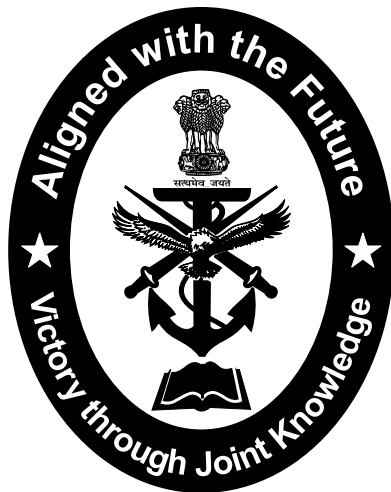


**TRANSFORMING PLA:
IMPACT ON INDIAN
SECURITY**

TRANSFORMING PLA: IMPACT ON INDIAN SECURITY

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Perspective :

It is often fashionable to recall a Sun Tzu quote as an opening statement on an analysis Chinese national power. The one that seems more appropriate for this monograph is the one that talks about defeating the enemy without a fight. In other words, the complex and often inscrutable Chinese mind creates a scenario that goes beyond the body and instead plays on the mind.

In recent times the Chinese leadership seems to have gone into that kind of a mode with India. Take the case of the Chumar 'intrusion' that occurred exactly when China's 'neo-Maoist' ^A President Xi Jinping was visiting India in mid- 2014. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had planned a grand gambit of drawing his attention to the civilisational nature of the Sino-Indian relationship by taking Xi and his entourage to Varanasi.

^AThe intense centralisation of power not witnessed in China since the demise of Deng Xioping coupled with the stripping of the economic issued from the portfolio of Li Keqiang, the premier, besides a recent reshuffle of the Communist Youth League – the core of the Chinese premier support base all point at Xi being of the kind of a Maoist style that was witnessed during and after the Cultural Revolution. A 'neo-Maoist' moniker does also reflect on the emphasis of the new administration to focus on 'Mao Thought' in the academic curriculum alone.

As they sat on the banks of the Ganges river – a true symbol of the ancientness of the multi-millennial Indian civilization – PLA border guards were crossing the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Ladakh-Aksai Chin area and positioning themselves on a piece of real estate that was claimed by India as its own. They had come prepared for a long stay.

There are two theories about this incident that caused a dark cloud to cover the Xi's visit. Considering that the intrusion took place from before and continued even when the Chinese president was being feted in India – the total duration of the intrusion was for about a week – concentrated the minds of his Indian interlocutors about the unresolved dispute of the Chinese boundary with India like never before.

One of the theories however went; this intrusion was also to embarrass Xi as a response to his anti-corruption drive in the Chinese State agencies, that had taken the scalp of two powerful vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The theory goes further into claiming that Xi had purged on corruption charges some of the middle rung officers of the PLA for the incident after he returned home.¹

The other theories denounced this argument. Proponents of the opposing line say that nothing of the sort of a 'purge' was undertaken by the PLA for this incident. On the contrary, this was show of force to underline the Xi visit. Indeed, this line of thinking is evident in the distinct lack of bonhomie between China and India relations in the last quarter of the 2016. A leading light of the Indian Army and China expert of repute, points at a visit of a Chinese general to the border troops about a couple of months after the Chumar incident. This visit can actually be seen as a one to keep up the morale of troops.²

Those who recall the epistolary exchange between Nehru and Zhou-en Lai soon after the latter visited India in 1960 for the third time and the muted nature of the visit after the rather triumphalist 1950s visits, would have recognised the Modi-Xi

interaction in the right perspective. In fact, the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs, puts out this text about the Zhou trip, “As the visit came right after the first armed conflict on the Sino-Indian border, foreign forces unfriendly to China attempted to exploit the situation to sow discord between China and its neighboring countries. Premier Zhou used the tour to fully express China’s sincere desire for amicable and good-neighborly relations with its neighbors.”³

But in the build-up to the 1962 war, the Chinese embassy in New Delhi was sending rather grim reports about India’s elites’ (political and business) inherent opposition to communist China. A diplomatic cable in January 1962 contained this dire politico-economic development in the host country. “India’s economic and political dependence on America clearly deepened, and there have been corresponding new developments in America’s economic infiltration and political use of India.”⁴

The 1962 debacle had led up to the 1967 incident in Sikkim on the Nathu La border. According to Major General Sheru Thapliyal (retired), the Nathu La pass at 14,200 feet was guarded by the two sides with barely thirty yards separating them. When the Chinese PLA challenged an Indian attempt at laying a wire demarcating the perceived LAC – a border in real terms because of the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 that the latter do not accept – on 12 September, 1967, a scuffle broke out between the two forces. The next day, the soldiers refixing the wire came under withering MMG fire from the Chinese PLA. The Indian side took a fair amount of casualties that day.

Day after, the Indian army unit positioned on two dominating features Sebu La and Camel’s back got the clearance from the Eastern Army commander, Lt Gen SAM Manekshaw to open up with artillery. The Artillery Observation Posts on the two peaks gave such accurate target coordinates that the Chinese bunkers on the other side were completely destroyed. This barrage went on for three days. On the third day, the Chinese

threatened to call in air power. Since, by then the point had been made the Indian army will no longer roll over like in 1962, the situation was cooled down.⁵

Again, late 1986 to early 1987 witnessed the Somdurong Chu incident when Deng Xiaoping had issued two threats to teach India a lesson – conveyed on both occasions by two visiting US officials, a Secretary of Defence and the Secretary of State. But Operation Chequerboard launched by the Indian army with a few mountain divisions in conjunction with the air force let the Chinese know that there will not be a repeat of 1962 this time.

So in effect any Indian strategist will vouch for a fact that each time China has had a strong leader, they have the tension over the varied perception of the LAC. The joint working group of the LAC has met umpteen number of times, and India has consistently sought to exchange maps of the disputed boundary, the Chinese have balked. They did exchange maps of the central sector of the LAC abutting Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh over which the dispute has been less much less virulent.

On the other hand, the Chinese incursions are on a rising graph in both the northeastern side of the LAC and the extreme northwest. By one statistic, in 2010 alone there were 600 incursions. The Indian side too has upped the ante of aggressive patrolling on the LAC.

In that light a Xi Jinping who has been emerging as a kind of Mao Zhedong and Deng Xioping, has hastened process of the current fast paced modernisation of the PLA – they have produced an advanced Jet fighter aircraft with stealth quality – the J-20 and an aircraft carrier, Varyag, besides developing missiles that can shoot down satellites and ships on high seas is getting ready to challenge the US hegemony of the global order.

In terms of military operations other than war (MOOTW), they have shown the capacity of launching PLA Navy (PLAN) far in the blue waters to the Gulf of Aden to take part in anti-piracy operations. It is been a feat considering till less than a decade ago, PLAN never left the brown waters, or at best aggressively patrolled of the Taiwan Straits.

The impact of the recent (June 2016) major reorganisation of the PLA forces with separate headquarters for all three services PLAN and PLAAF, led by the CMC Chairman, Xi Jinping is of great importance that shall be detailed in the next chapter.

But there are two issues that need to be observed: the intensive professionalisation of the armed forces and the subsequent delinkage from the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese State under Xi Jinping is asserting its control over the military in a sharp departure from the administration of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. In fact, one might recall that even after Hu became the President, Jiang Zemin, his predecessor did not vacate the position of the chairman, CMC for more than a year.

The second issue, crucially is what Cheng Li of the Brookings notes that even as Xi is making seminal changes in the CMC's own role; removing two vice-chairmen on corruption charges and a fairly widespread purge of even senior generals for the same reason, the President is cautious to not tread on Jiang's toes.⁶

But Xi has an advantage over Hu. Xi, a princeling (son of a former senior minister close to Mao) had wide access to the PLA and had come into office at Zhongnanhai with a constituency of his own amongst the military brass. Thus it does not evince any surprise when Xi ascends to the presidency of the nation, general secretaryship of the CCP and the chairmanship of the CMC.

In terms of Sino-Indian relations, there are two sides that need to be focused upon. One is the burgeoning trade between the

two countries. In 2015 the two way trade figure crossed \$ 70 billion mark. On the other hand, the contentious border issue seemed to loom over the security and political relations of the country. On top of that is the tacit competition between the two countries as each of them claims regional hegemony and global power.

So if China sees in Pakistan as a hedge against growing India, the latter finds in Vietnam an ally of opportunity, thus tapping into the well of the Vietnamese people's dislike of China's claims on cultural and social influence over them. When translated in strategic terms, this turns into both developmental assistance to each country – Pakistan and Vietnam – besides also arming them.

A Chinese scholar of the China Institute of International Studies, writing in July 2015 stated: "The Modi diplomatic team stresses that Indian diplomacy needs "Shanti" ("peace") as face and "Shakti" ("power and influence") as lining and that diplomacy must closely serve the interests of internal affairs and the needs of India's big power dream. It stands for expansion of contacts with cooperative partners and draws red lines for strategic adversaries."⁷ He reiterates the observation: "Pragmatism coupled with a more confident assertion of Indian interests is likely to be the hallmark."⁸

However, the fundamental issue of the disputed border remains the same with three agreements underlining the two nations' intent of maintaining a balance of power. These names of the agreements bear repetition. The first was the 1993 agreement on maintaining peace and tranquility along the line of actual control and reduced military forces in the border areas. In 1996, the Chinese president Jiang Zemin visited India and both sides decided to develop a cooperative and constructive partnership, further raising political level of bilateral cooperation between the two countries. And finally in 2013, the two agreed to a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA).

These are the three fundamental agreements that upholds peace and tranquility at the LAC, besides being the bedrock of the ongoing negotiations between special representatives of the two governments for final settlement of the border. While the still hanging dispute is an overarching irritant, there are other emerging factors which can jeopardise the efforts of interlocutors on both sides to see a “peaceful” rise of China and India with the two ‘competing’ and ‘converging’ on important regional and global issues.

China’s military modernisation :

In the third plenum of the 18th Party Central Committee, Chinese Communist Party held in 2013, a document was adopted that laid down the decision to “optimize the size and structure of the army, adjust and improve the balance between the services and branches, and reduce non-combat institutions and personnel.”⁹

The apex Party Committee also declared that there will be changes in “1) PLA personnel size and force structure, 2) command organization and structure from the CMC down to the unit level, 3) modern military capabilities as found in “new type combat forces,” and 4) the PLA professional military education system of universities, academies, colleges, and schools.”¹⁰

The whole reform plan of the defence sector of the country has been set on a calendar that is sourced from the Washington-based National Defence University. According to that almanac, the process began in 2015 and scheduled to end in 2020.

Last year, the process was to begin from right at the top. The Central Military Commission (CMC) was to be transformed with focus on departments like military services, logistics system, equipment development systems etc. But as the NDU scholars have noted that the real reforms were not announced till the second week of January in 2016.

Similarly, the transition to joint command and control system in the form of the CMC and the Theatre commands were not accomplished till January-February 2016.¹¹

But additionally, this year's goal is to reduce the PLA by 300,000 troops. This exercise is again expected to spill-over next year. The ones who are about to be furloughed are the ones with "old weapon systems," plus non-combat support forces and the like.¹²

The command and control systems of the People's Armed Police is to be streamlined; but the militias will be reduced; and a professional training procedure introduced along with a modern curriculum.¹³

Even though the military modernization process was one of the 'Four Modernisations' pronouncement of Deng Xiaoping, the process was sporadic at best between the 1980s till 1990s. What brought momentum to the process are two events: one was the first Gulf War of 1990 and second, the demise of the Soviet Union.

Both these events were studied in great detail. If one were to focus on just the military part, the Chinese strategists are believed to have been enthralled by the way the US forces fought the Gulf War. They recognised it to be the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA); an event that occurs every few decades.

The Chinese also studied the way the NATO forces undertook the Balkan wars: the battle of Bosnia, the formation of Kosovo etc. They were in a thrall with the usage of air power from the Persian Gulf as American aircraft carriers were stationed there; and the introduction of the infantry at a time when the risk of loss of friendly lives were the least.

Beijing leadership instituted a number of studies on both counts; the way the Soviet Union failed to reach a decisive victory in Afghanistan and had to return almost defeated; and two the RMA that made the US and allies seemed almost invisible.

They also watched the Afghan operation and the second Gulf War. The emphasis on informationisation of the battlefields and the C4ISR advantage was so huge that it was established as a 'Basic Point'¹⁴ of the CMC that constituted as a Party directive to the military leadership, which led to the Preparation of Military Strategy (PMS)¹⁵. They were ready for what the CMC called "Local Wars in High Technology Conditions."¹⁶

When the Chinese leadership talks about the 'local wars' it mostly means the cross-Straits battles it may have to fight if Taiwan declares 'independence' and naturally, the USA gets involved. The 2014 Chinese White Paper clearly identified the USA as a principal threat to Chinese national security.¹⁷ It also included the possibility of the USA seeking to thwart Chinese claims in the East and South China Sea.

In 2007, when this author had visited China, in a conversation at the premier Beijing University with a South Asia specialist, Prof Han Hua had said; "India is at best of secondary importance to the Chinese power elite." This was still an improvement, she had stated, from a position of "no interest." That worldview has not changed much over the decade that has gone by.

But as India's economy has grown at an average of eight per cent over the last decade, China has had to turn its gaze towards South Asia. This translated into a closer relationship with its traditional ally, Pakistan, while deepening military to military relationship with Bangladesh, tacit support to the Maoist rebels in Nepal (even though the latter considered China of Deng a 'revisionist power') and support to Sri Lankan government in their battle against LTTE.

In military terms the "local war" jargon now includes India. These geopolitical factors have been compounded by the strategic development in the form of the 1998 declaration of India in terms of being a 'nuclear weapon state' (NWS). The Pokhran II blasts that precipitated that declaration was also entangled with a communication by then prime minister, Atal

Behari Vajpayee, that India's NWS status was hinged upon the Chinese threat.

But despite that, since 2001 there have been a decrease in Chinese scholars writing about India. And a some Western observers have noted the Chinese leaders have assiduously sought to build connection with Indian leaders. However, the sense of a threat persists on both sides.

According to a Rand Corporation study, the Chinese force structures and their planned modernisation are based on capacity building. And, the PLA seeks four categories of capabilities:¹⁸

1. The capability to respond to both internal and external threats by quickly taking the initiative, preventing escalation, attaining superiority, and resolving the conflict on China's terms.
2. The eventual development of a limited power projection capability that would facilitate a sustained sea presence and an area denial capability, although area control is not a high priority for the PLA.
3. The ability to conduct short-range preemptive strikes using conventional missiles and air force assets
4. The development of a credible strategic nuclear capability to deter other nuclear powers from using nuclear threats to coerce China or to limit their strategic options, especially during a crisis.

Yet, when one looks at the Chinese geostrategic and geopolitical situation through the lens of Beijing, there are two factors that seem to appear in bold relief. One, of course, is the impact of the nation's economic slowdown on its global competitors. And the other, is the impact of the relative US decline in its southern neighbourhood.

Let us first look at what Xi's instincts are in the testing times of a modest seven per cent growth rate. On one level, almost the whole non-Sinified world were of the opinion that if the Chinese economic growth rate falls below a threshold, there would be high social costs that the residents of Zhongnanhai have to pay. But the last couple of years – do not forget that Xi-Li combine was new at the helm - have shown that they could stay afloat without virtually any internal conflagration, despite few reports of isolated social upheavals.

One possible reason is Xi's policy of 'catching the tigers and flies,' have succeeded in stymieing the popular anger against the 'imagined' impunity of CCP officials. It is in this scenario that the PLA modernisation is being undertaken. One of the key elements of this modernisation is to stop the sale of key appointments even at the highest echelons of the PLA. By one count, the total amount of confiscated wealth of the so-called 'tigers' (corrupt high officials) and 'flies' (corrupt lesser mortals) is over 6.5 billion yuans.

The Western Theatre Command (WTC), which encompasses, what were two military regions (MR) – Lanzhou and Chengdu – stretches right across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India. In fact, the WTC goes around Xinjiang right up to Inner Mongolia. There are reports explaining the jointness of the military command in terms of merger of the two MR-based air forces.

Considering that WTC is land based, there isn't much of a role for the PLA-Navy (PLAN). But it will be important, whether this command will have task forces that would play expeditionary roles.

On the contrary, the Eastern and Southern Theatre Commands have large seas to look after. They will have to have even more jointness in their manouvres with the new islands that the nation has created only to expand their the scope of their territorial waters. East and South China Seas are being reclaimed on a

fast clip by Beijing not just for natural resources as the Beijing planners would want us to believe, but it is also buying the same kind of security the US enjoyed by being in the middle of two oceans.

For two world wars, mainland USA remained safe because of those two vast oceans. China is only trying to buy space as buffers for its newly proficient, but yet untested PLAN. Though the navy that only till few years ago was good enough for just the Taiwan Straits, could now foray in the west to the Gulf of Aden and Seychelles in China's east into the Indian Ocean, it still remains untested. For the level of force projection that Beijing is aiming at, just one Laoning (formerly Varyag) won't suffice.

And indeed, the 'peaceful rise' with an increasingly preponderant regional role, if not global, and Chinese investments being made heavily across continents, the expeditionary role of the PLAN is increasing phenomenally. The Chinese now look at its growing economic might not just as a tool to make its citizens moderately wealthy by 2030, but indeed a whole schema of 'national revitalization.

This explains the 2015 military strategy white paper – a biennial exercise – states: “national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range, and cover a longer time span than any time in the country's history.”¹⁹ Then it goes on to add, in the words of an American expert, Timothy R Heath I: “The PLA Air Force will shift from ‘territorial air defense to both defense and offensive and build an air-space defense force structure that can meet the requirements for informationized operations.’ The PLA's strategic missile force will strengthen its capabilities for strategic deterrence and nuclear counterattack as well as medium and long-range conventional precision strikes. More recently, authorities announced the elevation of the strategic missile force, designated the “(Strategic) Rocket Force,” to a status coequal to that of the other (three) services. Authorities

also announced the formation of a “Strategic Support Force” responsible for managing defense assets in space and cyberspace, reflecting China’s growing emphasis on securing its interests in those domains and the PLA’s judgment that the struggle for information dominance will be central in future wars.”²⁰

In terms of India, Heath’s views are that though peacetime military activities have included incremental measures to bolster ties with the Indian military at the same time, the PLA continues to occasionally assert its presence through incursions. The main missions for the PLA, Heath told the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission that the PLA makes these intrusions across the Indian LAC to vacate the high-altitude contingencies to retake areas that may have been seized by India. However, he points out that the real possibility for an immediate conflict between the two countries could be from China’s increasing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean. “That is opening new areas of friction in the bilateral relationship. In the future, China may need to plan for possibilities of naval conflict against Indian forces.”²¹

In fact, China realises its own vulnerability as a more experienced Indian Navy sits astride the main choke point through more than 80 per cent China’s imports and exports pass through – Malacca Straits. This is one of the reasons PLAN has such a large fleet of submarines – SSKs, SSNs, and SSBNs. With the US pivot and conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific, India has gained a fair amount of geostrategic space to play ‘interference.’ And that makes Chinese strategists worry much.

Indian Military Transformation:

Almost the whole of the decade of 1990s, Indian armed forces felt asphyxiated for the lack of resources. The Indian economy that appeared to be going down the tube in 1990-91 – even as a part of the country’s holding in gold had to be mortgaged to the Bank of England and the United Bank

of Switzerland. Eventually when Narasimha Rao government came to power they launched the severe austerity measures that the Fund-Bank combine had prescribed. But successive government's made sure since, the average rate of 2.5 per cent of the GDP for defence expenditure is maintained. (See Fig 1)

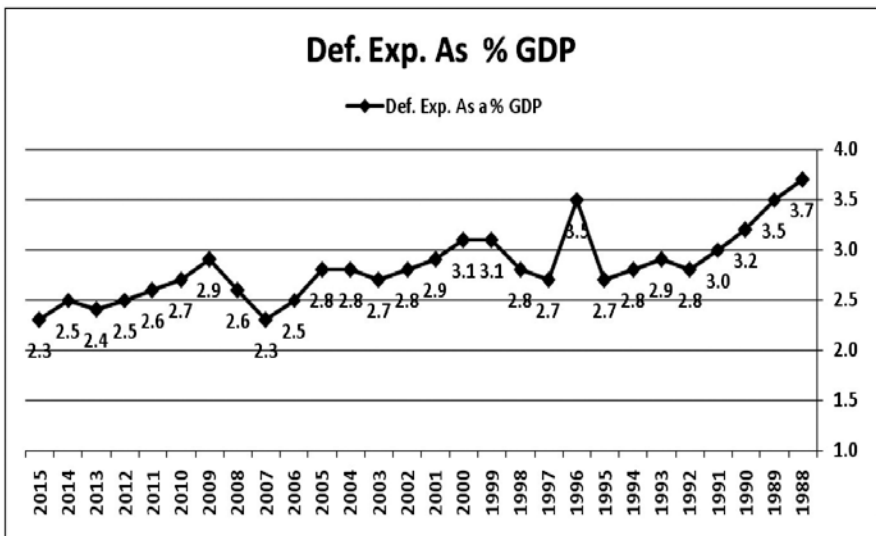


Figure 1

Source: SIPRI

But there were qualitative differences in terms of the Indian military modernisation and the Chinese version. The latter was more personnel-centric, while the Indian upgrade was more materiel-centric. There was another point of departure. When the Chinese wanted their legacy items – almost all of Soviet origin - to be replaced with the new, they mostly built their own. Their method was either reverse engineering or re-engineering their old stuff.

In the case of India, the emphasis was on imports, but the onus was on import-substitution of critical items. This was a result of the US-led Western sanctions regime it had to live through, imposed after its 'peaceful nuclear explosion' (PNE)

of 1974. In a way the modernisation of the Indian armed forces began with the advent of Rajiv Gandhi to power.

From the 1960s till 1980s, Soviet Union was the sole provider of armaments to the country. Only towards the mid-1980s did the Indira Gandhi government showed an inclination to diversify the purchases in a limited way to the West, There was the order for Jaguar aircrafts to the British and the HDW submarines to the Germans. The subs, however, were to be delivered to the succeeding regime of Rajiv Gandhi but got mired in a bribery scandal and the order remained unfulfilled.

But the Gandhi scion showed a great inclination of re-equipping the Indian military as is evident in the sharp spike in defence expenditure when compared to the GDP during 1988 and 1989 to 3.7 per cent and 3.5 per cent. One of the biggest buys of the period was the Mirage 2000 aircrafts – the only platform that could be modified for nuclear weapon delivery as Gandhi had given the necessary clearance for weaponisation.

Having said that, one should keep in mind it was Indira Gandhi who had given the green signal for beginning India's ballistic missile programme, the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP) under then a young engineer, called APJ Abdul Kalam. The Gandhi matriarch could not witness the first firing of the base missile – a short range liquid fuel burning Prithvi. Rajiv Gandhi witnessed that development.

More importantly, he also gave the clearance for an indigenous nuclear powered submarine building programme and the indigenous light fighter aircraft programme.

However, even if the Chinese can claim that they have had their RMA, India cannot still claim it. Even though the military materiel imports came down the in the austere 1990s, there was again a sharp spike from 2000, when the BJP-led NDA government opened the spigot. From then on there has been a steady increase in imports, to the extent that in 2015-16 India

became the biggest importer of arms and equipments. (Fig 2)

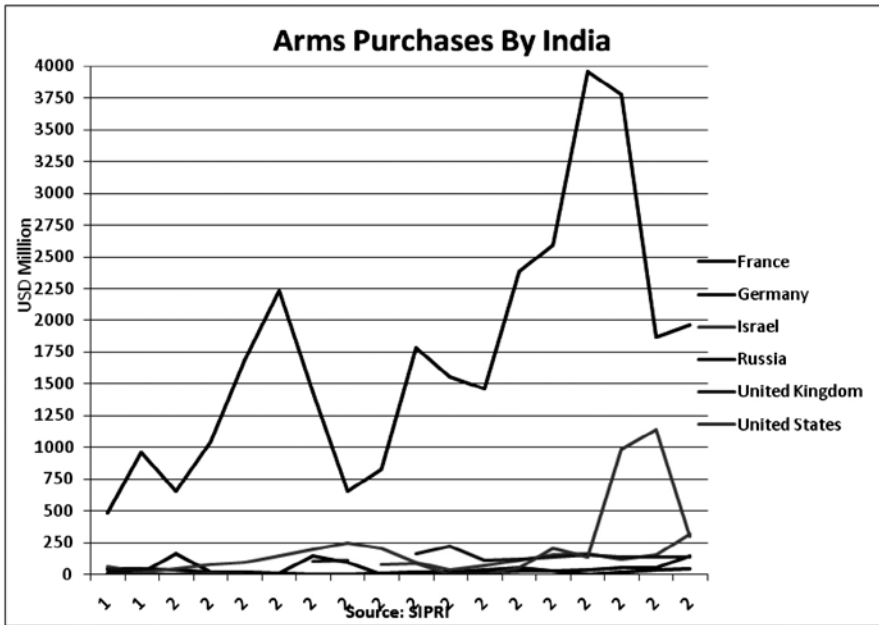


Figure 2

Under the former Chief of Army Staff, General VK Singh (retd), when he was the Eastern Army commander, a committee was formed for “Transforming Indian Army”, the recommendations of that committee remained largely unimplemented even during his tenure as the Chief. This was the only example of the any of the services planning an internal exercise for modernising itself to the extent of an RMA.

Earlier there have been at least two committees under former DRDO chief VK Aatre and another under, Ajai Vikram Singh, a former defence secretary – though the latter was mostly limited to the overhaul of the armed forces career acceleration process. While the AV Singh committee’s recommendations were implemented to a large extent as it was a matter of personnel, but the larger restructuring of the Higher Command management systems left undone.

On the contrary, another committee under the former cabinet secretary, Naresh Chandra was formed to look at the widest swathe of reforms and change of the Indian defence sector. Chandra committee submitted its report in 2011 but the Congress-led UPA government did not implement any of its recommendations.

Only now, a few of the key changes are being incorporated. A new Cyber czar has been appointed. The former Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) that had been fully made into the secretariat of National Security Council has been revived again. Though the most important recommendation – about appointing a Chief of Defence Staff, albeit four star – has not been implemented yet.

Another plan by the Head Quarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) for forming three joint commands for cyber warfare, special forces and space is still hanging fire. Of the two joint commands, the joint command of Andaman and Nicobar Isles is taking a long time in becoming a fully functioning frontier. The idea of it being a 'permanent aircraft carrier' on the Indian Ocean is still to come about.

In terms of procurement, while the Narendra Modi government have plans for spending \$ 250 billion in ten years. Prime Minister Modi had put a lot of emphasis on what he has called 'Make In India' projects that could be funded from this enormous corpus of money allocated to defence modernisation will obviously take while, even though the domestic defence industrial base in the public sector is quite matured to take on this task.

But the global majors would rather have the private sector to come into play. They have been complaining on a high note for long about a bias in favour of the DPSUs. Modi government has responded by making an elaborate attempt to lay down the ground rules of the engagement with domestic private sector industries. Capability and capacity building is obviously an important issue with the domestic private players as they had remained barricaded out of the defence sector for long.

The other problem with defence manufacturing is its long gestation that does not allow the private profiteers a quick return on their investment. The government has also addressed that problem by providing various incentives, including a rather high ceiling for foreign direct investment in the sector.

On the same plane, the two services barring to an extent the navy have a propensity for selection of imported materiel on supposed quality issues. They also complain about the DRDO, the OFB and the DPSUs being delayed in deliveries, and not maintaining quality standards. These organisations, in turn, complain about the services suffering from what they 'brochuritis' – the practice of picking up the 'unachievable' specifications from the various brochures of TNCs (transnational corporations).

However, considering the vast amount of money to be still spent, this should provide a motivation and momentum to continue the competition from which the country can only gain.

But now is the time the defence production side needs a regulator who can maintain a close watch on the utilisation of FDI, the development of research and transfer of technology, and also the functioning of the DPSUs.

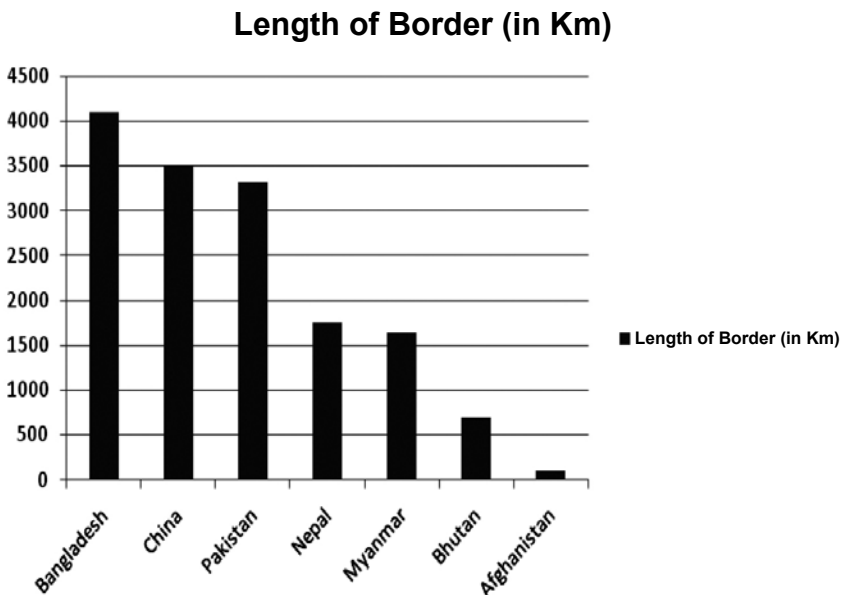
The current needs of the armed forces are quite dire as their regular reserves are down, and their readiness in terms of having futuristic network-centric operational capabilities is quite limited. The recent paracommando operations across the LOC with Pakistan to take out what they call their 'strategic assets' – India knows them as terrorists – were supposedly monitored in real time by the Northern Army commander, through drones and other technical means.

While this conveys a sense of understanding the needs of modern-day ops, the capabilities for that are still not quite really top of the order. This author can recall a conversation with CISC a few years ago, who had lamented that he had severe

embarrassment in taking foreign visitors of advanced forces into his operations room, owing to the relative primitiveness within which the Indian armed forces operate.

Unlike the Chinese, the Indian military planners have still not looked at the rationalisation of forces. Though the current Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Dalbir Singh, has set up a committee to look into the issue that only signals a work in progress.

India shares borders, plus lines of control on the ground that are results of conflicted areas where disputes lie with those who it shares the territories. The two nations are Pakistan and China. Besides them, it also shares a minuscule border with Afghanistan (notional considering the land is under the control of Pakistan/China), a slightly larger open boundary with Nepal and Bhutan. Then there is Bangladesh and Myanmar.



It also has an over seven thousand kms of coastline. So clearly a case exists for a large body of well-equipped armed forces. Plus, the country's expanding trade and economic interests are making its navy to increasingly strengthen its blue water capabilities. Though New Delhi does not yet feel the need for an expeditionary force, nor does it feel requirement of offshore bases, but the fact remains that it has to provide security guarantees to nations in the Indian Ocean Rim.

The navy also appears to be more organised of the three. From the beginning it had its own design bureau, which works in tandem with the shipyards and other stakeholders. While unlike the Chinese, India does not have a missile force, its IGMDP has matured enough by which it can now claim a developed delivery system for a nuclear deterrent, at least in terms of IRBMs.

It is going slow on a programme of developing ICBMs keeping in mind the sensitivities of the Western countries. But the fundamental technology for such classes of weapons is within the grasp of the technology development agencies. A quasi-ICBM of 5,000 km range is on the test bed having gone through a few successive tests. That reaches virtually all parts of China for which it has apparently been developed.

Of course, after the 1998 Pokhran II blasts, when the country declared itself nuclear weapon power, it felt the need for a second joint command in terms of planning and handling the strategic weaponry. Thus was born the Strategic Forces Command (SFC).

A beginning was also made in terms of an infrastructure for a nuclear weapons command. With the soon-to-be-operationlised nuclear submarine (SSBN), the experiences gathered by training with leased SSNs from Russia have provided a sure-fire second strike capability – following the NFU doctrine.

Very little of the SFC is known in the open sources, as it maintains a strict need-to-know, there have been issues of control over strategic assets that could arm the SFC. For example, when it wanted 40-odd Mirage 2000s a few years ago, the air force headquarters had raised the issue of who would fly, deploy and maintain them.

Similarly, there are problems with the Russian SSN and the indigenous SSBNs. The navy played the lead role in terms of designing the latter, and also training on the two SSNs – the first was actually acquired in the 1980s during the Rajiv Gandhi regime. Once the first SSBN is delivered, the two competing forces – navy and the SFC – will have to come to decision about who would run it.

Two classes of missiles, a SLBM and a SLCM, named Sagarika and BrahMos, are ready to be mated with INS Arihant, the first SSBN about to be commissioned. The second SSBN is already taking off as a project in the private sector.

Currently, there are limitations imposed on the IAF, by the fact that its acquisition plans for replacement of old stock of aircrafts or expanding its squadron strength to approach its aimed strength of 42 has been stuck in various quagmires. The first was the genuine delay in production of the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), which was to replace the MiG-21 varieties. Then there was a delay in decision-making in acquiring the medium combat aircrafts.

But at its current strength, it is capable of taking on our traditional adversary on the western border. However, if it becomes a two-front situation, then the Chinese have the numbers to throw at the IAF. This may change the quantitative picture in case of its main goal of achieving air dominance. But its defensive posture coupled with the ground-based air defence systems should hold good.

Having said that Indian armed forces' modernisation process is more equipment based, than command and control based as in the case of China, one has to say the armed forces headquarters will have to advise the government to allow them to undertake establishing certain command and control norms by which the country can, not just secure its territorial interests, but also secure its expanding interests abroad.

India's Chinese Threat Perceptions:

This section is being written after circulating a questionnaire amongst a small group of recently retired three star generals, who still have the sense of the lay of the land. The three research questions were in the following:

1. Will it be our strategy to grow asymmetric capabilities on the face of conventional threat from China?
2. Is it a given in the military minds here that a threat from China is posed as a default two front situation?
3. While the expanse of the Chinese Western Theatre Command is huge – probably the biggest – is our force structure adequate in a second strike mode after asymmetric attacks to degrade some of the main Chinese capacities?

The primary element on the threat-board of the Indian defence establishment is the factor of what Lt General Philip Campose, recently retired vice chief of army staff points out is the default position of a 'two front war.' As he puts it, any military planner in this country will have to foresee "It is a logical presumption, in view of evolving equations and developments in India's neighbourhood that any threat of war from China could manifest as a two front conflict."

General SL Narasimhan, who retired from the Army War College, Mhow, as its commandant and a hard-core China specialist provides an important insight. He provides two scenarios. One is when Pakistan initiates hostilities that lead

up to a full fledged war. China then may decide to support Islamabad politically besides maintaining crucial supplies of war material. In the opinion of this author, this scenario will get played when Pakistan's losses become too big and Beijing decides to even out the balance of power by even becoming involved militarily.

On the other hand, Narasimhan also mentions the fact Pakistan has the penchant to seek to ride piggyback on Chinese military moves. A good example will be the 1952 Sino-Indian border war. The last emboldened Pakistan make their own on war against India for Kashmir in 1965. In 1971, a brokerage of Sino-US establishment of diplomatic relations had emboldened them to wage war against India as it sought to liberate Bangladesh from the murderous regime of General Yahya Khan. Islamabad had then calculated that they will enjoy the support of a superpower and an emerging power while striking India hard. So evidently, if in the future, if China wages war against India, a two-front war may become a reality. However, Narasimhan adds an important rider that says it may be China's desire not to be seen as an emerging global power, which needs the support of piffling Pakistan.

The 'evolving equations' that Camrose refers to is the deepening Sino-Pak relationship that is extending beyond the pro-forma support in a situation to major financial investments that would have both strategic and operational fall-out. Both the proposed OBOR project, and the CPEC will have a material impact on India's security, besides the fact it will sanctify China's acquisition of the parts of what used to be 'northern territories,' but are now denominated by their individual locational references. If one is to undertake a grand view, legally at least India has a claim on the land as part of Kashmir that had acceded to India in 1948.

While in a reversal of fortune of sorts, the small tactical advantage that India enjoyed in the 1980s on its frontier with China has now been transformed into an advantage for the

latter. Plus, the major infrastructural developments that have taken place in the Chinese provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang that abut the boundary with India. Focussing on increasing rail and road networks, the developments have created a 'clear and present danger' in terms of increasing the intensities of the threats.

So when asked about how India is preparing to counter the threat, Campose said that, "India will continue to seek normalisation of relations with China by seeking to resolve the shared border dispute. Nonetheless, it would be prudent on India's part to be prepared to defend itself in case it faces a threat from any of its neighbours, including China. Towards that end, India is building up cross-spectrum military capabilities in the current and future perspective. These capabilities would include the entire range of conventional and non-conventional means of war-fighting, including technological and asymmetric capabilities, to support our deterrence posture."

Narasimhan seems more bent on our space-based capacities in terms of taking asymmetric actions in a war with China. He is unconventional to the extent that he believes cyber war is difficult to undertake because of the existence multiple agencies that need major coordination efforts. There are at least four centres of cyber capabilities – the three services and the ministry of defence itself. He sees our capabilities improving in terms of electronic warfare and in our missiles, even in the conventional mode.

China's own non-conventional edge in terms of cyber war-fighting is formidable. But India is not exactly a neophyte in that area. Indian exponents of cyber warfare are keener to talk of the defensive measures that the country is capable of undertaking, than the offensive measures that the cyber-force can take. In a recent conference on the cyber world, the Deputy National Security Dr Arvind Gupta stated, "Cyber weapons might play an important role in the future combats with artificial intelligence becoming an important area in cyber defence."

Considering that China has a 20 year time advantage over India in terms of its modernisation programme, India has a lot of catching up to do in terms of conventional, sub-conventional and strategic weaponry. But since China also suffers from having a lot of legacy systems of its own, it's comparable in a few areas with India's predicaments.

On another plane, there are oft expressed doubts about the quality of training of Chinese troops by western specialists, and also widespread corruption in appointing senior PLA leaders that can actually hobble the PLA's forward march in terms of need. Brigadier (ret'd) Gurmeet Kanwal, one of the key opinion builders in the country on military matters have recently commented in a volume on the PLA and India, "In the ultimate analysis, a pragmatic threat assessment must take note of "capabilities" and not of "intentions" as the latter are subject to change."²²

Pragmatism also dictates what Campose prefaces his first response with. It is in India's interest that maintains a serious levele to engagement with the Chinese State and increase people-to-people contact. For that, the biggest obstacle is the language the Chinese speak – Mandarin. There are a small band of people who speak the language in India. But 'soft skills' always score over 'hard capabilities.' Modi did score over all preceding Indian leaders barring Nahru by focussing Xi's attention on the smooth flow of the Ganges. In turn, he got to begin his first prime ministerial visit to China from Xian, where Xi was 'sent away' during the cultural revolution.

These tactical diplomatic moves are important, besides the joint exercises that are held every second year, with the PLA. These tactical diplomatic moves are important, besides the joint exercises that are held every second year, with the PLA. But actions of China like controlling the flow of the Brahmaputra river, as an upper riparian is a sort of asymmetric strategic ploy to rile India. The case of 'technical hold' on the UNSC's attempt at including in its list of global perpetrators of terrorism

of characters like Maulana Masood Azhar is an 'irritant' in a bilateral relationship. However, realistic appreciation of these measures is to be viewed through the prism of 'competition' and 'convergence' matrix that has been created by the Indian foreign and defence policy establishments.

While India's growing defence relationship with the US is rightly seen by China as a threat to its areas of influence in its east, it cannot be gainsaid that its geostrategy based on developing closer contacts with these nations are hobbled by its conflicts with some of the key countries of the region for maintaining control of sovereign rights of some of the islands. In that light the US 'pivot' from what it calls the middle-east to far east, is a matter of grave concern to Beijing. The additional nomenclatural change of the region – in terms of calling eastern Pacific as Indo-Pacific – only adds to that sense of insecurity.

Hence, there is an attempt to maintain its initiative on continental Asia through the strategy of building OBOR etc. However, India is developing its maritime capabilities to have a capability of policing most of the Indian Ocean as the US recedes from the area. This competition of extending individual 'spheres of influence' in much of Asia is still unfolding. The game that is being played is more like moves on the chess board than what is called 'wei wei' by China. As the comprehensive national power of the two countries continues with their upswing, the two countries will have potential for conflicts. This can be turned into opportunities of cooperation if the two countries decide to focus on what Lt Gen (retd) Philip Campose describes as their 'people centric development.'

Or as Lt Gen (retd) SL Narasimhan puts it that current environment of having a situation where wars among nations have almost become passé – "In the present (milieu) of War Prevention strategy it may not fit in" – the real worry is about escalation dominance on smaller issues like river waters, border management, war deterrence etc. However, in terms of the query about adequacy of 'force structures,' the strategic

planners say that they seem quite acceptable at the moment. Considering India is raising two Mountain Divisions to be stationed in its North-East where the disputed McMahon Line runs through, and two more independent mountain brigades to be stationed in the region of the extreme north of the country, India's preparations for a credible war prevention posture is getting positioned. That it is worrying Beijing is the recent spat about Indian Army's armoured corps positioning battle tanks on the heights where Ladakh is located, facing Chinese controlled tundra-like territory of Aksai Chin.

Narasimhan has a belief that the newly created Chinese Western Theatre Command comprising erstwhile Lanzhou military region and Chengdu military region oversees lands that have internal insurgencies. The WTC is the largest command of the new reorganisation of Chinese forces stretching from Tibet in the south-east to Xinjiang in the south and towards the north-west land of Inner Mongolia is restive due to their peoples not quite accepting the suzerainty of the Han Chinese, who constitute 90 per cent of the population.

But China is changing. Hitherto, the west was ignored in terms of economic development packages or creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) by the Chinese. The revival of the land-based Silk Route is also designed to connect the region of at least, Xinjiang, with neighbouring Central Asia. This will help the Uyghurs of Xinjiang to have the possibility of comporting with their culturally similar and coreligionist Islamic population. Besides, of course, there would be the usual economic pay-offs. But till the time this happens one ear and one eye of the WTC will have to be turned towards internal developments of the territory where it is based, by which their rear area staging posts will remain weak.

This is to India's advantage, even though it has its own worries in the North-East. What is more important for New Delhi to take note is the jointness of the command, where its own efforts in creating joint capabilities for its three services are an immediate need of the day.

Conclusion :

In that light at the end, it is important to examine the Chinese grand strategy and what kind of an impact it can have on India. Chinese are one of the biggest pragmatists of the world. The Middle Kingdom syndrome (Zhong Guo) had been preparing for this ever since Mao Zhedong and the Red Army defeated the nationalist forces and established 'socialism with Chinese characteristics.' The desire of the Chinese people, driven by the ambition of their leadership wanted to aim for regaining their pre-historical primacy in a civilisational context.

They have come through various formulations like 'Let Hundred Flowers Bloom,' 'Great Leap Forward,' the 'Cultural Revolution,' 'Four Modernisations,' 'Hundred Years' of Humiliation,' 'Harmonious Development' and 'Catching Tigers and Flies.' Each of these slogans have had their costs and benefits and have gone into the creation modern China.

So much in China is so Beijing-centric and ensconced within a perimetre of 10-odd kms beginning from the Great Hall of the People on the Tienanmen Square to the Forbidden City on its right as one looks outward and Zhongnanhai on the diagonal left, that one feels the growing power of the political elite. This power is not just amorphous mass, instead is the 'comprehensive national power' of the second largest economy of the world, the largest military of the world, and largest population, which has an increasingly adverse demographics, but not quite the same waiting disaster like that of Japan.

That mix requires a grand strategy at a time when China is poised second superpower of the world. Though the Chinese very modestly claim that 2030 they will become a middle income country way behind the US national income, though their GDP will be bigger than the latter's.

There is an interesting and revelatory quote by Srikanth Kondapalli in an edited volume cited earlier, attributed to now dead Kim Jong-Il, the 'Great Leader' of North Korea – second

only to his father, Kim Il Sung who is the 'Supreme Leader' – after a visit to Hubei, Guangdong and Beijing. Junior Kim had stated: "We have seen with our own eyes that China's comprehensive national strength is continually rising and its social appearance is being transformed, and we have a more all-round understanding of China; we have a deeper appreciation of the policies of the Chinese party and government such as emancipating the mind, attaching the importance to talent, basing efforts on self-determined innovation, and making efforts to promote all round, coordinated, and sustainable development."²³

Reading that quote first, the most fascinating notion that struck me was here was a leader of a nation that constitute the so-called 'Axis of Evil' (in George W Bush's redolent language); and a country that during his regime had often faced famine like situations. And he had to thus seek redress from the US (in Bill Clinton's presidency especially) while trading on their nuclear weapons programme and their missile programme for basic victuals. The same Kim is struck by China's economic progress and its all-round development that he had himself described as its 'comprehensive national strength.' Yet, he would be described by the Western media as a country yokel who had little knowledge of statecraft.

The second important in that effusive appreciation of Chinese power was its demonstration value to the region, if not the world. If China played the game of creating policies – both internal and external – that stems from its grand strategy, they could indeed be the second superpower of the world.

In fact, there is no denying the first big idea of peace and co-prosperity in a Cold War suffused world was provided by India and China. 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' or 'Panchsheel' as it was dubbed here had defined the politics of the developing world. Then China went on to expounding further principles some of which have struck a chord with global diplomacy. Most recently, after the Great Recession that began

in 2008 in the West, was a product of deep fissures of 'income inequality' in those countries and in China too, Hu Jintao gave the moniker of 'Harmonious Development' and 'Harmonious World.'

Amidst all this measuring an impact of China's Grand strategy essentially have to be judged in terms of India's national security imperatives. If China's party-State can be called a 'hard State,' India was considered a 'soft State.' China's geopolitical immersion into the competitive arena of South Asia, which naturally India considered to be its own sphere of influence, went largely unchallenged with India generally slothful politico-bureaucratic combine being devoid any strategic sense.

While countries like a Sri Lanka or an Afghanistan sought military help, New Delhi would sit on the proposals for months as they cogitated on past experiences. In the absence of a stated National Security Policy or a corporate view of national priorities, the Indian decision-makers remain hobbled by ad hocism. Take the 2014 example of Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai asked for some defence supplies including choppers for military purposes.

Manmohan Singh government sat on the proposal for such a long time that when Ashraf Ghani became the president, one of his first acts was to withdraw the request. While that action was not just a reflection of Ghani's early attempt to build a relationship with Pakistan, it also reflected the exasperation of the Afghan security apparatus with the Indian government. Incidentally, the Chinese who have a narrow passage reaching the embattled country through the Wakhan corridor, have major mining interests there. This is on what was erstwhile Indian land (See page 13). India too has mining interest Haji Gak area of the country.

Same with Sri Lanka. When at the height of its civil war with the LTTE, the Wickremasinghe government sought help from New Delhi. Of course the Indian leadership had a problem with the

domestic Tamil sentiments. After all they also recognised the fascistic side of Prabhakaran long ago, which led to the waning of their visible support.

But that should not have made the decision-making process to get into a stupor and paralysis. Result: the Chinese went in. And now we see them cashing on the goodwill of the majority Sinhala community that has allowed them to build a port in Hambantota. This lack of structural realism amongst the political-bureaucratic class that Kenneth Waltz has so theorised upon, creates problems in the long run for national interest.

Recall the initial quote of Sun Tzu with which this monograph had begun that the best way to win a war is to win it before fighting begins. The Chinese scholars now have propounded a theory. It is based on the new rise of nationalism in the country that is evident in rhetoric heavy social media conversations of the youth on Weibo. They say that even a 'hard' party-State like China, that maintains a tight cap on its population, these scholars say, cannot ignore the Weibo voices. Hence, they say the Tawang monastery is so revered by the Tibetans living in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) that reviving an old formula of border settlement cannot remain valid.

In other words, in terms of Grand Strategy, the Chinese have upped the ante from what Zhou Enlai had offered to Nehru in private in 1960. As the Hindu wrote in 2012 in an article by their then China correspondent Ananth Krishnan that: "The swap involved China giving up its claims to Tawang, in Arunachal Pradesh, whose geography is crucial to India's defence of the northeast. India would, in turn, give up its claim to Aksai Chin, which provides the People's Liberation Army the most crucial land link between Xinjiang and Tibet."²⁴

This was reiterated by Deng Xiaoping to Rajiv Gandhi when the latter visited Beijing in mid-December, 1988. But again the Indian government proved to be paralytic without understanding

the huge impact this exchange of territories would have had on Sino-India relations geopolitical terms and in terms of a major strategic advantage. Of course, by 1988, Gandhi had lost the political traction by which he could have ceded Aksai Chin, despite confirming India's hold on the territory of North-East.

Now by talking about the supposed public opinion in Tibet that the Chinese regime cannot ignore, the Chinese scholars say the offer is 'off the table.' They know that with the expansion of their cumulative national power they are capable giving India a run-around.

However, there is an increasing realisation in the community of strategic experts that their periodic 'choking' – to use an oft repeated cricketing term, invented by the media for describing the below par performance of the national team – delegitimises them in the public eye.

Thus it was easier for now Prime Minister Narendra Modi to package himself as a 'strong, decisive leader in terms of maintaining and extending Indian national interest' during his long campaign for national office.

Another major challenge for India is shaping up in the Indian Ocean from the Chinese side where it is bringing in its grand strategic vision to disable India from closing the Malacca Straits in case of hostilities breaking out between the two countries. On top of that, the Chinese regime of Xi Jinping has overturned an often repeated denial by Chinese leaders of not building overseas military bases, as exhorted by Deng. He professed "Hide your strength, and bide your time."

Considering that the PLAN has often sought to build offshore island bases, they were still in what can be called 'Near Abroad.' But since substantial Chinese capital has moved to Africa, the Chinese leadership is planning to set up base Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. This could become a staging post for an expeditionary Chinese force that could project into North Africa and beyond.

The Chinese Ministry of National Defence was so chary about using the word 'base', the spokesperson of the ministry, Wu Qian stated on February 25, 2016 that "Through friendly consultations between China and Djibouti, the two sides have reached consensus on China's building support facilities in Djibouti. Currently, construction of infrastructure for the support facilities has started."²⁵

Call it by what you will, it's still a military base where the immediate objective of the CMC is to resupply (and R&R) PLAN's assets that have to patrol the Gulf of Aden on anti-piracy patrol. Whether this first base multiplies and covers the whole continental Africa, is something any strategic planner of the world would be watching keenly.

Djibouti incidentally opens out on to the wider Arabian Sea shared by Pakistan and India in its east. The Chinese have built the now famous port of Gwadar in Balochistan. The strategic location of that port can be an alternative supply route in case the Malacca Straits get threatened.

India, in turn, is planning a naval base at Seychelles, an Indian Ocean island. The distance between Seychelles and Djibouti is 2,318 kms. By air, the distance is close to 1400 miles. And India clearly needs to maintain the command and control of the Ocean and the Arabian Sea from the spot.

What is rattling the Chinese at the moment is the new nomenclature of the Eastern Pacific into the Indo-Pacific region. The foray India has made in Vietnam is a direct counter to Chinese adoption of Pakistan. There are a few parallels between the Indo-Pakistan narrative and the Sino-Vietnam story. The Vietnamese have a traditional cultural antipathy of the Chinese as the latter had sought to impose it on the naturally strong-willed Vietnamese when it was assimilated during the times of the Qin warlords. They attached the southern part of Vietnam, then called the Red River Delta and attached it with Guangdong /Guangxi, thus creating a separate kingdom.

From 111 BC, the Hans directly took over the territory and brought rest of the country. Thus like Pakistan, Vietnam has an antipathy towards the much larger China. In contemporary times, 1979 when the Chinese attacked the country, for the latter was trying to evict the genocidal Khmer Rouge guerrillas from Cambodia, the people's war thus unleashed by the PLA was delivered a strong punch by the Vietnamese, the fellow communists.

Thus now, when India has taken to Vietnam in a big way as has been signalled by the recent visit of the PM, Narendra Modi, the Chinese Grand Strategy has shown a chink, signalling to it that New Delhi is waking up from its slumber in the realm of geostrategy. That could be a cautionary tale for people to follow.

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