



DOES INDIA PERCEIVE CHINA AS A REVISIONIST POWER?

BY JAGANNATH PANDA

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The world continues to debate whether China is a “status-quo” or a “revisionist” power. The Trump Administration’s *National Security Strategy* released in December 2017 officially labeled China a “revisionist” power and expressed concern that Beijing was upsetting the post-Cold war geopolitical order in the Indo-Pacific region through “expansion of a state-driven economic model.”

This assessment of China is based on *four* broad contentions: Beijing is taking advantage of global rules and norms as an emerging economy to reap a trade surplus with others; its unilateral measures to develop infrastructure around the Indo-Pacific overlook others’ interests; it is expanding its maritime military outreach across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR); and it is altering the global financial order through the promotion of alternative institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) to existing Bretton Woods institutions. As each of these issues also engages New Delhi, does India – an Indo-Pacific partner of the United States – also perceive Beijing as a revisionist power?

India is yet to officially term China a revisionist power. This, however, does not imply that India condones unilateral Chinese revisionism. Beijing’s flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has been designed to alter the regional power equation in China’s favor and is included in the CPC (Communist Party of China) Constitution as a long-term national developmental

initiative, is fueling international concern. An increase in authoritarianism under Xi Jinping’s rule has seen China ignoring neighboring countries when debating territorial claims. The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is becoming a grave security concern. Beijing’s impressive record of establishing ports, harbors, and maritime centers across the IOR disturbs the status quo of the region. India’s position becomes evident when its participation in the Quadrilateral consultative group (the Quad 2.0) comprising Australia, India, Japan and the US, is observed.

India’s participation in the Quad 2.0 consultative dialogue forum is based on “issues of common interest” such as connectivity, regional security, and maritime cooperation to balance China. Hence, India’s advocacy for a “free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific,” as stated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 is more to encourage China to contemplate the concerns of India and others. India’s advocacy of “inclusivity” is not to deny China its space in the Indo-Pacific. It is rather a demand to get China to consider the interests of others in the region and be transparent and accountable about its actions.

It is equally important, however, to note that the Indian perception of China as a revisionist power is much deeper and insightful than it appears. This perception is almost a decade old, first discerned when New Delhi decided to engage with China as an emerging economic powerhouse in 2003. The rationale was that emerging powers possess revisionist characteristics, as India too was following a revisionist policy to enhance its global participation. It had reached out to Brazil and South Africa [through the formation of India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) in 2003] to reform the global economic order, trade practices and financial institutions in favor of emerging economies. The same rationale was evident when India strengthened its economic relationship with China in the early years of the 21st century.

The start of this century also witnessed debate on “China threat” vs. “China development.” Many countries, with the US in the lead, viewed the modernization of the Chinese military as detrimental to their national interests. So, as a response to the rising “China threat” theory, Beijing promoted the idea of “peaceful rise,” then revised as “peaceful development” in 2002-03. Zheng Bijian’s “peaceful development” proposition under Hu Jintao’s leadership was to secure a place for China by establishing new partnerships without destabilizing world peace. The Chinese leadership also started

viewing India as a prospective partner, albeit conditionally.

India's response to the "China threat" vs. "China development" debate was reflected in the visit of then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to China in June 2003. His recognition of China as a rising economic power signified New Delhi's acceptance of Chinese power. Vajpayee not only acknowledged the "economic transformation of China" but also envisioned a "comprehensive" bilateral relationship with it. This acknowledgement was matched by growing concern over China's military modernization and posturing across the India-China border. More importantly, at a time when the "China threat" theory was intensifying, Vajpayee offered the narrative of two neighbors being "developing countries" and as leaders of "cutting-edge technologies," influencing the knowledge economy.

While China's growing military modernization led to India strengthening its security partnership with the US, India did not ignore its relationship with China. It still recognized China's economic success and rapid modernization. Acknowledging China as an economic power in the making and being willing to nurture a "comprehensive" relationship in the early years of the 21st century was predictive of Beijing's emergence as a revisionist power in subsequent years. This has helped India be part of the "Beijing Consensus" framework that aimed to offer an alternative model of economic growth to developing economies, without discounting the "Washington Consensus."

A further acknowledgement by India of the "Beijing Consensus" and in fortifying China's revisionist posture could be seen in the growing association of the two countries in various multilateral forums, especially the BRIC (Brazil-Russia-India-China) group in June 2009 (which South Africa joined in 2011) and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) in November 2009. BRICS has successfully lobbied for an increase of voting rights and better representation of India and China in Bretton Woods institutions. The New Development Bank (NDB) of BRICS aims to enhance the role of BRICS members in helping emerging economies and developing countries (EMDCs) grow and the BASIC seeks to present a united front of emerging economies on climate change. India's explicit support and adherence to the AIIB and its full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is another example of India's commitment to revising the global financial order and supporting alternative institutions or forums with Beijing's lead.

Recently, a subtle change can be noticed in India's approach to the emergence of a stronger China with Xi's "new era" foreign policy and the BRI. Beijing's emergence as a stronger actor in Asia and dictating Asia's strategic environment has unnerved India. Its aggressive approach toward the India-China boundary dispute has made India vigilant of any Chinese move. Concerns over BRI, the primary one of which is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have strengthened Indian uncertainties. India demands that connectivity "must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality."

Despite these concerns, India has not distanced itself from China-led institutions nor is it likely to do so. It has instead selectively endorsed Chinese revisionism in regional and global affairs. In other words, New Delhi has supported Chinese-led change that facilitates its own progress, while firmly opposing China's unilateral revisionism in the Indo-Pacific through its development projects. A more determined Indian stance toward China's revisionist proposals is becoming visible, which is a contrast with the earlier discourse that saw China as a prospective revisionist partner.

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