primarily meant for military operations against India) were retained as independent Theatre Joint Commands while preserving their operational orientation and application of sustained offensive pressure and posture towards India. As a follow through of the military reforms, India's land borders with China now fall under the purview of one single Western Command. This Command comprises the following:

1. More than half of China's land area;
2. Nearly 24 per cent of its population; and
3. More than one-third of Chinese land-based military.

By incorporating the Qinghai region in the Western Theatre Command, the rapid induction and deployment of high-altitude acclimatized and trained troops into Tibet and across Ladakh will be far more feasible and predictable. As opposed to that, on the Indian side, the Ladakh region falls under the Indian Army's 14 Corps of the Northern Command, while Arunachal Pradesh under the Eastern Command is divided in two parts; Tawang area under 4 Corps, and Rest of Arunachal Pradesh (RALP) under 3 Corps.

Information in the public domain points to suggest that the Indian Army's Dual Task Formations have been mandated to operate from the Eastern to Western sector, and from the Western to Eastern sector, depending on the operational requirements. What is critical is the lack of lateral mobility including switching over of forces,

magnitude of equipping and mobility of forces in shorter-durations and lesser warning periods—all these are likely to have their own share of limitations.

In this backdrop, China's new Western Theatre Command is now spread across all through to meet with India's Western, Northern, and Eastern Commands. In any future conflict between India and China, be it limited or otherwise, the application and coordination of operations between Chinese PLA's single Western theatre command and the three separate commands of the Indian Army shall have grave ramifications primarily over synergy related aspects of war and conduct of operations. More importantly, the variables of deterrence that India seemingly would have to cater to, ranges from conventional deterrence in the Indo-China border areas, to campaign planning for flexible deterrent operations (including joint operational planning).

Exerting Pressure on Surrounding Waters

Moving beyond land borders, developments in the Indian Ocean Region remain much in sync with China's well pronounced US\$ 1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative that features prominently in the current 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20). Simultaneously, China has been challenging the notion of the Indian Ocean Region being India's 'strategic backyard'. The caution thrown in by China needs to be read in conjunction with the cumulative maritime activity of the PLA Navy and its mounting forays into the Indian Ocean. The PLA Navy's presence and deployment in the Indian Ocean has been on the rise since 2014 with a conventional submarine docking in Sri Lanka's harbour at Colombo along with a Ming-class diesel-electric nuclear submarine. Besides this, China has also been attempting to demonstrate nuclear power projection in the Indian Ocean signalling a strong strategic intent. Between December 2013 and February 2014, a SHANG-

class nuclear-powered attack submarine conducted a - two month deployment in Indian Ocean; later that year a SONG-class diesel-powered attack submarine patrolled the waters of the Indian Ocean during September-October 2014.

The most striking fact is that the submarine docked at Colombo's South Container Terminal is built, run, and controlled by China Merchants Holdings. This very fact raises questions to why did it not choose to dock at the Sri Lanka port Authority in Colombo, which is mandated to accommodate foreign military vessels? The emphasis to dock at a minuscule 'Chinese facility' well within a Sri Lankan administered harbour, merits careful analysis. Given its strategic placement between China's eastern seaports and the Mediterranean, Sri Lanka is fast becoming the pivot of rising Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region.

Pakistan's Karachi port operational control has been handed over to China Overseas Port Holdings, where a Chinese submarine docked soon after. This is yet another step towards consolidating its permanent naval presence in South Asia. Besides, two Chinese warships were recently pressed into service for Pakistan's Gwadar port security, following which China was given exclusive rights to run the Gwadar port for the next 40 years. By virtue of this strategy, Beijing seeks to gain greater access to the strategic pathways of the Indian Ocean, alleviated access to the Gulf oil—which consequently shall reduce its dependence on the passage through the Straits of Malacca—a key potential vulnerability for China in the event of a future conflict.

China's emergence as a regional power gets further buttressed with robust anti-access/area denial capabilities, influencing the balance of power in the South China Sea and throughout the western Pacific. The anti-access capacity includes its growing land-attack ballistic and cruise missile force targeting air bases and naval facilities; while area denial capabilities consist of advanced counter-maritime and counter-air systems designed to destroy critical mobile assets—surface ships and aircraft. These also include advanced

ASBM/ASCM that can be launched from the air, land, or sea. The DF-21DASBM with an estimated range exceeding 1,482 km could compel aircraft carriers to remain beyond distances that are suitable for efficient air operations—invariably reducing the efficacy of a Carrier Strike Group in any theatre of operation. A2/AD extends support into the space and cyber domains, which shall be critical in any ‘future conflict over Taiwan’ scenario. For launching successful combat operations from Guam, the use of facilities at Okinawa is essential given the elongated lines of operation, and logistics’ limitations.

In order to boost naval power projection capability China needs to gain greater access to ports and berthing facilities. This is being increasingly reflected in a covert strategy of granting huge loans to smaller coastal island nations that are in dire need for developmental funds to improve infrastructure. Beijing’s expanding strategic naval footprint in the Indian Ocean by means of acquiring more maritime bases and berthing facilities by means of state- and private-sponsored ‘infrastructure investment’ is a core pillar of China’s ports policy.

Chinese publications including *Xinhua* have advocated and ‘advised’ the PLA Navy to build as many as 18 overseas naval military bases in the greater Indian Ocean area. These facilities in all likelihood shall end up becoming communication and surveillance facilities, in addition to being repair and replenishment centres for the Chinese Navy—underscoring the intransigent course of Beijing’s influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The maritime realm around India remains a traditional strategic nerve centre for New Delhi, and Beijing’s gradual upping the ante in here, foretells serious strategic ramifications.

Exerting Pressure on Global Forums

On the global level, at the plenary of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, China emerged triumphant in what could best be described as intense diplomatic

wrestling. Beijing managed to achieve what it set it out to do, even before the plenary was convened formally—that is to scuttle India’s application for the NSG membership, even if it were to be the last man standing. There are multiple geo-political and geo-strategic realities that India would have to contend with, and work towards, post the Seoul NSG plenary outcome. To begin with, it is evidently unambiguous that China does, in fact, remain opposed to India’s membership and entry into the NSG. China is taking the route of ‘criteria procedure’ as a means, to ultimately reach its desired end, that of blocking India’s NSG membership. Lead Chinese negotiator and Director-General of the Department of Arms Control, Wang Qun, craftily used the signing of the ‘NPT criteria’ as being ‘really an issue’ for members, and that ‘this is not a rule set by China, this is the rule set by the NSG and reaffirmed by the international community’.

It is nothing short of a paradox that China with its much-blemished record on non-proliferation is talking and putting ‘rules’ to context. The iniquitous and illicit nuclear and missile-related proliferation activities ran by China across Asia since the 1980s, directly, and indirectly, has caused irretrievable alteration of strategic realities across Asia. Specifically in case of South Asia, China continues to offer covert nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan, reflected in the recent transfer of the launcher for the Shaheen-3 nuclear-capable ballistic missile, with a range of 2,750 km.

Conclusion

China’s politico-diplomatic belligerence focuses on the larger debate that is structured around the growing power and influence of China. And, as part of this chessboard, Beijing will continue to keep India confined regionally, expectedly through the Pakistan angle (including during future discussions at the NSG). Globally, in the

long run, China would be a primary hurdle in India becoming a permanent member in the UN Security Council, for which membership at the NSG would be a key milestone for India to build up its case. India's appearance on the global stage and its role in international rule making will continue to get challenged by China in times to come.

Regionally, South Asia and its surrounding waters will continue to witness the increasing Chinese capabilities in the region that is seeking a rapid quest for strategic outreach and expanding influence. Given the latest upgrades and developments owing to the CCPEC, and its military portends, India appears to be getting

pushed to cater for a seemingly growing strategic asymmetry with China. Beijing is a vital player in the conventional deterrence situation in South Asia—one, that might not remain virtuously 'neutral' in the quintessential sense, both diplomatically, and militarily, in the event of a limited, or protracted, regional conflict in the near or, distant future. The difficulties in India's strategic equation with China remain lucid, as they vie for greater strategic space and say in Asia. What would remain critical to gauge is that China is fast gaining traction by virtue of its attempts to inject a Sino-centric rearrangement of the world order, and seemingly challenge the existing liberal global order.

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