

Engaging China : Need to Mind the Imperatives

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Background

Rapid rise of People's Republic of China (PRC) is being claimed to be peaceful by its leadership although with a caveat; "there will be consequences in case China's core interests are jeopardised." With accretion of PRC's Comprehensive National Power (CNP), its national aims stand redefined. China seeks strategic space and sphere of influence to recast the regional environment on its terms, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

While delving on 'Managing the Rise of Great Powers', Randall L Schweller has noted that pecking order of the nations is subject to continuous change.¹ As per Paul Kennedy, "due to uneven rate of growth, marked by technological and organisational breakthrough, the relative strength of nations has never been constant. The moot point has been whether the rise or process of transformation was smooth or turbulent".²

After the Fifth Generation leadership in Beijing assumed power last year, there have been visible signs of increased Chinese assertiveness in the region. In the recent past, series of incidents in the South China Sea involving China, over the disputed Senkaku (Diyaoyu) islands with Japan and oil exploration sites in the Gulf of Tonking with Vietnam are cases in point. PLA troops have been reportedly transgressing in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh frequently. The extent and degree of influence of a rising power is felt more in the neighbourhood than the distant lands. India's interface with rapidly rising China will be impacted by key imperatives which have overarching bearing in regulating the engagement process.

Salient Imperatives

Strategic Culture

The Chinese strategic culture is essentially based on the philosophy of 'Centrality'; signifying the notion of Chinese supremacy and its rightful place in the global hierarchy. Zhong Guo (Middle Kingdom) implies 'universal centre'- an ascendant power, known to seek deference from the smaller neighbours. The Communist leadership's obsession to emerge as the sole superpower is aimed at realising the aspirations of the Chinese people as a superior race and restoring the past grandeur. Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' experiment in the late 1950's and Deng's initiation of reforms in the late 1970's, were aimed to overtake the West.

Quoting Coates in his book "China and India - Great Powers", Mohan Malik highlights that as per the Chinese statecraft, there is no such thing as friendly and foreign powers. "All states are either hostile or subordinate. While India, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam fall in the first category; North Korea and Pakistan constitute the second one. Whereas allies are to be protected, hostile nations ought to be taught a befitting lesson".³ (It was India in 1962 and Vietnam in 1979).

The PRC strategists believe that China is more secure if neighbouring states are weak. It may be recalled, when China was internally strong, it was able to ensure peaceful periphery. Its imperial policy was to subdue neighbourhood and adjacent lands. During the Ming Dynasty era towards mid of the last millennium, the Chinese had effectively dominated the sea routes in the Indian Ocean to facilitate trade. China's border management and future power projection strategies continue to be influenced by its ancient statecraft.

As per David Shambaugh, an internationally recognised authority on contemporary China, the Chinese traditions of statecraft include constantly shifting tactical alignments, balance of power, manipulation while maintaining autonomy, personalisation of external relations, propensity towards militarily punitive actions, escalating patterns of conflict management and use of propaganda and myth to legitimise Chinese identity.⁴ China has successively exploited the differences between the US, Japan and South Korea in the Asia-Pacific region to its advantage.

PRC is uncomfortable with any peer competitor. Marginalising Japan and containing India is in consonance with the Chinese strategic thought. India's efforts to seek strategic autonomy and attempts to achieve parity with China through combination of economic, diplomatic and military means will be effectively resisted by Beijing. A strong India does not favourably serve Chinese strategic interests. Beijing is opposed to India's bid to gain membership to the Security Council as well as other global forums. In case India is able to achieve impressive growth over the next couple of decades, intense competition with China would be inevitable, leading to potential confrontation and even conflict. Asymmetric equation between the two could be a major source of tension, as sphere of influence will overlap both in Asia and Africa.

Political System and Leadership

As per Chinese ancient belief and philosophical idea, mandate to rule comes from heaven. It does not require that a legitimate ruler be of noble birth. Hence dynasties were founded by people of common lineage. Times of poverty and natural disasters were taken as signs that 'heaven' considered the incumbent ruler unjust and need for replacement. Post 1949, the Chinese Communist leadership has projected itself as the heir to China's imperial legacy. It came to power to undo the "Century of Humiliation" (1841-1949) and restore Chinese supremacy, by putting to end old order, wherein the Western imperialist and Japanese plundered, exploited and subdued the Chinese nation.

The Communist Party of China (CCP) has ruled the country for last six and a half decades with People's Liberation Army (PLA) as its pillar. One party based centralised authoritarian political system and flat structure endows the Communist leadership with enormous power. Single leader as head of the Party, PLA and Government along with a small nucleus - 'Standing Committee of Politburo' facilitates speedy decision making and execution. While Mao and Deng were known to be the paramount leaders, Jiang and Hu were referred to as the 'Core'.

Xi Jinping currently at the helm took over the baton in 2013 to lead the nation for a decade, till 2022. He moved fast to consolidate his grip over power and emerged as an undisputed leader. A pragmatic person, Xi's rise followed a difficult flight path. As per Mr Lee Kuan Yew, former PM of Singapore, "Xi is in Nelson Mandela class of persons, with enormous emotional stability, who does not allow personal suffering to affect his judgement".⁵

Xi has chalked out an elaborate road map to keep China's rise on track. He has conceptualised a 'China's Dream' - "making people wealthy and nation strong", which also entails recovery of all the claimed territories. He has the onus to successfully steer PRC past the 'Second Stage of Modernisation', adhering to the 2020 timeline. This will mark a grand finale of his inning and a befitting achievement, which will make him a rightful claimant to be in the league of Mao or Deng.

National Aims and Objectives

Historically, China has been hypersensitive to its borders, both from North and eastern sea board; according highest priority to territorial integrity. Traditionally, its relations with neighbours have been marked by hostility. Since the late days of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese diplomacy has given overriding priority to the economic activity to drive the national development. So was the case during Mao's time. As a sequel to the initiation of 'four modernisations' in 1979, China's prime focus has been on economic growth.

Today, China is externally formidable but internally fragile, as its major vulnerabilities are more at home than outside. Beijing is extremely sensitive with regards to Tibet and Xinjiang. PRC aspires to emerge as a developed nation by the mid of this century and considers peaceful periphery as an essential prerequisite. It's declared national objectives are Stability, Sovereignty and Modernity, in the given order.

'Stability' implies continued rule of the CCP and avoiding any type of unrest (luan). Due to rampant corruption in the party ranks coupled with the liberalisation of economy, the clout of the CCP is gradually on the wane. Instead, the Communist leadership is now increasingly relying on nationalism as a tool to bind the society and employing it as an effective weapon to whip the public sentiments against the adversaries.

'Sovereignty' is synonymous with territorial integrity and autonomy. It also entails integration of all the claimed territories with the mainland including Taiwan, disputed island territories in South China Sea as also Arunachal Pradesh (referred to as South Tibet). These also figure prominently in the list of China's core national interests.

'Modernity' entails continued economic development and ushering prosperity for good of the masses. The Communist Party can continue to stay in power only if the country maintains steady economic growth and effectively safeguards national interests. Or else, it faces the prospects of being eased out, marking an end of mandate to rule. The national objectives remain sacrosanct, changes in the leadership notwithstanding.

Engagement - The Way Ahead

Given the ongoing dramatic geostrategic shift in the emerging global order, India has to redefine and recalibrate its role. Political fence sitting approach is passé; action oriented diplomacy is the call of time. It is evident that prevailing regional geostrategic architecture is tipped more in the favour of competition than partnership, between the two neighbouring giants. This mandates India to formulate long term strategy to deal with China.

India's policy of engagement with China must aim to minimise the possibility of conflict, without jeopardising its stated position and compromising the national interests. India should be forthright in stating its concerns rather than adopting an ambiguous approach. Policy of appeasement, often propagated by the foreign policy mandarins in South Block should be ruthlessly curbed. As per Winston Churchill, "appeasement from weakness and fear is alike, futile and fatal; while from the position of strength is magnanimous and noble". China respects strength (li) and despises the weak.

With the ongoing process of engagement, India should buy time to build its CNP. Highest priority must be accorded to enhance the defence preparedness in the North East, integrating the process with the economic development of the region. Chinese model in Tibet and Xinjiang could be suitably modified and adopted. While major face off with China is unlikely in the near future, given its compulsion to sustain economic growth, skirmishes cannot be ruled out. Fighting and dialogue as concurrent activities (yi bian dan yi bian da) is inherent in the PLA Doctrine of 'Limited War'. This demands effective border management and ability to initiate timely calibrated responses in the event of a showdown.

Current initiatives by the Indian Government in developing and strengthening strategic partnerships both in the immediate and extended neighbourhood are steps in the right direction. These will help in balancing the Chinese forays in our backyard. The Communist leadership is adept in thwarting any multilateral/bilateral initiatives by its adversaries, through strategic counter moves. It will do its best to neutralise India's bonhomie with Asia-Pacific states, through politico-economic overtures.

Economic cooperation stands out as one of the arenas of convergence where the Chinese are keen to invest in a big way. However, current bilateral trade scenario is seriously flawed. India is primarily a raw material supplier and net importer of finished goods, with wide trade deficit. This needs to be corrected. India must press for gaining access to the Chinese markets and levelling off the adverse balance of payment issue.

India's engagement with China should be less on rhetoric and more on realism. The Chinese leaders and spokesperson often resort to clichés like - "the two neighbours sharing common rivers and mountains, with less than one per cent of the time period marked with hostile relations". However, when it comes to negotiations and brass tags, they are extremely hardnosed. PLA's aggressive posturing in Chumar sector in mid-September 2014, while President Xi was in India was rather intriguing, in the light of his statement on the eve of his visit; "Furthering strategic partnership with India is my historic mission". This amply illustrates the point.

The Chinese leadership lays no timelines to resolve the vexed issues, often preferring to leave these to posterity. On the other hand, our leaders have penchant to make history during their tenures. Border issue is an example as Mr Nehru wanted it to be resolved during his time. Half a century later, there is hardly any movement forward and unlikely to be in the immediate future, because PRC perceives the border dispute as part of the larger Tibet issue. Lingering the problem serves Beijing's strategic interests.

Finally, there is a glaring trust deficit between India and China, given the past bitterness. The Communist leadership has not done enough to assuage India's concerns. However, President Xi Jinping has the persona to change the setting. Will he be prepared to navigate through the 'Yellow Lines'- the geostrategic imperatives; only time will tell! As India scales up its engagement with the PRC, it must move forward with pragmatism, in a sure footed manner, fully mindful of the ground realities.

Endnotes

1. Alastair Iain Johnson and Robert S Ross, (1999), "Engaging China", Chapter 1- 'Managing the Rise of Great Powers' Randal L Schweller, Rout ledge, London and New York, p1.
2. Paul Kennedy, (1987), "Rise and fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500-2000", Random House, New York, pp xv-xvi.
3. Mohan Malik, (2012), "China and India-Great Rivals", Viva Books, New Delhi, p26.
4. David Shambaugh, (2013), "China Goes Global", Oxford University Press, p54.
5. Graham Allison and Robert Blackwell, (2013), "Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insight on China, United States and World", MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p17.

@Major General GG Dwivedi, SM, VSM &BAR (Retd) was commissioned into 14 JAT on 14 Nov 1971. A veteran of Bangladesh War, he later commanded 16 JAT in Siachen, a brigade in the Valley and a mountain division in the North East. He was India's Defence Attaché in China from 19 Jan 1997 to 19 Aug 1999 and retired as Assistant Chief of Integrated Defence Staff, HQ IDS in 2009. Currently, he is a Professor of International Studies at Aligarh Muslim University and visiting faculty to premier academic institutions.

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