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India and China: Redefining Security and Emerging Synergy

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An impending strategic contest between China and India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) where both the Asian behemoths jostle for power and influence, in ways reminiscent of the US-Soviet rivalry of the cold war days, is well discussed in existing literature. Bearing two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, one-third of its bulk cargo, and half of its container traffic, the IOR has, in recent years, become the busiest trade route of the world. No wonder, the region has captured the imagination of China, the largest trading nation in the world, which now wants to strengthen its foothold in the region on an unprecedented scale. On the other hand, with the beginning of the new century, India has also realized the geo-strategic significance of the IOR, and is striving to take advantage of its "geography of opportunity"¹. As both the countries embark on ambitious foreign policies in the IOR in order to maximize their strategic interests, cataclysmic projections of an imminent Sino-Indian fall out in the IOR is gaining currency.

However, a closer look at the ongoing strategic dynamics between India and China under the present leadership reveals a counter current of growing cooperation rather than competition at the defence/security realm, including the maritime domain. For instance, the joint statement issued during Chinese president's visit to India in September 2014, for the first time mentioned about agreements on holding joint exercises beyond the army – involving the navy and air-force of either side and to strengthen cooperation in areas such as peace-keeping, counter-terrorism, naval escort, maritime security, humanitarian rescue, disaster mitigation, personnel training, and communication between think-tanks. Decisions were also taken to hold the first round of maritime cooperation dialogue on maritime affairs and security, including anti-piracy, freedom of navigation and cooperation between maritime agencies of both countries, and to carry out consultations on disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control². Again, during PM Modi's visit to China in May 2015, the two sides agreed to carry out frequent high level exchanges including exchange visits of naval ships and to hold PASSEX and SAR exercises³.

Under the new leadership, both sides have made substantial progress in establishing and expanding defence exchanges. The year 2015 witnessed major breakthroughs in high-level mutual visits between officials of the defence ministry and personnel from armed forces. China's CMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong led a military delegation to India which is one of the highest-level visits to India in the past decade⁴. Later on, home minister Rajnath Singh visited China - a first by a home minister in a decade⁵. Besides, the two militaries carried out the "Hand in Hand-2015" joint anti-terrorism training in Kunming and organised the 7th China-India defense and security consultation in Beijing. The missile destroyer *Jinan* of the 20th Chinese naval escort taskforce also visited Mumbai for a four day friendly visit. On the other hand, in a novel effort, Indian military colleges like the Army War College and the National Defence College extended a red carpet to Chinese officials to share their security perspectives and to discuss the possibilities of dispatching cadets to study in each other's military academies and for undertaking joint research programs.

At the core of this growing intimacy between China and India in the strategic space, lies the synchronized strategic thinking of the present leadership in both the countries. As is pointed out in this article, there exists a striking resemblance in either sides' effort to redefine the concept of "security" commensurate to the evolution of global security scenario. While, a part of this conformity in thoughts and actions between China and India is due to the common security threats emanating from the evolving geopolitical developments in the world, the other reason is the inherent synergies between the two civilizations, the roots of which runs deep. No wonder, some of India's core strategic philosophies like that of "non-violence" and "the whole world is a family" find resonance in Chinese equivalents of "peace is of paramount importance", "seek harmony without uniformity" and "unity of the world".

The key purpose of this article is to highlight the common threads that exist in China and India's contemporary strategic thinking. It pitches the idea that the more India and China explore and identify their inherent synergies, better will be the mutual understanding, and easier it will be for both the countries to cooperate and coordinate at the global level.

India's Evolving Concept of Security

Early last year when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka as a part of his three nation tour in the Indian Ocean Region, he unveiled a novel concept in the realm of India's maritime security strategy - the vision of 'SAGAR'- "Security and Growth for All in the Region."⁶

The vision is unique because it is not just limited to the idea of India taking the lead in its neighbourhood as a net security provider, offering its own capabilities for the benefit of all. Rather it conveys a greater message of universality, equality and mutual respect between India and its neighbours. In other words, PM Modi's Mauritius message exhibited a distinct regional/collective/common undertone, emphasising on the need for a seamless, holistic approach to ensure peace and stability in India's neighbourhood. No wonder, throughout his speech, he repeatedly stressed on ideas like "shared commitment to peace and security", "collective responsibility/action towards common goal", "strengthening collective ability - economic and security" and "taking integrated measures for sustainable development of the region" which he termed as the "maritime home" for all Indian Ocean nations⁷.

This vision of "security for all, to all, by all", as proposed by PM Modi in Mauritius, has been further explored and institutionalised through India's maritime strategy⁸, released last year. Unlike last time when India published a maritime 'military' strategy, focusing on "the freedom to use the seas", this time India has carefully crafted a maritime 'security' strategy, aiming to "ensure secure seas". Furthermore, the last maritime strategy focused solely on strategies for conflict, deterrence and capability development, while in the current version, 'shaping a favourable and positive maritime environment' has been highlighted as one of the key objectives of India's naval forces. The document highlights that the recent revision in strategy has been carried out to address two key aspects of changing security scenario

- (a) Blurring of traditional and non-traditional threats, and
- (b) Growing realisation that the freedom to use the seas for India's national interest is of no avail without a safe and secure sea.

The strategy document mentions that although traditional threats continue to exist, there has been a sharp rise in recent years in non-traditional threats like piracy, armed robbery at sea, higher instances of natural disasters and regional instabilities which pose a stumbling block in maintaining freedom of navigation at sea and thereby open up avenues for simultaneous cooperation among nations, even amidst competition. To promote this cooperation through maritime effort has been a focus area in India's revised strategy.

To increase the scope and value of cooperation and coordination between India and various other countries against common threats at sea, the policy document highlights three key areas of action –

- (a) Increasing Indian Navy's contribution as a net security provider,

- (b) Expansion in the Navy's maritime operational engagements – exercise with foreign navies, enhanced training, technical and hydrographic operation, and
- (b) Continued development and promotion of regional cooperative frameworks like 'Milan', 'IORA' and 'IONS'.

China Relooks at Security

Le Yucheng, Chinese ambassador to India, in one of his speeches⁹ at the National Defence College of India, presented a succinct description of how the world security paradigm has been undergoing astonishing changes in recent years and how China has been responding. He observed that in today's world the scope of security has expanded, the contours have blurred and the security challenges have become more complex. In other words, security has become mutual, common, collective and inter-dependent where the Cold War era ideas of zero-sum game, gunboat policy, arms race, military confrontation, power politics and group confrontation are fast becoming redundant.

China's answer to the evolving security paradigm, he mentioned, is threefold-cooperation, development and innovation. China is striving to build a new, "common, comprehensive and cooperative security" outlook which has sustainable security at its core and which is based on the spirit of mutual respect, equal negotiation, transparency and win-win cooperation. This new concept of "common, comprehensive, and sustainable security" which is also an extrapolation of president Xi Jinping's doctrine of "community of common destiny", has since been the recurrent theme of all international communications/initiatives unveiled by China in the recent past.

China's redefined security narrative found an elaborate mention in its defence white paper¹⁰ especially with respect to its maritime military strategy. Chinese armed forces pledged to apply their cooperative security concept by taking part in bilateral and multilateral joint exercises and training, enhancing exchanges and cooperation with naval task forces of other countries, actively participating in international maritime security dialogues and cooperation, fulfilling international responsibilities and obligations like UN peacekeeping missions, international disaster rescue and humanitarian assistance, carry out escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and other sea areas and jointly securing International Shipping Lanes (ISL). It also stated that with the growth of national strength, China's armed forces will gradually intensify their participation in such operations as international peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance, and would do their utmost to shoulder more international responsibilities

and obligations, provide more public security goods, and contribute more to world peace and common development.

Other than this, China also proposed to ‘jointly’ build the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”¹¹ The vision statement issued by the Chinese government further stated that win-win cooperation remains at the core of the initiative, aimed at “building a community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness”. In similar vein, at the Shangri la Summit¹² China proposed to “jointly” safeguard peace and build a secure Asia-Pacific region while actively fulfilling its international responsibilities and obligations, safeguarding regional and international security and stability and making greater contribution to common security.

At the recently concluded, Xiangshan Forum, China once again put forward the Asian Security Concept¹³ based on common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. It was noted that security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific has long lagged behind economic cooperation in the region. Therefore, China proposed to bolster pragmatic cooperation among nations in non-traditional security areas and give more substance to regional security architecture by enhancing efforts for institution building for cooperation in various areas.

Taking the concept of “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” a step further, Chinese President Xi Jinping, while speaking at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, introduced “a new type of international relations”¹⁴ focusing on common development and shared security. He highlighted five key points for this new theory: (a) building a partnership of equality, mutual consultations and mutual understanding, (b) forging a security pattern of fairness, justice, broad participation and sharing, (c) seeking open, innovative, inclusive and mutually beneficial development, (d) promoting harmonious but differentiated and inclusive exchanges among civilizations, (e) fostering an ecosystem of respecting nature and green development. This, he called, a “five-in-one” blueprint for China’s future effort to build a “community of common future” for mankind¹⁵.

Emerging Synergy

As is evident from the above sections, the theory of “common, comprehensive, and sustainable security” has decisively united China and India in the seas and beyond. It is interesting to observe that both the countries have risen to the evolving global security mandate which requires concerted effort from every stake holder rather than actions driven by self-interest. Even in their immediate neighbourhood, both China and India are no longer restricting themselves to the role of being net security

providers, but are seeking to engage with powers, big or small, rich or poor, strong or weak, on equal footing, with mutual respect, ensuring mutual benefit. This is a welcome approach as it will not just create an overall favourable and positive regional security environment but will also help to build trust between China and India themselves, especially in the IOR, by dispelling of conspiracy theories like “Indian Ocean being India’s ocean” or “China’s String of Pearls in the IOR”. Hence, as China and India redefine their narrative on security and discover synergies between their thoughts, the world is set to move a step closer to the idea of Asian concert of power.

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