

China's Himalayan Strategy: Between Handshakes and Tug-of-War

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Abstract

India-China relations are nosediving, not having regained balance after the fatal Galwan Valley conflict in 2020. Propelled by Xi Jinping's military modernisation, China's trans-Himalayan handshake' outlined in 2013 has given way to an insidious strategy. It includes the use of several non-standard tools such as 'salami-slicing', civil-military fusion, and new laws to legitimise China's territorial claims, buttress its superiority, and give psychological credence to its objections. Notably, the Himalayan strategy draws from the 'charm offensive' of Xi's 'good neighbour' diplomacy, wherein the threat of impending military and economic coercion overrules the benevolent rhetoric. All in all, China's Himalayan ambitions are nuanced and precariously balanced between its neighbourhood outreach and national security ambitions. This article looks into the trajectory of China's Himalayan strategy, what constitutes it and what are the implications?

Introduction

In the first week of April 2023, China released a list of 'standardised' names of eleven places in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern Himalayan region, a territory it calls 'Zangnan' or southern Tibet.¹ And this is not the first such instance but the third in seven years. For the first time, in 2017, the drive covered only six places; in the next phase, post the Doklam and Galwan crises, 11 places were renamed, expanding the scope to include residential areas, rivers, and mountain passes. Importantly, the April 2017 renaming was in large part a reaction

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to the Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang earlier the same month – five of the six places were within the Tawang district.²

In a terse rejoinder that mirrors China's own diplomatic rhetoric, India's foreign ministry castigated the renaming move by stating that "Arunachal Pradesh is, has been, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India".³

As China refuses to recognise the north-eastern Indian State, it has time and again objected to the visits of Indian high-level officials or dignitaries, and of course, the Tibetan leadership, primarily the Dalai Lama, on grounds of breach of China's territorial sovereignty. In the same vein, renaming of places is one of the several tools – including 'salami' tactics and ever-emerging new (maritime and land) laws to name a few – used by the Chinese Government to legitimise its territorial claims, buttress its superiority, and give psychological credence to its objections. Moreover, China's adroitness in giving ultimatums, like asking India to cease actions such as leaders' visits to disputed border areas or risk the wrath of escalating the boundary question, forms the backbone of its cooperation-confrontation dual strategy with India.

However, this is neither a new phenomenon nor targeted specifically against India. China has renamed a multitude of places in the South and East China Seas (in 2020 alone, 80 features in the disputed South China Sea Region were renamed).⁴ Such unilateral moves have enabled China to successfully claim more disputed territories across the neighbourhood, forming an essential part of Xi Jinping's neighbourhood strategy across the Himalayas or in the South and East China Seas.⁵ It helps in the power projection and perception games for China's need to retain its status as a regional hegemon. Moreover, these 'grey-zone' tactics do not even require standard military means, but certainly insinuate the threat of impending military action should Beijing be trifled with. That lies at the heart of the 'charm offensive' of Xi Jinping's 'peripheral' or 'good neighbour' diplomacy. The Himalayan strategy is but an offshoot of its neighbourhood diplomacy; hence, the two complement each other.

Xi's Tactics an Extension of Hu-Era Trends?

It is often contended that the aggressive foreign policy traits exhibited during Xi's terms did not originate with Xi, but are an

acute manifestation of past trends, particularly, of the era of Hu Jintao.⁶ Hu's presidential term coincided with China's spectacular growth, and he consolidated China's western development strategy, initiated by Jiang Jemin in 1999, with a focus on Tibet; Xi has given the strategy a global dimension by including connectivity links with neighbours.⁷ However, the 'peaceful' economic transformation was accompanied by Hu's inability to rein in internal party factionalism and the rise in domestic unrest, particularly, in restive provinces.⁸ In addition, the simmering of flash points along China's borders never abated including a rise in tensions with South Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as no respite in the conflict with India, leading to domestic critics to emphasise on the failure of Hu's 'good neighbourhood policy'.⁹

Notably, the use of 'infrastructure and economic coercion' as leverage, especially, for overly dependent and poor Asian economies had already begun to take shape under Hu – though the role of the military in foreign policy making was rather limited and even decreased.¹⁰ Thus, China's turn into 'the backyard bully of the Asia Pacific' has not been a totally abrupt phenomenon, although the intent, scale, scope, and speed of 'rejuvenation' and repression during the 'new era' has been unprecedented.¹¹

The Trans-Himalayan Territorialism

China's trans-Himalayan 'handshake', which overtly covers among other cooperative aspects, development initiatives, trade, investment, connectivity, and regional collaboration, has its origins in 2013 during the then Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India. In an article in the Hindu, Premier Li offered India a "handshake across the Himalayas," citing the usefulness of a neighbour (China) as opposed to "a distant relative" (the US).¹² However, gradually the true geopolitical agenda was unmasked as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) downed in criticisms of its corruption and unethical mode of working that induces 'debt traps'. The July 2020 meeting of the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nepal brought forth another dimension. The meeting between the four Himalayan states, likened as the 'Himalayan Quad', highlighted China's goals toward coalescing newer alignments, as a rejoinder to the US-led Indo-Pacific collaborations such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad

comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the US).¹³ It certainly hinted at the impending repercussions on India's security/strategic landscape.

The Chinese state media, however, denied accusations of China establishing a security bloc with Chinese characteristics, and criticised the 'hype' surrounding China's 'mechanism of cooperation'.¹⁴ Yet, under the circumstances, nothing reflects the intention to build a 'bloc' than an aim like 'building a community with a shared future for mankind'. China's 'more activist and security-oriented' diplomacy was evident from Xi's first term itself, which has today paved the way for his 'Comprehensive National Security' governance paradigm that pervades all spheres in Chinese politics.¹⁵ This will naturally be reflected in Himalayan diplomacy. With the Himalayan strategy getting a new strategic fillip under Xi Jinping's hastened military modernisation, namely the People's Liberation Army (PLA) reforms that started in 2015-2016, China has been labelled "More militarily capable than ever".¹⁶ The PLA's "continuous reform and innovation" and enhanced techno-military capabilities aim to not only defend China's territorial sovereignty with focus on the restive regions of Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang but also further the CCP's overarching economic and political goals, domestically and globally.¹⁷

One of the most important aspects of China's non-standard military actions is its blatant law fare (primarily, coast guard, maritime traffic safety, and land border laws) in the Indo-Pacific – the use of domestic laws to undermine international disputes, and, in turn, international rules-based order. The one most relevant for the Himalayan Region is the 'Land Borders Law' passed in 2021. It not only supports China's territorial claims, transgressions, and gradual encroachments but also builds a case for 'civil-military fusion' along the borders.¹⁸

For India, particularly after the 2017 Doklam stand-off, the bloody Galwan Valley crisis in 2020 (which has resulted in an ongoing negotiations stalemate), and, the latest in series, the Tawang skirmish in December 2022, such a security-obsessed Himalayan outreach, in tandem with actions that highlight China's little regard for the rule of international law, does not bode well, to state the obvious. In particular, China's growing ties with Bhutan and Nepal will likely result in uncommonly escalated border skirmishes, perhaps in length or in intensity or both. The already

established convergence with Pakistan is, of course, deeply concerning due to the fear of facing a potential two-front war.

In the difficult mountainous terrain, the superior PLA logistics capabilities, largely thanks to the post-reform era Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF) will be critical for safeguarding or destroying supply lines. Besides, the informatised total military restructuring places China in an 'invincible position', especially against India.¹⁹

In short, Beijing's current trans-Himalayan strategy effectively covers economic investments, political backing, personal diplomacy, as well as quasi-military and military involvement. 'Soft' diplomacy and infrastructure expansion in these states are being used as tools not only to simply cut across regional barriers but also to further the so-called 'invisible invasions; which are employed to establish China-approved cultural, language, religious, and ideological superiority vis-à-vis the respective indigenous counterparts.²⁰ Moreover, the impact of projects such as the Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN) and the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is way beyond the financial aspect but into the very socio-political fabric of the relevant states. Hence, initiatives such as the THMCN and the CPEC become strategically integral to Xi's 'good neighbour diplomacy' and 'peripheral diplomacy' aims.²¹

All in all, China's Himalayan strategy and aspirations are nuanced and precariously balanced between its neighbourhood outreach and national security ambitions. China's strategic calculus is to prepare a comprehensive pressure scale across the Himalayan Region. Since 2013, in fact, there has been an increasing likelihood of a larger Sino-Indian conflict over the disputed Himalayan regions of Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, which has so far culminated in the Doklam standoff of 2017 and the conflicts at Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso in May-September 2020 and in Taiwan in 2022. China's motives have also evolved based on India's rising global and regional profile; the military, psychological, and diplomatic manoeuvres in the Himalayas are surely a means to check India's ambitions.

Beyond the LAC: Countdown to the Water Conflict?

Further, tensions between China and its neighbours in the region, notably India, have also risen as a result of China's construction

of large hydropower and water diversion projects. In the ecologically vulnerable region, the risks of mega dams, besides airstrips, and road and rail networks, are being totally neglected with the astounding infrastructure development. Ironically, China's 60-gigawatt mega hydroelectric dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo River (Jamuna in Bangladesh; Brahmaputra in India) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) is an effort at reaching carbon neutrality (by 2060).²²

Nonetheless, the geopolitical significance of this dam, located just 30 kilometres away from the Indian border, is not lost. India, in response, has decided to build a less powerful dam (10 gigawatts) to showcase China's lack of environmental sensitivities.²³ Moreover, for India, China's proposed dams bring forth questions on flood risks and water insecurity, besides the weaponisation of hydro data.²⁴

Notably, infrastructure projects on the transboundary waters are a means to control neighbouring states. For example, China's control over Nepal, where China has invested in the 30-megawatt Chameliya Hydropower Project, is a means to diminish India's regional dominance in a region where it has traditionally enjoyed prominence. India's reluctance to buy electricity from dams that have Chinese investment is part of the waterpower tussle.²⁵

Growing Assertiveness under Xi Jinping's New Term

China's escalating regional operations have significant geopolitical repercussions. Beijing has an obvious geostrategic and security justification for investing in trans-Himalayan connectivity. It is important to note that several large-scale road developments in the Himalayas appear to be designed to facilitate PLA mobility/logistics support, in addition to local transit. Even the BRI-funded hydroelectric projects, which are essential to the trans-Himalayan power corridors, must be considered a defining feature of China's territorialism and regional power play. China uses similar exploitative tactics in the neighbourhood, rather successfully, both on land and at sea: incremental territorial encroachments followed by militaristic building.²⁶

China's border village infrastructure development along the Himalayan borders with Nepal, India, and Bhutan has openly contradicted Beijing's official rhetoric of 'good neighbour'

diplomacy.²⁷ The creation of these *xiaokang* (meaning ‘well-off’) border villages has brought Xi’s expansionist policy back into the regional limelight, which can be expected to receive a stronger push under the Chinese president’s unprecedented third term. In his speech at the 20th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Xi spoke of winning ‘local wars’ and promoting “development in border areas to boost local economies, raise local living standards, and ensure local stability” highlighting the consolidation of civil-military fusion.²⁸ The intensity of such behaviour will only increase in the coming years along the length of China’s borders in the Himalayas.

China’s priority areas in the Himalayan Region include territory, water, and influence; these combine to make a strong geo-political dominance mechanism that it can use against countries like India to promote Chinese national interests. In his new term, Xi Jinping is going to continue pressing for infrastructure connectivity (mostly linked with the BRI) regionally and domestically. Here, projects like the Sichuan-Tibet and the Yunnan-Tibet rail lines will “*circumvent India’s eastern frontiers*” and “*play a key role in shaping China’s regional power*”.²⁹ The Sichuan-Tibet line via linkages to Tibet’s Yadong and Nielamu ports will allow entry into India and Nepal, enabling China’s connectivity with South Asia, as well as raising security questions.³⁰

Meanwhile, China’s proposed Tibet-Nepal railway is another red flag for India.³¹ Besides diminishing India’s trade control over Nepal, there would be concerns about the spike in border conflicts. For example, just weeks prior to instigating the Galwan crisis, China finished blasting all 47 tunnels on the 435-km rail line from Lhasa to Nyingchi in TAR, which is part of the Sichuan-Tibet railway.³² Notably, the rail link will facilitate logistics support to the PLA between the Lhasa and Nyingchi (near Arunachal Pradesh) bases in the case of an emergency.

India’s response has been to boost defence capabilities and infrastructure development along borders.³³ By pursuing schemes such as the Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP), officially the government is trying to ‘reverse out-migration’ by identifying economic drivers that can uplift the quality of life in border areas.³⁴ However, it certainly seems modelled on the Chinese civil-military fusion tactics. India is also consolidating and diversifying security

arrangements with multiple partners and forums. Its enhanced defence ties with the US are particularly thrust China. However, some have contended that the Indian policy is 'faltering', and that India needs to step up by using 'incentives and disincentives' to strong-arm, if needed, China into not misbehaving.³⁵

Conclusion

China has economic, diplomatic, security, regional, and even global stakes in the Himalayas with its coveted water and other natural resources; lack of basics, including infrastructure, and development; and governments in need – a scenario ripe for abuse by an economically and military thriving China. Hence, its trans-Himalayan strategy, underpinned by Xi's prime infrastructure project, the BRI, is closely interlinked with Xi's 'China Dream'.

In this context, an issue that is central, yet, plays in the background, is the politics surrounding Tibetan region. In this restive region, China continues to rule with an iron fist, disregarding basic human rights, while showcasing to the international audience the region's economic prosperity under the CPC rule. Moreover, with the 14th Dalai Lama's reincarnation looming, China has been preparing to manipulate and take over the Tibetan Buddhist Institution through Chinese disinformation narratives and law fare.³⁶ The Chinese Government already has a law on reincarnation wherein the chosen Dalai Lama needs to be approved by the CPC regime. The disappearance of the six-year-old reincarnated Panchen Lama in 1995, deceptively remote as the event may seem now, still casts a long shadow on China's Himalayan intent.

Notwithstanding the Tibetan complications, the consolidation of Xi's hegemony by first extending Chinese strategic influence in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and now even Bhutan, will not only deepen China's footprint but also the Himalayan states' support will justify Beijing's growing global governance ambitions. At a time, when India is looking to be the champion of the Global South, China's increasing influence in its traditional stronghold assumes vital importance.

Naturally, it transcends the officially scripted platitude of 'win-win cooperation', hovering instead within Xi's imperialistic vision of a Sino-centric sub regional, regional, and, in turn, global order. However, India's firm objections to the BRI, its rising profile in the

Indo-Pacific, and important states like Japan and South Korea, and growing defence/security cooperation with the US, including in US-led leading forums like the Quad, is a thorn in the side of China's regional goals, including the Trans-Himalayan ones. The constantly blazing border dispute makes it imperative for India to focus on thwarting China's game plan in this vital Asian sub-region.

Endnotes

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