

The Strategic Challenges that Lie Beyond the Elections and Power Transition in Washington and Beijing

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Introduction

Recent events in the USA and China have been politically momentous. In the west, defying all predictions, President Barack Obama stormed his way back to the White House riding on electoral jingoism, revealing the new but fractured face of America. On the other side of the globe, there was an equally momentous change, though predictable and orderly, it had its share of undercurrents. The Eighteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party easing in their 'nominated' Fifth Generation leadership to lead resurgent China in the coming decade. Both events have major ramifications and the aim is to highlight the strategic challenges that need to be addressed as they impact global equations and the established balance of power, and how India could leverage her unique position and bridge perceptual gaps.

Post-Election American Challenges

President Obama has been given a mandate to redouble his efforts to salvage the economy and restore faith in the American dream. Beyond the din of the elections, the challenge of a precipitous fiscal cliff and raising of the 'debt ceiling' looms large and requires the collective will of both political parties to ensure that the USA does not falter on the path of economic recovery. At the same time the US can ill afford to fall behind in the strategic game and 'contain' the unfettered rise of China. One involves the unwelcome task of cutting costs and rejuvenating the American economy to claw back the advantage from booming China, the latter calls for enhanced defence spending to sustain American power worldwide. Both pull in different directions but need concurrent attention if the

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US is to remain a 'superpower.' The USA, Obama has been elected to lead, is passing through momentous times and more than anything else, it is the fate of American primacy that is at stake.

Economics are likely to remain the principal contributor to national power. Though recent trends indicate a decline in the economic fortunes of China, her progression as a 'Nation-State' has been momentous. On the other hand, the waning of power of the US has been predicted even by her own think-tanks,¹ and if left unaddressed, this portends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If America is unable to translate Obama's electoral cry that 'the best is yet to come,' the writing is on the wall. The USA therefore needs to shake itself out of self-induced coma and claw back the space America has conceded to China – the straight talk of the Presidential debates now needs to be translated into tangible action(s).

While there appears to be a renewed sense of urgency in America's Asian policy, and the President's overtures have offered hope and injected a sense of collectivism in ASEAN nations, it will require greater efforts to calm the turbulent East and South China Sea waters. Despite Obama's ground breaking initiative and the keenness of the ASEAN nations, it cannot be ignored that he is fishing far away from home and there are pressing domestic reasons that detract from the USA's pivot to the Asia-Pacific.

Concurrent to the requirement of reassuring the ASEAN nations, the situation brewing up in Gaza and heightened American stakes in the Syrian Civil War along with the requirement to limit Iran's nuclear ambitions, the President can ill afford to ignore the Islamic World. The region has also mutated dangerously since the Arab Spring and the Shia - Sunni divide along with heightened Muslim activism is unsettling the precarious balance in the region. There is an urgent requirement for the USA to inject dynamism in her foreign policies. Unfortunately, after her experience in Libya these seem to be driven more from the fear of failure than with any hope of success – these are but some of the strategic challenges that President Obama has to address.

The China Inherited by the Fifth Generation Leadership

China too faces major challenges, mostly the result of her 'unique' political system and her single-minded obsession with economic

growth. It also needs to be highlighted that though the Chinese political system may appear closed and undemocratic, yet beneath the surface, she has started her own experiments with democracy.² At the same time, while the Communist Party remains all powerful, 'other' political parties are 'permitted to exist,' though their practical contribution remains negligible; the Communist Party, purportedly representing the 'people' of China remains the '*Primus inter pares*.' At the same time, the decision making within the party appears to have metamorphosed and become 'collective' and 'institutionalised' since the times of earlier generations. This has added stability in the manner modern China conducts her business.

A brief explanation of political system of China would be in order. The 82 million members of the Chinese Communist Party nominally elect 2,270 members to the Party Congress every five years and while this is fairly representative of the population, in practice it is ensured that only protégés having approval of the leadership get selected. The next step is the selection of the 370 member Central Committee, the party's policy setting body. Since the seats are only marginally more than the candidates, it is again ensured that only the 'select' get anointed. The Congress then goes on to select the Politburo of 25 members who in turn select the Standing Committee of seven members, which include the Chairman and Premier. A similar process is again followed for nominating the 34 State (provincial) Secretaries and Governors. Thus right from the top to bottom, it is more a process of 'selection' than representative elections, and it is the will of the Party that prevails. Put in different way, it is one set of 'unelected' leadership who benignly shower their blessings for the next set of 'nominated' incumbents to rule China.

The Chairman elect, Mr Xi Jinping had been a Central Committee member since 1997 and thus has adequate experience, working as the Vice President under the tutelage of Chairman, Hu Jintao and otherwise considered the protégé of Mr Jiang Zemin. Similarly, Mr Li Keqiang, has also been a member of the select committee and therefore adequately groomed for higher responsibilities. Except for minor surprises in the predicted pecking order of the anointed seven, and Mr Hu Jintao handing over reins of the 'all powerful' CMC prematurely, the transition in Beijing has been on predictable lines. Herein lies the difference between the Western system and that followed by Communist China – their

leaders are selected 'early' through a process of vigorous internal selection and then progressively groomed for higher responsibilities. At the same time, this does not mitigate the fact that since the elite nominate their successors from within, this results in the creation of a class of 'princelings' which progressively widens their gap with the people of China, whom the People's Party are purported to represent.

China's problems are a result of hyper economic development and emphasis on Foreign Direct Investment driven growth, which has left her society fractured internally. This has not only created an urban - rural divide, but glaring disparities are also visible within the progressive coastal region. Mr Hu Jintao highlighted the socio - economic maladies that have come about due to what he ascribed to China's 'unbalanced,' 'un-coordinated' and 'un-sustainable' growth, and warned that money obsessed China needs to reform politically, and apart from weeding out corruption, also has to ensure that the law of the land is applied uniformly. The new leadership has been mandated to find de-novo solutions of purging the socio-economic maladies, cutting unproductive investments without impeding China's economic development in any way. Rebalancing China's trajectory and concurrently reducing socio-economic disparities appear daunting tasks, but if left unaddressed or if not handled with the finesse the situation demands, this could result in a severe backlash. Though these are still early days, Chairman elect Xi Jinping appears to be inclined to ride the tiger by appealing to China's growing 'nationalism' - a theme that may have popular appeal and may help drown the voices of dissension, but with tensions already high in the Asia Pacific, this is a perilous path for the new leadership of China to tread on.

Potential for Conflict or Convergence

Future Sino - American relations could lead to heightening the conflict reminiscent of the Cold War or conversely, both could come to an understanding and delimit their spheres of influence like it had been done before between Czarist Russia and the British Empire at the height of the Great Game. Ultimately, in the real world, capabilities matter more than words, and both sides seem intent on developing capabilities to counter the other physically and psychologically. Hopefully, this competition may not result in a direct conflict, though an intense Sino - American game of attaining

moral and physical ascendancy, spurred by economic and/or strategic reasons is undeniably 'on.'

The Contest for Strategic Space in Asia-Pacific

China and Japan have already engaged in shadow boxing over the sovereignty of the uninhabited Senkaku/Daioyu Islands; Taiwan a claimant in her own right has wittingly given the right to Mainland China to champion the larger Chinese claims. Apart from rich fishing and energy resources, it is the locational significance of the islands that makes them militarily important. The four islands encompassing seven square kilometres form a cluster between the American Military Base of Okinawa and the island of Taiwan. For the Chinese to breach the first island chain formed by Japan – Okinawa - Taiwan, domination of the waters around Senkaku/Daioyu becomes militarily imperative.

The South China Sea is even more turbulent as the claimants are many and the stakes even higher. The Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Brunei stake their claims over the energy rich waters of the South China Sea and at the same time, Mainland China has revived the 'nine dashes line' drawn by Nationalist China claiming 80 per cent of the South China Sea. Domination of sea is important for China as not only does it provide access to the Pacific and Indian Ocean, but the failure to do so restrains her to Chinese coastal waters. For resurgent China which has aspirations beyond the region, this is a major restraint impeding her strategic progression. China has already demonstrated her resolve by creating the Shansha Prefecture to administer her claims, and this pits her defiantly against the Philippines and Vietnam. China has so far resisted ASEAN collective initiatives and propagates bilateral discussion which places smaller nations at a great disadvantage. An American led security architecture currently underwrites the strategic balance and in the light of the current stand-off, the question engaging everyone's mind is how President Obama's initiative would translate in concrete terms. 'When,' 'how' and with 'what' the USA will react remain the foremost questions. At the same time, questions also arise on what 'could' and/or 'should' be the role of India and Russia who have their own interests in the region, and how they could contribute to calm the turbulent waters of the region – individually and/or collectively.

The Turbulence in Eurasia, West Asia and the Middle East

The dynamics of the Islamic World is in many ways different from the Asia-Pacific region, though apart from factoring in Russia, China's overtures remains the common factor. Central Asia is important for China not only for sourcing energy, but is increasingly becoming her window to Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Facilitating transit and trade for China may presently be economically alluring for Russia, though it has long term security implications. China is powering her growth through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and though this is at the cost of the traditional Russian influence in the region, prospects of co-prosperity are making Moscow accommodative to China's overtures. At the same time, the USA is constrained to reduce her footprint in the region and this is again detrimental for her long term strategic interests. Under the circumstances, while the potential exists to build consensus between the US and Russia, in view of their traditional intransigence, India is uniquely placed to facilitate the US - Russian strategic cooperation for maintaining stability in a strategically important but turbulent region, where the Western world interfaces with the East.

The Fault Lines in the Af-Pak Region

Despite the optimism expressed by President Karzai, the world fears a downslide in the situation after the US - ISAF drawdown in 2014. While undeniably, Afghanistan has to find her own leadership and internal accommodation to guide her, there can be no doubt that ramifications of security deteriorating in Afghanistan will be felt in Washington, Moscow, Islamabad, Beijing as well as in New Delhi. Since the trigger for seismic activity in Afghanistan lies in Pakistan, the US and Beijing need to re-assess the pay-offs of continuing their linkages with Pakistan as their strategic ally.

President Obama who finally tracked down the elusive Osama-bin-Laden to Abbottabad seems to have realised the futility of dealing with the leadership of Pakistan, though surprisingly, there are signs that Washington is endeavouring to re-engage Islamabad. At the same time, Pakistan has been the (only) bright spot in China's foreign policy and the new leadership in Beijing may prefer to exploit their protégé and keep the pot boiling in Afghanistan, not merely to embarrass the Americans, but to dilute

their capacity to pivot to the Asia-Pacific. Thus, in a way, Pakistan has regained her relevance for both the US and China as part of the 'New Game' being played by them on the gargantuan Asian chess-board and this has major security implications for India. On her part, while India requires to nurture her partnership with Afghanistan, she needs to elicit the support not only of Washington but also of Moscow. This throws up yet another reason for India to facilitate strategic cooperation between the US and resurgent Russia.

Conclusion

On one hand, while there is a distinct possibility of escalation of tensions, yet at the same time there is also scope for the world to accommodate the forces of change re-configuring the existing uni-polar world order. The salience of Russia and India to 'collectively' counterbalance the tremors rising from the concurrent rise of China and possible waning of American power and managing the global strategic equation(s) amidst this turmoil, need to be harnessed. The circumstances are opportune for both to renew their strategic partnership as they collectively have the potential to shape the environment of the future and make the Twenty First century an era of co-prosperity and global stability.

Endnotes

1. United States National Intelligence Council, 'Global Trends 2025' of Nov 2008, and United States Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments Study by Ambassador Eric S Edelman 'Understanding America's Contested Primacy' of 2010.
2. Panda Jagannath P, 'China's Path to Power : Party, Military and the Politics of State Transition, Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, Pentagon Security International, New Delhi, 2010.