

INDIA'S CHINA CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *The present phase of India-China relations emerged from the desire and imperative to reset relations after the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the realization that, despite the persistence of major differences between them, India and China have significant areas of cooperation both in the bilateral and multilateral arenas. From a longer-term perspective, however, the origins of the current phase of India-China relations may also be traced to the strategic and security underpinnings of the US-China trade spat. New US tariffs have targeted key Chinese exports, and new US export restrictions have impacted a range of high technology industries, especially in those areas, in which China hopes to lead in 2025 or 2049. As long as there are continuing tensions in Sino-US relations, China will make positive overtures towards India, without any assurances that it will not revert to a confrontationist posture under different circumstances in the future. India has been careful not to blame China for the coronavirus or its spread. However, there remains a strong undercurrent of mutual distrust between the two countries. India has put Chinese foreign direct investment under the "prior government approval" category. Predictably, China has described this as a violation of the World Trade Organization principle of "non-discrimination". There have been two border incidents involving Indian and Chinese troops in recent weeks. It would appear that the fragile equilibrium of India China ties has an uncertain future.*

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India is a rising power, but its transformation is occurring in the shadow of China's even more impressive ascent. Beijing's influence will almost certainly continue to grow and has already upset Asia's geopolitical balance. India must decide how to secure its interests in this unbalanced environment by choosing among six potential strategic options; staying unaligned, hedging, building. Indigenous military power, forming regional partnerships, aligning with China, or aligning with the United States.

Challenges Posed by China's Rise:

Military Threat:

China is a direct military threat to India, particularly in light of the two countries border disputes. Through India has considerable military power, China's forces are already stronger and better-funded; China's outsized wealth will likely allow it to outspend India for the foreseeable future.

- China actually has slightly fewer ground forces (1.15million troops) than India (1.20 million troops)
- But China enjoys critical terrain advantages along the Sino Indian border, accentuated by far superior transportation and communications infrastructure in bordering Tibet.

Meanwhile, China fields almost twice as many modern combat aircraft (of the Mirage-2000 vintage or newer) as India (653 to 349) and nearly three times as many major surface combat vessels (79 to 28) and submarines (53 to 14).⁸ China is also building its own fifth generation fighter jet and a new aircraft carrier that will be larger than any Indian Carrier.

China's growing military muscle would be a concern for India even in the absence of any direct disputes. But India and China have unresolved territorial disputes that led to a war in 1962 and several subsequent skirmishes. The possibility of another war might appear remote, but the combination of China's military power and its proclivity to use military force as most recently illustrated in the South China Sea – represent a serious threat.

China's influence at Multilateral Forums:

China's influence in both established international organizations like the United Nations and in new institutions China is setting up, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, gives it opportunities to hamper Indian interest and goals in multilateral forums, especially when it comes to reforming these institutions and giving India a greater voice in global affairs.

- Most recently, in 2016, China thwarted India's efforts to join the NSG.
- China is likely to continue to obstruct India in this manner, and its capacity to do so will only grow as its power increases.

Moreover, as its power grows, China has also started establishing international institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and has also been shaping other multilateral organizations to promote Chinese interest, such as the BRICS (a group consisting of Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Alignment with Pakistan:

China's alignment with Pakistan and deepening relations with other South Asian Countries represents a significant challenge to India's position in the region, which India has dominated for decades. China's ability to provide financial assistance and balance against India may tempt India's smaller neighbors to play one power against the other, undermining India in its own backyard.

China's support has bolstered Pakistan's military capabilities and (at the very least) accelerated the development of Islamabad's nuclear weapons and missile programs. Moreover, the possibility of a two front conflict pitting India against China and Pakistan simultaneously also worry Indian National security policymakers, a concern accelerated by the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Parts of this infrastructure corridor traverse Indian claimed territory in Pakistan occupied portions of Kashmir.

Aside from Pakistan, the enhancement of China's relations with some other Indian neighbors – Including Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal and Srilanka provides an understandable temptation for these smaller states to attempt to use China to counter India's natural domination of the region.

Economic Power:

China's economic power allows it to spread its influence around the world, which could be used to India's detriment. China has used its aid and trade policies to promote its interests, and it is not difficult to imagine that it could use these tools to pressure others, especially developing countries, to support China in a potential disagreement with India. For example, China has used economic boycotts to punish countries like Norway and South Korea for actions deemed to be unfriendly to its interests. China has also used aid to advance its foreign policy objectives in its relations with countries like the Philippines.

India's Potential Policy Responses:

Strategy of Nonalignment:

A strategy of nonalignment, hedging, or alignment with China likely would not serve India's interests because China's power, geographical proximity, and policies already represent a clear danger to India's security and global interests.

Closer Alignment with the U.S.

A closer alignment with the United States, further along the same policy path that India is already pursuing, represents the best way to meet the challenge of China's rise, because the United States is the only power that is stronger than China. Further, India and the U.S. share a common interest in balancing Beijing.

Building Indigenous Military Power:

Among India's other strategic options efforts to build indigenous military power and forge regional partnership are necessary and complementary means of countering China, but are by themselves insufficient, because China is already wealthier and stronger than India or any combination of other Asian powers.

India's Foreign Policy Tools:

In response to the challenges China represents, India has four types of tools at its disposal; military power, potential partnerships with other countries (including China), multilateral diplomacy, and international economic Integration.

Military Power:

India needs to cultivate and enhance these tools as much as possible. The first tool is military power. States are ultimately responsible for their own security, and for most states – except especially weak one's military power is a form of insurance that cannot be ignored. It is the most basic instrument that states have, and it is ultimately the only instrument that is

entirely under the control of the state. That said, military power is often by itself insufficient, and expending too much efforts in this area can potentially have deleterious consequences.

Partnerships with Other countries:

India needs partners, although such partners should share India's concerns about China and be capable and willing to use their own military forces to counter China's military power. Equally important, they should have enough clout in the international arena to be able to support India's interests. Additionally, they should be both able and willing to help India develop its own economic, technological, and military power so that it can better balance against China.

Multilateral Diplomacy:

India could potentially use multilateral institutions such as the United Nations to undermine the legitimacy of and constrain any aggressive Chinese behavior in the international arena. In addition, although India is not a permanent UNSC member, it could conceivably garner support on issues it deems important from other states, especially more powerful ones like the United States, and, in so doing attempt to isolate Beijing and deter China from acting against India's interest. Admittedly, China could opt to veto such proceedings in the UNSC, but it would likely pay a diplomatic cost for doing so, and such veto power does not extend to the UN General Assembly. Meanwhile, in some situations, India could also conceivably partner with Beijing in such venues, in order to give China an incentive to be more accommodating of India's interest.

Economic Cooperation:

Trade and economic cooperation are useful tools for growing the Indian economy, generating greater wealth and developing India's technological capacities. Greater wealth and technological capacities are essential building blocks of military power and greater international influence, both of which are necessary for meeting the challenge China poses.

But the pacifying effects of such economic integration on international conflict are often exaggerated, and expectations that commerce will lead to cooperation in other areas are usually misplaced. So, India can use trade and economic cooperation with China as one way of enhancing Indian economic growth, But India should be careful about buying into the idea that such cooperation can ameliorate potential conflict with China.

Regional Balancing:

Regional balancing is a strategy India could pursue to align with other Asian countries in order to balance against China. Such partners could include Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam although, in the future, Indonesia and Malaysia could potentially be incorporated. These countries are also concerned about China's rise and aggressiveness, and they may be open to India playing a role in establishing a more favorable balance of power in the region.

Over the last two decades, India's Look East and Act East Policies have aimed at closer economic and strategic links with other countries in the region. But follow up has been unsatisfactory, as India is still trading less with members of the association of Southeast Asian Nation's than even Australia or Hong Kong. India's inability to improve transportation infrastructure to its east is a serious problem.

Advantages of Regional Balancing Approach:

- First, it would allow India to balance China without the disadvantage of aligning with another great power such as the United States.
- Second, a regional balancing strategy would circumvent worries in some corners about a new wave of U.S. isolations and the prospect of U.S unwillingness to balance against China.
- Third, unlike an alignment with another great power, India would likely be the more powerful partner in the relationships that would form a regional alignment in Asia, where only Japan is of comparable power.
- Fourth, this strategy has an inherent legitimacy. Traditionally, India has objected to great power politics that are played out in the territories of small, weak countries for the benefit of others. But a regional balancing strategy involves defending small powers against a local hegemony, which is an eminently justiciable and legitimate task.
- Fifth, there would likely be economic benefits to building up such links, particularly in terms of trade-fueled economic growth.

Way Forward:

India's choice of strategy is not stagnant and has to be based on the prevailing balance of power. If this changes, the strategy also has to change. For example, if India's power were to become roughly comparable to China's, India would not even need alliances but could balance China with its own internal resources (though partnerships may reduce the burden).

Similarly, if China declines, the United States could reign supreme as the global hegemony, leading to different choices. But these are not the conditions that prevail today. The current context is one in which China, a neighbor with which India has territorial disputes and which has been attempting to contain India, is the dominant power in Asia and likely will be for some time. In these circumstances, there is only one effective strategic choice for India to protect its interests and safeguard its security; a closer alignment with the United States.

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