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India's China Policy: Strategic Shift or a Drift?

By PS Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

Successful disengagement by the confronting Chinese and Indian soldiers at a key site along their disputed frontier in February 2021 is optimistically seen as a pause for peace. It is time for India to choose to remain an autonomous player or become a frontline-state in a US-led coalition focused on China.

COMMENTARY

CHINESE PRESIDENT Xi Jinping has portrayed his globalised foreign policy in the glowing terms of an epigram from his country's ancient statecraft. "Men of insight see the trend; men of wisdom ride it", he said at a video-linked international conference hosted by Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow last year. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the leaders participating in that conference.

Universal aspiration for peace and development, according to Xi, is the current trend. Riding it, China has been practising win-win cooperation with other states, he messaged. His unstated but evident implication for India is that it could either choose to ride this Chinese win-win wave or join the Sino-sceptic countries like the United States.

A Triangular Neighbourhood

Punctuating the ongoing China-India military crisis, the two sides agreed on 10 February 2021 to pull back their confronting soldiers from a key contested border site, Pangong Lake area. Their "synchronised" disengagement was completed by 20 February, setting the stage for mil-to-mil talks on mutual pullout at other sites in the western sector of the disputed boundary.

This sector constitutes the China-India-Pakistan neighbourhood, in renewed focus since Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe's talks with Pakistani military leaders in Islamabad on 1 December 2020. He said China and Pakistan should "jointly cope with various risks and challenges...and safeguard the regional peace and stability".

The timing of these remarks during the Sino-Indian military brinkmanship at Pangong was significant because of Delhi's strategic considerations. Would India face a two-front challenge if China and Pakistan decide to join hands to "safeguard the regional peace" in the triangular neighbourhood?

The stakes of these Himalayan neighbours in this sector are high. Besides the remaining friction points along the undemarcated Sino-Indian Line of Actual Control, two Chinese-aided projects in the triangular neighbourhood are unacceptable to India.

These are the strategic Karakoram Highway and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which pass through areas India deems as its domain.

Non-Alliance Partner

Whether or not China and Pakistan synchronise their strategies, will India and the US act in concert to engage or counter China? The answer is not clear from the stated outcome of the video-linked Quad summit, hosted by US President Joe Biden on 12 March 2021.

Initially an informal security dialogue forum, the Quad – comprising the US, Japan, India and Australia – is seen from Beijing as being operationalised to constrain or compete with China. Of the four protagonists, Sino-sceptic Japan and Australia are America's close allies. India is *not* a military ally but a "major defence partner" of the US since 2016.

By signing the mandatory "foundational agreements" with Washington, Delhi has, however, enhanced its logistics, secure communications and interoperability with the US armed forces. But a non-alliance partner is just that in America's worldview.

This status may be seen as giving India some elbow room in dealing with China in the current global ambience of a deeply troubled Sino-American equation. In Beijing's worldview, though, India is not sufficiently autonomous and non-aligned vis-à-vis the US.

Mixed Signals

In the Quad's summit statement, there is no direct support for India in its current confrontation with China at their land frontier. In contrast, Japan's concerns about East China Sea and America's focus on South China Sea as a maritime highway are reflected in the statement.

A ray of support for Delhi in its current tussle with Beijing is the Quad's collective affirmation that "we strive for a region that is...unconstrained by coercion". The group's nuanced support is reflected in this quest, because India suspects that China has resorted to military coercion to try and force a boundary settlement.

A forthright commitment of support for India, albeit from Washington alone, came from new US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin during his visit to Delhi on 20 March 2021. He described India as “a central pillar” of America’s “approach” to the Indo-Pacific region in “today’s rapidly shifting international dynamics”.

With Xi viewing America’s Indo-Pacific strategy as a ploy at containment of China, Austin may have only fuelled Chinese suspicions about India. Yet, if his commitment could really enhance India’s military capabilities, including at the land frontier, vis-à-vis China, Modi will have the option of a strategic shift towards America.

Complicated Choice for India

But the US-India “global partnership” faces a potential disaster, at this writing. Should Washington impose sanctions on India for its deal to buy Russia’s state-of-the-art S-400 air defence system, influential opinion may compel Modi to rethink his US policy.

On another jarring note, a US warship sailed through India’s exclusive economic zone without New Delhi’s consent in April 2021. Delhi felt constrained to convey its “concerns” over such freedom of navigation. For Modi, therefore, the choice is complicated.

China is too powerful a neighbour to be confronted easily with America’s firm military help, even if it materialises. Diplomatically, too, it will be unwise of India to abandon, in a hurry, the nascent practice of Xi and Modi holding candid informal talks.

Modi will be hosting Xi later this year at a summit of leaders of the BRICS forum (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). This can be an in-person summit if the current global pandemic eases or disappears. Xi and Modi may then be able to hold separate candid talks.

It is not clear if and when the latest pause in China-India military crisis will produce a positive spin-off. The threat of US sanctions on India remains to be sorted out. The cumulative effect of these two critical factors is a circumstantial or tactical drift in India’s current China policy.

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