



Article Type: Review Article

Article Ref. No.: 21030400551IL

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-0301-a001>



INDIA AND CHINA AT THE CROSSROADS: THE IMPERATIVES OF REWORKING INDIA'S STRATEGY

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Abstract:

Any discussion on India- China relations is incomplete without mentioning that today the center of gravity of the whole world is slowly shifting to Asia. Besides, one-third of the world's population lives in countries, bordering the Indian Ocean. The security environment is uncertain and great power transitions are taking place. India and China both are aspiring powers in Asia, however, with a certain degree of asymmetries in their power and strength. In the eighties, both the economies were of the same size but today the Chinese economy is way ahead and most global supply chains run through it. China is the world's manufacturing superpower and with its technological expertise, its military expansionist ways, and its distinct footprint in India's neighborhood, both land and maritime, all make it a serious force to contend with. Over time, the relations between the two neighbors have been a cause of grave concern. The interests of both India and China intersect. They have expanding geopolitical horizons and earnestly strive for 'strategic space' in the same region. The present essay reflects upon the relations between India and China that have been oscillating from cooperation to competition and from confrontation to conflict. Further, an attempt is made to focus on the challenges that are galore and the potentiality of reworking India's China strategy.

Article History: Submitted on 01 Aug 2020 | Accepted on 29 March 2021

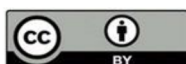
Keywords: Asymmetric, Challenges, Conflict, Cooperation, Relations, Strategy

1.0 Introduction:

The Year 2020 was historic in more ways than one. First, the novel coronavirus pandemic has taken the world by storm. Second, China's aggressive designs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), its incursions in Ladakh, and the Galwan killings occupied center stage in the bygone year. The escalating boundary dispute, China's debt-trap policy and the string of pearls strategy, its ever-growing military prowess, and its ambitious BRI Project have caused much alarm to India. India too, with its tilt towards the US, its bold initiative of revoking Article 370, and refusing to be a signatory to the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), have resulted in the deteriorating relations between the two powerful giants. The RCEP is a trade deal comprising of sixteen countries in the Indo-Pacific region and is significant because these contribute to nearly thirty percent of global GDP. These countries have formed the world's largest trading block and the pact is yet another example of China's influence in the region.

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2.0 Objectives of the Paper:

The focus is on bringing to light not only the challenges that have had a long bearing but also some that have set in, in the recent past. The power vacuum in the international arena has prompted China to act swiftly. China's foothold in the maritime domain, its digital authoritarianism, along with its adept handling of the corona pandemic followed by its smart vaccine diplomacy, are clearly noticeable. The economic imperatives which were weighing heavy on India, even before the onset of the pandemic, have necessitated the urgency of a significant shift, in India's policy. The overall GDP declined in the previous year and there have been huge job cuts along with a substantial decline in revenue for migrant labor. In the maritime and economic domain, close cooperation between both countries can benefit both, as there are several points of convergence. In contrast with other countries, China has had a creditable rate of growth towards the close of 2020, and in all possibilities, its economy will see a phenomenal rise in 2021. The paper throws light on a series of alternatives that India needs to pursue, to further its national interests. The objective of the study is also to discuss the requirement of reviewing India's policy towards its South Asian neighbors and understanding their sensitivities, as China's position across Asia is stronger today. India has to continue its bonhomie with the US as well as capitalize on the Quad. Embarking on a more proactive strategy rather than a reactive one and dispelling its misplaced confidence with its immediate neighbors will prove beneficial for India.

3.0 Methodology of the Study:

Secondary data obtained from published sources like various books, international journals newspapers, articles, magazines, and websites on the internet, have formed an important component of this study and provide a foundation to it. Research material published in reports and documents that have been acquired from public libraries has been made use of. Facts and data have been discussed through qualitative techniques.

4.0 Challenges:

4.1 *Boundary Dispute:*

Both India and China have an unresolved 3488 Km long boundary dispute (Clive & Mareike, 2020). The border, or Line of Actual Control, is not demarcated and this seems to be the toughest challenge by far. Both China and India interpret the demarcation in ways that suit them, giving rise to periodic border transgressions. Delineating a timeframe to sort out the differences, followed by demilitarization is absolutely essential to move forward. P. Stobdan, a well-known expert on India-China relations, pointed out that for the last many decades, both countries have been engaged in a 'differing perception' theory over the LAC (Stobdan, 2020). China has capitalized on the issue and "gained control over a massive disputed territory in Eastern Ladakh." (Sarma, 2020). Besides, an interesting revelation was made by the Shyam Saran Report of August 2013. "India lost 640 sq. km due to 'area denial' set by PLA patrolling (Sarma, 2020).

India has had a history of clashes with China. Starting with the war of 1962 followed by the Nathu La and Cho La military clashes(Sikkim) in 1967, the 1987 Sino- Indian skirmish at the Sumdorong Chu Valley, the 2017 Doklam military standoff, and the recent Galwan clash in eastern Ladakh, in May-June, 2020 (Hoffmann, 1990). The border clash in the summer of 2020 was unlike any other clash witnessed in the previous years. It was marred by bloodshed and excessive military buildup on the LAC. Both the armies were engaged in a faceoff in Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley, Demchok, and Daulat Beg Oldie in eastern Ladakh (Peri, 2020). The face-offs happened because patrols were disallowed and Indian soldiers were denied access to patrolling points from Debsang plains in the north to Pangong Tso Lake in the south. Besides, the PLA unilaterally attempted to change the status quo in its favor and thereby took control of more territory.

4.2 Revocation of Article 370 and the Reorganization of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir as Union Territories.

This major move by the Indian Government on the 5th of August, 2019 was not perceived kindly by China. After the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, Home Minister Amit Shah had categorically stated: "Jammu & Kashmir includes Pak occupied Kashmir (including Gilgit-Baltistan) and Aksai Chin (Sarma, 2020). China reacted with an equal vengeance and blamed India for unilaterally undermining its territorial sovereignty and termed the revocation of Article 370 as "unlawful and void." (Patranobis, 2019). It also took the Kashmir issue to the UN Security Council and asserted that "China will stand by Pakistan for regional peace and stability." (Anand, Anurag 2019).

4.3 The Tibet Issue:

Tibet is an unresolved issue in India-China relations. Tibet was brought under Chinese control way back in 1950. The fact that the Indian government has granted political asylum to the 14th Dalai Lama and there is a Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala, is a thorn in the relations. Tibetan movement in India is gradually democratizing and Tibetans often stage protests against China, in India. China has always been critical of Dalai Lama's free movement in India, particularly to Arunachal Pradesh.

Besides, China has gone in for rapid infrastructure development on the Tibetan border. The high-speed Shanghai-Tibet railway constructed in 2006 now extends to Shigatse close to the Indian border. Three airports are also coming up in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), close to the Indian border in Xinjiang (Claude, 2019).

4.4 China's South Asia Policy vis-à-vis Bhutan and Nepal:

Keeping in mind, India's security, Bhutan is an important buffer state and India has a security arrangement with Bhutan for the protection of its borders. The face-off between Indian and Chinese forces near Sikkim-Bhutan-Tibet tri-junction at Doklam plateau in 2017 had caused much alarm to India and took more than 2 months to be settled. There is always the apprehension that China can target the Siliguri Corridor and cut off the northeast from the rest of India (Gurung, 2018).

A strategic perspective apart, Bhutan's stark debt burden and the high unemployment rate have given the necessary opening to China. China is also utilizing Bhutan to fulfill its global ambitions. Bhutan is fast serving as a window for China to widen its linkages with South Asian countries.

Similarly, China through its economic diplomacy, has been successful in doing away with Nepal's singular dependence on India vis-à-vis, foreign trade. It has gone in for rapid infrastructure projects in Nepal and has exercised its hegemony by setting up several think tanks and imposing Mandarin in schools

4.5 The Debt Trap Policy & the String of Pearls:

The future might see the Indian Ocean become the new hotbed of conflict between India and China. Over the past few years, China is widening its foothold in the Indian Ocean rapidly through its 'Debt Trap Diplomacy' and 'String of Pearls Strategy'. China has a distinct presence in India's neighbourhood.

Recent satellite images reveal that China has been modernizing its Djibouti military base. By making use of its debt trap policy, China has lured the strategically located developing nations in India's vicinity, to borrow loans from it, for infrastructural development. The loans keep on mounting and so does the indebtedness. China is the biggest beneficiary as the nations are compelled to support its long-term interests. Besides, the emergence of the 'String of Pearls'

strategy, aims to expand China's geopolitical influence by deploying efforts to increase access to ports and airfields and expand military bases as well. China also aims to widen diplomatic relationships with trading partners. Port construction projects are in full swing in Burma and Bangladesh. China has a long-term investment in Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which can be used to dock submarines. A military base by China in the Indian Ocean region near the Maldives is a cause of concern for India's security. In Myanmar, China's control over Kyaukpyu port can be used for a twin purpose i.e. a commercial maritime facility and a military facility in case of a conflict. Besides, Mombasa in Kenya and Malacca in Malaysia are also ports that can be used for military purposes (Srivastava, 2020). Presently, India does not have any military bases in the area. What it has, is just radar outposts or surveillance systems in Seychelles, Madagascar, and Mauritius (Srivastava, 2020).

4.6 Sharing of the Waters of Brahmaputra:

China's construction of dams in the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra has led to the degradation of the entire basin and poor agricultural productivity. This has affected the livelihoods of the Indian local people. Besides, the location of the dams in the Himalayas is not free from danger as the Himalayas are most vulnerable to earthquakes. China, being an upper riparian state in Asia, can block the rivers and can tamper with the flow rate during times of face-offs, thus endangering some areas of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam to the risk of sudden floods. India's objection has been conveniently overlooked due to the absence of any formal treaty over the sharing of the Brahmaputra waters.

4.7 CPEC--China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor:

Through the CPEC, China's strategy has been to encircle India and pose a challenge to India's trade and territorial integrity. "India has kept out of the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) because it includes projects in POK (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir) as part of a corridor, connecting Xinjiang (China's North Western region) with Pakistan. What is objectionable is that the region is described as belonging to Pakistan and Azad Jammu& Kashmir." (Shah, 2017). To expedite its maritime trade with West Asia and North Africa, China has also developed the Gwadar port near Karachi. If need be, this port can be used as an overseas naval military base in the Indian Ocean Region

4.8 China's Defense Capability and Military Strategy:

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Report, India has the third biggest defense budget at \$71.1 billion. However, China's defense budget at \$261 billion is three times that of India. India currently has a stockpile of 150 nuclear warheads and China has close to 320 nuclear warheads. Talking of Air and Naval power, China's military prowess is many times that of India (Jain, 2020).

India has a serious drawback pertaining to its weapons procurement procedure. Besides, a major chunk of the Indian Defense Budget is spent on salaries and pensions. In order to safeguard, India's strategic interests and security dynamics, it is important to take stock of structural inefficiencies and transform the armed forces into a worthy state instrument of the 21st century. China's war-waging potential is also immense. (Reserves for war) Today, China has taken a lead in Quantum Computing and Artificial Intelligence. War has acquired new dimensions, be it strategic and cyber warfare, which is ongoing. Pakistan and China have also collaborated on the production of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) including Caihong-5 and Wing Loong-I. (Sahu, 2020). China also supplies arms to India's immediate neighbors and fulfills 2/3rd of their requirements (Scroll Staff, 2018).

4.9 The South China Sea:

This sea is becoming more like Beijing's maritime empire and has become a source of tension between China and other nations. The PLA has mobilized its Southern Theatre Command, which overlooks the South China Sea.

It has carried out military exercises and deployed survey vessels there. China has claimed sovereignty over two largely uninhabited island chains, the Paracels and the Spratlys, and has established administrative districts on the artificial islands for the purpose of building military bases (Pradhan, 2020).

4.10 Expanding Chinese Influence in India Through Soft Power:

China's United Front Works Department (UFWD) is an entity that focuses on influencing psychological and information operations in foreign countries.

China sends ambassadors to South Asia to carry forward the BRI project and undermine India.

The Nepali NGOs (China Study Center) established in Nepal have been instructed to provide information about Gurkhas joining the Indian Army (Sharma, 2020).

The Rajiv Gandhi Foundation received Rs. 90 lakh as donations from the Chinese Embassy in 2006-07, on the pretext, that India needed the FTA more than China, and hence it had to be expedited (Singh, 2020)

The future might see China write the rules of the Internet and surpass the US in the field of the cyber domain. China is working towards "creating a new model of governance for the digital domain." (Mehtani, 2020) It is using the tools of mass surveillance technology so that access to information and content can be significantly controlled.

4.11 China's Interference in the Internal Matters of India:

This is particularly evident in the cases of Kashmir, Article 370, and Arunachal Pradesh. India does not interfere in the internal affairs of China but China does not reciprocate this noble gesture. China has faced immense criticism because of extensive human rights violations in Xinjiang province, its inhuman policies in Hong Kong, and militarization in the South China Sea. India has not been vocal on these issues or for that matter, the maritime security issues. Besides, India has been religiously trying for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). However, China has continued to block India's entry and instead is vying for Pakistan's entry into the NSG. In fact, at the UN, China has stood by Pakistan, whenever it has been cornered on the issue of terrorism

5.0 Reworking India's Strategy:

What should be our response options? In the early years of independence, Indian leaders had romanticized relations with China. However, much has happened since then and in the current times, India's strategy has to be a multifold one.

5.1 Carefully Crafted Policies in Tune With Realistically Achievable Objectives:

Being assertive in some instances and resilient in others goes without saying. India has to be assertive towards the BRI and boundary disputes with China, to ward off its "salami slicing' tactics. The Ladakh stalemate and the Doklam standoff are glaring examples.

In negotiations with China, sometimes a resilient position works best. Making way for a well-chalked-out proactive strategy involving effective Strategic communication on the part of political leadership is perhaps a step in the right direction. Sometimes the gap between the diplomatic angle (MEA) and the armed forces perception is not becoming. Whatever narrative is projected at the MEA (Ministry of External Affairs) Gupta, 2020 level has to be matched with the ground reality.

5.2 India would do well to Expand its Theatre of Operation:

The maritime domain is getting increasingly important. The strategic advantage of India's maritime geography can be deployed in a much more constructive manner to match the Chinese forays into this oceanic space that surrounds us. India is an important member of the Quad. Quad is one such platform where the partners (the US, Japan, and Australia) can collectively put pressure on China. 2020 saw the Malabar Exercises in the Bay of Bengal, being conducted by the Quad. These military exercises have been more like a strategic message for China.

5.3 India Needs to Form Alliances With Like-Minded Partners:

Keeping in mind, China's aggressive and expansionist designs, a way out could be for India to align its interests unequivocally with the U.S. as a principal strategic partner. The security, defense, and intelligence ties are strong and there is congruence on the maritime side. However, neither side has talked of entering into any formal military alliance. A good option for India would be to form issue-based coalitions with like-minded partners. It could be on energy security, maritime security, countering terrorism, and the like. India can invest much more in its relations with Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN. In fact, India needs to have a security regime organic to Asia. "Our stakes are common in each other's security (Rao, 2020).

5.4 Military Preparedness:

India has to undertake a series of self-strengthening measures vis-à-vis military and intelligence reforms. At the border clash in Galwan, there are questions that need to be answered. Was our military preparedness in order, both at the strategic level and tactical level?

Where the Indian Army scores over the PLA, is in the combat role. The Chinese do not have a standing army. At best they have a conscript army, which, after completing a two-year cycle, is sent back. No doubt China has gone in a big way for modernization of its military but the task of "informationization" and "mechanization" of all its services is still in progress. The Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 was the last active combat, the PLA was involved in (Pant, 2020). Indeed, the PLA also falters for its inefficient command system as well as corruption in its ranks

5.5 Exploring Alternatives to Lessen Economic Dependence on China:

India needs to strongly consider, revamping its manufacturing capabilities and explore alternative supply chains networks, closer to home. In the wake of the Galwan incident, India banned a plethora of Chinese apps and America followed suit. The video-sharing app TikTok is an example. However, banning a few apps is merely symbolic and has not impacted China, economically. India can use a number of its credentials to its advantage, be it the rising economic status, its balancing power within the Indo-Pacific and the world, its dynamic role in multilateral institutions and to top it all, its democratic credentials.

5.6 Necklace of Diamonds Strategy:

In a counter-action move, India has started working on a counter encirclement strategy - 'Necklace of Diamonds' to meet the challenge posed by the 'String of Pearls' and 'New Silk Route'.

The Necklace of Diamonds strategy includes the development of naval bases, air corridors, and boosting multilateral trade on the part of India. India has strategic bases in the following areas: (Javaid, 2020)

- Changi Naval Base in Singapore
- Sabang Port in Indonesia
- Duqm Port in Oman
- Assumption Island in Seychelles
- Chabahar Port in Iran

In addition to the above-mentioned efforts, India is also improving relations with strategically placed countries like Mongolia, - Japan, Vietnam, and Central Asia to counter China's strategies. Both Mongolia and India have collaborated to develop a bilateral air corridor using India's credit line.

6.0 Way Forward:

6.1 Economic Angle:

In the global landscape, both China and India are aspiring powers with gigantic markets. The Wuhan and Chennai Summits did emphasize economic cooperation, by identifying sectors for mutual investment. If India can learn from China's manufacturing experience, so can China, from India's IT sector. Both countries do synchronize on global financial reforms and climate change. Trade deficit apart, (India's trade deficit with China was \$53.57 billion in 2018-19) (PIB, 2020) there is also a possibility that the more our economies get interlinked, strategic challenges may just as well get mitigated. Although India has rejected Chinese-driven initiatives like the BRI and the CPEC, India has been on board on multilateral initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Till 2019, China was India's largest trading partner but the USA surpassed this position in 2020. Ironically, in the same year, India's imports from China dropped 13%, whereas, exports went up by 16% (Singh, 2020). Economic linkages between the two countries, run deep, hence India has to be balanced in its approach. "68% of India's pharmaceutical ingredients, 90% of antibiotics, solar cells, fertilizers, electrical equipment as well as basic ingredients for auto parts, power sector and telecom come from China" (Singh, 2020).

Given the current state of affairs, economic cooperation cannot be wished away totally. India's economic growth has been quite skewed with little focus on distributive growth. India needs to go in for fundamental economic transformation, expand its horizon and lessen economic dependence on China. India is looking towards Taiwan for mobiles and electronics. A good number of years are needed to reduce trade interdependence on China. Meanwhile, India has to work more on self-reliance so that it can gradually come into its own.

6.2 Taking Positions:

Since India is a respected non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council; it can afford to be more vocal on issues pertaining to Tibet and Taiwan. A reassessment is definitely required on the 'One China Policy.' In the last few months, China has gone to the UN several times to discuss the Kashmir issue. This should incentivize India to raise the issue of Taiwan. We need to get back to China as far as Tibet and Taiwan are concerned. It's high time India put across its 'One India Policy'. A question that is often asked is what prevents the Indian government from reassessing the "One China Policy".

6.3 The Quad Front:

India's policy will have to be, one of, wait and watch. Much depends on how the new Presidency takes shape and America's ensuing policy towards India and China. Whether the US would work towards CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act) (B S Web Team 2020) against India, on account of the purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems, remains to be seen. A US-China trade deal may well be on the cards. These are testing times for the future of the Quad and the Indo-Pacific strategy. Deepening defense ties with the US and resolving the trade and visa issues will work favourably for India.

6.4 Deeper Engagement with Neighbours:

As China has a strong foothold in India's neighborhood, be it land or maritime, India needs to walk the extra mile. At this juncture, the revival of SAARC will prove beneficial for India. Sincere efforts have to be made towards gearing up newer institutions such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Economics apart, there are a host of other issues that are common and India can certainly take the lead. When the pandemic has engulfed all and sundry, India also has done well to expedite its vaccine diplomacy.

7.0 Conclusion:

"Crisis in India-China relations has best been managed, but not resolved". This was put forth by Shiv Shankar Menon in his book "Choices in the making of India's Foreign Policy" (Menon, 2016).

A fundamental factor in the relationship is the asymmetries in power rivalry. How best to meet the challenges and optimize our relations with China? There is no one size fit all approach. Many rounds of talks have been held between India and China and India has reiterated restoring the status quo i.e. April 2020. Until the long-pending border dispute is resolved, it is difficult to move ahead. In fact, China's strategy has been a three-pronged one.

It is not just incremental encroachment on the border but also economic and digital encroachment. India's strategy has to be in keeping with this three-fold challenge. In the current scenario, both the US and China are ahead in the game. They matter immensely to us and both should be favorably disposed to India. No doubt, Sino-Indian relations have been far from smooth, but keeping the diplomatic channels open and improving strategic communication is very essential. This, however, cannot be at the cost of India playing second fiddle to China. Alongside the diplomatic angle, adopting a carrot and stick policy seems to be a doable strategy. Putting across a final word on Sino-Indian relations seems next to impossible. Nevertheless, if the Galwan chapter had a Chinese beginning, it will need to have an Indian ending, of course keeping in mind what Lenin once said, "There are decades when nothing happens and weeks when decades, happen." (Zakaria, 2020). This is where the world stands today, and it is the interplay of political, social, technological, and economic factors that will help decide the future trajectory of relations.

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