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COOPERATIVE SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC : MANAGING CHINA'S RISE



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Chinese Military Assertiveness

India's foremost external security challenge in the 2020–30 timeframe will be to manage the rise of a militarily assertive China that is seeking to achieve a 'favourable strategic posture' through its outreach into the Indo-Pacific region. Among others, China is supported in the quest by nuclear-armed Pakistan, its belligerent ally. The Iran-Saudi stand-off may add to instability in West Asia if Iran's nuclear deal with the United States (US) and other Western powers breaks down irretrievably. Together with its strategic partners, India will need to make a substantive contribution to ensure peace

and stability and the freedom of the seas in the Indo-Pacific.

China's brazen violation of international norms in recent years, particularly its construction of military facilities on forcibly occupied and reclaimed islands in the South China Sea, and its growing military and economic power pose a strategic challenge to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including India and the US and their allies and strategic partners. Now that President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power base and China has completed its 'four modernisations', it has discarded Deng Xiaoping's twenty-four-character strategy to 'hide our capacity



and bide our time’ and has begun to flex its military muscle. It has also stopped using the phrase ‘peaceful rise’ while referring to its military and economic growth. Given the gradual reduction in US force levels in Asia since the end of the Cold War, China senses the emergence of a security vacuum in the Indo-Pacific and is rushing headlong to fill it. As part of its strategic outreach, China is rapidly upgrading the capabilities of the PLA Navy. It is reportedly building three aircraft carriers.

With its growing military power and preference for resolving territorial disputes through coercion and the use of military force, the possibility of China displaying militarily irresponsible behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region, including against India, cannot be ruled out. China could decide to intervene militarily in the South China Sea to establish its presence on some of the disputed Spratly or Paracel islands (it has already been engaged in building air strips on reclaimed land), or to occupy one or more of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, or decide to resolve the remaining territorial disputes, like that with India, by using military force. Though the probability is low, the reunification of Taiwan with China through the use of military force cannot be ruled out.

Also, China has deep internal fault lines. Its rapid economic growth, now slowing, has been fairly uneven and non-inclusive. There is a growing sense of resentment among the people against the leadership of the Communist

Party for the denial of basic freedoms. The discontentment simmering below the surface could boil over and lead to a spontaneous implosion that may eventually become uncontrollable. The downturn in annual growth rates and the crash of Chinese stock markets in July 2015 and again in January 2016 and their continuing volatility also point to the possibility of an economic meltdown. David Shambaugh, a well-known China scholar, is the latest to have jumped on to the China-may-implode bandwagon.

Both the contingencies—implosion and military adventurism—have a low probability of occurrence, but will be high-impact events with widespread ramifications around the Indo-Pacific should either of them come to pass. Both contingencies will shake up the markets, result in millions of refugees and lead to a bloodbath. India and its strategic partners will need to cooperate closely to deal with the fallout and to manage the disastrous consequences if either of these contingencies unfolds.

China’s String of Pearls in the IOR

Closer home, in South Asia, China’s aim is to confine India to the backwaters of the Indian Ocean as a subaltern state. It is engaged in the strategic encirclement of India. It does this by making deep inroads into each of India’s land neighbours. It has reached out to Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka and is acquiring port facilities and developing infrastructure through soft loans. As part of its ‘String of Pearls’ strategy, it is acquiring

port facilities from which its navy can operate in the northern Indian Ocean.

The growing China–Pakistan nexus for nuclear warheads, ballistic missiles and military hardware is a matter of concern not only for India but also for the other countries in the region. In a grossly unfriendly act, in June 2016, China virtually vetoed India’s application for the membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) on the specious grounds that the criteria for membership needed to be established first. Though it makes the right noises to jointly fight the scourge of international terrorism, China has consistently refused to allow the 1267 Committee of the UN Security Council to designate Azhar Masood, the chief of the internationally banned terrorist organisation Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), as a global terrorist.

China is now engaged in developing the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to link Xinjiang with Gwadar on the Makran coast as part of its ‘belt and road’ (BRI) initiative. Involving an investment of about US\$62 billion, the project is designed to give a fillip to the Chinese economy, create an alternative route for oil and gas supplies and counter US influence in the Indo-Pacific. The port may eventually be upgraded to a naval base as part of China’s String of Pearls strategy to dominate the Indian Ocean. Pakistan, of course, has failed to realise that the CPEC is a debt trap that might eventually make it the 23rd province of China.

China is gradually extending its maritime outreach to the Indian Ocean.

In the northern Indian Ocean, China is engaged in acquiring port facilities through its “string of pearls” strategy to enable the PLA Navy to operate in the seas around India. It has built ports in Sri Lanka, off Myanmar, in Qatar and in Pakistan. Gwadar port on the Makran coast of Pakistan has been leased to China for 40 years. China has upgraded ports in Chittagong, Bangladesh, and Lamu in northern Kenya. These ports can be converted to naval bases in due course. China is also engaged in building its first overseas military base in Djibouti.

China’s support to the military-backed regime in Myanmar; efforts at making inroads into Nepal; increasing activities in the Bay of Bengal; its relentless efforts to increase its influence in Bhutan and Bangladesh; its attempts to isolate India in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and keep India’s participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at a low ebb; are all indicators of China’s intention to bog India down in an unstable neighbourhood.

Cooperative Security in the Indo-Pacific

India must join the US and other strategic partners, such as Australia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam, to establish a cooperative security framework for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, for the security of the global commons and to deal with contingencies that might arise. If China is willing to join the cooperative security effort, it should be welcomed. However, the experience has been that China prefers to plough a lonely furrow rather than cooperate with its regional neighbours. Its record in UN peacekeeping



operations has belied expectations. China took over five years to join the international anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa. Even now the PLA Navy limits its activities to escorting its own merchant ships and does not coordinate operations with the other navies.

In this context, the India–US strategic partnership makes eminent sense as a hedging strategy for both countries. In more senses than one, it is India’s ‘principal’ strategic partnership, as former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had once described it. His predecessor, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had gone further and said that India and the US were ‘natural allies’.

In its first National Security Strategy (NSS) document, released in December 2017, the Trump administration has noted India’s emergence as a ‘global power’. In the past, in 2015, in the Obama administration’s last NSS, India’s role was described as a ‘regional provider of security’ and in 2010, India had been termed one of ‘21st century centres of influence’. In 2006, George W Bush administration’s NSS had called India one of the ‘regional and global engines of growth’ and in 2002, it was viewed as a ‘potential great democratic power of 21st century’. (Shubajit Roy, “Washington Unveils New Security Strategy”, *Indian Express*, December 20, 2017.)

Whichever term is used to describe the relationship, clearly, the US cannot be expected to pull India’s chestnuts out of the fire, and vice versa. Only when

the vital national interests of both are simultaneously threatened will the two countries come together and act in concert. For over a decade now, US officials have been calling upon India to take up its regional responsibilities as a ‘net provider of security’. India is gradually stepping up to the plate.

Defence Cooperation

In order to counter China’s military assertiveness, India must increase its defence cooperation with its strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific. Because of its exaggerated claims over the South China Sea, China has been objecting to India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) prospecting within Vietnam’s territorial waters. Future ONGC operations should be backed up with support from the Indian Navy by way of providing point defence to offshore oil installations and conducting maritime patrolling in the South China Sea jointly with the US and other strategic partners.

Vietnam has often expressed an interest in Indian weapon systems. These must be provided on soft loans, including ballistic missiles that do not violate MTCR guidelines such as the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, Prithvi I and II and Prahar SSMs. The indigenously designed and manufactured Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher (MBRL) should also be provided. Initial batches of these weapon systems could be gifted and training teams sent to provide in situ training assistance. Notably, in May 2016, the US lifted its fifty-year-old embargo on the sale of arms to Vietnam.

Afghanistan has given India a wish list of weapons and equipment in accordance with the provisions of its strategic partnership with India. So far India has given mainly non-lethal defence equipment, except for a few attack helicopters. The other items required by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in order to improve combat capability should also be provided. The training assistance being provided to the ANSF should be stepped up by an order of magnitude.

If invited to do so by the Afghan government, India should be prepared to train ANSF personnel inside Afghanistan. The Indian training teams should be self-sufficient and capable of organizing their own local security, including limited counter-terrorism measures. The trilateral agreement with Iran and Afghanistan for India to develop the Chabahar port and link it with the Zaranj–Delaram highway, built by India in Afghanistan, to gain access to the Central Asian republics and beyond to the countries part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is a positive development.

It will also provide a suitable route for logistics support should India be called upon to send an infantry division or a brigade group to Afghanistan to support operations of the ANSF if it becomes necessary. Similarly, India should reach out to Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore and Sri Lanka and other countries on the Indian Ocean littoral in order to minimize the negative

impact of the overtures being made by China to them.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

In November 2017, senior officials of Australia, India, Japan and the US, meeting on the side-lines of the East Asia Summit in the Philippines, agreed that a “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region and of the world at large.” This development has led to speculation that the idea of a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is being revived after a hiatus of ten years. It is expected that this will eventually lead to strategic realignment for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The ‘Quad’, as it has come to be called, had a short-lived existence in 1987-88 when Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pulled his country out. He did this after China, which perceived the Quad as an attempt to counter its rise, lodged a formal protest with all four countries. Now, in view of increasing Chinese political donations and China’s growing influence in its universities, Australia appears to have had a change of heart and the concept of the Quad is once again seeing forward movement.

The month of November 2018 was extraordinarily productive for the establishment of a cooperative security framework in the Indo-Pacific region. Meeting for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue for the third time in one year, officials of Australia, India, Japan and the US agreed to expand their cooperation to establish a free, open and inclusive rules-



based order in the Indo-Pacific region amid growing apprehensions about Chinese military assertiveness.

Around the same time, in bilateral meetings on the side-lines of the APEC, ASEAN, and the East Asia summits, several heads of government emphasised the importance of cooperation for security in the Indo-Pacific. And, at the end of the month, the prime ministers of India and Japan and the president of the United States met on the side-lines of the G-20 summit at Buenos Aires and resolved to support a free, open, inclusive and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

In June 2018, while speaking at the Shangri La Dialogue at Singapore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that India's cooperation with its strategic partners was not "directed against any country," and that India visualises the Indo-Pacific as a space that requires a "common rules-based order." He laid special emphasis on the importance of freedom of navigation and connectivity. The Quad is soon expected to upgrade its discussions on the Indo-Pacific to the ministerial level and enlarge their scope to include additional countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam that are wary of China's expansionist tendencies. Interestingly, the US has re-named its Pacific Command (PACOM) as Indo-Pacific Command. This is a telling indicator of the shape of things to come.

Though it will be a gradual and long-drawn process, a cooperative security framework may eventually emerge from the discussions now being initiated by the leaders

of the Quad. Cooperative security does not necessarily require a formal military alliance. Cooperative security entails the sharing of intelligence; joint counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation efforts; upholding the rules and norms governing maritime trade; providing help to the littoral states to meet their security needs; helping to counter piracy, arms smuggling and narcotics trafficking; and, undertaking joint humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) operations in the region.

Requirement of Intervention Capabilities

Ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and maintaining the freedom of the sea lanes of communication for the unfettered flow of trade requires the creation of robust capabilities for military intervention. Contingences triggering such interventions could include the removal of illegal blockades, the rescue of political hostages (for example, US diplomats held hostage in Teheran, 1979-81), the restoration of a legitimate regime after a coup (Indian intervention in Maldives, 1988), the overthrow of rogue regimes and the recapture of islands seized illegally by inimical forces.

In the past India has repeatedly required such capabilities, though these were used mostly for HADR purposes. Starting with the war in Iraq in 2003, through the conflicts in Lebanon (2006), Egypt, Libya and Yemen (2011) and Ukraine and Syria-Iraq (2014), the Indian armed forces and civil aviation personnel have been engaged in evacuating beleaguered Indian citizens from

war zones. In the space of ten days in April 2015, India had evacuated 5,600 displaced persons from Yemen under Operation Rahat (relief). Of these, 4,640 were from India and 960 from 41 friendly countries, including citizens of Britain, France and the United States. They were evacuated by air by C-17 Globemaster aircraft of the Indian Air Force flying from Djibouti, Ethiopia; by Air India aircraft flying from Sana'a; and, by sea on board ships of the Indian Navy from Aden, Al Hudaydah and Al Mukalla ports in Yemen.

The present requirement of a force for military intervention is of at least one air assault brigade group with integral heli-lift capability for offensive employment on India's periphery by 2020. Comprising three specially trained air assault battalions, integral firepower component and combat service support and logistics support units, the brigade group should be based on Chinook CH-47 and MI-17 transport helicopters. It should have the guaranteed firepower and support of two to three flights of attack and reconnaissance helicopters and one flight of UCAVs.

Simultaneously, efforts should commence to raise a RRD by 2022. The first air assault brigade group mentioned above should be a part of this force. The second brigade group of the RRD should have amphibious capability with the necessary transportation assets being acquired and held by the Indian Navy, including landing and logistics ships. One brigade group in Southern Command has been recently designated as an amphibious

brigade; this brigade group could be suitably upgraded. The amphibious brigade should be self-contained for 15 days of sustained intervention operations. The third brigade of the RRD should be lightly equipped for offensive and defensive employment in the plains and the mountains as well as jungle and desert terrain. All the brigade groups and their ancillary support elements should be capable of transportation by land, sea and air.

Another RRD, the second, should be raised by about 2030 when India's regional responsibilities would have grown considerably. Special Forces support should be available to the RRDs on as required basis, for conventional conflict and intervention operations. A permanent tri-Service headquarters equivalent to a Corps HQ should also be raised under HQ Integrated Defence Staff for continuous threat assessment and operational planning and to provide C4I2SR support to the RRDs and their firepower, combat service and logistics support components. Unless planning for the creation of such capabilities begins now, the formations will not be available when these are required to be employed.

Concluding Observations

India's area of strategic interest now extends from the South China Sea in the east to the Horn of Africa in the west. In order to discharge its growing responsibilities towards regional security, India must upgrade its military capacities for intervention operations in the Indo-Pacific. Two rapid reaction-cum-air assault divisions backed by air support, air lift and



sea transportation and logistics resources for 30 days each will be required by 2025-30. It will then be apparent to potential adversaries that India will not hesitate to intervene in conjunction with its strategic partners if its vital national interests are threatened in its area of strategic interest.

China's growing military and economic power pose a strategic challenge to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including India, the United States and its allies and strategic partners. China is too large to be contained effectively, but India can and must raise the cost for China's pursuit of its grand strategy to confine India to the backwaters of the Indian Ocean as a subaltern state. India should do this through conengagement – engagement, astute diplomacy and proactive defence cooperation with its strategic partners.

Defence cooperation, a key component of the Indo-US strategic partnership, must be taken to the next higher trajectory to enable the two countries to undertake joint threat assessment; contingency planning for joint operations; sharing of intelligence; simulations and table-top exercises - besides training exercises with troops; coordination of command, control and communications; and planning for operational deployment and logistics support. All of these activities must be undertaken in concert with Australia, Japan, South Korea and India's strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific.

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