

March 2018

‘RESETTING OF THE INDIA-CHINA BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP’

by JAYADEVA RANADE

In a backdrop of unsettled global geopolitical equations and absence of a single dominant world power willing to exercise its influence to prevent the unilateral alteration of the established status quo in the Indo-Pacific region, India-China relations are presently at a crucial stage. Competition for strategic space between the two has been increasing as a ‘rising’ China tries to expand its military, economic and diplomatic influence across South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. The emergence simultaneously of strong leaders in Japan and India each with an articulated vision for his country has, however, made clear that they would be unwilling to acquiesce to China’s dominance. Sino-Indian tensions have predictably increased as both countries are trying to find new accommodations to reset the relationship.

The Narendra Modi-led BJP government came to power in India after winning the general elections in May 2014 with a huge mandate and at a time when the world had been in flux for nearly a decade. The regional environment was uncertain and India’s relations with virtually all its neighbours were marked by distinct unease. India’s borders too were facing a challenge. The list of invitees at Modi’s swearing-in ceremony outlined the geographic perimeter of India’s perceived area of strategic influence and Modi, unfettered by constraints of domestic politics, embarked on visits to neighbouring countries to consolidate and rebuild ties. Soon after his swearing-in, Prime Minister Modi signalled his desire for improved bilateral ties with China and pointed to India’s enormous need for foreign investment especially in infrastructure. He hosted Xi Jinping on the latter’s first visit to India as China’s President in September 2014.

Xi Jinping had, however, in November 2012 articulated the ‘China Dream’, which charted an ambitious course for “the rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation” to restore its so-called lost eminent position and “recover” its territories “lost” through the imposition of “unequal treaties” by “imperialist powers”. The policy directly impacted India. His visit to India was marred by the deliberately planned intrusion by China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in Chumar in Ladakh that commenced prior to the visit and ended days later. This was followed in April 2015 by announcement of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which dispelled China’s decades-long ambiguity and implicitly endorsed Pakistan’s illegal occupation of PoK, Gilgit and Baltistan claimed by India. This is a watershed in Sino-Indian relations and contributed to the sharp deterioration in ties. The developments prompted Prime Minister Modi to say in a press statement after his talk in Tsinghua University in Beijing in May 2015 that “I stressed the need for China to reconsider its approach on some of the issues that hold us back from realizing full potential of our partnership. I suggested that China should take a strategic and long term view of our relations.” Since then though, senior Chinese officials and interlocutors have been saying at official and non-official levels that “India must ease tensions with Pakistan, resolve the Kashmir issue

and then look to improved relations with China". Beijing, which described Pakistan as its "only friend and ally", gave it unstinted support. At the same time India sought to accelerate construction of border infrastructure and defences while indicating that it sought improved ties with China but without compromise on matters of sovereignty and territory.

Major changes have simultaneously been taking place in China under Xi Jinping which has seen the steady hardening of the Chinese state. Xi Jinping, who was appointed to the country's three top posts of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and President of China at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, began using ideology and nationalism to ensure the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s monopoly on power and bolster its legitimacy. He used them also to consolidate his authority and power.

Xi Jinping blended assertiveness with aggression to achieve the "rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation". His acolytes began saying that under Xi Jinping China has embarked on a new thirty year era like those of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping before him! This was borne out at the 19th Party Congress in Beijing (October 18-24, 2017), when Xi Jinping formally and for the first time spelt out the time table for China's development with two prominent benchmarks being 2021 for the 'China Dream' -- coinciding with the centenary of the establishment of the CCP -- and 2050 for making China an advanced country in the ranks of the world's developed nations and having "pioneering global influence". The last implied that China hoped to rival, if not surpass, the US. China has set 2049 -- the hundredth year of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) -- as the target for realization of the BRI!

Importantly, the 19th Congress added to Xi Jinping's authority and placed him virtually on par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping by incorporating 'Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for the New Era' in the Party Constitution. Subsequently the first session (March 5 – 20, 2018) of the Thirteenth National People's Congress (NPC) – China's version of a parliament – similarly amended the PRC's constitution and, additionally, paved the way for Xi Jinping to continue in office indefinitely by abolishing the limits on the terms of China's President and Vice President. The first Politburo meeting held after the 19th Congress formally acknowledged Xi Jinping's pre-eminent status in the CCP. The Party and State constitutions were both amended to include the BRI, indicating that this would now be more vigorously pushed. India will, obviously, come under increased pressure.

Intent on expanding its influence and readjusting the regional strategic geography during what it perceives as its window of strategic opportunity, China unveiled an assertive policy of 'peripheral diplomacy' in 2013. For the first time identified countries as 'friend' and 'enemy'. It promised 'friends' who help it achieve its goals huge financial benefits, advantages flowing from its global diplomatic clout and even -- or the first time in the history of the PRC -- security alliances. Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives and Turkey were among the designated 'friends'. China asserted that 'enemies' would be subjected to immense sustained pressure and isolation. Soon thereafter Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his ambitious 'One Belt, One Road', later renamed the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Designed to extend China's economic, military and diplomatic influence through a China-built land and sea transportation artery that girdles the globe, the BRI's major objective is to boost China's declining economy and earn revenue by putting to use the enormous cash reserves lying in

China's banks, surplus manpower and the idle technological capability of the mammoth State-owned Enterprises (SoEs). Operationalising the CPEC at once demonstrated that China would henceforth not hesitate to promote its strategic and national security objectives even if it meant damaging bilateral relations with neighbours.

Visible indicators of Beijing's unstinting support to Pakistan and the slide in Sino-Indian ties soon became evident. These included the extended intrusions in the Depsang Plains in 2013 and later in the Chumar area in 2014, both in Ladakh, which were unusual and almost coincided, or overlapped, with the first visits of Li Keqiang and Xi Jinping to India as Chinese Premier and President respectively. And since 2015, Beijing consecutively vetoed India's requests at the United Nations (UN) Sanctions Committee thus supporting Pakistan harbouring internationally acknowledged terrorists and terrorist organizations like Masood Azhar (of the Jaish-e-Mohammed), Syed Salahuddin (of the Jamaat-ud-Dawaa), Hafez Sayed (of the Jamaat-ud-Dawaa) and Zaki-ur-Rahman (of the Lashkar-e-Taiba). China, instead, defends Pakistan against criticism claiming that it has itself suffered enormously from terrorism and should be lauded for combating it. Beijing is also assisting Pakistan develop tactical nuclear weapons and helping it frustrate US pressure to give these up. Most recently, in March 2018, the Chinese Academy of Sciences confirmed that China had sold Pakistan a powerful optical tracking and measurement system that will facilitate Pakistan develop Multiple Independently Retargetable Vehicles (MIRV) missiles. And in a break from past practice, China also did not hesitate to come to the forefront to deny India admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in order to prevent its neighbour gaining enhanced international stature. In addition to trying to demonstrate the limits of American power, it linked India's admission with that of Pakistan, ignoring Pakistan's dubious record as a nuclear weapons proliferator. Beijing and Islamabad continue to actively collude in blocking India's effort to get Permanent Membership of the UNSC. In addition, China is insistent that India endorse the BRI and join the CPEC. During his visit to India in September 2014, Xi Jinping publicly recommended that India dovetail its 'Act East' and 'Sagarmala' initiatives with China's BRI and the Maritime Silk Route (MSR). There was particular interest in obtaining India's endorsement for the BRI, with enormous pressure – including through the Indian media -- till even a day before the BRI Forum in Beijing in April 2017. India declined. These strains imposed on India-China relations saw the steady deterioration of ties.

The 73-day face-off between India and China at Doklam that ended on August 28, 2017 marked the second recent watershed in India-China relations. The nature of the military deployments, kind of Chinese propaganda offensive not witnessed in over 40 years, and actions of the Chinese Foreign Ministry and Chinese embassy in New Delhi, set it apart from earlier stand-offs. It also saw India stand up to Chinese threats. It was for the first time since 2007 -- when China began projecting its strength -- that its policy of aggressive territorial expansion had been successfully challenged by any power. Importantly, the face-off revealed the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's intentions and thinking about India.

From 26 June 2017 onwards, China's propaganda apparatus mounted an intense vitriolic offensive comprising over 150 articles. This included personal attacks on Prime Minister Modi, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval. The state-owned English-language Global Times published articles each of the 73 days threatening India. Each of the threats had a

historical background. In addition to warning India that it risked repetition of the 1962 debacle, the articles threatened that China would revive insurgency in India's northeast – suspended by Deng Xiaoping in 1980, reverse its position on Sikkim and foment internal strife there, launch an international campaign to disrupt the close India-Bhutan ties and, as India had done at Doklam, send PLA troops to Kashmir ostensibly at the behest of Pakistan. The People's Daily, the CCP's official newspaper, on 14 August 2017, stated that "as of press time, China has laid out its position sixty seven times, with the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterating its firm stance on the issue for fifty four times, while the Ministry of National Defense has issued four announcements regarding the incident". There were also a number of posts by Chinese 'netizens' and PLA ex-servicemen advocating war and that India "be taught a lesson". The kind of language used by the Chinese media has not been seen in more than 40 years. Delhi-based Chinese diplomats adopted a similarly belligerent stance and in conversations with interlocutors repeatedly threatened "war". This propaganda offensive would have been launched with the twin objectives of buying time for Chinese leaders as they deliberated the best course of action open to them, and getting India to blink and back off. China's propaganda offensive was certainly orchestrated by the CCP CC's Propaganda Department, which keeps a tight grip on China's official and other media, supervised at the time by Politburo Standing Committee member Liu Yunshun. Pertinently, Liu Yunshun was also (till his retirement at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017) the senior most member of the CCP CC Secretariat reporting directly to President Xi and which, in Xi Jinping's term, has grown to become more powerful than in the past. There is no doubt that the threats and statements of the Chinese media during this period reflect the views and intent of the CCP leadership towards India.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Central Leading Small Group on United Front Work in mid-2015 and strengthened the CCP CC's United Front Work Department (UFWD). With its increased personnel strength and larger budget, the UFWD since at least 2016 increased its activities in India, and the Chinese Embassy in India became noticeably more active since 2016 in projecting China. It has been aggressively trying to 'win over' journalists, columnists, academics, think-tanks and opinion makers by offering various types of inducements and scholarships. The Embassy sought to publicise China's stand through the Indian media and create divisions in the Indian media, strategic community and politicians.

There has been obvious reluctance in China to accept the decision to "disengage" at Doklam. The armed forces of both sides have reinforced troops and remain deployed at the site indicating quite clearly that China's leadership plans to redeem its perceived lost prestige. On 30 August 2017, Yue Gang, a retired Colonel of the PLA's General Staff Department and frequent commentator on military matters, quite significantly said "Despite Beijing's deliberate ambiguity, China has apparently made substantial concessions in order to end the dispute. India has got exactly what it has wanted. It was a humiliating defeat for China to cave in to pressure from India despite all the tough talk." Numerous comments on China's social media and their not being deleted suggested a degree of tacit official support. Netizens asked why there has been no "apology" from India, whether China gave up "legitimate rights such as building the road" and "whether India's withdrawal is unconditional." Meanwhile, a rumour spread in China claiming that it had purchased India's acquiescence to the withdrawal by giving it a loan of US\$20 billion! Revealing the Chinese leadership's discomfiture, separate denials were issued by the spokesman of China's Ministry of National Defence Colonel Ren Guoqiang, spokesperson of China's Ministry of

Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the CCP's official mouthpiece, People's Daily. In a widely circulated video clip the Editor-in-Chief of Global Times, He Jixin, declared the people are unhappy with the "withdrawal". Significant was an article in Global Times of 12 September, by serving PLA Major General Qiao Liang, who justified the withdrawal as "strategic positioning". Arguing that "only doing the right thing at the right time is correct", he added that entering into a military conflict with India at this point of time would only harm China. Within a couple of days of announcement of the disengagement, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that Doklam is sovereign Chinese territory and that China will build the road to Gyemochen. He is the senior most Chinese official to make such a statement.

China's official media continues to publish articles critical of India. Unlike prior to the face-off at Doklam, PLA border personnel exchanged no pleasantries or visits with Indian counterparts on China's National Day on 1 October. Neither did China, till late February, propose dates for the annual 'Hand-to-Hand' exercises between the two armies. The Doklam face-off will undoubtedly colour India-China relations for a long time. That China appears unwilling to set it aside and move ahead despite the lapse of so many months is evident in its media criticism of India and its sharp reactions to the Indian drone crashing inside China in the Doklam area on December 7, 2017 and during the recent political crisis in the Maldives.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping is building the capability for achieving his national objectives for 2021 and 2050. Establishing sovereignty over the South China Sea and reunification with Taiwan are priority issues as is ensuring a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean. Xi Jinping has, therefore, initiated a far reaching restructuring and reorganization of the PLA. He has ordered demobilisation of 300,000 personnel. This is to be followed by more personnel cuts. The PLA has also been brought within the purview of the watchdog anti-corruption body, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), which launched a continuing severe anti-corruption drive. By September 2017, at least 14,000 officers -- including 120 above the rank of Major General -- were officially reported to have been dismissed or arrested for graft and other violations. Xi Jinping filled the upper echelons with his loyalists and instructed the PLA to prepare "to fight and win wars". Keeping in mind China's ambitions and growing interests, the PLA has been tasked to protect and safeguard Chinese interests, investments and personnel wherever they may be. There is an added emphasis on "fighting and winning" local wars. Since the nineteenth Party Congress, the PLA has sharpened its focus on acquisition of hi-technology and indigenous production of modern weapons systems. This is indicated in the composition of the new CMC constituted at the thirteenth NPC.

There is increased emphasis on enhancing the capabilities of the PLA Navy, PLA Air Force and the PLA Rocket Force, or strategic missile force. They will get proportionately larger slices of the USD 175 billion defence budget. Production of modern fourth and fifth generation aircraft, including stealth fighter jets, Early Warning Aircraft and long-range bombers capable of covering the entire South China Sea has been accelerated since the nineteenth Party Congress. Similarly, the PLA Navy has set a target of having in its inventory 315 surface warships and 100 submarines by 2030. China is already in various stages of building four aircraft carriers, with the fourth likely to be nuclear powered and in the sea by 2024. It is also building missile frigates and destroyers. Missile frigates are being added at the rate of one every three weeks.

As a strengthened and emboldened Xi Jinping seeks to attain the ambition of his forebears to make China a great nation once again, tensions in the region will increase. So will pressure on China's neighbours like India, who must keep in mind China's thinking that outstanding territorial and border issues can finally only be resolved through conflict. Nonetheless, Xi Jinping and Modi are both strong, decisive and nationalist leaders with a robust articulated vision for their countries. Both have economic prosperity and development as the centerpiece of their vision. It would be their endeavour to have peaceful relations so as not to jeopardize economic growth, but without yielding on issues of sovereignty or territory. Over the next few years the effort would be to reduce tensions, balance economic ties and strive to reset the uneasy relationship.

(The author is a former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is presently President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)