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China's Strategic Ambitions in the Age of COVID-19

Edited by
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Editors' Note

The growth of China's economic and military might long precede the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. China was already pressing ahead with its maritime territorial claims, especially in the South China Sea and its continental territorial claims against India. China's military power has also increased several folds and the pandemic has created opportunities to service its territorial ambitions, which Beijing is increasingly exploiting. It has made critical strategic bets on its ties with Pakistan and Myanmar, and pursued a coercive strategy against states in South East Asia. This edited volume captures the ambitions, complexities and impact of Beijing's strategic choices as well the response of different countries to China's growing assertiveness across the Indo-Pacific.

Power is not static in the international system and the world has been witness to the increase of Chinese economic and military might over the last four decades. To be sure, Chinese military power is as much an outgrowth of its economic power. It is a truism of realism that as power expands, so do interests, and China is asserting power to secure its interests. Territorial claims, whether in the maritime or the continental domain, that were latent 15 years ago are today being pressed as China sees increasing opportunities bequeathed by its power. However, the variable and expansive territorial claims advanced by Beijing are also a direct consequence of the distractions generated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The responses of countries across the Indo-Pacific to Beijing's aggressiveness can best be characterised as a mixture of trepidation and half measures. Although it is premature to dismiss them as outrightly ineffective, they have yet to produce an outcome that fundamentally alters China's strategic calculus and restrains its aims. Discretion has tended to be the dominant approach of Indo-Pacific states in pushing back against Beijing's aggressive conduct. Dependence on Chinese medical assistance to fight the pandemic as well as a dense trading and commercial relations with Beijing has left some states more cautious than others. India is a holdout among the countries, finding itself locked in a tense and protracted border military stand-off with China (1), which has claimed the lives of

soldiers on both sides. India, while still cautious, has gone farther than other states in the Indo-Pacific in confronting China by reducing dependence on Chinese pharmaceuticals, banning Chinese 59 mobile apps within the Indian cyberspace segment, and additional bans to follow in potentially telecommunications sector (2) (3) (4). New Delhi is also forging closer ties with the US, Japan and Australia through the Quadrilateral or Quad grouping that includes the latter three countries and India, which are likely to conduct joint naval exercises (5).

The first section examines the emergence of China as a major military power. Unlike China, the modernisation of Indian military capabilities is more staggered. Chinese military modernisation is an outcome of its economic growth. Determining military spending is a far more complex exercise today than it was a few decades ago. China has maintained a steady and constant rate of military spending (1.9 percent of its GDP), which is far more than what India spends. In absolute terms, between 2010-2019, China spent more on defence than India as its GDP is five times larger, however, in relative terms, it is less than India's defence expenditure, which stands at 2.4 percent of GDP over the same period. Underlying the improvements being made across China's various military branches is its quest to become a global leader. Beyond conventional warfighting capabilities, China is expanding its space military capabilities. Its counterspace capabilities are significant and space, which has historically never been intricately linked to geopolitical competition, is now assuming greater salience. The COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities for Beijing to press ahead with its territorial claims in the maritime domain and beyond. China has been more effective in weathering the worst effects of the virus as opposed to its principal rival (the US) and its Asian competitor (India). By pushing ahead with maritime claims in the South China Sea, China has intensified friction with the US and compelled the latter to deploy greater naval capabilities to limit such aggressive moves. The implications of China's increasing stranglehold over the South China Sea will impact states beyond the region.

The second section assesses Chinese strategic goals in the extended South Asian region. The un-demarcated status of the boundary dividing India and China is at one level at the root of the current crisis between Beijing and New Delhi. However, a combination of Chinese motivations ranging from domestic insecurities to President Xi Jinping strategic ambitions and Indian misjudgments about Chinese intentions are to blame. Beijing has also escalated its territorial claims over eastern Bhutan, opening up another front for the expansion of Chinese ambitions. To offset growing anti-China sentiments resulting in part from the construction of dams along the upper riparian areas of the Mekong Delta, Beijing has pursued intensive outreach to neutralise the growing unease with China by assisting Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. China is also making

technological intrusions into other countries through its heavily subsidised 5G telecommunications network developed by Huawei to secure information and pursue espionage.

The third and final section evaluates regional and country-specific responses to China's strategic conduct in the Indo-Pacific. India and Australia have discovered the importance of forging a strategic partnership amidst the uncertainties undergirding the current US Donald Trump-led US administration's foreign policy conduct in the Indo-Pacific and Chinese assertiveness. Several Southeast Asian states who depend on China for investment and aid downplayed the extent of the COVID-19 threat initially, and China has worked intensively to limit damage to ties through 'soft power'. Similarly, Japan has also been treading a fine line in its relations with China. Taiwan remains a lightning rod for China if any country abandons the 'One China policy' and establishes formal diplomatic relations with Taipei. India now faces a dilemma over whether it should recognise Taiwan and support its membership to the United Nations (UN), given Taipei's medical assistance to New Delhi during the COVID-19 pandemic (6).

The larger pattern emerging in Chinese ambitions is driven by a combination of patience deceit, surprise, and stealth aggression. Beijing has coupled this muscular approach by tailoring concessions in the form of medical assistance to wean states away from assuming a potentially hostile posture towards Beijing's strategic goal – hegemony over the Indo-Pacific. It also dovetails well with China's historical proclivity for making variable claims, whether in the maritime or continental domains, and frame Chinese responses, which are acts of aggressive expansion, with victimhood to rationalise territorial seizures. The real source of China's strength lies in the efficient and effective conversion of economic strength into military power, which is why it remains such a daunting state to confront. With few costs to incur, the pandemic has eased Beijing's aggression and constrained the response of other nations. Yet confrontation is precisely the course on which Chinese leaders have set the country with the Indo-Pacific's other major powers. Any countervailing coalition, which is now emerging in the form of the Quadrilateral (consisting the US, India, Japan and Australia) must not just seek to limit China's aims, but equally influence Beijing's strategic choices. Only this collective effort will generate a genuine equilibrium or balance of power and prevent the establishment of Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

Kartik Bommakanti

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CHINESE MILITARY POWER

1

The India-China Military Matrix and Their Modernisation Trajectories

Harsh V. Pant and
Anant Singh Mann

The recent tensions between India and China along the Line of Actual Control at the Galwan Valley has been a watershed moment, marking the nadir of diplomatic relations between the two nations and heralding the ominous possibility of further escalation. To accurately gauge the functional capabilities of both countries in the times to come, any attempt to contrast their militaries must be made in the context of military modernisation and their conceivable advancement in the near future.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates that China's expenditure on its military has increased from two-and-a-half times that of India's in 2010 to over three-and-a-half times India's in 2019 (See Table 1). This monumental difference is partly explained by the fact that while Indian military expenditure had reduced from 2.7 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2010 to 2.4 percent in 2019, China's expenditure on its military has mainly stayed constant since 2010 at around 1.9 percent of its GDP. Mostly, however, the primary reason for the gap is the sheer size of China's GDP, which is estimated by the World Bank to have reached US$13.61 trillion in 2018 as compared to India's US$2.72 trillion (in current US dollar rates) (1). China's GDP growth per annum has also increased rapidly since 2010 (See Table 2).

Table 1: SIPRI Estimates of Military Expenditure (current US dollar rates), its Share of the GDP, and the ratio of Sino-Indian Military Expenditure (2010-2019)

Year	China		India		Ratio of Sino-Indian Military Expenditure (A/B)
	A. Military Expenditure	Share of GDP	B. Military Expenditure	Share of GDP	
2010	US$115.772 billion	1.9%	US$46.090 billion	2.7%	2.5:1
2011	US$137.967 billion	1.8%	US$49.634 billion	2.7%	2.8:1
2012	US$157.390 billion	1.8%	US$47.217 billion	2.5%	3.3:1
2013	US$179.881 billion	1.9%	US$47.404 billion	2.5%	3.8:1
2014	US$200.772 billion	1.9%	US$50.914 billion	2.5%	3.9:1
2015	US$214.472 billion	1.9%	US$51.296 billion	2.4%	4.2:1
2016	US$216.404 billion	1.9%	US$56.638 billion	2.5%	3.8:1
2017	US$228.466 billion	1.9%	US$64.559 billion	2.5%	3.5:1
2018	US$253.492 billion	1.9%	US$66.258 billion	2.4%	3.8:1
2019	US$261.082 billion	1.9%	US$71.125 billion	2.4%	3.7:1

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, (2020) "Data for All Countries 1949–2019 (excel spreadsheet)", SIPRI (2).

Table 2: IMF Estimates of GDP Growth in India and China, 2010-2020

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
China	10.6%	9.5%	7.9%	7.8%	7.3%	6.9%	6.8%	6.9%	6.7%	6.1%	1.2%
India	10.3%	6.6%	5.5%	6.4%	7.4%	8%	8.3%	7%	6.1%	4.2%	1.9%

Sources: International Monetary Fund (2020), "People's Republic of China" (3); "India" (4).

Military capabilities

The unique tactical and strategic needs of both India and China have governed their financial allocations to enhance their military capabilities. China's is estimated to have an active military force of 2,183,000 personnel and reserves of 510,000 (5), as compared to India's active force of 1,444,000 and reserves of 2,100,000 (6).

On land, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is estimated to have approximately 3,500 tanks, 33,000 armoured vehicles, 3,800 self-propelled artillery, 3,600 towed artillery, and 2,650 rocket projectors (7). The Indian Army, on the other hand, is estimated to have 4,292 tanks, 8,686 armoured vehicles, 235 self-propelled artillery, 4,060 towed artillery, and 266 rocket projectors (8).

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is said to have a total strength of around 3,210, including 1,232 fighters, 371 dedicated attack aircraft, 224 transport aircraft, 314 trainers, 281 attack helicopters, 911 helicopters, and 111 maintained for special missions (9). The Indian Air Force has a strength of 2,123, which include 538 fighters, 172 dedicated attack aircraft, 250 transport aircraft, 359 trainers, 23 attack helicopters, 722 helicopters, and 77 reserved for special missions (10).

In the maritime sphere, China's PLA Navy (PLAN) has a total of 777 naval assets, which include two aircraft carriers, 36 destroyers, 52 frigates, 50 corvettes, 74 submarines, 220 patrol vessels, and 29 mine warfare crafts (11). The Indian Navy, meanwhile, has a total of 285 naval assets, including one aircraft carrier, ten destroyers, 13 frigates, 19 corvettes, 16 submarines, 139 patrol vehicles, and three mine warfare crafts (12).

China is estimated to have a total of 104 nuclear missiles, operated by the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), which include the DF-31A, DF-31, and DF-21 missiles (13). India, on the other hand, is estimated to have around 10 Agni-III launchers and eight Agni-II launchers (14). Furthermore, it is estimated that India has about 51 aircraft (Jaguar IS and Mirage 2000H fighters) that are capable of launching nuclear warheads (15).

What modernisation means for military capabilities

These statistics must be understood in the context of the military modernisation that both nations have pursued over the last few years. Chinese President Xi Jinping has made it evident that one of the central objectives of his presidency is to modernise the PLA to help the country become a "global leader" (16). This has been done by maintaining the defence budget's share of the GDP and, crucially, downsizing the PLA Army (PLAA) to divert its resources to the associated services like the PLAN, PLAAF and PLARF (17).

A bulk of these changes were implemented in 2015—five war zones were created, the Second Artillery was converted into the PLARF, and the PLA Strategic Support Force was created to combine the space, electronic and network forces into a single service (18). More pertinently, in 2015, the PLA announced a cut of 300,000 personnel (19), and two years later followed it up with another announcement that, for the first time, the size of the PLAA would be reduced to below 1,000,000 (20). In the 2019 White Paper, further reductions in the PLAA's size were announced, while still maintaining the size of the other forces (21). The PLA has also focused on procuring new technologies to modernise its support systems and logistics to improve its teeth-to-tail ratio (TTR).

Even as China has taken great leaps in the modernisation of its military, it is critical for the PLA to complete the "informationization" and "mechanization" of all its services to achieve its "Revolution in Military Affairs" (22). The PLA has not been involved in active combat since the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 (23); indeed, the PLA has been repeatedly criticised not only for its inefficient command system, but also for the rampant corruption in its ranks (24). Consequently, the amassing of cutting-edge military technology by China and much of its modernisation depends solely on the quality of its recruits, the experience of its commanders, and other such soft skills that have been weighed and found wanting.

Apart from modernising its armed forces, India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has focused on creating greater "jointness" in its functioning (25). As part of this initiative (26), Modi established the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in 2019 to head the Indian Armed Forces. Other changes in the command structure of the Indian Army include the addition of a third deputy chief who, unlike the first two, will not oversee capital procurement and instead is responsible for strategy and information warfare and will control the army's military intelligence (27). The navy has also introduced several changes in its operations, training and organisation with its increased presence in the Indian Ocean Region to protect key strategic communications (28).

In 2017, it was decided that 57,000 army personnel would be redeployed to improve the TTR (29). Part of this was achieved by restructuring the Engineering and Signals Corps and Ordinance Units, and closing all military farms and postal establishments in civilian areas. In February 2020, CDS General Bipin Rawat announced that the Indian military plans to focus on the "theatreisation" of its commands, basically aiming to unite the tri-services under a common command (30). This proposal is set to be implemented by converting the Northern and Western Commands into two to five theatres, making Jammu and Kashmir a separate theatre (31). Further, the Western and Eastern Naval Commands will be incorporated under a single Peninsular Command.

However, much of these changes are yet to be implemented, with the Indian Armed Forces consisting of 19 Commands, only two of which are presently tri-services (32). Another major faultline is the sluggish weapons procurement procedure, which is weighed down by bureaucratic red-tape and risks, widening the technological gap with China and reducing it with Pakistan (33). Apart from this, a peculiarity of the armed forces' demographic profile is the significant increase in the expenditure on military pensions, with projections that in the near future the military will expend more funds on pensions than salaries (34).

If this analysis shows anything, it is that the Indian Armed Forces are not

underfunded and the expenditure on them is in a healthy proportion to India's growing GDP. However, India's strategic interests and security threats require that these funds be utilised efficiently to transform the armed forces into an effective state instrument of the 21st century. It appears that the only way this will be possible is through the further restructuring of the armed forces to reduce their structural inefficiencies and financial shortages. A leaner force will be a more capable force for India's current needs. On the other hand, while China appears to have achieved a certain degree of modernisation in its military, their insufficiencies of organisation and the quality of personnel have the potential to weaken their technological superiority. Any potential Indian defence strategy towards China should take these factors into account if it is to hit the bull's eye.

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2

The Chinese Military is Busy Exploiting the COVID-19 Pandemic

Harsh V. Pant and
Kartik Bommakanti

The COVID-19 pandemic shows no signs of abating, but China, which was the source of the virus, is confident it has weathered the worst of the health crisis. At the forefront of fighting and controlling the spread of the virus in China was the People's Liberation Army (PLA). PLA troops were deployed extensively to arrest the spread of the respiratory illness, and it is likely, despite official denials (1), the virus potentially infected, at least initially, a sizeable number of troops deployed in and around Wuhan, the epicentre of the viral infection (2). Wuhan also happens to be a major submarine building centre, with orders from Pakistan and Thailand (3). The two putative factors behind this ostensible "recovery" are repression and secrecy that have enabled the Chinese state to conceal the extent of the infections among PLA troops. Also, amid the pandemic, the Chinese military is flexing its muscle and may see an opportunity to press claims more robustly in the South China Sea and more menacingly in targeting Taiwan. Thus, three issues are worth examining when it comes to China's response to the viral outbreak—first, how far have the PLA personnel been affected by COVID-19; second, the impact on Wuhan's military-industrial capacity; and third, the opportunities created by the pandemic for potential Chinese military action.

The military's role in containing the spread of the COVID-19 does appear to have helped ease the worst effects of the viral outbreak. But reports indicate that at least several hundred PLA soldiers deployed for the fight the virus were likely infected (4). Reinforcing this fact is that Wuhan is the headquarters of the PLA Logistic Support Force, whose service members are likely to have mingled with the local population, making it highly implausible that members of the service were unaffected (5). People's Armed Police members are also unlikely to have escaped infection, given their involvement in brutally enforcing the lockdown in Wuhan and the wider Hubei province (6). In addition, notwithstanding the extensive expertise within the PLA in biological

and chemical warfare, the PLASSF medical units and militia involved in the containment of the viral spread also could not have escaped infection, given the high transmissibility of COVID-19 (7).

China is also revving up its military production capabilities during the pandemic from its Wuhan military-industrial hub. Although not a coastal city, Wuhan is located close to the Yangtze River and serves as a waterway to the East China Sea. Chinese submarine production has increased to meet orders from Thailand and Pakistan (8). The city is home to the Wuchang Ship Building Group and several engineering and technical institutions that directly support the Chinese military's needs, covering electromagnetic catapults for aircraft carriers, railguns and submarine technology as well as service Beijing's defence exports (9). There are indications that China has managed to limit the spread of the virus by at least keeping key military-industrial production clusters to meet delivery requirements (10). This is particularly true of Wuhan, which is a key military-industrial hub. However, full-scale military-industrial production will take a few months to restore, which would still be an impressive recovery, if it actually crystallises. Meanwhile, the remainder of the advanced industrialised world would still be limping back to normalcy by the time China completes its recovery. But this is a speculative scenario, and China could still face constraints due to a lack of sufficient demand from prospective importers of its military hardware, as is evident from Thailand's decision to place the acquisition of new submarines on hold (11). Also, the Chinese regime's existing fears of a renewed round of infections are likely to forestall a revival in defence production.

Finally, the pandemic has presented China with opportunities in flexing its military muscle by pressing the country's territorial claims. The sinking of the Vietnamese fishing trawler recently is illustrative of Beijing's aggressiveness (12). This event occurred in the South China Sea (SCS) leading Hanoi to protest China aggressive tactics. China and Vietnam have rival claims over islands in the SCS and compete for marine resources. In March, Beijing also conducted military exercises in the South China Sea (13). Both regional and extra-regional powers in the Indo-Pacific are distracted by the spread of COVID-19. Regardless of Beijing's fervent denials, the coronavirus has provided it with a chance to secure military gains. The pandemic has potential diversionary benefits for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), enabling it to shore up the legitimacy of the regime by appealing to nationalism and playing victim before its people by selectively using the international opprobrium Beijing has had to endure in recent weeks and diverting attention away from the CCP dispensation's manifest failures in containing the outbreak domestically and internationally (14).

On the other hand, a potent extra-regional power such as the US finds itself on the backfoot, if not at an outright disadvantage, despite its forward-deployed

presence in East Asia. Unlike Chinese naval and air forces, the US Navy is constrained both by infection aboard one of its aircraft carriers and the tyranny of distance (15). While the US Navy can replenish American naval forces operating in the South China Sea and the East China Sea from its bases in Japan and Guam, it is at a disadvantage as crew aboard vessels in its Pacific fleet could be infected with the coronavirus, limiting their replacement. Lacking instantly available crew on standby and located at a considerable distance from the American mainland, the US Navy is constrained where the Chinese navy is not, giving China a military opportunity.

A crisis is a terrible thing to waste. The CCP seems to have internalised this dictum in the way it is using the military to make creeping gains while the rest of the world remains busy in managing the life and death of its people. But whether the pandemic would allow Beijing to make long terms gains in its search for great power status remains to be seen.

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3

China's Growing Counter-Space Capabilities

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan

The growth of China's space capabilities in the last decade has been impressive, corresponding to the growth of overall Chinese power. Although outer space had remained relatively peaceful and delinked from geopolitics for most of the last three decades, it is now at the heart of the great power competition, a manifestation of the conflicts on earth. While China is developing these capabilities with an eye on the US, the impact of these capabilities will also be felt in the Indo-Pacific. Given the economic, social and security stakes involved, India must devote more attention to China's growing space capabilities and address some of the vulnerabilities and gaps.

While China continues to claim that it is only pursuing peaceful uses in outer space, there have been growing concerns from other countries about the country's recent advances in outer space because of the inherent strategic and security risks. Like all the modern militaries, China is also heavily reliant on outer space for carrying out what is called passive military applications such as intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance (ISR). But with the creation of the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), China's military is indicating that it has much bigger roles planned for utilising outer space. The PLASSF is significant for several reasons, including the integration of outer space, cyber and electronic warfare to bring about more effective synergy into play. Importantly, China established the PLASSF (December 2015) much earlier than the US Space Force (December 2019).

This is also in line with China's defence white papers, which see a more significant role for outer space. For instance, the 2019 defence white paper explained the importance of outer space in China's national thinking. "Outer space is a critical domain in international strategic competition. Outer space security provides strategic assurance for national and social development. In

the interest of the peaceful use of outer space, China actively participates in international space cooperation, develops relevant technologies and capabilities, advances holistic management of space-based information resources, strengthens space situation awareness, safeguards space assets, and enhances the capacity to safely enter, exit and openly use outer space" (1).

In February 2019, the 'Challenges to Security in Space' report by the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) detailed how China has been reorienting its space programme with a special emphasis on space for modern warfare. The report articulated the US-Chinese view wherein counter-space capabilities are seen "as a means to reduce US and allied military effectiveness" (2). China's growing space surveillance capabilities are also noteworthy, and the DIA report points out as to how China's space surveillance networks are "capable of searching, tracking, and characterizing satellites in all earth orbits." That this wherewithal can be used for both peaceful space operations and counter-space operations is problematic.

China's military reforms and modernisation undertaken in 2015 have streamlined the PLA to make it a more agile and responsive fighting force. The major reorganisation—including the creation of the PLASSF—is meant to make the military effective and efficient and bring about operational synergies (3), as a recent report by the Project 2049 Institute detailed (4). This has further accelerated China's ISR capabilities. The PLA's growing fleet of electro-optical, radar and other space-based sensor platforms are able to "transmit images of the Earth's surface to ground stations in near-real-time" (5). It has also made significant investments in synthetic aperture radar and electronic reconnaissance surveillance capabilities. Additionally, as the report points out, "(F)uture deployments of potential sea-based imagery receiving stations, additional data relay satellite systems, or the further establishment of ground stations abroad could enhance China's extended-range near-real-time targeting capability."

The risks posed by China's military space programme is primarily to other more capable powers, such as the US, using space as a force multiplier. But the growing number of counter-space capabilities developed by China poses a threat to other countries as well, especially those in the Indo-Pacific. The return of the anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons with China's conduct of the ASAT test in January 2007 has sparked a new competition, which was absent at least in the outer space domain. Following the first successful Chinese ASAT test, the US carried out its own test but in a more responsible manner, thereby not resulting in a large amount of long-lasting space debris. Since the Chinese ASAT test, India has mulled over the threats, challenges and ways to protect its own assets. Even though India has remained a somewhat reluctant player in the military space realm, ignoring the larger developments, including the ASAT tests and renewed efforts at developing counter-space capabilities, carries its own risks

for the country. This thinking pushed India to demonstrate its own ASAT capability in March 2019.

Thus, one could argue that China's actions in outer space, including the development of ASAT and other counter-space capabilities, have led to new competition. Indeed, the signs of a budding arms race are evident. Recently, several reports have chronicled China's growing inventory of counter-space capabilities, including studies by the Secure World Foundation (SWF) (6) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (7). The reports detail China's counter-space capabilities—direct ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) weapons, high-powered lasers, co-orbital satellites, directed energy weapons, electronic jamming and spoofing, and cyber means—that have been developed over the past decade. China has so far undertaken several ASAT tests to make its capability more mature and reliable. The SWF report claims that "Chinese DA-ASAT capability against LEO targets is likely mature and likely operationally fielded on mobile launchers. Chinese DA-ASAT capability against deep space targets - both medium Earth Orbit (MEO) and GEO - is likely still in the experimental or development phase," but also suggests that there is no substantial evidence to suggest that China plans to develop it as an operational capability in the future (8).

On other technologies, the situation is different. The SWF report says that China now has "sophisticated capabilities for jamming or spoofing space-based positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) capabilities," which have been operationalised and used in the South China Sea. The report also states that the PLA PNT jammers have possibly been used in "sophisticated, widespread spoofing of civil GPS signals near the port of Shanghai." On China's co-orbital ASAT capabilities, the CSIS report states that "It does not appear that China has successfully tested a co-orbital ASAT capability, although it has demonstrated several of the technical capabilities required to construct such a weapon." There are also other civilian technologies that can be effectively used in counter-space functions. China has been developing and testing such technologies but verifying the intent of these is challenging. China's increasing number of rendezvous and proximity operations (RPO) capabilities is a case in point. RPOs are simply capabilities "to maneuver satellites in orbit near one another" (9). These can be done with hostile intent (a co-orbital ASAT), but the same technology can also be used for on-orbit satellite servicing or active debris removal functions. It is a challenge to determine the purpose of such dual-use technologies.

While China is developing much of its counter-space capabilities in an effort to deny the US any advantage it may accrue from its space capabilities, especially in the context of possible conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea, India and other neighbours cannot afford to take these developments lightly. China's activities have produced a longer-term and broader impact in the region

and beyond. China's first successful ASAT test, for instance, broke a norm of no-ASAT testing that existed since the last test in the mid-1980s and has now given way to other countries following suit. India has begun to respond, the first of which was the demonstrated ASAT capability in March 2019, but China's counter-space capabilities are also leading to further responses, contributing to a more competitive outer space realm. The absence of effective global conversations on these issues to develop global norms of responsible behaviour has meant that more countries will go down this path, adopting deterrence in space as a state policy.

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4

Rising Tensions in South China Sea Tensions: Why India Should Worry

Abhijit Singh

If 2019 was the year of a trade war between China and the US, 2020 is proving to be the year of security competition. In a show of strength, in July, the US Navy deployed two aircraft carrier strike groups—the USS Nimitz and USS Ronald Reagan—for joint operations in the South China Sea (1). Reportedly, a US Air Force B-52H bomber took off from its home station in Louisiana to participate in a maritime integration exercise with the two aircraft carrier strike groups before making a landing in Guam, where the US military has strengthened its forward presence (2).

Officially, the US navy maintained that its naval presence in the South China Sea was merely in "support of a free and open Indo-Pacific, with exercises meant to improve air defense and long-range missile strikes in a rapidly evolving area of operations (3)." Yet a statement from the State Department revealed a deeper motive. In a major policy speech in July, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo emphatically asserted US support for Southeast Asian countries against Beijing's "campaign of bullying" in the South China Sea. "The world," he declared, "will not allow China to treat the strategically important waterway as its maritime empire", possibly the bluntest position Washington has adopted on China's illegal land grab in the disputed littoral (4). The tenor of the announcement, commentators noted, suggested growing US resolve to counter China's "unlawful" claims in the South China Sea and its harassment of smaller neighbours (5).

China's 'bullying' behaviour

Washington's hardening military posture in the South China Sea follows China's growing attempts to coerce and intimidate fellow claimants in the regional disputes. Since April this year, when Beijing ordered an administrative reorganisation of its territories in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, the littoral

has witnessed more Chinese muscle-flexing than usual (6). The latest in a string of Chinese provocations was a military exercise near the Paracel Islands in July, where a swathe of sea space was closed off to enable the Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to conduct naval drills. Weeks earlier, the Liaoning aircraft carrier group carried out cross-regional mobilization exercises featuring comprehensive attack-defence mock battles in the South China Sea (7).

The Chinese navy has been particularly aggressive in the waters off Vietnam and Malaysia, where a stand-off in April this year between the Malaysian coast guard and a Chinese government survey ship raised tensions several notches (8). After Kuala Lumpur accused the Chinese vessel and its coast guard escorts of harassing an exploration vessel operated by Malaysia's state oil company, the US ordered the USS America, an amphibious assault ship, and guided-missile warships USS Bunker Hill and USS Barry into the region (9). Fortunately for all sides, the brinkmanship did not result in a skirmish.

China's moves have received pushback from Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, through a combination of administrative, legal and operational means. In December last year, Malaysia approached the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf claiming waters beyond the 200-kilometre limit of its exclusive economic zone in the northern part of the South China Sea (10), a move prompted by China's extended presence in and around the Luconia Shoals. Weeks later, Indonesia deployed warships and a submarine in the waters off the Natuna Islands after encroachment by Chinese fishing boats and coastguard ships (11). Meanwhile, Vietnam sent a diplomatic note to the United Nations protesting China's aggression, after a Chinese ship rammed and sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Spratly islands (12). Under Hanoi's chairmanship, the ten-member ASEAN stated in June, reaffirming their collective stand that "the 1982 UNCLOS is the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests" in the South China Sea (13).

India and the South China Sea

For Indian strategists observing developments in the South China Sea from the sidelines, three aspects appear to be of interest. First, Chinese military operations have focused on the region's western end close to the Indian Ocean Region, targeting countries that India has a close political and military relationship. Since September 2018, when a PLAN destroyer came within 100 yards of the USS Decatur near Gaven Reef in the South China Sea (14), China's naval and military operations have harassed Vietnamese (15) and Indonesian law enforcement agencies (16), which frequently cooperate with the Indian Navy and coast guard in regional security initiatives.

Second, the developments in the South China Sea coincide with a rise in Chinese activity in the Eastern Indian Ocean, particularly Chinese research and survey vessel presence. In September last year, an Indian warship expelled the Shiyan 1, a Chinese research vessel found intruding in the exclusive economic zone off the coast of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (17). At a time when there's talk of a China-backed plan to construct a canal across the Thai isthmus (18) and a secret agreement for a Chinese naval base on the Cambodian coast, a spurt in Chinese presence in the eastern Indian Ocean has triggered disquiet in New Delhi (19). To add to India's discomfort, China's mining operations in the Southern Indian Ocean have expanded considerably (20), as have the presence of Chinese fishing boats in areas close to India's territorial waters (21).

The third factor for Indian analysts to consider has been the growing instances of Chinese intelligence ship sightings in the Indian Ocean Region. Chinese Dongdiao class intelligence-gathering ships—known earlier to stalk US, Australian and Japanese warships in the Western Pacific—now operate in the waters of the Eastern Indian Ocean, keeping an eye on Indian naval movements. One such Chinese spy ship was spotted close to the eastern sea border near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands late last year, causing some disquiet in India's security establishment (22). Regional observers are troubled by Beijing's attempts to take advantage of a fluid geopolitical situation following COVID-19. With many Southeast Asia leaders sick or in self-imposed quarantine and Washington distracted by the pandemic at home, the Chinese military has upped the tempo of operations in critical regional hotspots (23).

India's position on the South China Sea disputes has so far been neutral. A tendency to view the region through a prism of geopolitics and "balance of power" makes Indian decision-makers wary of taking a stand on China's aggressive posturing. In the aftermath of the border confrontation with China in Ladakh in July, however, an Indian spokesperson stated India's official position thus: "The SCS [South China Sea] is a part of global commons where India has an abiding interest in peace and stability. New Delhi firmly stands by freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce in these international waterways. India believes that any differences in the South China Sea be resolved peacefully by respecting the legal and diplomatic processes and in accordance with international law, and without resorting to threat or use of force (24)."

In the past, New Delhi has been subtle in articulating its "freedom of navigation, overflight and unimpeded lawful commerce" stance, seemingly respectful of Chinese sensitivities (25). When India has stated its position, it has usually been part of joint statements with friendly Pacific countries like Vietnam, Indonesia and Japan. A standalone declaration reiterating its South

China Sea stance amidst negotiations to calm tensions on the border with China suggests a veiled warning to Beijing that aggression on the Himalayan border would compel New Delhi to breach Chinese redlines by taking a hard stand on the South China Sea disputes.

India's concerns about maritime security in littoral Southeast Asia also have to do with New Delhi's political and trading interests in the region. Not only have India's political relations with regional states become more robust and more in-depth, New Delhi has also placed the ASEAN at the centre of its 'Act East policy' and emerging 'Indo-Pacific' vision. With more Indian trade now flowing from east to west than at any time in the past, and growing energy interests off the coast of Vietnam, Indian policymakers have been clear that economics remains the most critical factor in India's security policy in East and Southeast Asia. Beyond preserving access to the major waterways in Southeast Asia, New Delhi has also been building security capacity in member states.

New Delhi is acutely aware that territorial conflicts in the South China Sea threaten the future trajectory of India's economic relationships. Indian policymakers also realise that security in the South China Sea is a test case for international maritime law, and that New Delhi must be seen to be taking a firm stand on principles enshrined in UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. India's principal consideration in formulating maritime security policy, however, is to ensure a favourable balance of power in littoral Asia. When New Delhi defends nautical norms and the right to access common maritime spaces, it is usually part of messaging to Beijing to keep clear of India's sphere of interest and influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Ruefully, New Delhi has been wary of provoking China in its maritime backyard. Notwithstanding the security establishment's deep misgivings about Chinese expansionism in Asia—including in the eastern Indian Ocean—Indian leaders and policy planners have shied away from making public their reservations about China's maritime assertiveness.

The conflict in Ladakh could well mark a turning point in India South China Sea policy. Now, more than ever, India faces an imperative to display solidarity with its ASEAN partners. It is beginning to do so by publicly stating its discomfort with Chinese assertiveness, and by strengthening its strategic partnerships with the US, Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region. New Delhi knows that the time for fence-sitting and reactive policies in the South China Sea is long past.

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CHINA'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS IN SOUTH ASIA

5

The Ladakh Crisis: India's Lapses and China's Stealth Aggression

Kartik Bommakanti

With China's occupation of five points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)—four in Ladakh and one in Naku La in Sikkim—the Narendra Modi government finds few good options at its disposal. Given the geographic spread of the current crisis, the Indian government and army are under pressure to respond to the intrusions by the People's Liberation Army Army (PLAA). Since the stand-off became public in the middle of May, there is little analysis on what India's options are when it comes to the territory that is in contention and the LAC in general. Apart from New Delhi exhorting Beijing to respect five bilateral agreements concluded in 1993, 1996, 2005, 2012 and 2013 that require resolution through negotiation and diplomacy, recent discussions in Chusul-Moldo in Ladakh between the Corps Commanders of the two countries ended inconclusively (1). The 1993 agreement calls for the maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity requires limited force levels along the LAC, pre-notification of military exercises and all disputes that emerge between the two sides along LAC is required to be settled through negotiations and by way of a Joint Working Group (2). The subsequent 1996 agreement required settling face-offs between Indian and Chinese forces amicably, only a brigade-sized military exercise could be undertaken close to the LAC following prior notification, large calibre weapons such as 75 mm guns and weapons platforms including tanks, artillery guns, and missiles were subject to mutually agreed ceilings and could only be deployed in minimal numbers (3). Also, both sides agreed to avoid aerial intrusions across the LAC. For any significant military activity that involved air sorties within 10 km of the LAC or the use of live fire ammunition could only be undertaken following notification through diplomatic channels (4). It also required that the two sides work through an expert military on clarifying the LAC and developing confidence-building measures (5).

In 2005, both India and China reinforced their agreements concluded in the 1990s by specifically concluding that they would protect the interests of settled populations and would use cartographic surveys to find a mutually agreed delineation of the boundary through military and diplomatic officials for an eventual boundary settlement (6). In 2012, China and India again set-up a Working Mechanism consisting of military and diplomatic officials largely to ensure better cooperation between the two sides in border areas of the LAC. The Working Mechanism was to meet twice every year and meet in the event of an emergency if disputes and tensions emerged along the LAC (7). Finally, the 2013 bilateral agreement required both sides to pursue Border Defence Cooperation (8). It required greater levels of contact and communication military officials from the military regions of China and the army commands of India. They were required to exchange information about military deployments, aircraft, demolition operations and unmarked mines and maintain peace, tranquillity and order along the LAC (9). It also necessitated periodic meetings between the Ministry of Defence of the Government of India and the Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China (10). Despite all these agreements, the Chinese annexation of Indian claimed territory means that possession, as the cliché goes, is nine-tenths of the law—it is easier to keep something than to take it.

Waving legal and diplomatic instruments is irrelevant in the face of Chinese occupation of Indian-claimed territory, unless Beijing, in a fit of magnanimity and conciliation, chooses to adhere to the provisions of the existing bilateral agreements and pull back its forces, particularly in between fingers four and eight in Pangong Tso. Initially, it appeared the Galwan Valley and Hot Springs in Ladakh were amenable to resolution (11), evident by a limited mutual disengagement involving a reduction of forces by both armies (12). However, despite talks on the withdrawal of Chinese troops occupying the Galwan River Valley, which they have refused to do is only 1.5 kilometres away from the strategically vital Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi (DSBO) highway (13). It is the Indian Army's only road that is usable for the entire length of the year connecting southern Ladakh to the base of the Karakoram Pass (14). But the standoffs in Naku La as well as in the Depsang Plains persist. The Depsang Plains, where the Chinese have made an ingress of up to 13 km overlooks the Daulet Beg Oldi road connecting southern and northern Ladakh leaving it at grave risk to military interdiction (15). There is a range of reasons for China to precipitate the ongoing standoff. Indeed, among the factors believed to have triggered the current crisis is the construction of roads by India in the Ladakh sector and elsewhere along the LAC that will allow Indian ground forces to deploy more rapidly to forward areas along the border. Beijing has construed this road development activity as a threat. Among the several factors driving China's territorial seizures in Ladakh is the Communist Party's insecurities over its grip on power and President Xi Jinping's quest to consolidate power and

assert Chinese dominance over its neighbours with whom it has disputatious relations (16).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in China and has spread across the world, has facilitated Xi's military move and executed most likely under his directives against India. This is unprecedented to the extent that the pandemic eased China's seizure of territory because the Indian army pursued the isolating and social distancing measures that the Indian government ordered in March 2020. An additional factor facilitating China's stealth aggression is Chinese forces deploying rapidly to seize territory across the LAC in Ladakh as a result of the military exercises they were conducting in territory adjacent to the region in Western Tibet. Consequently, it reduced the mobilisation time for Chinese forces and took Indian forces by surprise, with insufficient time to react (17). The Indian territory occupied by Chinese ground forces was unoccupied or unpatrolled by Indian forces as they usually withdraw during the winter months and return with the onset of spring. The Chinese fundamentally replicated what Pakistan did to India in the spring of 1999 when Pakistani forces moved into territory left vacant by Indian forces in the Kargil region of Kashmir (18). The current crisis in Ladakh is the most serious since the 1962 war because of the scale and extent of the Chinese occupation of Indian claimed territory.

New Delhi is staring at the prospect of losing territory and acceding to Beijing's *fait accompli,* particularly in Pangong Tso, and more menacingly and potentially acquiescing to Beijing's claims over the entire Galwan River Valley (19). These losses might not seem large, but they are likely to become an invitation, if the status quo ante is not restored, for future Chinese tactical adventurism, and cumulatively these shallow territorial gains potentially establish the conditions for the Chinese military to launch a war with more ambitious territorial aims. Doklam was sufficient strategic warning for the recurrence of the current crisis in Ladakh and Sikkim, and the tactical summitry witnessed last year in Mamallapuram and the year before in Wuhan are merely palliatives (20). Their limits stand fully exposed today because they have done nothing to alter Beijing's aggressive conduct on the LAC. If anything, these summits may have only counterproductively lulled India into complacency, revealing the transient benefits they have brought New Delhi. Despite extensive analysis on the magnitude of the PLAA ingress, which was in any case facilitated due to Indian lapses (21), New Delhi's response deserves careful attention.

India will likely be compelled to revise or terminate its budgetary cutback by 20 percent that it urged the Indian Army to pursue due to the spurt in violence in Kashmir and along the Line of Control (LOC) (22). A re-think on fiscal belt-tightening and securing tactical gains against the Chinese along the LAC should also be on the table. For the latter, the window is fast closing

or completely lost, because the Chinese are likely on guard to stop the Indian Army from doing to them what the PLAA did to India.

Chinese gains in Ladakh are the result of Indian lapses and advantages accruing from being the first mover. Beyond abandoning the idea of reducing army expenditure, the Indian government is now staring at the prospect of higher increases in spending for a sustained presence along the LAC, mirroring the high level of militarisation along the LOC with Pakistan (23), because Chinese aggression has rendered fiscal austerity impossible. This would mean a year-round deployment of a heavy military presence along the entire stretch of the LAC. This is likely to sunder the economising measures the Modi government is insisting the army and other services implement. To be sure, amidst the current crisis, the government has acted with alacrity by concluding a Military Logistics Support Agreement with Australia, upgrading their 2+2 dialogue from the foreign and defence secretary level to the ministerial level (24). Although very important, Australia—and for that matter, the US and Japan, who are also India's strategic partners—does not have any intrinsic interest involving the high stakes that New Delhi does in the current territorial standoff with Beijing.

While one may empathise with the Indian government for being blindsided by the pandemic, allowing the Chinese to move into key strategic position along the LAC, and the continued distractions caused by the spread of COVID-19, the buck stops with Modi and his strategic advisory team. It was inevitable that China would trigger a crisis of this kind with or without the global health catastrophe, which only rendered it easier.

The only glimmer of optimism for the government vis-à-vis China in the still ongoing negotiations to help secure the PLAA's withdrawal from contested territory is China's decision to relent and allow all the agreements dating backing to 1993 and in the letter and spirit consistent with the Summit level discussion held between Modi and Xi at Wuhan and Mamallapuram. As Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying stated, "We have reached one consensus – that both sides have to carry out the previous consensus made by the top leadership to avoid escalating a disagreement into a dispute" (25) Whether this will hold true in the coming weeks and produces a salutary outcome is at best uncertain. In the latest round of military-level talks in August, the Chinese have refused to withdraw from any of the areas stretching from the Pangong Tso area in Ladakh as well the Depsang Plains and are pressing ahead with troop mobilisation along the India-Nepal-China tri-junction at Lipulekh creating another front for confrontation (26). The latest evidence suggests that China has occupied seven border areas in Nepal to bolster its position in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) (27).

Thus, the impasse continues with Beijing refusing to withdraw its forces.

General Bipin Rawat Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) has stated that the military option is on the table in the event negotiations fail (28), the government of India is persisting with diplomacy to secure Chinese withdrawal despite no breakthrough following five rounds of talks between the Corps commanders of the two sides (29). General Rawat also stated that the Indian Army is preparing for a long deployment throughout the winter along the LAC (30).

Regardless of the outcome of current negotiations to resolve the stand-off, the Modi government is faced with hard realities—the security and defence of India's territorial integrity do not come cheap, especially against motivated adversaries such as China and Pakistan. At one level, he is repeating the same mistake Jawaharlal Nehru made by investing heavily in diplomacy without a significant parallel expansion in military capabilities. Nehru almost doubled defence spending following the 1962 war, amidst considerable economic stress. Although India is not facing the same situation now as it did following the debacle of 1962, the Modi government has few choices, despite the present economic difficulties, but pursuing an upward revision in the allocations for defence, especially if the army is to ensure the robust defence of India's frontiers.

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6

Chinese Checkers in Bhutan?

Manoj Joshi

On 21 July, China said that it was pushing for a "package solution" to its boundary dispute with Bhutan. The spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry was reiterating that the boundary between the two countries was yet to be demarcated and the "middle, eastern and western sections of the border are disputed (1)."

The re-introduction of China's eastern claims on Bhutan could well be a message to India. Though China has claimed areas of northern and western Bhutan since the 1950s, the eastern claim was never pitched directly, until recently. The reason for this is that the area in question is not contiguous to China, unless India concedes the Tawang tract, along with its famous monastery, something that Beijing has been demanding as part of any Sino-Indian border settlement since the mid-1980s (2).

China's signal first came through its attempt in early June to get the Global Environment Facility of the UN Development Programme to stop funding activities in Bhutan's Sakteng sanctuary in the east on the grounds that it was "disputed territory" (3). Then, days after Bhutan protested the Chinese move, Beijing doubled down on its claim and made an official declaration: "The boundary between China and Bhutan has never been delimited. There have been disputes over eastern, central and western sectors for a long time," through a statement of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (4).

The fact that this position emerged in early June at a time when China was locked in a series of standoffs along its Line of Actual Control with India suggests that the move had an India connection.

The statement was strange but characteristic. Beijing had suddenly changed goalposts for reasons best known to itself. There have been 24 rounds of

negotiations between China and Bhutan over their border, the last in 2016, but the eastern sector had never been raised before (5). This is not unlike what China did in 1959 when it informed India that the entire border was disputed. It did the same with Vietnam with regard to the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and Japan in connection with the Senkaku Islands.

Bhutan has an old tradition of interaction with Tibet, but the notion that it was somehow a Tibetan and subsequently Chinese suzerain is a fanciful interpretation of the relationship (6). As of today, it shares a border, which has never been delimited, with modern China. It is the only neighbour of China with whom it has no diplomatic relations. The two sides do maintain diplomatic contact, and from 1994, Chinese ambassadors in New Delhi have regularly visited Bhutan and held talks with the king and his officials.

Bhutan-China border issue

Talks between China and Bhutan over their 470-kilometre border have been taking place since 1984, but Chinese claims go back earlier. According to the scholar Medha Bisht, since the 1950s, China has published maps claiming Bhutanese territory (7). These covered some 764 sq km–269 sq km in the northwestern areas and 495 sq km in north-central Bhutan. The central part covered the Pasamlung and Jakarlung Valleys (See Map 1). There was no reference to any eastern dispute with the Chinese, which now covers 3,300 sq km of the Bhutanese territory in the extreme east (8).

From the seventh round in 1990, China continued to push a "package proposal" which would see them concede two valleys, with an area of 495 sq km in northern Bhtuan, in exchange for conceding their western claims. There was no reference to the eastern claim of some 3,300 sq km (9).

Map 1: A Chinese map showing the disputed areas along the Sino-Bhutan border

Source: Weibo

Nor was there any reference to the eastern claim when the king told the 75th session of the National Assembly in July 1997 that the Chinese wanted to exchange the Pasamlung and Jakarlung Valleys with the western claims of 269 sq km, which comprised of 89 sq km of Doklam, 42 sq km of Sinchulung, and 138 sq km of Dramana and Shakhatoe (10).

The Chinese were targeting the western areas that would help them enlarge the narrow Chumbi Valley and give them a bird's eye view of the Siliguri Corridor through Doklam. China came close to swinging this deal in 2001, but then things changed (11).

The Bhutanese National Assembly debates on the border reveal the concerns of the individual provinces over the encroachment they were already facing from the Chinese side. There was consistent opposition from the members who, in turn, were being pressed by their constituency (12).

Map 2: The Western Claims

Source: Sohu

The hidden hand behind Thimpu's refusal to compromise with Beijing was India, which was not interested in easing China's strategic concerns over the Chumbi Valley, nor in enabling them advantage through the acquisition of Doklam. But there was resistance as well from the Bhutanese National Assembly, which was opposed to trading what some members said was one set

of Bhutanese territory for another (13).

Bhutan has gone along with India in refusing any compromise until now. But things are changing and India's leaning on Bhutan in 2012, using LPG subsidies as a lever, has not been forgotten. This was said to be a somewhat heavy-handed expression of unhappiness over the meeting between Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigme Thinley and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao at the Rio +20 summit on sustainable development in Brazil the same year (14).

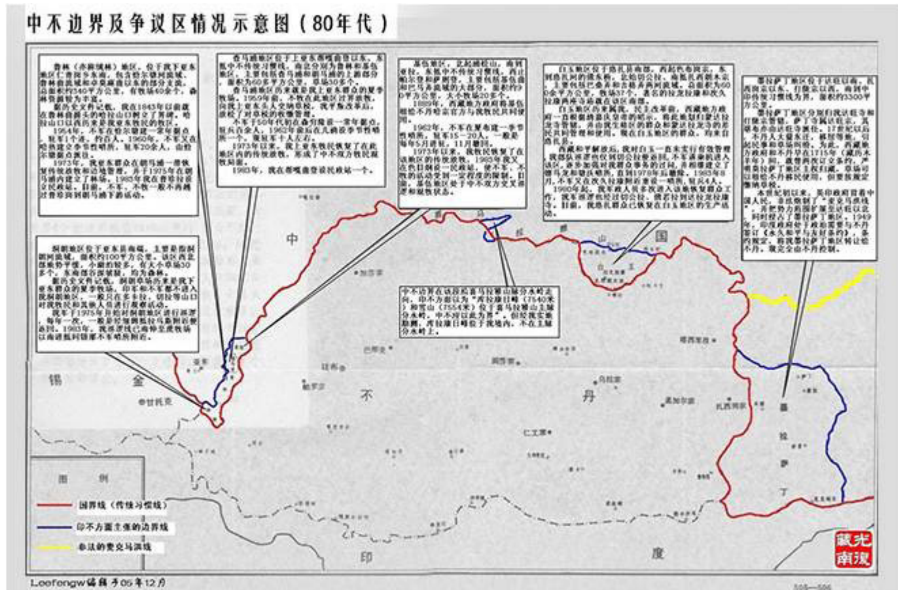
However, Bhutan has been accommodating to its northern neighbour by forgoing another significant claim of the area around Kula Kangri in the north. Bhutanese officials acknowledged in 2009 that their claim had been based on erroneous maps (15).

As in the case of India, the border negotiations are now got in an endless loop, underscored by the signing of the agreement to Maintain Peace and Tranquility on the Bhutan-China border areas in December 1998. Clause 3 of the treaty committed the two sides to maintain the status quo on the border areas (16). However, Beijing has cared little about this commitment and has been building roads in what is Bhutanese territory. It was the construction of such a road in Doklam that triggered the 2017 crisis between India and China.

The Eastern claim

The disputed borders between Bhutan and China were depicted in a July 2017 blog post.

Map 3: Overall Chinese claims



Source: Weibo

There are seven items mentioned in the map that purports to show the Chinese version of the Bhutan-China boundary in red and the Bhutanese version in blue. The line in yellow is the Sino-Indian boundary in the Tawang area. The origin of the map is not clear, though it says it is from the 1980s (17).

The first six items beginning from the left refer to the well-known differences in the boundary relating to Doklam, Dramana, Shakhatoe, Pasamlung and Jakarlung areas. What is of interest is the box on the extreme right, which is linked to the eastern region where the Sakteng wildlife reserve, which has triggered this most recent controversy, is located.

The translation says this area is termed as the "Murasadin (墨拉萨丁)Disputed Area," which is south of Tawang and comprises of 3,300 sq km. The item notes that the area was brought under the jurisdiction of the Tawang monastery and the Dalong district and the Sadin temple there belonged to Tawang monastery that appointed its spiritual head. It claims that the Bhutanese only moved into the area in the 17th century. It also claims that India transferred the Murasadin region to Bhutan in 1949 as part of its Permanent Peace and Friendship Treaty (18).

But the text of the treaty only speaks of the return of a tiny tract of land adjacent to Kamrup, called Dewangiri (19).

"Murasadin" cannot be located in Google Maps, and neither the "Sading Temple." It could be a combination of Merak Sakteng, gewogs or village groups in Trashigang District of Bhutan. There is a Sakteng temple in the region and Brokpas, who migrated to the region from the Tsona region of Tibet centuries ago, people the area (20). Incidentally, the blog post itself suggested that China had given up its claim to the area. But that was in 2017, and the blog post appears to have been written by a pseudonymous writer. Even Bhutanese maps show the area as being largely forested and known for its wildlife sanctuaries, the exotic Brokpas and little else.

Conclusion

As of now, China and Bhutan have no formal diplomatic relations, and any affairs are handled via the Chinese embassy in India. Nevertheless, high-level delegations from each country have visited the other, and Bhutan receives Chinese tourists as well (21). Border talks have been held in both countries, although there have been none since the 24th round in 2016. It remains to be seen if Beijing places the eastern sector on its agenda for negotiations in the future.

The last set of senior Chinese officers to visit Bhutan were Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou, who made a two-day visit to the country in July

2018, a year after the Doklam standoff. The former Chinese Ambassador to India, Luo Zhaoui, visited in January 2019 and his successor Sun Weidong in November the same year. Luo, who had dealt with Bhutan in mid-2005 as the Deputy Director of the Department of Asian Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has since become a vice foreign minister.

The Chinese have made it clear that a border settlement must precede the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Bhutan. Many Bhutanese, including those in the government, want stable and predictable relations with their giant neighbour. The Bhutanese know they lack the capacity to police their borders, especially against a country that has made border nibbling a fine art.

However, in the past decade, China has concluded that its border negotiations with Bhutan are not going anywhere. They have violated their solemn commitment from 1998 to maintain the status quo on the border that freely encroached on Bhutanese territory at several places by building roads and permitting herders to go in. For instance, they built the road into Doklam as far back as 2005, their foot patrols went to the Jampheri ridge regularly, and now they are consolidating themselves in Doklam, agreement or no agreement. The standoff with India may have blocked the Chinese from the ridge itself, but they have consolidated themselves on the Doklam plateau, and have the option of building a bridge across Torsa Nala and reach the ridge anyway.

The issue is not so much Bhutan itself, but a growing belief that along with economic dominance, the time has come for China to establish its regional primacy in Asia. So, on the one hand, it is seeking to consolidate itself along a belt extending from Korea to Malaysia, and on the other, it is reaching out in Central, South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. India, of course, is a 'problem' and so is Bhutan, with its 'special relationship' with India. However, Bhutan, of course, has its own value in Chinese calculations in the context of its sensitivities relating to Tibet.

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7

The Mekong Subregion in Beijing's Strategic Calculus

K. Yhome

The strategically vital Mekong subregion has been gaining importance in Beijing's strategic calculations as China faces growing pushback from the US (1) and other countries (2). The COVID-19 pandemic appears to be consolidating a few trends in China's ties with the Mekong nations. In this emerging scenario, it is likely that China will keep its focus on the Mekong subregion in the post-pandemic period.

Cooperative partnerships with some countries have been further deepening, while China's 'mask diplomacy' has raised concerns among citizens who want their governments to adopt a more cautious approach (3), and there have been new factors that have been added to the existing difficult relationships often viewed through the confrontational lens.

Apart from China-ASEAN cooperation in engaging with the Mekong subregion, Beijing has been using the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC)—a sub-regional cooperation mechanism jointly established by Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam—to engage with the subregion in the fight against the pandemic.

In February, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Vientiane, Laos, to participate in the fifth LMC foreign ministers' meeting, where he called for "concerted efforts" to fight the COVID-19 epidemic (4).

The global pandemic provided Cambodia and China with an opportunity to consolidate their cooperative partnership further. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to China in early February at a time when "anti-Chinese sentiments" were rising has been interpreted as demonstrating "solidarity," (5) and China-Cambodia relations have been described as "a model" (6) for neighbourhood diplomacy.

In one of the first high-level bilateral meetings between China and its neighbouring countries since the COVID-19 outbreak, Wang co-chaired the fifth China-Cambodia intergovernmental coordinating committee with Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Hor Nam Hong on 16 June via videoconference. During the meeting, Wang reportedly said that the two countries have strengthened their "traditional friendship" by supporting and assisting each other since the novel coronavirus outbreak (7).

The establishment of a "fast track" (8) for the movement of people and a "green corridor" for the flow of goods between the two countries to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and Cambodia expressing support for China's Hong Kong national security legislation (9) are signs of growing strategic ties between the two countries.

Like Cambodia, China's cooperative partnership with neighbouring Laos has also been strengthening during the pandemic period. The Lao government has been instrumental (10) in organising the China-ASEAN special foreign ministers' meeting on COVID-19, held alongside the LMC ministerial meeting in February. When cases of COVID-19 were reported in Laos, China sent medical teams and medical supplies to the country, described as "return[ing] the kindness" (11).

On 3 April, in a phone conversation with his Lao counterpart Bounnhang Vorachith, Chinese President Xi Jinping assured continued "all-out support and assistance" (12) to the Southeast Asian nation in its fight against the pandemic.

Similarly, on 20 May, in a phone conversation with Myanmar President U Win Myint, Xi assured "staunch support and assistance" (13) to Myanmar in combating the pandemic. While Myanmar has been receiving medical supplies and technical assistance from China in fighting COVID-19, there have been concerns expressed about China's medical assistance (14).

Long-standing issues such as the South China Sea dispute and the growing concerns over China's dam-building exercises in the Mekong river have also posed challenges to Beijing's ties with the Mekong nations.

For Vietnam, a couple of developments have further posed complications in its relations with China. In early April, a Vietnamese fishing boat was sunk in the disputed South China Sea after it was rammed by a Chinese maritime surveillance vessel (15).

A new dimension that has been added to the already tense relationship has been Vietnam's growing role in providing neighbouring Laos and Cambodia with medical aid to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic (16). While the move

may not necessarily be a challenge to Beijing's "monopoly" (17) on COVID-19 diplomacy in the neighbourhood and could simply be part of Hanoi's efforts to position itself as an emerging "responsible" (18) nation, the geopolitical dimension cannot be ignored.

Another development that reminded the complexities of China's ties with Mekong nations was the release of a study in April that alleges that China's dams are responsible for the drought in lower Mekong basin (19). Although Beijing disputed the findings of the study, which was funded by the US government, it brought to the fore the concerns of the Mekong nations, with rights groups calling for "greater transparency" from China (20).

With Beijing likely to prioritise its neighbourhood in the post-COVID-19 period, how its relations with the Mekong subregion pans out will be a major test for China, with huge implications on its Belt and Road Initiative in the subregion and beyond.

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8

The Ladakh Lesson: India Must Guard Against Chinese Tech Intrusion

Gautam Chikermane

The recent border standoff between China and India at Ladakh confirms two political realities that must not be ignored. First, India must not allow the intrusion of Chinese firms into its telecommunications network. If societies are digital, China should not be permitted to encode India's public sphere. New Delhi must not license Huawei or ZTE to provide equipment for its 5G rollout. And second, India must not allow any Chinese-origin firm into its critical infrastructure in much the same manner that it was kept away from certain industrial projects in the past.

Apart from a thin ideological constituency and vested business interests, China has limited appeal left in much of India's imagination. An authoritarian regime that has given Chinese President Xi Jinping absolute power has now become predatory in its external engagements and is a caricature of an insecure bully. The courtesies of diplomatic speak have been dispensed with as it referred to Australia as a "giant kangaroo that serves as a dog of the US" (1). The middle kingdom now has a medieval mindset that only seeks territory and markets for its benefit. That it continues on this course during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals much about its naked ambitions.

Its incursions into Indian territory in Ladakh are part of this new grammar of engagement, which has been ably captured by analysts such as Ram Madhav (2), H.S. Panag (3), Harsh V. Pant (4), Kanchan Gupta (5) and Manoj Joshi (6). This time around, China's incursions may be another episodic distraction for its territorial ambitions in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Its contempt for India is more persistent. This is demonstrated by China's self-serving support to Pakistani terror against India and its actions at the UN Security Council that seek to undermine New Delhi. That India, over the past decade, just refuses to bend frustrates this increasingly pompous nation and fuels its ire further.

This is China's approach to India, and each nation must make its own choice. For India's national interest, the choice is clear. There is no more room to accommodate China's economic affections while being scorched by the dragon's fire. The criticality of 5G technology is based not only on its speed but also on its all-pervasiveness. The real power of 5G lies in its ability to be a network of networks to simultaneously serve several verticals, including governance, business, smart cities, education, mobility and, in the post-COVID19 world, healthcare through telemedicine, along with most other human interactions (7).

This makes the way we negotiate 5G technology a vital matter for national security. Allowing Huawei or ZTE to be a 5G equipment provider to Indian telecommunications firms will be like asking the Chinese Communist Party to run our general elections. As we repulse China at the borders, we must ensure that we do not surrender our cities, homes and minds to that ideology. One major lapse on the part of India has been that it has allowed the creeping acquisition of India Tech by the digital Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), even as the country has opposed the BRI in its physical manifestation.

The risk Chinese technology firms pose to Indian interests is real. Considering they are backed by an authoritarian regime that's weaponising everything in its armoury, from trade and technology to medical equipment and humanitarian aid, the provisions by state-controlled Chinese firms are a global concern. Australia and the US have discovered it, Europe is in the process of finding out, and smaller nations will awaken to the consequences too late.

As a US$3 trillion economy that has set its eyes on becoming a US$10 trillion one in the 2030s, India cannot ignore the perils of the noxious interplay of Chinese Communist Party objectives and the capitalist façade represented by Huawei. This is especially problematic when juxtaposed with the 3,488 km long (and volatile) border that is now also being weaponised by the mandarins in Beijing. China's recent incursions expose the persistence of this risk. This continuing Chinese behaviour "has become a tipping point for security-embedded engagements, such as the entry of Chinese firms into India's critical infrastructure" (8).

The risk of Chinese state control over the actions of Chinese firms is not a matter of perception. Further, it is not restricted to India; the risk is global. If governments across the world in general, and India in particular, were to read the Chinese National Intelligence Law (9) (adopted at the 28th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 20th National People's Congress on 27 June 2017) carefully while keeping national interests in mind, they would not allow any Chinese firm to participate in their critical infrastructure. Here are excerpts from four Articles of the law:

> Article 7: All organisations and citizens shall support, assist, and cooperate with national intelligence efforts in accordance with law, and shall protect national intelligence work secrets they are aware of.
>
> Article 9: The State gives commendations and awards to individuals and organisations that make major contributions to national intelligence efforts.
>
> Article 12: In accordance with relevant State provisions, national intelligence work institutions may establish cooperative relationships with relevant individuals and organisations, and retain them to carry out related work.
>
> Article 14: National intelligence work institutions lawfully carrying out intelligence efforts may request that relevant organs, organisations, and citizens provide necessary support, assistance, and cooperation.

National security is not a choice. It is a primary assumption and the first responsibility of statecraft. A country that uses its military power to threaten other nations and its economic power to pervert free trade and steal technologies will not think twice before using its technological influence to advance its strategic ambitions and lust for territory. These networks are India's lifelines of growth and highways of aspirations. These will support economic growth, governance and innovations, and be the critical infrastructure that can cart India towards a US$10,000 per capita income future. These must not be implicated by the wrong choice of partners.

For India to allow Huawei even in its 5G trials (10) displays an act that's not very different from India rooting for China as a member of the United Nations Security Council against its own interests in 1950 (11). It is a signal that India is giving in to China's bullying. The Narendra Modi government must undo this action and prevent Huawei from entering India's high technology arena and must exclude Chinese participation in India's critical sectors and infrastructure. Following the US, the UK has imposed a symbolic ban on Huawei (12). India must stop sitting on the security fence and make a more effective ban on Huawei equipment for 5G, just as it has recently banned 59 Chinese apps (13) and barred Chinese firms from road projects or investing in its micro small and medium enterprises (14).

It is hoped that China will miraculously change, but for now, unless Xi mends fences, New Delhi must continue to frame policies assuming the worst about Beijing's intentions. Beijing cannot expect economic returns from India without making commensurate investments in building strategic trust. China must climb its way up India's trust vanguards before it enters India's trust

vaults. Until then, made-in-China firms must be treated with as much caution and precaution as India is treating the "Made in China pandemic" (15).

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CHINA IN THE WIDER INDO-PACIFIC AND REGIONAL RESPONSES

9

In Xi and Trump's Shadow: The Evolving Australia-India Partnership

Ian Hall

Both Canberra and New Delhi had deep concerns over the possibility of Donald Trump becoming the US president, but neither thought he would be elected. When he was, the shock—and indeed fear—was palpable. On the campaign trail and before, Trump had said things that directly challenged Australian and Indian interests, promising, among other things, to pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and to restrict skilled worker visas severely. Consequently, it took a while for both Canberra and New Delhi to come to terms with the new president, and neither found it easy. The early months were rocky. Australia's then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had an angry phone exchange with Trump, and the details of the call were leaked, allegedly by former White House Chief Strategist Stephen Bannon, to the media (1) (2). When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi went to Washington, D. C. in late June 2017, his encounter with Trump looked awkward, the discussion skirted around contentious issues, and the meeting produced few tangible results (3). And in the background, concern across the Indo-Pacific mounted about the apparent absence in the administration of a clear strategy for the region (4).

Strategic catalysis

In retrospect, however, this Trump-induced anxiety had a catalytic effect. Worries about the direction and implementation of US policy have not gone away, and in some areas, they have intensified as his presidency has progressed. Both Canberra and New Delhi have serious qualms about the way in which the Trump administration is handling the relationship with Beijing and the trade war into which the US and China are now locked. But these concerns have stimulated or accelerated initiatives that might not have occurred without Trump. Canberra's decision to press ahead with the TPP together with Japan

and New Zealand, but without the US, is one (5). The bolstering of the strategic partnership between Australia and India is another.

The partnership does long pre-date Trump. Its origins lie in the mid-2000s, at the point at which sustained US engagement of India produced the civil nuclear deal and a defence framework agreement, and encouragement from Washington to its allies to build stronger ties with New Delhi. Fortunately, these developments coincided with renewed interest in the Australian business community in India and the opportunities its booming economy might offer. In fits and starts, ties broadened and deepened over the years that followed, especially in defence and security, as China became more assertive in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and then with the rise of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The partnership has not yet reached its full potential, however, for at least three reasons. First, misperceptions and misunderstandings of each other's relationships with China persist. Of particular concern is what some in India see as Australia's economic 'dependence' on the Chinese market. They argue that the scale of Australian exports gives Beijing an effective veto over Canberra's foreign policy, or at least a means of dissuading it from doing things of which China does not approve. Second, Canberra and New Delhi had— and still have—very different understandings of how the economic relationship between Australia and India will develop. Canberra maintains that liberalisation and deregulation are essential to boosting trade and investment, and to make those happen, has pushed first for a bilateral trade deal—the so-called Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) —and then for the ASEAN-based Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) deal (6). New Delhi's view is rather different. It thinks the sheer size and dynamism of its economy should be enough to generate Australian interest, and so it has slow-walked the CECA and pulled out of RCEP. And third, politicians, bureaucrats and analysts in both countries harbour doubts about the capacity of the other to deliver what they promise, politically or indeed militarily.

The combined Xi-and-Trump effect has not swept away these issues, but they have put them in a different perspective. Doubts and disappointments have been set aside in both capitals and efforts made to work around differences. Canberra has invested heavily in an India Economic Strategy that tries to locate opportunities for trade and investment in the absence of a CECA and Indian involvement in RCEP (7). It has shared details of its efforts to manage foreign interference and maintain cybersecurity, partly to assuage Indian doubts about Beijing's influence over Australian decision-making (8). It has also worked hard to build stronger military-to-military and security ties, not least with an annual bilateral naval exercise, first held in 2017. And it has tried to make more of

the fast-changing people-to-people and community ties Australia now has with India, as it welcomes more temporary and permanent migrants from that country.

The summit and after

The eight agreements signed during Modi's virtual summit with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on 4 June displayed some of the fruits of these efforts (9). The joint statement upgrading ties to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership had no fewer than 49 paragraphs, covering everything from shared values to cooperation on COVID-19, supply chains, cybersecurity, defence science and technology, and reforming the World Trade Organization (10). The Maritime Logistics Supply Agreement was especially significant. India has only a handful of these, notably with France, Singapore and the US. So too was the vision statement on maritime cooperation, which aims to develop better links not just between their navies but also their coast guards (11).

It needs to be said that Australia has taken the lead in bringing much of this to the table. The relationship has long been—and remains—lopsided, with more work being done by Canberra than New Delhi. To some degree, this is understandable, as the Australian side has more capacity in some areas than the Indian, and Australia arguably has more to gain from closer ties, in terms of regional security and in its attempts to diversify trade and investment ties away from an increasingly coercive China. But partly it is also due to a lack of knowledge in parts of New Delhi about what Canberra has to offer, as well as a perceived status asymmetry, in which incipient great power India expects lesser powers to contribute more labour to the maintenance of bilateral ties.

Of course, real and perceived asymmetries in capacity cannot be wished away any less than differences over the virtues of economic liberalisation. But there are signs that the views of Indian diplomats and analysts about what 'middle powers' like Australia can offer are shifting, as New Delhi's strategy for managing a more assertive China evolves (12). Rightly, the US will continue to play a major part in that strategy, even in the near-nightmare scenario that Trump wins again in the November US presidential elections and continues down his destructive path, simply because its capabilities still outstrips all other's in the region and its military-technological edge persists. But it must also involve nurturing and strengthening partnerships with other states that have weight and influence, among them Australia, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam, and indeed Russia, for all its many faults.

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10

Decoding the Initial Response and Ongoing Impact of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia

Premesha Saha

Months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a "global health emergency," the world continues to grapple with the pandemic (1). Southeast Asia was one of the first regions to have been affected by the disease given its geographical proximity, business travel, tourism and supply chain links with China. The number of confirmed cases in the region is still rising, but the rate of increase is slowing. As of 7 August, the death toll in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries was 7,990 (2). But the number of fatalities in Southeast Asia has been lower than most advanced regions, such as Europe and North America (3), despite the high rates of poverty and weak healthcare systems.

The economic impact of COVID-19 will be massive for the region, which is heavily dependent on trade and tourism (4). Countries that previously stood out as exemplar in "flattening the curve" are now grappling with massive new outbreaks. Singapore, for instance, is currently dealing with a new wave of cases for its large migrant worker population. For other countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, the slow government response to the crisis and weaknesses in the public health systems are beginning to take a toll. There has been a surge of new cases in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore.

Many Southeast Asian countries had initially played down the threat posed by COVID-19. Only Singapore and Vietnam responded to the outbreak early on, which seemed to have kept the epidemic under control at that time. The two countries were the first to ban travel to and from China in early February, and both undertook extensive surveillance, monitoring, contact tracing and isolation of those infected by COVID-19 or who had come in contact with the disease (6). Elsewhere, some officials also said that "prayer would keep the disease away" (7), while others had expressed

Table 1: COVID-19 cases and deaths in ASEAN countries (as of 27 August)

Country	Cases	Deaths	Tests	Recovered	Cases per Million
Indonesia	1,60,165	6,944	11,91,948	1,12,867	598
Philippines	2,02,361	3,137	23,78,069	1,32,396	1,929
Vietnam	1,034	29	2,61,004	592	11
Thailand	3,403	58	7,85,547	3,229	49
Myanmar	580	6	1,46,037	341	11
Malaysia	9,291	125	11,82,845	8,971	298
Cambodia	273	0	12,378	263	17
Laos	22	0	37,151	21	3
Singapore	56,495	27	17,45,928	54,587	10,067
Brunei	144	3	29,841	139	336

Source: Centre for Strategic and International Studies (5)

optimism that "the tropical heat would slow the spread of the virus" (8). In March, a large religious gathering in Kuala Lampur became the source of hundreds of new infections across the region (9). Meanwhile, Indonesian President Joko Widodo admitted that he had misguided the citizens about the dangers of COVID-19 to avoid mass panic (10), while his health minister had advised citizens "to relax and eschew overtime work to avoid the disease" (11). In the Philippines, critics have accused President Rodrigo Duterte of "using the virus as cover to pursue his oft-stated ambition of imposing martial law" (12). Myanmar's spokesperson was reported saying, "COVID19 is still not present in Myanmar. The lifestyle and diet of Myanmar citizens are beneficial against the coronavirus" (13). In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen told a packed news conference that "he would kick out anyone who was wearing a surgical mask because such measures were creating an unwarranted climate of fear" (14). Even when the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the message did not seem to resonate in some parts of Southeast Asia, a magnet for Chinese tourists and workers (15). The delayed governmental response set the stage for a disaster in countries with underfunded and poorly equipped healthcare systems.

Countries that had a laid-back attitude in dealing with the virus outbreak initially are highly dependent on China for the development and sustenance of their economies. ASEAN and China have an annual travel flow of over 65 million visits, and many ASEAN economies are reliant on Chinese tourist receipts. ASEAN countries are also China's second-largest trading partner (16). Given its proximity to China and the number of Chinese tourists and workers who travel to Southeast Asia, the region should have, at the very outset, designed a coordinated response to deal with COVID-19.

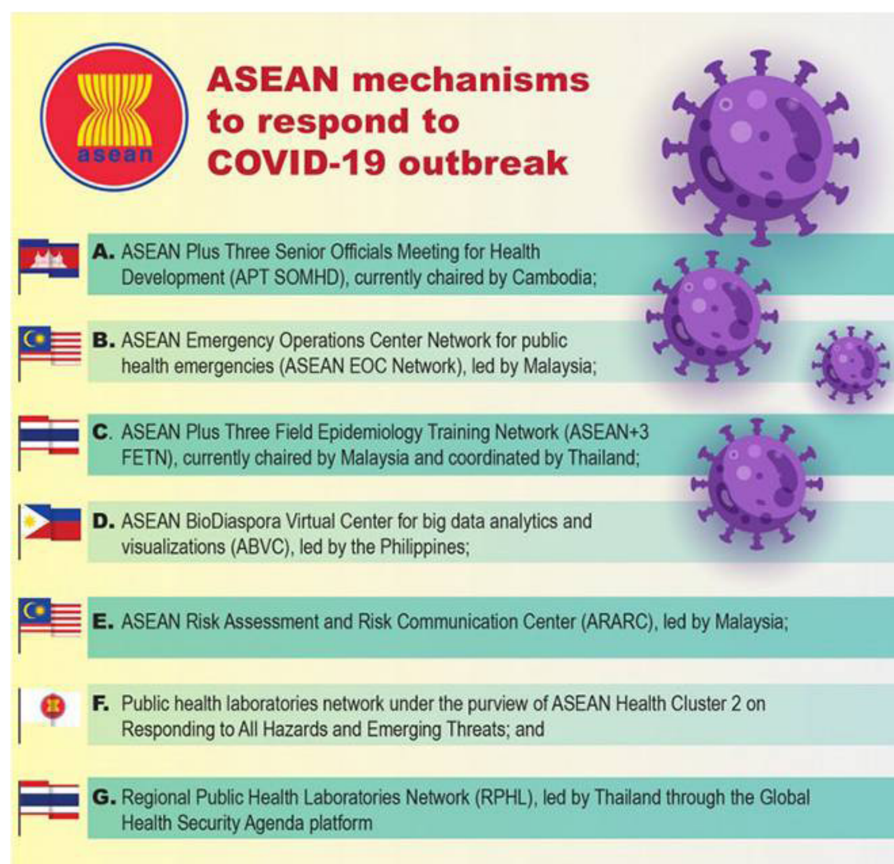
China has been using the tool of its 'soft power diplomacy' to draw support from its Southeast Asian neighbours, which have been the recipient of

billions of dollars of Chinese investment and infrastructure in recent years as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease (COVID19) in February, ASEAN representatives joined hands with their Chinese counterpart and shouted: "Stay strong, Wuhan! Stay strong, China! Stay strong, ASEAN!" (17). Analysts have said Beijing was garnering support after it was being questioned about its handling of the outbreak of the new coronavirus. According to Alfred M. Wu, associate professor in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, "China is promoting a message of friendships in ASEAN to counter the attack from the West that it has been handling the outbreak poorly" (18).

Later, countries like the Philippines enacted strong measures like barring all foreign nationals coming from China, Hong Kong and Macau. Malaysia too imposed a temporary travel ban on arrivals from all Chinese provinces that were under lockdown. Thailand also issued an advisory urging citizen to avoid non-essential travel to China and for those already there to leave. Singapore, meanwhile, had imposed an outright ban from the start (19). In Cambodia, which has grown to gravitate in China's orbit, Prime Minister Hun Sen insisted that air travel to China would not be impacted beyond the suspension of the weekly flights from Wuhan. Laos sealed its borders with China and Myanmar, while people in Brunei, Singapore and Thailand were ordered to restrict their movements (20). While countries like Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore have been successful in containing the spread of the virus, Indonesia and the Philippines—the two most populous countries in Southeast Asia—are still struggling to control the spread of COVID-19 (21).

The different policies adopted by the ASEAN countries in response to the pandemic have brought out the discrepancies and differences between neighbours and raised suspicion on the feasibility of a united regional response, despite the group already having several response mechanisms in place. According to the ASEAN post-2015 health development agenda, there are at least seven mechanisms designed to support regional preparedness and response by ASEAN and its Plus Three partners—China, Japan and South Korea (22). At the regional level, the 26th ASEAN Economic Ministers retreat on 10 March issued a statement calling for "collective action to mitigate the impact of the virus, with a particular focus on leveraging technology, digital trade and trade facilitation platforms to foster supply chain connectivity and sustainability" (23). At the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 held on 14 April, attendees issued a statement calling for a post-pandemic recovery plan and proposed the establishment of a COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund (24).

Figure 1: ASEAN mechanisms to respond to COVID-19



Source: The Jakarta Post (25)

Southeast Asian governments, barring Singapore, spend little on health per capita by international standards (26). Even Indonesia, with a population of nearly 270 million spread over thousands of islands, faces discrepancies in health resources and suffers an overall shortage of facilities and personnel (27).

Countries in the region have also been impacted economically. Indonesia has reported its first economic contraction in more than two decades after its second-quarter GDP shrank by 5.3 percent from a year ago, while the Philippines posted a 16. percent year-on-year contraction, its worst on record (28).

Yet, despite the shortcomings in their own healthcare systems, some Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar and Laos have donated goggles, face masks and respirators to China. Laos raised US$400,000 and US$100,000-worth of supplies for China after a national fundraising campaign (29), and Myanmar's military donated protective equipment (30).

Most Southeast Asian countries now must grapple with the consequences of their initial lackadaisical approach and their 'political kneeling' to China. Southeast Asia is highly interconnected with the rest of the world due to cross-border travel, migration and international tourism. Although the ASEAN countries are now implementing proper social distancing and other measures, the underdeveloped health infrastructure in several member states means they will need to work closely with the international community for a united ASEAN response to curb the spread of COVID-19 and combat its effects.

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11

Japan's China Dilemma in the COVID-19 Pandemic Situation

K. V. Kesavan

Bilateral relations between Japan and China have seen serious twists and turns since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this year. A major disappointment for both countries was the postponement of the much-anticipated visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Japan in April. After years of turbulence and uncertainty in bilateral ties, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had succeeded in getting Xi to agree to make a state visit to his country in April (1). There has only been one official visit by top-level Chinese leaders to Japan in the last ten years. Both countries were keen to use this visit to redefine their relationship in the volatile geostrategic Asian situation and usher in a new epoch in their partnership (2).

But that was not to be. Under the crippling influence of the coronavirus crisis, both Xi and Abe agreed to postpone the visit without suggesting a future date. And so, Xi's visit became a casualty of the pandemic.

Both countries cooperated in the initial days of the pandemic, and Beijing allowed the Japanese government to evacuate hundreds of its citizens from China (3). Further, China also supplied large quantities of essentials like masks, gowns and medicines needed by the Japanese. But as US-China relations continued to strain—first on issues like bilateral trade and then on the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the COVID-19 crisis—Japan was caught in the crossfire. US President Donald Trump's criticism of China's alleged role in the spread of the virus created a great deal of discomfort for Japan's foreign policy establishment (4). Additionally, the Taiwan factor also figured quite prominently, complicate ties further. Top Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders, including Abe and Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, openly welcomed the re-election of Taiwanese President Tai Ing-wen. Motegi called Taiwan an "important partner and a precious friend of Japan" (5). More significantly, Abe and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga urged that

Taiwan be permitted to take part in WHO deliberations on the coronavirus as an observer. Abe told the Japanese Diet that it would be "difficult to maintain health and prevent further infections in this region if Taiwan is excluded for political reasons" (6). Naturally, China resented these sympathetic sentiments of Japanese leaders towards Taiwan.

On 5 March, an official announcement on the postponement of Xi's visit to Japan was made. On the same day, Abe, during an addressed to the Council of Investments for the Future, expressed his deep concerns about the perils of Japan's supply chains being unduly reliant on China. This became clear in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic when Japan ran short of essential requirements like face masks, medical gowns and medicines due to the disruption of Chinese supply chains. China accounted for about 80 percent of Japan's protective equipment, like gowns and masks (7). Japanese manufacturers were not well-placed to augment the output of these products, but some electrical companies like Sharp have now volunteered to enter this field (8). It was under these circumstances that Abe underlined the need for Japan to pursue a new policy to establish domestic production bases for products for which it was highly dependent on China, and diversify production bases among other countries, such as ASEAN countries, for other products (9).

On 7 April, Japan allocated US$2.3 billion in its supplementary budget to encourage domestic companies to shift to the country or to diversify their bases in Southeast Asia (10). In the same month, Japan's National Security Council set up a special economic division (which included a high-level official of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry), tasked with formulating a new strategy for national economic security before the end of the year (11). The new division is expected to identify the industries and technologies that can play a key role in boosting the country's security needs. Additionally, it will also formulate appropriate strategies to deal with the rapidly changing regional dynamics following the US-China economic conflict and China's aggressive pursuit of its economic and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

These new initiatives have reportedly caused considerable anxieties within the Chinese government, forcing it to reach out to Japanese companies to discuss their future course of action (12).

This is not the first time that Japanese companies based in China are being called to return and set up their manufacturing bases at home. Around 2010, when Sino-Japanese relations were getting strained, the term 'China plus one' was devised to provide another option to Japanese companies in addition to China. Sino-Japanese economic ties are old, massive and complex, encompassing a broad spectrum of interests. Even at the peak of the Cold War, the Japanese managed to maintain trade ties with China under the 'seikei

bunri' (separation of economics from politics) rubric. Today, China is Japan's biggest trading partner, and there are thousands of Japanese companies doing their business in that country. Further, with a limited budgetary allocation of US$2.3 billion, it will be next to impossible to expect Japanese companies to leave China. Nevertheless, Abe's initiative is significant because it has given timely notice to China to understand Japan's true sentiments.

On 17 July, Japan announced a list of 57 companies that will receive a total of US$535 million to set up their plants in Japan and 30 others that will be paid to expand their production in countries like Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. These firms include producers of auto and aviation parts, hygienic products, like alcohol-based sanitisers, medicines and paper products (13).

This is only a small beginning, and how it will play out in the coming months remains to be seen. Having invested heavily in China for decades, it will not be easy for Japanese business interests to exit 'Asia's workshop' abruptly (14).

The crux of Japan's China dilemma lies in the delicate balancing act it plays between its dependence on the US for its security needs and the enormous economic benefits it derives from China. Hong Kong is yet another case to prove this. The former British colony, home to about 1400 Japanese companies, accounts for 2.5 percent of Japan's total trade (15). On 28 May, Japan declined to join the US, UK, Australia and Canada in issuing a statement condemning China on its new security legislation in Hong Kong. Japan clarified its position by saying that it would be more appropriate to use the G-7 countries to criticise China (16). Instead, what many saw as Japan's delicate balancing act. On 17 June, the foreign ministers of the G-7 countries—including Japan—issued a statement criticising China for its new security law for Hong Kong. Domestically, many LDP members used China's action in Hong Kong to pressurise the party leadership to cancel Xi's official visit (17).

Many in Japan are concerned that China has exploited the raging COVID-19 pandemic to aggressively expand its strategic influence over the South China Sea and the East China Sea, Hong Kong and India's Ladakh. Its belligerent attitude has contributed to increased tensions in these areas, but it has encountered stiff resistance from ASEAN, the US, Australia and India (18). China's aggressive maritime activities in the East China Sea area have particularly posed serious challenges to Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands. Since April, Japan has spotted 67 Chinese coast guard ships near the islands (19), and this appears to have become a regular habit. Japanese Defence Minister Taro Kono has warned that China's behaviour in the East China Sea is jeopardising peace in the region, adding that the question of Xi's visit will be considered in light of the security situation facing Japan (20).

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12

The Taiwan Question in Indian Foreign Policy

Harsh V. Pant and
Premesha Saha

At a time when the world is attempting to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing tussle between the US and China has politicised a global health issue. The two countries have been bickering over China's reticence in sharing information on the virus, with the US tagging the World Health Organization (WHO) as China's "PR agency" (1). The latest flashpoint has emerged over the admission of Taiwan in the meetings of the World Health Assembly (WHA), the WHO's decision-making executive body, and also in the WHO. Many countries, such as the US and Australia, are championing Taiwan's entry into the WHO. This is also a challenge for India, which is currently the chairperson of the executive decision-making body. India is in a tough spot over rising global pressure and sharpening faultlines between the US and China, and has to take a stand on whether it is going to support the US's demand of reinstating Taiwan's observer status at the WHA, which, China will argue, goes against New Delhi's longstanding 'One-China' policy.

Both Taiwan and China have engaged New Delhi in their own ways in recent weeks. Taiwan has donated about one million surgical masks to help India (2), and the Chinese Embassy in India has underlined that India should keep in mind its 'One-China' policy while deciding on the issue (3).

Taiwan's response to COVID-19 has been commended by health authorities globally; as of 1 September, the country has reported only 488 confirmed cases and seven deaths, a stunningly low number for a population of 23.6 million. Despite emerging as a global exemplar, Taiwan remains effectively locked out of membership in the WHO due to its complex relationship with China. The WHO also continues to list Taiwan's case numbers under China's deceptively. After a video of a top WHO official trying to avoid questions on Taiwan

during a TV interview went viral, the WHO is facing more criticism and accusations of bias (4).

Taiwan leads the way

It makes little sense for an organisation like the WHO to exclude Taiwan, which has successfully tackled the spread of the virus, at a time when sharing best practices should be the norm. At a recent press conference, Taiwanese Health Minister Chen Shih-Chung said, "We hope through the test of this epidemic, the WHO can recognise clearly that epidemics do not have national borders, no one place should be left out because any place that is left out could become a loophole… any place's strength shouldn't be neglected so that it can make contributions to the world" (5). China views this as an opportunity for Taiwan to be exploited to press its case for greater recognition. Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese foreign ministry, made it clear that "Beijing has made "proper arrangement" for Taiwan to deal with local or global public health emergencies in a timely fashion," but Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's "Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was pushing for independence" (6).

Taiwan's successful handling of the pandemic has garnered its support from a few major global players, with some even recalibrating their policy towards the state. Nations are expanding bilateral ties with Taiwan to bolster their own COVID-19 responses. A consensus is also emerging in the international community that Taiwan should be given access to the WHO and other multilateral agencies, even as Chinese opposition grows louder. The US has attempted to maximise Taiwan's involvement in international relations and has, without much success so far, supported Taiwan's "meaningful participation" in various institutions, including the WHA (7). In March 2020, the Trump administration enacted (8) the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act (TAIPEI Act) (9), aimed at supporting Taiwan's international presence. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has suggested that the US State Department will "do its best to assist" Taiwan's "appropriate role" in the WHO (10). The State Department has also launched a "Tweet for Taiwan" campaign. Last month, Washington's representative to Taipei issued a joint statement, with Foreign Minister, Joseph Wu announcing increased cooperation, including in research and development, contact-tracing and scientific conferences (11). Other countries expressing their support for Taiwan include Japan (12), New Zealand, UK, Canada and Australia, along with multiple European and developing countries (13). The European Union has said it is working with the Taiwan government's Academia Sinica to develop a rapid test (14). In a rare move, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen publicly thanked Taiwan for donating masks to the European Union (15).

India's dilemma

India is among the 179 UN member states that do not maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The Indian government is yet to make a final decision on whether to support the US move to reinstate Taiwan or to accept China's objections to it. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar recently attended a virtual meeting convened by Pompeo with the foreign ministers of Australia, Brazil, Israel, Japan and South Korea, which is seen as an American effort to garner support to bring about changes in the WHO (16). All the attendees besides India are major non-NATO US allies, who are expected to support Washington's call. India shares good relations with all these countries and most are India's trusted partners in the Indo-Pacific, as well as are part of Quadrilateral alliance. Four of the seven countries—US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand—are signatories to a demarche that urges the WHO to allow Taiwan to be admitted as an observer because its input will be "meaningful and important" (17). Other signatories to the demarche are Canada, France, Germany and the UK. Given that most of these countries and India are also champions of the Indo-Pacific—which stresses on international cooperation, transparency and openness—this will be an added pressure for New Delhi.

Taiwan is an important stakeholder and a valuable partner in fighting the unprecedented health crisis the world is facing. Taiwan's government is donating masks to countries in need and sharing its experience using technology to investigate outbreaks (18). It is also working with US experts to develop more rapid diagnostic test kits and vaccines. India's relations with Taiwan have been on an upward trajectory, and this presents an opportunity for New Delhi to leverage its ties with Taipei vis-à-vis Beijing. There are many avenues that India can explore in its ties with Taiwan without being needlessly defensive, such as enhancing trade ties and ensuring greater ease of doing business for the Taiwanese corporate sector. New Delhi could also send officials to Taiwan on visits pertaining to culture and commerce. India can also partner with Taiwan in several sectors that are critical for its next phase of technological evolution, such as electronics, semiconductors and 5G. Most importantly, Taiwan's health sector is one of the most advanced globally, so in the wake of the pandemic, India, like many other countries, can also work alongside the Taiwanese health, and research and development sectors.

If the goal is to share ideas and best practices among countries in the Indo-Pacific region to respond effectively to the complex challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, then India must support Taiwan's admission to the WHO. Given that the Sino-India relations are going through a rough patch currently, engaging with Taiwan seems logical, especially if New Delhi wants to build alternate supply chains and reduce its economic dependence on Beijing. Taiwan has been championing its New Southbound policy since 2016 and is also keen to engage with countries in the Indo-

Pacific region. India also believes in an "inclusive" Indo-Pacific. India must thus support the inclusion of Taiwan in its Indo-Pacific discussions. There are many avenues of cooperation, such as information and digital industries, cybersecurity, biotechnology, defence and renewable energy, that can be explored under India's Act East policy. In recent years, India's foreign policy vision has evolved, with issue-based alignments becoming the norm. It is now time for its ties with Taiwan to develop accordingly.

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