

India's Strategic Articulation: Shift in Thinking

P Stobdan

Ambassador P Stobdan is Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

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Summary

In a 4-part series of Policy Papers, P Stobdan analyses India's response to the global shifts and how India's strategic perception seems to have altered dramatically in the recent years. What it essentially means is that embracing the cold-war perception or adopting any containment strategy is unlikely to be enduring in the longer run.

Significantly, for the first time, India has very firmly articulated its concerns over geopolitical flash points in Asia when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressed the Combined Commanders' Conference on 22 November. While underling the impending strategic threat scenarios affecting India, PM significantly hasn't mentioned China but emphasized on the global surveillance operation by the US National Security Agency as a factor for Indian planners to consider. PM also made it clear that the increasing contestation in the Asia-Pacific - the US 'pivot' strategy is a 'development fraught with uncertainty.'

For over two decades, China threat loomed large in India; analysts debated over impending competition. China was seen as inexorably exploiting India's vulnerabilities in South Asia to ensure it is surrounded by inimical neighbours. The idea of China's 'String of Pearls' strategy - building roads, railways and ports - was seen as encircling India. China's deepening economic influence in South Asia, its maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean remained points of concerns. China frequent display of aggressiveness along borders and India's possible counter moves to block the Malacca Straits worsen the mistrust.

All these came against the backdrop of China's rapid ascendancy and amidst changing international environment in China's favour. When India's rise too became a reality, other global powers tried to pitch India against China as a regional countervailing force. Japan, South Korea and ASEAN countries, fearing China's regional dominance, encouraged India's participation in the East Asian affairs. Various strategic constellations were sought including a coalesced 'US-Japan-Australia-India' alliance to encircle China. China also made no secret of its displeasure over the changes. As Indo-US strategic ties ascended, analysts rejoiced over the US 'pivot Asia' announcement and its intended aim to make India a linchpin in the Asia-Pacific theatre. Thus far an illusionary 'Indo-Pacific' idea currently in the offing - is being viewed with excitement.

Surprisingly, India's strategic perception seemed to have altered dramatically in the recent years. Interestingly, the new pronouncement comes within a month after PM returned from his China visit. It also comes at a time the US is preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan. Significantly, it also comes when a decade-long hyped prospect of the Indo-US relations and the impression of America propping up India's rise to counter China is getting feeble. It also comes when America is facing economic downward spiral and risk for decline in power. To be sure, it is correctly noticing that the role of the US on the global stage is narrowing down.

It may also be a sign that India's Strategic and Cooperative Partnership with China, in fact, is producing some substantive and enduring results. Not conveyed clearly, there are clear signs of India having achieved a level of confidence with the new leadership in Beijing. Though, Prime Minister has been making the point in the past that there is no inevitable conflict of interests between India and China.

To do a reality check, for example the economic ties with China have only deepened and the two-way trade is expected to touch \$100 billion by 2015. This is despite efforts at stalling so far China's entry into the SAARC and opposing a Regional Trade Agreement (RTA). Significantly, many of the fears seem matters of the past. India is no longer shying away from accepting Chinese proposals though with desired scrutiny. The recently signed Border Defence pact is a case in point. The prospects of a RTA, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement and proposal for setting up industrial zones are being looked into.

No longer fearful of China's forays, India is talking on the concepts and alignments of Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor. China has outlined several other overland projects to connect India from east. In the north, there seems no escaping from the impact of China's development plan in Tibet and Xinjiang on South Asia. The Golmud-Lhasa railway had already knocked down the Great Himalayas. A rail line to Shigatse and then to Nepal, Bhutan and eventually to India will soon become a reality. By 2017, a parallel railway line is expected to come up even along the Tibet-Xinjiang National Highway No- 219 that runs through Aksai Chin. The Economic Corridor Secretariat in Islamabad overseas the proposed \$18 billion road, rail and an energy pipeline link between Kashgar and Gwadar. But, if Pakistan remains volatile, China will prefer to make more investments in India.

To be sure, if these projects get implemented, the dynamics of the region will transform in the coming decades. India hasn't so far responded in many articulated ways. India is already absent in all the major trans-continental East-West connectivity projects. It is time that India crafts an equivalent smart strategy. Surely, India has its own designs. Why can't it simply put them on the table, instead of waiting for China to propose them? There is absolutely nothing wrong taking lesson from how China is spurring internal development with global linkages.

It only proves to suggest that India is thoughtfully responding to the changing global strategic landscape. What it means essentially is that embracing the cold-war perception or adopting any containment strategy is unlikely to be enduring in the longer run. Both China and India recognise that they have more overlapping than conflicting interests in this uncertain global environment. India and China should resolve the unresolved boundary problem quickly and team up to expand the strategic opportunities further.