

India's China Policy: Dynamics of 'Change' and 'Continuity'

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Date: 20 May 2019

As manifestations of definitive core-national interests and evolving aspirations, foreign policies are inherently dualistic constructs that involve elements of both strategic continuity and tactical dynamism. In addition to national interests and aspirations, foreign policy dynamics are governed by a country's ideological underpinnings and outlook, and the overarching narrative of international politics. It is this interplay between *continuity* (in pursuing strategic national interests) and *change* (in the style and normative ideals of diplomacy) that constitutes the defining theme of India's foreign policy towards China since 2014.

Any nuanced analysis of continuity or perceived departures in a country's foreign policy template vis-à-vis another country needs to be foregrounded in a study of evolving strategic dynamics between the two nations. In the context of India-China relations, it can be persuasively argued that the strategic environment has continued to be defined by the same set of issues that existed prior to 2014.

While Indian foreign policy since 2014 has largely followed the established doctrine vis-à-vis the long-standing border dispute, new policy narratives have been fostered to deal with the Belt and Road 'grand-strategy', skewed bilateral-trade economics, and China's selective reading of terrorism. Further, there has been an enhanced effort to integrate India's cultural ethos with its foreign policy outreach to counter China's gradual penetration within India's civilizational space through a state-funded and meticulously crafted strategy of embracing and appropriating Buddhism.¹

To counter China's growing footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region,

the country's foreign policy has begun conferring an enhanced thrust upon geopolitics. This approach has been articulated through the idioms of 'extended neighborhood' and 'Act East', 'neighborhood first', and 'Indo-Pacific'. Most importantly, India has moved beyond the shibboleths of 'non-alignment' and has embraced the concept of 'strategic and issue-based alignment'.² While these formulations signify India's larger strategic interests, their importance in India's China policy cannot be over-emphasized.

In addition to the aforementioned issues, India-China dynamic is also governed by the PRC's efforts to undermine India's status as a global nuclear power under the pretext of its 'all-weather friendship' with Pakistan. The alliance with Pakistan and heavy investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have also fueled the Chinese ambitions to foresee a mediation role for itself in the Kashmir dispute. On both these issues, Indian foreign policy has followed strategic continuity that upholds the country's credentials as a responsible nuclear power, and reaffirms India's traditional position on Kashmir being a bilateral issue.

While strategic contestation remains the overarching theme of India-China dynamic, the Doklam crisis of 2017 marked the watershed in this relationship. Not only did the 73-day-face-off demonstrated India's firm position and resolve on the issue of territory and sovereignty, it made China recognize India as a strategic challenge almost for the first time³. Additionally, India's robust stand at Doklam reaffirmed the country's leading role in the South Asian geopolitics.⁴

Beginning with the contentious issue of boundary demarcation between India and China, it is justified to assert that the 1988 paradigm continues to define the larger contours of India's foreign policy approach towards the dispute. While the 1988 rapprochement between the two countries was noteworthy in many respects, it has tacitly relegated the boundary question as secondary in India-China dynamic⁵. The reluctance or inability on part of successive policy dispensations to establish a new *modus vivendi* to deal with this vexed issue has allowed the stalemate to linger on for several decades now.

Since 1988, India-China border dispute is largely managed by a framework that involves the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border of 1993⁶, the expert group talks, and the Special Representative (SR) Mechanism of 2003. While it is conventional wisdom to cite BPTA⁷ and its various

avatars as 'instruments of success' in maintaining peace and tranquility along the India-China border, it is equally important to recognize that the SR mechanism has not yielded any tangible results even after 21 rounds of talks. However, it is important to recognise that since 2014, the mechanism has been approaching the boundary dispute with a more assertive vocabulary that emphasizes upon achieving '*a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the India-China boundary question at an early date*'⁸. This constitutes a significant departure from the earlier formulations that committed the two countries to '*discussions on a framework for a resolution of the Boundary Question*'⁹.

In terms of political approach to the dispute, a new discourse was added to India's foreign policy during Xi Jinping's maiden visit to India in 2014 and Modi's 2015 State visit to China. In a significant move, Prime Minister Modi raised the boundary issue at public forums as against keeping it confined as a recurrent topic in bilateral documents¹⁰. Ironically, this momentum and dynamism was not maintained during the Wuhan Summit- which, as a matter of fact, came under the backdrop of a border stand-off.

The very bedrock of the Wuhan Summit was built on India's sacrifice of the 'Thank You India' celebrations. This constituted a strategic retreat from the policy narrative that the country had initiated on Tibet in 2014 when Sikyong Lobsang Sangey was invited to Prime Minister Modi's oath-taking ceremony along with the Heads of all SAARC nations. If this invitation had signaled a new posturing by New Delhi, Wuhan provided the Chinese with a 'new normal' to deal with India. In the final analysis, while the summit achieved strategic compromise by India on Tibet, it did not secure any commitment from the Chinese side regarding India's core national concerns.

It is important to note here that the joint statement issued at the end of the Wuhan summit included the formulation of '*fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement*' with regards to the boundary dispute¹¹. The crucial missing link in this position is the emphasis upon '*early settlement of the boundary question*' that was an integral component of the joint statements that were issued after the Modi-Xi State-level meetings in 2014 and 2015¹². In this context, the 'strategic guidance' issued to the officials at the end of the Summit appears to constitute yet another appendix to the CBMs (confidence building measures) regime that began with the 1993 agreement. When read alongside the joint statement, the much hyped 'strategic guidance' serves as

a reiteration of the lexicon of 'border management' that has come to characterize the border question.

While it can be argued that the Wuhan Summit was directed towards restoring normalcy in India-China relations, it is equally pertinent to underscore that the summit came at a time when China was faced with an increasingly unfavorable domestic and international climate due to the trade war with the US and growing internal unrest (albeit muted) against the decisions taken during the 19th Party Congress. Though it is never advisable to undermine an adversary's strength, times like these require countries to design foreign policy templates that offer a skillful combination of realpolitik and constructivist approaches and not commit themselves to a liberal positioning.

Notwithstanding the above discussed criticism, the Wuhan Meet can be justifiably credited for introducing the concept of 'informal summits' within the scope of India-China strategic dialogue. If institutionalized as an annual event, this mechanism of informal exchanges between the top leaderships of the two countries can go a long way in addressing the 'political-will deficit' that has kept the boundary issue in an imbroglio for several decades now.

With regards to 'One China', while India's foreign policy continues to abide by the 2010 decision to not endorse this formulation, certain developments on this issue merit attention. In the middle of 2018, India's national carrier, Air India was made to replace 'Taiwan' with 'Chinese Taipei' in the list of destinations on its website. While this move could have easily been projected as a business decision- if only for tactical reasons, the MEA decided to dub it as a reiteration of its official policy on Taiwan¹³. Though this turn of events does not exactly represent a departure from the 2010 policy, it certainly dilutes the strategic impact of this robust initiative. The fact that this development came in the post-Wuhan context makes it all the more crucial.

In yet another significant move on the 'One China' construct, India recognized Tibet as '*Tibet Autonomous Region of People's Republic of China*' in the 2014 joint statement and followed it up with the 2015 joint statement¹⁴. Needless to say, this move contradicted India's consistent position since 2010 to not recognize Tibet as a part of China in any joint statements between the two countries. As against these initiatives, 'One India' policy has not found any mention in India's recent dealings with the PRC.

Inarguably, the most successful demonstration of India's foreign policy approach towards China has been on the issue of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI is not only China's flagship foreign policy project, it bears Xi Jinping's 'personal signature' in more ways than one. While the country has reiterated its unflinching position on India's territorial integrity through its opposition to CPEC, India should be credited for shaping the emerging global narrative on connectivity and infrastructure finance by highlighting the predatory nature of China's 'debt trap diplomacy'. In fact, India has not restricted itself to the criticism of BRI and has proposed an alternative in the form of 'Asia-Africa Growth Corridor'.

Another disconcerting dimension of the BRI is its use as a geostrategic tool by China to advance its penetration within the South Asian landscape. In order to deal with this issue, India's foreign policy re-invented the doctrine of 'neighborhood first'. While the idea itself is not new, the concept was imbued with renewed strategic salience that involved reiteration of India's cultural links with the South Asian nations and an enhanced thrust upon the issue of regional connectivity. However, in spite of these initiatives, India still needs to address the perennial irritants in its relations with the South-Asian region. This policy vacuum has been utilized by China to acquire strategic space within this region.

Over the years, oppositional political discourse in all South Asian states (barring Bhutan) has expressed itself through an anti-India rhetoric. Moreover, alignment with China is employed as a tool in South Asian polities to demonstrate their strategic autonomy vis-à-vis India to their domestic audience. While this narrative has continued to define India's regional environment, India has not been able to create permanent constituencies in South Asian states that can safeguard its strategic interests across the entire political spectrum in these countries. Though this lack of strategic template has characterized all foreign policy establishments, the 2015 Nepal-blockade has proved to be the most negative articulation of India's neighborhood policy in a long time. Even on the issue of connectivity, the progress has largely remained mixed. As a result, China's increasing footprint in the South Asian region continues to remain a challenge for India.

With regards to the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) component of the BRI, while continuity has been maintained in the policy of deepening strategic interests in the region, India's stand on the Indo-Pacific construct remains in stark contrast to the much

touted policy of 'issue-based alignment'. While more negotiations regarding the scope and nature of the proposed architecture were due, India did not have to altogether reject the concept's credentials of being a 'strategy'¹⁵.

While on the subject of geostrategic conceptualizations that have direct bearing upon India's China policy, India crafted the novel approach of reimagining its strategic geography and extending it to Southeast Asia. In order to fully realize the scope of this 'extended neighborhood', a constructive effort was made to connect the South and Southeast Asian spaces through the idiom of Buddhism and physical connectivity. The evolution of 'Look East' into 'Act East' was integral to this strategic outlook. Another dimension of this policy is that it allows India greater strategic presence within the South China Sea.

Inclusion of cultural diplomacy within the dynamics of the 'Act East' construct has been one of the most significant foreign policy initiative by India in recent times. While this policy is important for varied reasons of diplomacy, it entails a definitive strategic component with regards to China. By placing Buddhism on India's diplomatic agenda, India has offered a potent counter to China's consistent efforts at assuming the leadership of the global discourse on this philosophy. In fact, Buddhism is one of the key pillars of China's outreach to Nepal. Moreover, ownership of Buddhism narrative is indispensable to China's hold over Tibet and its attempts to place pro-China spiritual leaders within the pantheon of Tibetan Buddhism.

Further, in pursuance of its policy of 'strategic alignment', India has forged closer ties with US, Japan and Vietnam. While these partnerships have evolved over the consistent work of several decades, it needs to be recognized that the last five years have imbued them with a new momentum and energy. Today, India's relations with these countries have moved beyond the dynamics of bi-laterals and have acquired the status of 'comprehensive strategic partnerships'¹⁶ that involve an ever-increasing military dimension. As has been mentioned elsewhere in this article, while such developments need not be viewed entirely from the perspective of India-China binary, they nevertheless remain central to India's foreign policy approach vis-à-vis China.

The issue of trade deficit continues to be a work in progress. While India has reportedly reduced the deficit by 10 percent recently, this largely remains an outcome of the US-China trade war. As such, India needs to continue with its efforts to secure more

favorable and justified trade terms with China- both at the bilateral level as well as under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) framework.

With regards to the domination of India's smartphone sector by the likes of Huawei and ZTE, India urgently needs to revisit its policies. While an outright ban is neither advisable nor tangible, India should participate in the global narrative being led by the US regarding the strategic designs of these companies, and insist upon operational transparency by these Chinese giants.

Finally, it can be concluded that 'dynamism' and 'assertive posturing' constitute the two recurrent themes of India's foreign policy approach towards China since 2014. In the last five years, the most articulate expressions of this policy narrative have been the Doklam issue and India's position on the BRI. Additionally, India's foreign policy template towards China is now governed by the ideal of 'strategic and issue based alignment'. This newly crafted ideology and India's thrust upon cultural diplomacy have allowed the country greater maneuverability space against China's expansionist policies in India's sphere of interests. However, since the beginning of 2018, India's foreign policy has yet again become hostage to the jargons of 'conciliation', 'respect for differences of opinion and positions', etc. From the national-interest perspective, such policies remain compromising at best and self-congratulatory at worst.

The views expressed in this essay are the author's own and do not reflect the position of the NMF. She can be reached at shikhaaggarwal8@gmail.com The essay was previously published in India Foundation Journal, May-June 2019, Vol. VII, Issue No.3.

Notes and References

¹One of the primary initiatives by China in this regard is the World Buddhist Forum.

² This conceptualization was introduced by Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale at the 2019 edition of the 'Raisina Dialogue'.

³ This assertion is borne out of at least two articles that have been written by well-established Chinese commentators Yi Guomin and Li Yang. The Papers can be accessed at <http://www.cwzg.cn/politics/201707/37313.html>, and <http://www.kunlunce.com/gcyj/zxzz111111/2017-12-21/121772.html>. Additionally, one of China's

foremost strategic experts, Prof. ShenDingli has described Doklam incident as one of China's five major foreign policy failures. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-great-power-diplomacy/4038160.html>

⁴ This assertion is rooted in the fact that Doklam is a disputed territory between Bhutan and China. India had stopped China's iDoklam under the spirit of 'India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty' of 2007. The treaty can be accessed at <https://mea.gov.in/Images/pdf/india-bhutan-treaty-07.pdf>

⁵ This assertion is borne out of the fact that while India-China relations in areas of political, cultural, economic and defense

https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/China_September_2014.pdf

http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indiachina_bilateral_relations.pdf

https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/China_07_12_2016.pdf

https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/China_October_2017.pdf

The status report on bilateral relations for 2012 can be accessed at:

<https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/China-January-2012.pdf>

⁶ The agreement is available at:

https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_930907_Agreement%20on%20India-China%20Border%20Areas.pdf

⁷ The 1993 agreement is referred as the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA) is general discourse

⁸ The formulation appears in the official Press Releases of the SR mechanism. The press releases for the talks since 2014 can be accessed at: https://www.mea.gov.in/media-advisory.htm?60/Media_Advisory

⁹ The formulation appears in the official Press Releases of the SR mechanism. The press releases for the talks prior to 2014 can be accessed at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-advisory.htm?60/Media_Advisory

¹⁰ The Prime Minister's Press Statement during President Xi Jinping's 2014 India visit can be accessed at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24014/>

¹¹ The joint statement can be accessed at :

https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan

¹² The two joint statements can be accessed at :

<https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/24022/Joint+Statement+between+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China+on+Building+a+Closer+Developmental+Partnership>,

https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25240/Joint_Statement_between_the_India_and_China_during_Prime_Ministers_visit

¹³ The statement by the MEA spokesperson can be accessed at:

<https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/30035>

¹⁴ ibid 9

¹⁵ India declared its official policy on the Indo-Pacific at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue. The PM's speech can be accessed at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>

¹⁶India-Vietnam ties were elevated to 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' in 2015

India-Japan relations were upgraded to "Global and Strategic Partnership" in 2014