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Fifty Years after the Sino-Indian Conflict, Will the "Asian Century" See a New Confrontation?

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Key Points

- The fiftieth anniversary of the 1962 war comes at a time when India, now a rising power, is enhancing its hard power through military acquisitions and soft power through increased diplomatic initiatives. Naval diplomacy is being employed.
- For India, the anniversary provides an opportune time to review the legacy of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's Cold War Non-Alignment policy in favour of a judicious use of *realpolitik*.
- Both India and China might further spread their "Spheres of Influence" in the Indo-Pacific region with the US willing to support New Delhi as part of its own forward policy in the region.
- As the two powers become more economically interlinked, war is increasingly likely to be viewed as a secondary or last resort option by decision-makers in both New Delhi and Beijing.

Summary

If it is agreed that, in the twenty-first century, there will be a geo-political shift from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, then by extension it could be argued that China and India will dominate events in the region. If that dominance were to lead to a classic case of great power competition, then such a future might be better understood by returning to 1962 and

the first Sino-Indian border clash and considering the dramatic changes that have occurred since then.

Analysis

Fifty years have now passed since the Sino-Indian conflict. The war was a result of tensions that arose during the 1959 Tibetan uprising, when India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama after the capture of Tibet by the People's Liberation Army and India adopted a "Forward Policy" intended to demonstrate its control of the disputed areas. Chinese troops overran the Indian forces, capturing Akai Chin in the western Ladakh region and, to the east, Tawang in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. The war ended when China declared a unilateral ceasefire on 20 November 1962 and simultaneously announced a withdrawal from the disputed area.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the theatre shifted to the wider Indo-Pacific region. It is understandable, and even predictable, that the two Asian giants appear once again to be heading towards a situation very similar to that of 1962. With both countries' economies growing and the influence of the West in global affairs waning, India and China are increasing their footholds in distant corners of the world through trade, investment and security-related understandings.

Now a rising power, India will observe the fiftieth anniversary of the India-China war with enhanced hard and soft power, through greater military capabilities and increased diplomatic initiatives.

The fiftieth anniversary offers an opportunity for India's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party to push for a closer relationship with the United States, including increased arms purchases. It may also force the Indian Government to yield to calls for increased co-operation between the Navy, Air Force and Army. This analyst recommends the creation of a Chief of Defence position to co-ordinate the three services.

With increased economic might and an assured place in the twenty-first century – the "Asian Century" – China can be expected to follow a "Forward Policy" of its own in South Asia, East Asia, the South Pacific and the Central Asian republics. Such a policy might increase India's security dilemmas in South Asia, those of Russia in Central Asia and, for the US, the whole Indo-Pacific region, not to mention Africa and even Latin America.

In this classic "Great Power" rivalry, China wishes to win by keeping India in a low-level equilibrium, with New Delhi kept boxed-in within South Asia. Otherwise, India could act as a challenger to Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. With a population of more than one billion, a growing economy and supple latent power, India is at least a competitor to China. India is also a clear leader in the affairs of South Asia and has sought to increase its influence in South-East Asia through its "Look East" policy. Further afield, East Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan are, in fact, ready to co-operate more closely with India and look for active strategic partnerships. India has also expanded its presence through active diplomatic

ventures in Africa, via the Indo-African Forum, and in the South Pacific Islands through the Pacific Islands Forum.

New Delhi has also initiated a more active dialogue with the Indian diaspora through the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas festival, which fosters better relations between expatriate Indians, overseas-born Indians and the mother country. In fact, the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, sealed during the Bush Administration, would not have happened without the active lobbying of Indians resident in the US. This has pushed India to initiate its own diplomatic "Forward Policy".

That has concerned Beijing to such an extent that it now considers that, to clip the wings of a rising India, New Delhi must first be boxed in within South Asia. That is precisely the strategy employed by Beijing in aiding Pakistan in its relations with India. With India distracted in Pakistan, China can expand quickly in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, having the US distracted in Afghanistan at the same time, helps China establish its presence even further. Another major problem often encountered in democratic countries, such as India and the United States, is that policymaking is hampered by being more reactive than pro-active. In the case of India, part of the reason is that the political class in India is not much attuned to international relations; foreign policy receives very little emphasis in the course of day-to-day Indian politics. Though Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh is not a classic professional politician, and could even be considered more of a statesman, the tendency to look inward has prevented a more active engagement with the region.

India has decided, however, to play to its strengths. To counter China's much-talked about "String of Pearls" strategy, India has decided to pursue an active "Naval Diplomacy". The String of Pearls includes the building of a deepwater port on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, in the once-sleepy fishing town of Hambantota. Second, China has helped Pakistan to build a deepwater port of its own in the town of Gwadar in Baluchistan. China has also started to court the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, such as the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles, and has donated funds to boost their economies.

In return, China wishes to enable its forces to have access to these littoral states. As a part of its Naval Diplomacy strategy, India sends its naval officers on routine trips to these countries and there are regular exchanges at the naval officer level. Traditionally, all great powers that have controlled – or aspired to control – the Indian Ocean, have sought a base in the Maldives: Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union have all done so. India has decided to help the Maldives by establishing a radar network that will benefit the island nation, which does not have a navy of its own.

India's Security Dilemma

The problem with India's strategic thinking since independence is that it has been unable to identify the main right security dilemma. The security dilemma for any state involves first identifying the main threat and then finding solutions to address it. In India's case, even the first step is a problem. Most of the political class, especially the Congress Party and the strategic community, identifies the primary threat as coming from Pakistan. This has a lot to do with a "Delhi-centric" world view and needs a paradigm shift. India's main security

threats – as pointed out by retired Admiral Suresh Mehta and strategic expert, Bharat Karnad – come from over the Himalayas and in the Indian Ocean; in both cases from China. Failure to understand this might cost India in the long-term, just as it did in the 1962 war.

China and India in International and Regional Institutions

As India tries to graduate from a regional power to a great power, it aspires to gain a place as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with an accompanying veto power. One of the advantages that China has as a member of the UNSC, with a veto, is that it can translate that power into effective trade negotiations when it deals with energy-rich countries in Africa and Latin America. Until the end of 2012, India is a non-permanent member of the UNSC and many consider this as an apprenticeship for permanent membership. This might involve reforms to the UN Charter, which can be carried out only with the support of two-thirds of the UN General Assembly and all the votes of the permanent members: the US, Russia, France, UK and, of course, China. When the heads of state of the other permanent members visit India, they make it a ritual to support India's permanent membership of the UNSC. US President Barack Obama's speech to the Indian Parliament, in November 2010, was a good example. China, however, has been reluctant to support India's accession – which is understandable – and so has actively joined Pakistan in opposing it. In regional organisations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), China has tried to sway the other members by "yuan diplomacy"; it takes a dim view of India's "Look East" policy, including its possible membership of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum (APEC).

US scholar John J. Mearsheimer states that great powers behave aggressively not because they want to, or because they possess some innate drive to dominate, but because they have to seek more power if they want to maximise their chances of survival. But the question is, what can the Indian Government do? Realism has been the basis of China's conduct in world affairs since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949; in contrast, India's foreign policy, under the leadership of Nehru, flirted with a moralistic running commentary through the prism of idealism. This, in fact, has been the main problem with India's strategic and foreign policy. It needs to be replaced by a *realpolitik* vision, in which India first needs to expand its presence in the Indo-Pacific region with regional partnerships and then globally through multilateral fora.

Is War Likely?

Finally, let us ask the central strategic question: is war likely between India and China? How and why would the two countries go to war? Some in India fear that China will attack to settle the border issue in its favour or to prevent India's rise. Some darkly point to the prospect of war over scarce resources, particularly water and energy. Whatever the motive for war, the suggestion seems to be that China would launch a frontal attack, as in 1962 – either to grab territory or to punish and coerce India in the competition for valuable resources.

But is this a realistic possibility? Leaving aside the economic costs of war for China, I would argue that a Chinese frontal attack, in the style of 1962, is unlikely for at least four military reasons.

The first is nuclear weapons. China has over 200 nuclear weapons and India has about 100. That induces extreme caution on both sides, even though India's delivery capabilities at present are largely dependent on long-range aircraft. Conventional war under the shadow of nuclear weapons may still be a temptation but, as India has discovered in relation to Pakistan, even the side with superior conventional capabilities must be extremely careful, given that conventional warfare could escalate to a nuclear confrontation. The September 2012 success of the *Agni-IV* missile test, along with the development of an *Agni-VI* intercontinental ballistic missile and its submarine-launched (SLBM) variant, suggest that Indian deterrence capabilities will only be strengthened.

Second, both countries have airpower that would make a conventional war of any duration and decisiveness very difficult. China's long supply lines, essentially from Chengdu, are vulnerable to air interdiction: the trip to the border is over 4,000 kilometres by train and over 2,000 kilometres by road. Any attempt by China to disable the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the north-east and in West Bengal in a first strike would be a challenge. The IAF is heavily deployed there and would be ready for a surprise attack. To the extent that the IAF remained a viable force, the movement of Chinese ground forces and supplies would be problematic.

Third, while China enjoys the advantage of the heights of the Tibetan plateau, its ability to send large forces into India in this sector is limited by geographical constraints: the routes down into India are narrow and winding, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would find itself vulnerable to air attack if it breached Indian ground defences. In addition, of course, its supply lines would become increasingly longer, while India would have the advantage of ever-shortening internal supply lines.

Fourth, Chinese forces would have to take account of possible Tibetan instabilities behind them. It is hard to know if Tibetan underground militias exist and, if so, whether or not they would harass the PLA during wartime, but this is could be an additional complication for China.

Now, let us look at the areas in which China could threaten India, if it were to challenge the Indian Armed Forces along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The first is that the Chinese attack would develop quite differently, after an initial attack along the LAC. Chinese forces could supplement their frontal attack by "leapfrogging" over the Himalayas with highly-mobile Special Forces, to cut off supplies to the Indian front and trap Indian units at the LAC. This would depend on China possessing the requisite airlift capability, very large and sophisticated Special Forces, and the ability to suppress Indian ground defences and, especially, air defences. While China clearly is organising itself for quick strike attacks with sophisticated mobile forces (for various regional contingencies), it is not beyond India's capacity to counter them, given that the Indian military is generally aware of new Chinese military doctrines and capabilities.

The second possibility is that China would attack at sea – for example, in the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean. Given the growing reach of both navies, a future bluewater navy conflict along these lines cannot be altogether ruled out. Here again, however, deterrence should prevail. Clearly, it would be extremely foolish for the Indian Navy to pick a fight with the Chinese in the South China Sea. India's naval forces in the area will be small, at least for many years to come, with extremely long communication and supply lines; they would have little chance against a Chinese force. In the Indian Ocean, the situation would be reversed: the Chinese navy would be a long way from home and very vulnerable.

In Conclusion

The Indo-China great power rivalry is shaping up to be the story of the first part of the twenty-first century, much like the rivalry between the United Kingdom and Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Having abandoned its previous, rather moralistic tone, Indian foreign policy now needs to adopt a judicious use of *realpolitik*. If India's leaders can do that, the Indian tiger can stand up to China's dragon.

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