

India-China Border Dispute and the Hanging Future of South Asian Region

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Abstract

The world has not changed much since the Melian dialogue was conducted between Athenians and Melians. International politics guiding spirit is might is right. Foreign policies of major powers like USA, UK, Russia and Germany or in Asia, China, are evident to it. India-China decade long border dispute can be seen or analysed with comparable continuum. Historically a land power China is eager to get a bigger role in world politics in 21st century. Presently, when the world is facing economic, political, social and other related problems due to the deadly corona virus, Indian neighbourhood is restless.

Introduction

India is living the spirit of *Vasudhev Kutumbkam* and *Sarve Bhawantu Shukhinah* during the course of the pandemic. India's humanitarian assistance and global diplomatic outreach is being appreciated at every forum. Voluntarily India has contributed \$10 million to the SAARC Covid19 emergency fund; to the Indian Ocean countries, Indian Navy ship INS Kesar was sailed to Comoros, Maldives, Seychelles and Sri Lanka with essential goods and medicines like hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol tablets (reportedly India has supplied these medicines to 133 countries); beyond the South Asian region, India has extended its help to the Latin America, Indo- Pacific and Africa; Nepal and Afghanistan are also among those countries who got benefited by India's philanthropic works (The Mint, 11 May 2020).

In another hand ironically, Indian neighbours have chosen this indeterminate time for claiming to the different Indian territories. Nepal has claimed to the Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura and Kalapani region (The Hindu, 24 May 2020). Strategically this tri- juncture is very sensitive for India, especially after 1962 Indo- China war. This claim was made by the

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Nepali government when the India government has inaugurated 80 kilometre road for the pilgrimage of Kailash Mansarovar Yatra. Immediately, on 15 June 2020, Peoples Liberation Army, China had a violent face off with the Indian army in the Galwan valley, Eastern Ladakh region (H. Davidson. and B. Doherty, 2020). It has resulted into the death of 20 Indian soldiers and 40 Chinese military personals (approximately) (B.B.C. News, 30 May 2020).

Critically, after 1962 war it was 1967 (Nathu La border) when both the border patrols had confronted each-other (88 Indian soldiers have lost their lives). After that in 1987 and 2003 an intense skirmishes was reported in the borders of Arunachal Pradesh and in the Ladakh region respectively. India has avoided any provocative incidents or clashes with China in the Himalayan region every time.

Skirmishes in Galwan and its Strategic timing: Revenging Doklam or Beyond?

India and China shares 3488 km land border. Indian states, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, and Arunachal Pradesh boundary links with China. There are 24 disputed points between India and China over this border. It is the first time when Galwan valley is being pointed out as disputed area. Notably China shares its territory with almost 14 countries and it claims the land from 23 countries (with 12 countries China has resolved border dispute). India- China border is named as LAC (Line of Actual Control) or Mac Mohan line. China considered as it as mark of colonial period with India and thus does not pay respect to LAC. But in its relationship with Myanmar, China respects Mac Mohan line as the base of their relationship. This is unfair and unfortunate!

China's strategy is to lag behind India over border dispute (maritime and land border). In 2017, Doklam standoff between India and China was a recurrent story. It has gained international attention and given a clear message to Indian policy makers that China is still leaving in past and has hegemonic intentions. Doklam is a tri- juncture between India, Bhutan and China. For the better access to Chumbi Valley in Bhutan

and Siliguri corridor (which connects mainland India with its north-eastern region) in India, China wanted to control over this reason. This standoff was stretched for two months. Over the present border dispute, the Chinese Communist Party's mouth-piece, Global Times had stated that, "The Galwan Valley is not like Doklam because it is in the Aksai Chin region in southern Xinjiang of China, where the Chinese military has an advantage with advance infrastructure. So, if Delhi escalates the conflict, the Indian military could pay a heavy price" (Global Times, 18 May 2020). Interestingly, over the deescalating tensions at Line of Actual Control (including areas like Hot Springs, Gogra and Depsang plains), apart from 11 rounds of Corps Commanders-level talks, the two forces have also held 10 Major Generals level, 55 Brigadiers-level talks and 1,450 calls over the hotlines (Business Standard, 31 July 2021).

Historically, China is deemed to be an aggressor. It has illegally occupied Tibet, East Turkistan, Inner Mongolia, Paracel and some of the Spratly Islands. China has invaded Vietnam 17 times in its recorded history. Foreign policy experts say, China has been always assertive and aggressive in developing infrastructure in border areas. Certainly India's advantageous stand in Doklam, Kailash Mansarovar road and now its presence in Galwan valley and Pangong Lake area have pushed new skirmishes.

Why China has chosen this tensed and complicated time (when the whole world is fighting with covid-19) can be a million dollar questions? There can be different reasons. Firstly, may be with the apprehensions that it will take a lead over unprepared India. Secondly, India's ally USA is also busy in overcoming the Covid19 crisis and preparing for the next Presidential election. Perhaps this would pave the way for easy and swift accumulation of land!

Thirdly, after the amendment in the Article- 370 and separation of Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir has put China on toes. As India's Home Minister Amit Shah has stated in the Parliament on August 5, 2019, asserting: "Kashmir is an integral part of India, there is no doubt

over it. When I talk about Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan- occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin are included in it” (The Indian Express, 6 August 2019). But unfortunately all its assessment went wrong.

Fourthly, for China’s OBOR (One Belt One Road) project, Himalayan region holds the utmost important position. Heavy investments in Pakistan and in Nepal are part of this strategy (Eurasian Times, 20 June 2020). Accept this what potential buffer zone Nepal or an unstable terrorism promoter Pakistan (Grey zone) has to offer China? Almost nothing, except there advantages of geopolitics! Economically or politically Nepal can give nothing to China but strategically there are number of things which Nepal can offer to China. China’s president Xi in his recent visit to Nepal, said that Beijing will seek to boost economic cooperation and look into the construction of a cross-border rail link in Nepal.

Fifthly, India's mounting figure in the Indo- Pacific region would defeat its purposes. Equally India-USA tuned interest and cooperation is also making China worrisome. India's refusal to OBOR project may have worked as an area irritant for China. Last but not the least; QUAD can also affect China’s interest in the South Asian region. China’s suspicious behaviour is being criticised globally over the spread of Covid19. Now, WHO is also planning to investigate the same? As a saviour China is doing all these notorious activities in the Indian border area or elsewhere in the world.

Hanging future of South Asia!

South Asia is a home to almost 24% of world population and it occupies approximately 3% of worlds land. A huge market and young workforce has become the identity of South Asian region. Paradoxically the stained bilateral relationship, particularly India-China and India-Pakistan relations has jeopardised its growth since long. SAARC is the living evidence. Simultaneously it provides swift and unwanted accesses to the major powers in the active politics of South Asian subcontinent. The defining event of 1960s (India- China war) has made China the most decisive determinants of South Asian politics. China’s South Asian vision

is mostly perceived as India centric but it has other folds moreover. In South Asia, China shares border with India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan. With smaller South Asian countries China has resolved its boundary issues but its boundary dispute with India is still unresolved. This makes China very integral to South Asian Security architecture.

Perhaps seeing Asia as a whole also tells a never ending story of China's ravenousness for land. As China has border dispute with number of countries, i. e. Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and above all Japan. Nevertheless, Nepal also has to fear from China but only to counter balance India, Nepal is moving to a deadly end! Recently in May 2020 in a tweet, China's Global Television Network (Chinese state run) has claimed over the Mount Everest but after massive protest from Nepalese people it was deleted (Eurasian Times, 23 June 2020). Previously in 2019 also China was accused by Nepal for grabbing its northern territory namely, Sindhupalchowk, Humla, Sankhuwasabha and Rasuwa. It is speculated that later China may develop BOP (Border Observation Posts) in these areas.

The stained bilateral relation between the giant nuclear weapon states may lead to an unstable and fragile South Asia. This acrimonious relationship will also dismantle regional security and provoke a "big conflict" and arms race in the region (Eurasian Times, 21 June 2020). South Asia can be a new laboratory for a new cold war between USA and Russia. Notably South Asian region is a cluster of developing countries and they need food, money and opportunity instead of weapon and war!

Therefor on altruistic terms countries are expected to corporate and develop mutual trust. At the national and regional level new public health strategies and policies should be made. Reports say in every country (rich or poor) public health is kept or given the last priority. It is a timely demand for the countries of South Asian region to break the cocoon and think beyond the box. Simultaneously, substantial developments are happening in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinxiang province and South China Sea. Prime Minister Modi's "Neighbourhood First"

policy is India's attempt to counter China's Belt and Road plan and keep New Delhi's regional influence strong. This would be a litmus paper test for India's strategic vision and planning. It will be stimulating to see that how the political rivalry between the duo, India and China will shake the future of South Asian region?

What is the way out?

Flaring Tibet issue

India under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru signed the Panchsheel Treaty, 1954 with China and subsequently acknowledged China's sovereignty over Tibet. It was a historical blunder that India has made and paid heavily in 1962 war with China. China considers Tibet as its inevitable part so do not respect to either Shimla Treaty or the Mac Mohan line. China's hidden strategic interest is to keep Himalayan border disputes alive so that time to time Chinese interests shall be bargained (Asia Times, 19 June 2020). Raising and recognising Tibet as a sovereign country shall help India in deterring Chinese movement in the region. Exile government of Tibet is already running in Dharamshala, India and it is one of the most annoying factors for the Chinese government.

Shift the conflict to South China Sea and Indian Ocean

China's provocative actions in the high peak of Himalayas should be responded by India which counters moves in South China Sea. This is the black hole of Chinese foreign policy. Historically and culturally East Asian countries share a much trusted relationship with India. Since decades small countries of East Asia are looking hopefully towards the powerful projection and presence of India in the region. It will be a saviour against Chinese bandwagon and debt-trap. India already has a strong hold on Indian Ocean. Inevitably and immediately, India should extend its naval exercises and exchanges with the East Asian countries. It will help India to deter Chinese creeping policy of transgression from taking a hard line on territorial dispute.

Chinese assertive foreign policy in South China Sea (in reference to the Great wall of sand and Nine Dash line) is bullying Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and Japan. China claims over 90% of South China Sea. This notorious claim aims to control over the global trade (50% of global trade route is the South China Sea). ASEAN (as a group) has given clean chit to China over this issue. But in South China Sea, USA is also a party. So, annoyed US have deployed three Aircraft carriers in the South China Sea (Eurasian Times, 20 June 2020). This has enhanced the probability of war or conflict in the region. India has to harness its interest from this palpable situation.

Revival of the Quad

The first Quadrilateral summit was held on the side-lines of the ASEAN regional forum meeting in the Philippines in May 2007 between India, Japan, US and Australia. Since its inception this Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has not grown much and was ill fated (as its objectives were not pointed)! Chinese growing assertiveness in the Indo- Pacific region has made revitalisation of QUAD a necessary necessity of the time (Asia Times, 27 July 2020). Regrettably, before 2018 India was perceived as the weakest link in QUAD, Australia was reluctant for its active participation; and except Japan USA was also a hesitant observer. But, China's bullying policies towards Senkaku Islands, South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Corona virus controversy (laboratory made), military standoff in Doklam and violent skirmishes in Pangong Lake and Galwan Valley; human rights violation in Xinjiang province, trade war and so on has increasingly pushes all four nations to strengthen their bond, bilateral as well as quadrilateral.

The paramount results are evident and they need to be encouraged in pursuit of the "free and open" Indo- Pacific region, i. e. Malabar naval exercise, Japan's Ministry of Defence new arrangements of cooperation and coordination with India and Australia (Japan also shares its intelligence with the USA regularly), USA Indo- Pacific Strategic Report and planning to train the fighter jet pilots of India, Japan and Australia at Anderson Air force base at western Pacific Ocean, Australia's Defence

Strategic update (Asia Times, 27 July 2020) etc. Presence of USA in the Indo-Pacific region will help to keep a check on China's rise, freedom of navigation, maritime security, non-proliferation, terrorism and last but not the least the North Korean threat. Deepening strategic and defence cooperation between the QUAD partners shows their profound determination and preparedness. Together with these likeminded countries India would be able to put China on margin (odd man out!).

US President Joe Biden will host the leaders of Japan, India and Australia at the end of 2021. While China sees the Quad, as the new NATO framed against Beijing, whereas the Quad nations view it as a grouping of democratic countries tool of cooperation for maritime security, human disaster relief and management, counter- terrorism, defence and trade cooperation, freedom of navigation (in the Indo- Pacific and South China Sea) etc. (Hindustan Times, 6 July 2021).

Limiting imports and exports from China

Known diplomat G. Parthasarathy says that time has come when India should review and reduce its economic dependence on China (The Hindu, 16 June 2020). India's supply chains critical dependence on Chinese imports is more tormenting, especially for electronic equipment, mechanical appliances, semi-conductor devices, iron products, steel merchandises, coal, fertilisers, auto machineries, textile materials, antibiotics etc. (The Quint, 2020). India has a huge promising market but it does not have manufacturing or industrial ecosystem, i. e. India has the second largest smartphone market in the world but it does not manufacture anyone of them. India has completely missed out the third industrial revolution. The Hindu writes from the account of D. Raghunandan, that the very idea of LPG (Liberalization, Privatisation and Globalisation) has ruined the spirit of 'self-reliance'. Since then with the rented or borrowed technology we are running our economy (The Hindu, 27 May 2020). Needless to say over the night India cannot erode the Chinese influence over its domestic industries! The profits of trade and investment with China are colossal and lucrative.

The most effective and robust response to present Chinese antagonised behaviour would be replacing China by other potential countries like, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore and others though who shares friendly bonds with India. For an example, Taiwan's electronic and high-tech industries have the capability to replace China. Perhaps in 2018, globally China's overall export was \$2.5 trillion, in this India's part was only \$70 billion (approximately 3% of total export). Through simple boycotts Chinese economy will neither be affected nor be damaged. So India has to significantly change its policies and carefully make a web to trap China by mobilising other countries though who are against China.

Conclusion

Two Lions cannot live together! Best policy of survival would be confining the territories, either with dialogue or with war. India and China both has to make their choices unblemished. Simple diplomatic mistakes or strategic choices will change the course of the regional as well as International politics. Both are potential nuclear powers and giant nations (in terms of population, economy, market, geographical stretch etc.). India has always been a responsible country and has a proud history of non- intervention in other territories but reversibly China has a long history of intervention and aggression. Beside this Chinese history, socio- cultural practices, political institutions and political leadership etc. differs with India. To deal with communist China, Indian foreign policy should be primarily offensive rather than defensive. New Delhi's message to Beijing should be clear and loud that if you will irritate us here we will irritate you there! Now, one million dollar question would be what the rest of the world is going to do about China? Because singularly Indian efforts will not lay any fruit!

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