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Balancing or Containing China? Interpreting Chinese Views on India-US LEMOA

The signing of India – United States Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) symbolizes the geopolitical changes in the Asia-Pacific region. LEMOA is widely perceived by the Chinese media and scholars as an agreement directed at China. These Chinese interpretations of this agreement might form the basis of China’s future course of action towards the increasing closeness of India and the US.

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On 29 August 2016, India and the United States signed Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). “LEMOA is a facilitating agreement that establishes basic terms, conditions, and procedures for reciprocal provision of Logistic Support, Supplies, and Services between the armed forces of India and the United States”,² and the main objective of the agreement is to enhance Interoperability between Indian Military and American Military. It generated a great deal of attention from media and strategic experts. Indian strategic experts hailed it as “long delayed but welcome move”, and “one step further in consolidating India-US

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² *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, (Ministry of Defence), August 30, 2016, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/mbErel.aspx?relid=149322> (accessed on September 6, 2016).

partnership in defence”.³ United States newspapers as well as strategic experts also universally welcomed the move, most of the reporting on the LEMOA pointed to China as the target of the agreement as well as the core reason for the increasing military engagement between United States and India. However there is no detailed analysis of the Chinese reactions towards LEMOA. To analyse Chinese response to the LEMOA is important because the Chinese view of the agreement will become the basis of its reaction on the ground.

Reminding India of its Non-Alignment

One of the most common reactions of Chinese media and strategic specialists towards India having closer relations with United States, symbolized by the LEMOA, is reminding India of its tradition of non-alignment. According to Chinese media, an alliance with United States will make India subservient to America in Asia, and it will lose its strategic autonomy. Being a non-aligned nation India is getting the best of all worlds, all the great powers are wooing India, and by aligning with the US India will lose this advantageous position. According to the Chinese media and scholars, non-alignment is almost a foundational principle of Indian state and endorsed by most of the Indian elites, suggesting that for any Indian government it will be really hard to move away from these principles. Chinese scholars refer to India’s participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its aspiration to become a full member of SCO, India’s indifference to the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s suggestions to create India-Japan-US-Australia alliance, as well as India’s participation in 2016 RIC (Russia, India, China) foreign ministers’ meeting, where, from a Chinese point of view, India implicitly endorsed Chinese perception of the South China Sea issue, as indicators of India still holding on to its non-alignment traditions.⁴ According to *Global Times*, the US wants to make India a quasi-ally, and asks how far India can get close to the US; the answer, in the paper’s view, is not very close, for India is not Australia or Japan, both these countries because of various reasons and historical circumstances lost their strategic autonomy and became an appendage to the US strategic interests. Chinese media reminds India of its hard-won freedom from the

³ “Experts welcome India-US military logistics agreement”, *Business Standard*, August 30, 2016, http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/experts-welcome-india-us-military-logistics-agreement-116083001099_1.html (accessed on September 6, 2016).

⁴ “Qi si meiguo le! Yindu zhe ci jingran zhan zai zhongguo yi bian” [made United States really angry! Unexpectedly, this time India decided to stand with China], *military.china.com*, April 21, 2016, http://military.china.com/critical3/27/20160421/22491546_all.html (accessed on September 1, 2016).

colonial powers, signalling that by aligning with the US it will lose its hard-won freedom.⁵ India's getting closer to the US reminds China of its own strategy during the cold war, whereby it built close relations with the US in order to deter Soviet Union, and Chinese believe that India is now playing a similar role; assuming this Chinese media explains that the regional and international political situation is different now and unlike China during the cold war India does not face an existential threat and India holds a predominant position in South Asia, and there is no immediate threat of war. According to Chinese media India is reaping the benefits of long-held nonaligned position, and the benefits of having a balanced relationship between China and the US is far greater than having a strategy of swinging towards United States.

Is it all smooth and merry between the US and India?

From a Chinese scholarly point of view, the agreement as well as the US-India relations face many issues. According to National Defence University Professor Jin Yi Nan, India will be cautious in aligning with the US, because United States won't want western Pacific to be dominated by the Chinese and Indian Ocean to be dominated by India. So India is also a potential threat to American hegemony in Asia, this suggest that Chinese experts believe that at some point of time the US will also try to limit India's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region. Chinese experts point out that it took a long time, almost 12 years, to reach an agreement between India and the US to sign LEMOA. The Chinese also point out that LEMOA is not an obligatory one, it is a voluntary one and will be decided on a case-by-case basis. It also won't allow each other to establish naval base in each other's territory. India signed only one of the three foundational agreements and didn't give any time frame for signing the other two agreements, such as the Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Information and Services Cooperation (BECA).⁶

Chinese experts believe the LEMOA will be influenced by the overall relationship between India and United States, especially the economic relations; they mention economic issues such

⁵ "She ping: Yindu toujin meiguo huai bao? Ta na you nama sha" [Editorial: Is India falling into the American embrace? How can India be that foolish?] *Global Times*, August 30, 2016, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/editorial/2016-08/9374197.html> (accessed on September 1, 2016).

⁶ "Jin Yi Nan: Mei la Yindu shi e zhi Zhong Guo you shi qi wei zhan lue dui shou" [Jin Yi Nan: United States is pulling India to Contain China, as well as view it as a strategic competitor], *military.people.com.cn*, September 2, 2016, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0902/c1011-28686696-2.html> (accessed on September 4, 2016).

as *Walmart* investigating whether the Indian company *Welspun* supplied fake Egyptian Cotton Sheets. And *Apple* Company is facing difficulties to expand its operations in India. Chinese point towards United States-India Strategic and Commercial Dialogue initiated in 2015, and the proposed target to increase the value of India-United states bilateral trade from current US\$100 billion to US\$500 billion, a level closer to the current China-United States trade. Chinese perceive the increasing focus on India-United States economic relations as a strategy by the United States to replace China with India as the major economic partner of United States in Asia. Chinese view the increasing expectations on the India-US trade and economic relations through a pessimistic prism; according to them the US Congress and the public mood is more towards protectionism than liberalism, United States Congress is resisting Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement and public mood is also strengthening against free trade, so it is unlikely that there will be large-scale American investment coming to India or India getting an opportunity to increase its exports to United States.

Chinese analysts think that the development story of India is more talk than action which will ultimately defeat the American initiatives, for instance they refer to the “Make in India programme”, which is widely publicized by the Narendra Modi government but is facing a big question mark. Since Modi became Prime Minister he came up with many catchy phrases and slogans, among them the most important was the “Make in India”. A slogan which captures India’s aspiration to become a manufacturing powerhouse, however international investors are yet to bet on India in a big way, because Indian infrastructure is still substandard, particularly the ports and railways. Hidden costs are high in industrial production, industrial relations are still bad; even though a common tax system (Goods and Services Tax) is introduced the implementation will take a long time. Apart from these disadvantages Chinese media also points out the fact that the scale of production by Indian companies is small and marred by technological backwardness; the labour skill level is low, and Indian products are yet to reach the international standards. From this analysis Chinese experts drew the conclusion that American project to replace ‘made in China’ by ‘made in India’ cannot happen within a short period of time.

Chinese experts argue that the logistical agreement is essentially a one-sided one; according to Lu Ningsi, a popular political and strategic commentator from Hong Kong-based *Phoenix* Television, the nature of India-United States logistical agreement is unequal, essentially because of the power disparity between India and United States. According to him even though the agreement is for both sides to use each other’s military facilities, it will mostly result in

United States using India's naval facilities than the other way. This is essentially because compared to US Navy Indian naval power is limited, Indian Navy is not a blue water navy, and it is hard to envision India using American naval bases in the Pacific. United States is a global power and the American military bases are all over the world, and United States has to often use military bases in different parts of the world, and India is only one another support base for the American Navy. Chinese experts believe that India will serve as a supply point for the interoperations of American Navy's seventh fleet base in Japan's Yokosuka and American fifth fleet base in Bahrain, in this way United States can link both Pacific and Indian Oceans. So essentially even though from an Indian perspective it looks like an agreement between equals, in reality the agreement will largely benefit United States than India.⁷

The Normal State of Affairs

The more sophisticated and nuanced Chinese view of India's signing of LEMOA frames its arguments in the larger context of post-independence India-United States relations and tries to view India's relations with United States with empathy and through India's national interest. It observes that during the initial stages of the post-cold war India-US relations which went through wild fluctuations, currently is entering an era of stability, especially the relationship is strengthening in the sphere of military procurements.

Chinese analysts think that the deal will greatly benefit United States, for United States there is a real strategic thinking behind the deal. United States wishes to exploit historical and contemporary issues existing between India and China. India's strategic location is very unique, it is the biggest country in the Indian Ocean region and geographically close to Middle East, West Asia and North Africa, the regions which are causing headaches to United States. Indian and United States' interests are similar in terms of resisting Islamic extremism. From a Chinese point of view, India can be a very good protective shield for United States both in East Asia as well as in Indian Ocean Region; however, United States camouflages its intentions behind the deal by using the concepts like collective security and collective values.

Chinese analysts acknowledge that there is lack of political and security trust between India and China, India holds a strong, guarded and vigilant state of mind towards China. India also

⁷ "Lu Ningsi: Yindu Meiguo Qitu lian shou KongZhi Yindu Yang" [Lu Ningsi: India and United States Join hands to control Indian Ocean], *Phoenix Television*, September 1, 2016, http://phtv.ifeng.com/a/20160901/44445602_0.shtml (accessed on September 4, 2016).

wishes to increase its hard power through military cooperation with United States. India also has many unresolved historical as well as contemporary issues with China. But this does not mean that India wants to make alliance with United States, this is not going to happen in the short-time period.⁸ Chinese analysts also believe that the cooperation between India and United States is riddled with difficulties, it is only because United States is concerned about rising China it is sparing no effort to getting close to India. United States' cooperation with India, like nuclear cooperation, violated international principles and rules, and many American experts and law makers are unhappy about this. Chinese experts also point out how divergent Indian and United States views can be on global issues by mentioning India's voting patterns in United Nations. In the UN historically Indian votes against American positions are more than China's votes against United States.

Through this deal India can ride on United States' influence in the world and United States can use Indian influence in Indian Ocean Region, the deal will definitely make India and United States closer. However, according to the Chinese analysts, China should not be anxious about the India-United States LEMOA, and India coming closer to United States. They point out that India is not supporting American initiatives in South China Sea in any substantial way, and its support to United States initiatives is not comparable with the support United States receives from Japan and Australia.

Based on the above mentioned points, Chinese experts call for a nuanced view of India- United States relations; according to them, international relations are not a zero-sum game, to say that because China-US relations are going through a bad patch, India coming close to US is against China is a wrong view. China will have to see United States-China-India triangular relationship in a mature way, India does have the right to be close to the United States; Chinese experts also point out that American naval ships also visited Hong Kong as well as Qingdao, this shows that United States also won't view it as a zero-sum game.

Conclusion

Western media mostly publishes extreme viewpoints in China as its popular views or even as the only views, in contrast this paper shows that Chinese views are various and nuanced. The

⁸ "huanqiu shibao quanwei guwen: yin mei qian "zhong yao zuo zhan", shi chong zhe Zhongguo de ma?"[Authoritative Consultations by Global Times: India and United States signed "major war pact", is it directed against China?] *Global Times*, August 29, 2016, http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2016-08/9373227.html?_t_t_t=0.13866881203618064 (accessed on September 2, 2016).

important aspect of the Chinese perception on India-United States LEMOA is that China perceives American action as containment of China and India's action as balancing of China.

The failure of American initiative to make an informal collaborative framework with China called G2 during the initial years of Obama administration and the failure of current Chinese administration's efforts for the same in the name of "New type of great power relations" made the boundary lines between the two powers more clearer, the United States with its allies are more clear about containment of China, and China is more open to carve out a sphere of hegemony in Asia. In this emerging polarized but interconnected world, India is swinging towards West, however still maintaining its relations with China. India's closer relations with US will probably make China take Indian interests in Asia Pacific more seriously.

China also views that in the long term the success of the India-US cooperation depends on economic factors, economic interests are the only long term mould which will keep United States' relations with India close, and without India's consistent economic growth, United States will find it difficult to prop up India as an economic and security alternative to China in Asia. In view of India's weak economic fundamentals and weak prospects, Chinese believe India cannot pose a threat to China, and United States' intention to use India to contain China will eventually collapse. So in conclusion the Chinese media and scholars think that LEMOA is an important turning point in US-India security relations, however they don't see it as a threatening act from the Indian side, but a containment act of United States.

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