

# India's weak China policy can spell havoc



Anand K. Sahay

Far & Near

Recent steps of the Narendra Modi government to go out of the way to appease Beijing can only lead to the entrenchment of unhealthy ties with our northern neighbour. This would be singularly unfortunate because there is some merit in the view — held by some of our prominent foreign policy practitioners — that it is with Beijing that India must imagine her most important relationship.

This view has been obscured because, for the most part since the 1950s, our relations with the Soviet Union had very high value. There was a beneficial economic and defence component, besides Moscow's crucial assistance on the Kashmir question in the UN Security Council. And since

the end of the USSR, India has come to enjoy a very productive and comfortable connection with the West.

With China, the memory of 1962 has been somewhat effaced. Still, the bilateral interaction has at times been characterised by mutual mistrust, in part on account of China teaming up with Pakistan to discomfit India in a variety of ways. At the level of both popular perception and official deliberations, these factors have badly undercut the rapid rise in trade ties with China, about which some questioning has now begun to be raised.

On the whole, broad Indian nationalism has been affronted. That's not a good sign in building relations with any country, leave alone a powerful neighbour with which there is an unsettled boundary. There are several reasons

why the China relationship is extremely important and ought to be seen as such. For one, China's economy is four times the size of India's, although India could forge ahead in about 30 years' time if we are sensible and can make our young population productive.

Two, China has been spending heavily on defence for a number of years, several times more than India. Three, China — like Pakistan, which it partners against India — is an unsatiated power, which makes it a troublesome entity.

It appears to have messianic zeal and a sense of destiny. In line with this, regionally it gives every impression of flexing its military muscle by growing as a maritime force, a missile force, and a cyber force in a manner that its neighbours find threatening. Its spectacular rise in recent decades has disturbed the placidity of the waters that surround it.

If any neighbour of China must deal with these harsh realities, it is evident that if ties are managed in an equitable and mutually respectful way, India-China relations have enormous potential to be a stabilising factor for the international economy, and calming

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Beijing, that India ought to be "prudent". Last week, Mr Wang, answering media questions, held forth rhetorically on the good that may ensue from good Sino-Indian ties, but pointedly noted that China would "protect its legitimate interests". Is this a warning? And, if so, how is India going to prepare for it?

Replying to a Parliament question recently, the minister of state for defence gave the impression that India needed to prepare for a renewal of Chinese military belligerence in the Doklam area, where the armies of the two countries held each other in a "standoff" for 73 days last summer.

But the way India has shaped its political response gives the impression of being obsequious to Beijing, leaving room for the impression that the present government is strong on words but weak, vacillating and unimaginative when it comes to action.

New Delhi asked all officials not to associate themselves with programmes featuring the Dalai Lama. The noted Tibetan spiritual leader was planning on a programme to thank India in the 60th year of being given shelter in this country.

There was simply no need for this as Indian officials have not participated in the Tibetan monk's programmes in the six decades that he has been here. The Dalai Lama runs only religious affairs here. A precondition set by India was that he won't engage in politics. Therefore, India declared a ban for transgressions that have never occurred. This is a sure sign of being overly courteous.

The meaning that can be plausibly read into this is that New Delhi is paying obeisance to Beijing. This is the way India has received it, and this is the way China would too. India's several neighbours — who are always looking at how Beijing and New Delhi deal with one another — are also likely to read a similar meaning into recent events.

Here on, then, we may expect the Chinese to turn on the squeeze even harder — the perfect example of an unequal and inequitable relationship. In our ties with Nepal, which has lately made no bones about privileging China over India, and with Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, our supine stance in relation to Beijing is likely to leave India without any worthwhile leverage in the region. What would

then be left of India's standing in Saarc?

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru gave the Dalai Lama refuge in 1959 when the Tibetan uprising against Chinese occupation was crushed. The Chinese attacked India in 1962, and gave our unprepared forces a thrashing with a view to belittle Nehru's leadership. But Nehru stuck to his guns. He did not turn over the Tibetan monk to Beijing.

But the Modi regime appears to be altering the terms of engagement against the Tibetan holy man. This sudden loss of nerve on India's part belittles us in the eyes of the Tibetan people and dents this country's image across Asia and the world, which regards the Dalai Lama with sympathy.

It is now also easy to see why India backed off from underlining its strategic interests in the Maldives once it became clear that the absolutist government of President Abdulla Yameen was in cahoots with Beijing and has offered China a naval observation post, which, doubtless, will become a full-fledged military base on India's doorstep. We have caved in and our interests will be hit hard all round.

## Beijing's defence budget unveils grand security ambitions



Jagannath Panda

More than the figure, it is the intent behind the figure that matters. In a rather modest rise compared to its 2017 defence budget, Beijing has decided to increase its defence budget by 8.1 per cent in 2018. The 2017 defence budget was 7 per cent while the 2016 and 2015 figures were 7.6 per cent and 10.1 per cent respectively. Setting the goal to build a stronger armed force for the "new era", the hike in the 2018 defence budget was projected by Premier Li Keqiang to meet the challenges emerging from the "profound changes in the national security environment" that China is facing. What are these "profound changes"?

The Chinese firmness to establish a stronger armed force is not new. The Chinese leadership defends this rise by stating that China's total defence budget is \$175 billion, one-fourth of the United States budget, which is \$716 billion, making it non-impressive and below par. So, this rise in the military budget is neither meant to engage in an arms race nor is it large enough to match with a superior military such as the US. In order to narrow the gap, Beijing's strategy is to focus on economic modernisation, which can direct sustained high rates of investment in the defence sector. Chinese state media further contend that the country must aim to increase the budget to 20 to 30 per cent to emerge as a

stronger military power with greater influence. There is obviously merit in this Chinese contention, but it becomes provocative when China links this increase to "profound changes" in the security environment. It points towards a grand Chinese thinking that is associated with its ambitions in the immediate Indo-Pacific, in particular, to the ongoing People's Liberation Army reforms, defence strategy and security ambitions.

Increase in China's defence budget is indeed closely linked to the goal of transforming the PLA into a "modern, mechanised, IT-based force". The emphasis is being offered to bring qualitative changes in the PLA, both on the technological and operational fronts. A continuous "technological revolution" is taking place in modernising the PLA for a "new era" where the military emphasis is on "information warfare". This points to the overall development, adoption and integration of micro-electronic technologies into weapons, precision-guided weapons and IT-based CAISR system, in areas like artificial intelligence and Nano technology. The PLA reform is at the heart behind the rise of China's defence budget, but this reform is not taking place in isolation. The military leadership has always foreseen that a stronger and professional military is the key to challenge US supremacy. The main target therefore is to improve China's Comprehensive National Power

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(CNP), essentially to improve its economic, diplomatic and military prowess, and guarantee China its rightful place as a power at par with the US.

The reference to the "profound changes" is therefore linked to the recent security developments in the Indo-Pacific that are closely associated with China's international maritime and security ambitions. The emphasis is given to maritime zones, building maritime and military capability, protecting maritime networks, and creating alternative maritime supply routes in the Indian Ocean. Along with the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca and the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean is factored highly as a "maritime lifeline". As a result, Beijing has been closely observing the security developments in Indo-Pacific, with special emphasis on the Indian Ocean. There is a continuous stress to promote China as a maritime power, where the immediate aim is to have a superior numerical strength which increases China's maritime influence. This is intended to alter the balance of power equation in Indo-Pacific, where the US naval presence continues to remain the dominant force along with the increasing maritime understanding between India and Japan. The revival of the idea of the

"Quadrilateral" initiative involving Australia, India, Japan and the US has further encouraged the Chinese security apparatus to focus more intently on the Indo-Pacific region. Donald Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) report has also strengthened the Chinese resoluteness since the US increasingly views China as a "revisionist power".

China's "revisionism" in military strategy is visible in Beijing's international thinking in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The immediate target is to enhance its international profile as an advanced military. The recent deployment of the J-20 stealth fighters is a fine reference to this effect. Chinese officials were quoted stating proudly that the J-20 is aimed at safeguarding China's "sovereignty, security and territorial integrity". Likewise, the new intercontinental ballistic missile Dongfeng-41, which is to be launched this year, is aimed at boosting China's profile as a missile power. The electromagnetic railgun if developed will make China the first country to test such a weapon at the sea. The emphasis is offered in strengthening China's technological capability in artificial intelligence, quantum information science, hypersonic technology, electromagnetic technology and supercomputing. These technological advancements are closely linked to China's defence budget and Xi Jinping's international security ambitions to put forth a strong military dream.

In fact, the changing security conditions in Indo-Pacific have constantly encouraged the Chinese leadership to increase the defence budget despite the slow growth rate in the Chinese economy. The reference to "profound changes", however, points to a more interesting

fact: Beijing's defence budget and military dream are both complementary to each other. China's defence budget is critically discussed due to its non-transparency. The non-accounting of the budget allocated in military research and development, arms imports, nuclear forces and strategic rocket programme, budget spent for the People's Armed Police (PAP) to the overall defence budget have always been debated internationally. Likewise, Beijing's military ambitions in the IOR are fast growing where Beijing is gradually establishing a number of military and strategic bases. China's naval base in Djibouti is a fitting reference to this effect. The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) facilitates the Chinese Navy to stay focused in the Indian Ocean. Besides, what needs to be understood is that China's military goals are not military per se, these are rather institutional foreign policy and national security centric goals tied to its national objectives. As a result, the Chinese military is in a position today to assert itself on defending territories and securing the country's interests.

Beijing's defence strategy and military planning has been mainly intended over the years to dissuade the US capability of supporting Taiwan and coerce the latter into unification. There seems to be a subtle change in this priority that is reflected in China's "profound change" reference while announcing the defence budget. The change is more towards enhancing military presence and enriching the maritime-military strategy in the Indo-Pacific region.

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### REPORTERS' DIARY

#### JAYA IN RS, DISSENT IN SP

JAYA BACHCHAN's nomination by the Samajwadi Party for the Rajya Sabha had led to considerable discontent in the party. Party leaders, in hushed tones, are questioning the rationale behind giving Ms Bachchan a third term in the Rajya Sabha.

"She does not have any following in the party, does not have a caste identity and is not even a crowd puller — the present generations are not even aware of her contribution as a film star. Moreover, she does not share good relations with party workers. What can she give to the party?" asked a SP veteran.

The fact that Ms Bachchan has been chosen over stalwarts like Naresh Agarwal and Kiranmoy Nanda has also led to dissent.

"We will now have no voice in the Rajya Sabha because Ms Bachchan is not very well conversant with UP politics. Moreover, when she raises her voice, it is mostly to scold people," said a former SP MP.



#### JUAL, THE GIANT

BJP STALWART and Union tribal affairs minister Jual Oram has an inimitable style. The strong tribal leader is known for never giving in to pressures. This approach of Mr Oram inspires the party's rank and file to overcome the pain suffered due to electoral defeats and not get bogged down by political opponents.

When the BJP, despite aggressive campaigning by half a dozen Union ministers lost the Bijepur bypoll by 42,000 votes, many of the party's leaders went into hibernation. The fearless Mr Oram, however, flew down to Bhubaneswar from New Delhi and went straight to party's state headquarters to celebrate Holi.

When mediapersons thronged him to get his bytes on the poll debacle, he said: "Hum haare hain, mare nahin (We have been defeated, but certainly not killed)." He went on to add: "We will rise again from ashes with more fire and beat the BJD."

The party workers playing Holi with the minister whispered: "The giant is alive and he will go for the kill."

As the television channels beamed live Mr Oram's statement, the party leaders sulking in silence at their homes came out and started celebrating Holi.



### THE NYT CROSSWORD

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#### CELEBRITY CROSSWORD

This puzzle is a collaboration by the basketball-loving senator Joe Donnelly of Indiana, working together with longtime crossword contributor Michael S. (Mickey) Maurer, the owner of the Indianapolis Business Journal. This is Mickey's 25th crossword for The Times. More information about the making of today's puzzle appears in the Times's daily crossword column (nytimes.com/column/wordplay).

#### ACROSS

- Exchange of words
- Smart farm animal?
- Chevrolet model
- Warning during a heist?
- Washes against, as the shore
- In baroque fashion
- Gutterball?
- Afternoon social

- Pigeon-\_\_\_\_\_
- Filler ads, in brief
- Korean border area, for short
- Sinus doc
- Yukon or Sierra
- Opening word at many a conference
- Eric of old CBS News
- Flipped (through)
- Dinner at the end of Ramadan?
- Where Socrates lived
- Artists' oil sources
- Like Times Square on New Year's Eve
- Diet of Jack Sprat's wife
- "Doesn't excite me"
- Spanish uncle
- Elite team member
- Bowery boozier
- "The Spy Who Loved Me" org.
- Rug store promotion?
- Pacifies

- Establish
- Something bleeped out for television?
- Successful batter
- Knocked over
- Think about only one thing
- Works with pupils?
- "No one's with me"
- Digital media player that's "big" in New York City?
- Operated on, as the eyes
- Beauty product line with the slogan "Ageless"
- Cat, to Catarina
- Site of a 1955 "Pact"
- Comfort \_\_\_\_\_
- 32-card card game
- Punta del \_\_\_\_\_ (Uruguay resort)
- Leading

- Fa follower
- Home on a farm
- Noggin knocks
- Footnote abbr.
- Jennifer Lopez title role
- Tussaud: Abbr.
- The end of the British monarchy?
- Thou
- Things babies make
- One of one's worries
- One might say "Happy Birthday"
- Not many
- Two-bagger: Abbr.
- Part of N.R.A.
- SAT alternative
- Numerical prefix
- Has a one-night stand, say
- Abu Dhabi, for one
- Signifies
- Ejected player might be sent to them

- Protect against the other team scoring
- The end of the British monarchy?
- Sharpens
- More than a sip
- Spalding or Voit

- product
- Bounce off the wall
- Chicago daily, informally
- Back, on a ship
- Great Lakes' \_\_\_\_\_ Canals
- Bestow, to Burns

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