

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

New Era Under Xi Jinping: Challenges for India

By P.S. Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

Xi Jinping has secured an unprecedented third term as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. This will intensify India's foreign policy challenges as underscored by Beijing's quick prioritisation of enhancing ties with Islamabad and recently cool attitude towards resuming summit-level diplomatic and political engagement with New Delhi.

COMMENTARY

For the international community, the endorsement of Xi Jinping by the Communist Party of China (CPC) as its leader for another term is more than a Chinese internal affair. He seems to have emerged as a tech-savvy post-modern Maoist (this authors' terminology) in seeking to control all aspects of Chinese life including foreign policy.

Mao Zedong's patronage of Pakistan was evident even during his controversial Cultural Revolution, as pointed out by Shivshankar Menon (a former National Security Adviser to the Indian Prime Minister and a former Indian Ambassador to China) in his book, *India and Asian Geopolitics*. Evident now, too, is that Xi is patronising Pakistan in his "new era" of seeking to advance China's rejuvenation and reshape the world order.

This matters to India which must address its unsettled equation with China and mutually-adversarial relationship with Pakistan for being able to influence the creation of any global order.

Pakistan as a Partner in Xi's Worldview

In Xi's strategic calculus, Pakistan has come to play three roles of direct relevance to

India. First, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through some areas that India deems as its own sovereign territory. Despite this controversy, Xi sees CPEC as being relevant to the Chinese future in global strategic connectivity.

Second, Beijing appears agnostic about the Indian claim by sustaining interest in the India-Pakistan dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, formerly a princely state under imperial Britain's "paramountcy". Embedded in this dispute is the Indian version of territorial sovereignty over certain areas of CPEC's route. Three, Xi views Pakistan as a key ally in his quest for United Nations (UN) reforms to lay the foundation for a new international order.

On CPEC, Xi has expressed his "great concern about the safety of Chinese nationals in Pakistan". He also hoped for a "reliable and safe environment for Chinese institutions and personnel working on cooperation projects there". Xi was candid in speaking to Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif who made a "visit to China upon invitation" on 1 and 2 November 2022 after Xi secured an unprecedented third term at the 20th national congress of the CPC.

Why does Xi persist with CPEC despite such concerns about Pakistan? He wants to "make CPEC an exemplar of high-quality Belt and Road cooperation", his strategic initiative for China-led global connectivity. Being developed by China, Gwadar port in Pakistan is "the leading project of CPEC" that serves as "an important node in cross regional connectivity" in Xi's grand strategy.

Xi and Sharif, therefore, expressed "strong determination to counter all threats and designs against CPEC". Far from being a cliché, China has been prioritising this task since India undertook a stealth counter-terror air raid in 2019 over a place near some CPEC facilities.

On the related history-remnant Kashmir dispute, China once again advocated a resolution based on the "relevant UN Security Council [UNSC] resolutions and [India-Pakistan] bilateral agreements". But China knows that the relevant bilateral agreements have long superseded the UNSC resolutions which India had in fact repudiated.

More relevant to the future is China's securing of Pakistan's support for "consensus-based reform of the UN to respond to the interests and concerns of all Member States". China's evident calculation is that "consensus" gives each Member State the undeclared right to veto any aspect of UN reforms. This is unacceptable to India which advocates, instead, "reformed multilateralism" to arrest the "UN's declining effectiveness".

India as a Rival in Xi's Worldview

Xi Jinping focused on neighbourhood diplomacy, too, in his 'report' approved by the CPC's national congress on 22 October 2022. Pakistan (not India) figured, however, in his priority meetings in Beijing in early November. Significantly, too, he did not hold a bilateral meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the occasion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization's in-person summit in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) in September. Xi met all other leaders individually on that occasion.

In Samarkand, India expected China to ask for a Xi-Modi meeting because the Chinese leader had invited Modi in 2019 for their third “informal” or confidential meeting in 2020. However, with the onset of COVID-19 pandemic preventing in-person meetings globally, the SCO summit in Samarkand was the first occasion when Modi and Xi were present at the same venue.

Until now, the two leaders have met 19 times since 2014, the hiatus occurring after the second “informal” meeting in October 2019. Three reasons account for this ‘pause’ at the apex-level in Sino-Indian dialogue. First, the deficit of trust, a lurking factor since the war along the disputed Sino-Indian boundary in 1962, worsened following a clash in the western sector in June 2020.

Following 16 rounds of corps commanders’ meetings thereafter as also bilateral civil-military diplomacy, China said that the “disengagement” of Chinese and Indian troops, as attained now, would be “conducive to peace”. However, Delhi remains concerned about the continuing military stand-off at Depsang Plains. It is a site that could potentially give China access to a Pakistan-controlled but India-claimed area of strategic relevance to all three.

Second, Tibetan leader Dalai Lama’s recent sojourn in the Sino-Indian western sector angered Beijing which sees him as an inveterate separatist. Third, a major factor in the recent chill at the apex-level Sino-Indian dialogue is Beijing’s perception of Delhi’s reticence to acknowledge Taiwan as the inherent Chinese territory.

Delhi has not explicitly endorsed Beijing’s one-China policy for several years, insisting on a reciprocal Chinese one-India policy. However, this aspect was recently viewed in Beijing as Delhi’s psycho-diplomacy of seeking a new template of Sino-Indian ties by treating China and Taiwan alike.

Towards an ‘Asian Moment’

A silver lining for India right now, is that Xi’s “new era” of Chinese reunification does not cover the incorporation of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as China’s territories. Arunachal Pradesh (including the strategic district of Tawang with a population of 50,000) is an Indian state (province) claimed by China as part of the boundary dispute in the eastern sector. Aksai Chin, claimed by India, is under Chinese administration in the western sector.

Beyond the silver lining, Xi sent a condolence message to Modi on 31 October 2022 on the collapse of a cable bridge in the latter’s home state of Gujarat. More significant is the potential opportunity for these two leaders to interact with each other during the G20’s hopefully in-person summit in Indonesia’s famed tourist magnet, Bali, in mid-November.

In any case, India’s helming of G20 in 2023 could potentially raise Delhi’s profile and lend substance to China’s expectation of an “Asian moment” in “global governance”. Will the catch-phrase India has chosen for its G20 presidency — One Earth, One Family, One Future — resonate with China’s advocacy of ‘a shared future’?

P. S. Suryanarayana is Adjunct Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is the author of 'The Elusive Tipping Point: China-India Ties for a New Order' (Singapore, World Scientific, 2021).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg