

The Changing Moods on the Sino-Indian Front

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Abstract

The goodwill call by a Chinese naval hospital-ship at India's Mumbai port on 8 August 2013 has followed the Sino-Indian agreement on "an early conclusion of negotiations" for a border defence cooperation pact. These two developments have occurred in the context of a serious episode of military standoff in April-May and the Chinese Premier's subsequent visit to India. These changing dynamics in the Sino-Indian relationship are explored in the light of China's military prowess and India's concerns.

Introduction: Fragile Dynamics

Globally there is general consensus that the most important relationship between any two countries is the evolving equation between the United States and China. This is believed to be true as of now and into the foreseeable future. Within Asia, however, it is not easy to determine the most important bilateral relationship. Such a dilemma overarches the fact that there is no doubt whatsoever about the centrality of China to the politics and economics of this continent. The tenuous Sino-Japanese relationship does cause concern to many countries and peoples in Asia. Not widely recognised, though, the fragile dynamics of a progressively intense dialogue between China and India are equally relevant to peace and stability in Asia now and into the future.

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The reason is not far to seek. Both China and India are nuclear-armed and space-faring neighbours with a hugely unresolved border dispute. In this broad context, the recent meeting between India's Defence Minister A K Antony and his Chinese counterpart Chang Wanquan in Beijing on 6 July 2013² was really significant on two counts.

First, the defence ministers were meeting in the shadow of a military standoff between the troops of these two Himalayan neighbours. Although the standoff did not flare up into a fire-fight, it caused considerable international concern. Surely, the standoff, which began in mid-April, was defused several weeks later through diplomatic and military channels at the bilateral level. In a sense, such a development cleared the diplomatic air considerably before the new Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India between 19 and 22 May. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Mr Li held what turned out to be an unusually productive summit with his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh.³

The military standoff had occurred at a spot in the Depsang/Tianan section along the un-delineated Line of Actual Control in the disputed Sino-Indian border area. Bewildering the international observers the standoff had actually followed a cordial and positive meeting between the new Chinese President Xi Jinping and Dr Singh.⁴ Viewed in this perspective, Mr Antony's meeting with General Chang has sent out a political signal. Hopes have been raised that these two Asian mega-state neighbours may have now risen above and gone beyond the bitterness of their recent border standoff.

'Border Defence Cooperation' Talks

Flowing from such an interpretation is the second and more important aspect of the Chang-Antony talks. This is fully reflected in the Joint Statement they issued after their meeting in Beijing on 6 July. At stake is the issue of maintaining peace and tranquillity along the disputed Sino-Indian border, pending a final settlement of the basic dispute. The two defence ministers "agreed on an early conclusion of negotiations for a proposed agreement on border defence cooperation between the two Governments".⁵ Even a bare outline of the proposed accord with India, Beijing's initiative, has not been spelt out so far in an authoritative fashion in the public domain. Relevant, however, is the track record of China in having signed similar agreements with some of its other neighbours. This has caused much speculation. Some Indian analysts argue that New Delhi should not sign a border cooperation pact with China in the absence of a final settlement of the basic border dispute itself.

² Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying described Mr Antony's visit as "an opportunity to enhance mutual trust and understanding between the two militaries". <http://www.china-un.org/eng/fyrth/t1057224.htm> Accessed on 23 July 2013

³ *ISAS Insights No. 206* - 3 June 2013: An Unusual Sino-Indian Summit and After, by P S Suryanarayana

⁴ *ISAS Insights No. 204* - 10 April 2013: India-China Talks: Full-Scope Security is Potential Issue, by P S Suryanarayana

⁵ *Chinese Ministry of National Defense*, Full text of joint statement by Chinese, Indian defence ministers, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2013-07/07/content_4457638.htm

There is fear in some non-official Indian quarters that the Chinese proposal might only have the effect of freezing India's current military fire-power at its current level along the LAC. In the eyes of many, the density of India's military deployments along the LAC falls far below that of China's on its side of the disputed frontier. Obviously, however, the Indian officialdom does not share this view. Having already exchanged draft pacts with China in this regard, India thinks that the relevant issues could be negotiated to mutual satisfaction. This is the only possible rational explanation of Mr Antony's consent to "an early conclusion of negotiations".

China's joint statements with other powers in general, and India in particular, are usually replete with emphatic utterances about the "need" for one or other course of action. So, the latest announcement of an actual agreement favouring "an early conclusion of negotiations", albeit in a limited sphere, is of unusual significance. In this respect, the Chang-Antony Statement goes way beyond the "additional exchanges and visits"⁶ that the two leaders agreed upon for the coming months.

Quickly beginning to implement this new accord on heightened military exchanges, China sent its naval hospital-ship, 'Peace Ark', to Mumbai for a goodwill call. The officers and men of the ship were hosted a ceremonial reception by India's Western Naval Command on 8 August. China had tasked the officers and men to "aim at contributing to cooperation between the two sides in non-traditional security"⁷ areas. In the longer run, however, the overall mil-to-mil ties between India and China will be determined by their relative strengths, going forward. It hardly needs to be emphasised that India trails China in their overall military capabilities as of now. The reality is marginally moderated, not absolutely altered, by the views of international experts that India has had an earlier start over the Chinese in its efforts to deploy a blue-water navy. On the whole, instructive is David Shambaugh's concise assessment of China's current military capabilities.

Chinese Military's Global Rank

In his 2013 book, *China Goes Global The Partial Power*, David Shambaugh has this evaluation: "Thus far China's global security presence has not evolved in the 'traditional' great power manner of establishing alliances, acquiring bases and dispatching troops abroad, building global power projection capabilities, sailing its navy around the world, coercing others, or fighting in conflicts directly or via surrogates. At the same time, China has been steadily improving and expanding its military capabilities over the past two decades and, by some measures, can be considered to possess the No. 2 military in the world today".⁸ A counter-argument is indeed possible. Such a sweeping assessment lends itself to a poser whether China or indeed post-Soviet Russia (which is still a nuclear superpower) has the No.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ *Chinese Ministry of National Defense*, India welcomes Chinese hospital ship, "Peace Ark", http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2013-08/08/content_4461137.htm

⁸ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global The Partial Power*, Oxford University Press 2013, p. 269

2 military in the world. However, it is indisputable that India's current military profile does not measure up for this exalted position.

Shifting the focus from Beijing's strengths to its relative weaknesses, David Shambaugh, a veteran Sinologist, has presented the other side of China's military as follows: "Other than cyber warfare, its space program, and intercontinental ballistic missiles, it has no global power-projection capabilities. To be certain, these are not insignificant capabilities, but China's air and ground forces cannot operate away from China's immediate periphery, and the naval forces have very limited deployment capacity beyond China's 'near seas'. When China had to evacuate 35,000 civilians from Libya in 2011, it had to rely completely on leased ships, ferries, and civilian aircraft from neighbouring countries – as it did not have the air or naval capacity to deploy that far and did not possess military base arrangements in the Mediterranean region".⁹ In his overall view, "China is a *partial power*"¹⁰ in the military/strategic domain.

Such a judgment, arguably true in the Sino-US context as of now, is of no solace to the Indian military establishment, though. Surely, India does pursue a vigorous space programme with civil and military applications. New Delhi is also actively seeking capabilities in developing and deploying ballistic missiles, including "intercontinental" delivery systems.¹¹ However, what is more relevant to India are China's formidable military coefficients – even as an arguably "partial power".

China, India Reach for Space

It may not be out of place to quote David Shambaugh again, because of his well-known expertise on China's military prowess. Citing data-sources ranging from China's State Council Information Office in 2006 to the Pentagon in 2010, he sums up Beijing's outreach to the new frontier of space as follows: "China sent its first satellite into orbit in 1970 and since that time has launched nearly 130 satellites, currently with 69 in orbit. China also has an active anti-satellite weapons program, as demonstrated in 2007 when it shot a meteorological satellite out of low earth orbit with a ballistic missile. As the U.S. Department of Defense 2010 report on the Chinese military noted, 'China is developing the ability to attack an adversary's space assets, accelerating the militarization of space.' The United States is very concerned about this growing Chinese anti-satellite capacity, given the heavy reliance of the U.S. military and intelligence community on such space-based assets".¹² In terms of terrestrial military prowess itself, "the Chinese military has not yet gone global".¹³ But "it remains an Asian regional military power and strategic actor to be reckoned with, and its

⁹ Ibid., p. 270

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ *ISAS Brief No. 238* – 23 April 2012: Beyond the Sparks and Fumes of India's Agni-V Test, by P S Suryanarayana

¹² David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global The Partial Power*, Oxford University Press 2013, p. 296

¹³ Ibid., p. 269

strengthened strategic posture is affecting the balance of power throughout the Asia-Pacific region”¹⁴.

The encapsulated data of this order shows that India, which trails China in the outer space except for having sent a successful unmanned mission to the Moon, must feel concerned. In terrestrial terms too, China’s dominating relevance to the Asia-Pacific balance of power, now and into the future, is of material consequence to India’s own rising military profile. Significant, therefore, is the latest Sino-Indian move to aim at “an early conclusion of negotiations” on a border defence cooperation pact. The two sides have already in place a series of military-related confidence-building measures (CBMs) with reference to peace along the undefined LAC in the disputed border area. And, a Working Mechanism, one of a host of relevant Sino-Indian task forces (no military-oriented pun intended), met on 25 July in the context of the earlier Chang-Antony talks.

The Sino-Indian border dispute and the related matters of peace and tranquillity are conspicuous in the public domain, even in the absence of details about the bilateral parleys. Far less known, however, is the actual state-of-play in regard to the issue of deterrence in the China-India nuclear-security domain, a matter of their atomic weapons and their deployments. As of now, there is no official dialogue between India and China on their nuclear-security doctrines, postures, and plans.

A series of Sino-Indian CBMs, possible but not necessarily feasible right now in this domain, has been spelt out by former Chinese Ambassador to India, Cheng Ruisheng; Professor Zhang Li at Sichuan University; and Ma Jiali, Executive Deputy Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies at the China Reform Forum. Expressing their personal views, unrelated to their affiliations, they have written as follows: “China and India maintain a number of identical stands on the issue of nuclear arms control and disarmament. ... Both sides also reaffirmed [in December 2010] their firm opposition to the weaponization of and an arms race in outer space. Enhanced cooperation on [such] points of synergy should be explored”¹⁵.

A Nuclear Common Ground

On the tricky issue of the nuclear-armed India remaining outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, these three Chinese experts have called for unspecified innovative ideas. “On the question of India’s nuclear status, China articulated a flexible attitude in 2008, so that the resolution to lift the nuclear embargo against India could be passed by the Nuclear Suppliers Group. At present, among all the nuclear-weapon states, only China and India have announced a no-first-use policy. With new thinking on both sides, cooperation between the two countries on this question could be explored”¹⁶.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 269 & 270

¹⁵ Lora Saalman (Editor & Translator), *The China-India Nuclear Crossroads*, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 2012, p. 162

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 162 & 163

Envisioning an unspecified role for China in the India-Pakistan nuclear equation and in the triangular nuclear stability, the three have further written: "... on China's part, there is a growing interest in helping to strengthen the rudimentary nuclear confidence-building measures that are being attempted by New Delhi and Islamabad. Credible rapprochement and a sustainable peace process in South Asia, after all, will greatly heighten China's interest in doing this".¹⁷

Shining the spotlight on a promising area of possible Sino-Indian cooperation in the civil sector of atoms for peace, the three Chinese scholars have traced an optimistic thought-line. "In the 1980s, China once supplied heavy water to India. And in the 1990s, China supplied low-enriched uranium to India. During Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to India in 2006, the two countries issued a joint declaration advocating civil nuclear cooperation. However, only limited progress has been achieved until now (2012). Both sides could start with technical exchanges in areas of mutual interest, such as breeder reactors, high-temperature, gas-cooled reactors, thorium development, and nuclear reactor security and safety".¹⁸

Such impressive ideas about nuclear-security CBMs, matched by the thoughts from some non-official Indian experts, acquire unusual importance in the latest Sino-Indian context. Civil nuclear cooperation emerged as a pleasant surprise in the package of topics during the new Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India in May this year. Hopeful signs, too, are the Sino-Indian move for an "early conclusion of negotiations" on a border defence cooperation pact and the visit of Chinese 'Peace Ark' to the Mumbai port. However, the fate of such warm perceptions of the diplomatic kind may still be determined in the cold mil-to-mil environment along the LAC in the Sino-Indian border zone!

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¹⁷ Ibid., p. 163

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 164