

ВОЕННЫЕ НАУКИ

INDIA'S CHINA STRATEGY: A CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL

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DOI: [10.31618/ESU.2413-9335.2020.8.76.954](https://doi.org/10.31618/ESU.2413-9335.2020.8.76.954)

ABSTRACT

The article studies the conflict between China and India with reference to current geopolitical and geo-economic developments. China and India have had serious differences over border areas since the 1950s. Both countries have huge military expenditures which The article highlights that a military option by India is unworkable, and it will affect the development of the country. COVID-19 has reaffirmed the shift in the balance of world power from the United States to China, particularly in Asia. India needs to accept this stark reality. At present India does not have a realistic strategy to peacefully coexist with China. The article advocates a focused political and diplomatic effort to resolve the border dispute between India and China. The article is relevant for diplomats, civil servants, military experts and researchers in both countries engaged in international relations and conflict studies. The article may be of interest for relevant courses and programs at universities.

Keywords: India, China, strategy, border dispute, energy, trade, military, navy.

“In 2019 China and India were, respectively, the second- and third-largest military spenders in the world. China’s military expenditure reached \$261 billion in 2019, a 5.1 per cent increase compared with 2018, while India’s grew by 6.8 per cent to \$71.1 billion. ‘India’s tensions and rivalry with both Pakistan and China are among the major drivers for its increased military spending.’”¹

- Siemon T. Wezeman, SIPRI Senior Researcher

Introduction

PLAN has been sending ships and submarines to operate in the Indian Ocean for some years now. It is not the only foreign Navy operating in the Indian Ocean. The Government of India and the Navy have been making public statements regarding the Indian Navy’s monitoring the activities of the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean. India hopes that China’s dependence on the Malacca straits for passage of oil and other strategic minerals could be exploited during a conflict. India has also gone along with the United States in being a party to an artificial ‘Indo-Pacific’ construct. China has resolved land border disputes with all countries other than India, including Russia and Vietnam with whom it had border skirmishes much later than that with India.² However, it continues to hold onto mainly maritime claims regarding Taiwan, the South China Sea and the Senkaku-Diaoyu islands held by Japan.

Historical Perspective

The ‘China Factor’ in Indian foreign policy has been an important issue for Indian politicians. In the 1950s, the fraternal friendship between the two

countries led by strong leaders, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Chairman of the Communist Party Mr. Mao Zedong promised to redefine Asia. Dreamers even entertained the idea of India and China piloting a post-colonial renaissance in the developing world.³ However, this idealistic vision was short-lived and ties between China and India have been under great stress since the 1962 war. Though Chinese troops withdrew from Indian territories except an insignificant 2000 square kilometers of Alpine desert in Ladakh after approximately two and half months. This may have been aided by the fact that both the superpowers - the United States and the Soviet Union as well as Britain openly supported the Indian cause. Subsequently, the relationship between the two giant Asian neighbours has been based on mutual distrust, rivalry and occasional border clashes and skirmishes. This trust deficit is exacerbated by China’s longstanding relationship with Pakistan, India’s defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian war, long-standing border disputes, increasing competition for resources and influence and history, which most Indian politicians and members of the security establishment are unaware that China’s one century of humiliation commenced with the Opium wars in which Indian soldiers recruited by the East India Company played the key role in an attack on Hong Kong, the sacking of the Forbidden City and the aftermath. This of course was fictionalised by Amitav Ghosh in his extraordinary Ibis trilogy (Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire) which recreated events up to the first opium war of 1839-42.⁴ The Belt and Road Initiative further complicate the relationship

¹ SIPRI, Global Military Expenditure Sees Largest Annual Increase, Stockholm, 27 April 2020. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/global-military-expenditure-sees-largest-annual-increase-decade-says-sipri-reaching-1917-billion> (accessed 10 May 2020).

²Ralph Jennings, China’s 3 worst border disputes and its Best Border Buddy, 27 July 2017. URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphjennings/2017/07/27/chinas-3-worst-border-disputes-and-its-best-border-buddy/#407912fb4f36n> (accessed 10 May 2020).

³Atul Aneja, Wuhan’s Promise, The Hindu, Visakhapatnam, May 16, 2018. URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/wuhans-promise/article23897881.ece#> (accessed 17 May 2018).

⁴Alex Clark, Flood of Fire by Amitav Ghosh review – the final installment of an extraordinary trilogy, 05 June 2015. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/05/flood-of-fire-by-amitav-ghosh-review>

2015. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/05/flood-of-fire-by-amitav-ghosh-review>

between Asia's two fastest growing powers. The ongoing border dispute, trade imbalances, and competition for influence across South and Southeast Asia also thwart efforts to reduce the pervasive mistrust. Ultimately, this mistrust challenges the security and stability of the entire region. As of today, the border dispute between India and China still remains unresolved, and large border areas to the East and West of Nepal and Bhutan are under substantial military surveillance by both countries.

This 'China factor' continues to linger in Indian foreign policy issues, and although steps have been taken by both India and China to normalise relations, a deep sense of mistrust remains. The consequence of this 'China factor' is that whatever China does, India has to follow and that China is considered as the main rival in the region and vice-versa. Many commentators have termed the 21st century the 'Asian Century', a period where India and China are expected to rise to become global great powers as in the historical past. Consequently, the relationship between these two countries will have wide-ranging consequences for the rest of the world. New Delhi and Beijing do find common ground and cooperate in international forums such as the BRICS, the G20, SCO and in Climate Change Conferences where both countries leverage their convergent interests to shape international trade rules to ensure their continued domestic development and economic growth.⁵ Steps have been taken in recent years to reduce the imbalance in trade and initiate cooperation and reduction of tension even in the disputed border regions for mutual benefit.⁶

The ongoing and strategic alliance between China and Russia is interesting for India in another aspect, namely the so-called 'strategic triangle' between India, China and Russia which the SCO represents to some degree. The former Russian Prime Minister Primakov was the architect behind this idea, which envisaged a strategic triangle around the axis of Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi. But although this triangle has been inconsequential in terms of deeper cooperation between the three countries, it is still perceived in international political discourse as a 'power balancer' vis-a-vis the United States in advancing a multi-polar world order. The larger geopolitical picture depends on how the Sino-Russian relationship converges or diverges.

The government needs to ensure mechanisms that were first established during Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's historic visit to Beijing in 1988, and subsequent steps taken such as the agreement on peace and tranquility on the border negotiated by Prime

Minister PV Narasimha Rao government and the 2013 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh negotiated Border Defence Cooperation Agreement are implemented properly and gradually; and steadily institutionalised for mutual benefit.⁷ The overhang of the border row and its aftermath has marred a full-scale rapprochement between the two countries despite these welcome measures. President Xi Jinping's ambitious visit in 2014 was sullied by the military face-off in Chumar in Ladakh.⁸ The supplementary steps of 2015, concluded with China by Prime Minister Modi during his later visit to China to give additional teeth to previous measures, were also tardy in implementation. "Irritants" between the two countries have multiplied due to India boycotting the May 2017 international summit gathering in Beijing to launch the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) attended by almost everyone else including Japan and USA (whether or not they went along with the Initiative).⁹ The Doklam faceoff or near war situation happened a few weeks after the BRICS summit. The inexplicable failure to "operationalise the hotline between the two Military Headquarters" agreed upon could have been one of the contributory factors to the Doklam crisis.¹⁰ We need to keep in mind that China has resolved border disputes with all countries including Russia; the only exception being India. Our quest for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group will not fructify in the face of China's adamant refusal to countenance this. Post the recent Wuhan meeting between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi the two leaders were unable to issue even a joint statement. Each side issued its own press release and the difference in tone and substance was not conducive for cordial relations.¹¹

The US President Donald Trump has crashed into the India-China equation. China worries that the so-called trade war is only the beginning of Washington's long campaign to impede China's rise. The Chinese have indicated their urgency to seek India's backing to counter the headwinds blowing across the Pacific by initiating a dialogue with India inclusive of rectifying the imbalance in trade and related measures including possibility of agricultural imports from India. According to Atul Aneja "*China perhaps views India as part of a larger pan-Asian riposte to Mr. Trump's America First Doctrine. Beijing is also re-engaging with Japan, South Korea and ASEAN to make Asia the new pivot of globalization.*"¹² After the Wuhan summit, the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang visited Tokyo for a trilateral summit. Japan, South Korea, and China are advocating a Regional Comprehensive Economic

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/05/flood-of-fire-amitav-ghosh-review-installment-trilogy> (accessed 10 May 2020).

⁵The Center for Climate and Security, US Geographic Combatant Commanders on Climate Change, Website: <https://climateandsecurity.org/available> at URL: <https://climateandsecurity.org/2012/03/20/the-u-s-geographic-combatant-commanders-on-climate-change/> (accessed 17 May 2018).

⁶Mani Shankar Aiyer, Wuhan Flop Show, 02 May 2018, Website: <https://www.ndtv.com/available> at

URL: <https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/at-wuhan-flop-show-modi-put-in-his-place-by-xi-by-mani-shankar-aiyar-1845600> (accessed 02 May 2018).

⁷Mani Shankar Aiyer, Wuhan Flop Show, op.cit.

⁸Atul Aneja, Wuhan's Promise, op.cit.

⁹Mani Shankar Aiyer, Wuhan Flop Show, op.cit.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Atul Aneja, Wuhan's Promise, op.cit.

Partnership, a free trade bloc which will not only cover these three countries but will also bring together ASEAN with other major economies of the region including India, Australia and New Zealand.¹³ In view of these far reaching developments we need to be realistic and pragmatic about our relations with China.

Colonial and NATO navies have been operating in the Indian Ocean from times immemorial. Some of them such as the United States and France continue to have bases in the Indian Ocean. It may be recalled that Diego Garcia part of the Chagos archipelago had been handed over by the United Kingdom to the United States for use in 1968 during decolonization. In 2019, the United Nations highest court the International Court of Justice (ICJ) stated that the United Kingdom's occupation of the Indian Ocean archipelago was illegal. The US base at Diego Garcia has been vital to the US military supporting military missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, serving as a landing spot for bombers that fly missions across Asia, including over the South China Sea and also includes remote satellite tracking stations, support and logistic teams. As per the ICJ ruling, which is advisory to the United Nations General Assembly, the territory should be returned to Mauritius. China's greatest naval explorer Admiral Zheng sailed his treasure fleets as far as East Africa. Spreading Chinese goods and prestige, Admiral Zheng He commanded seven voyages that established China as Asia's strongest naval power in the 1400's. As the world's defacto economic powerhouse China only seeks a return to its glorious past. The United States which is trillions of dollars in debt still holds sway only due to goods and services being traded in dollars. In a recent report, the Times, UK reported, "*Officials at the US Federal Reserve expressed concern about the stability of the financial system during their rate-setting meeting late last month, it emerged last night. Some were worried that stresses caused by the coronavirus pandemic posed risks to American banks and some other financial companies, particularly if the worst-case scenario for COVID-19 was realised*".¹⁴ However, even before COVID-19, economists and financial analysts had already projected the onset of the 'Greatest Depression' for the United States impacting several countries with strong trade and economic ties to the United States. These analysts have also stated that the coronavirus situation is a fig leaf to mislead the world on serious economic infirmities facing the world. As on date 38 million people or 40% of the working population are unemployed in the United States. Therefore, the United States realistically cannot be considered as the world's only remaining superpower. Paul Kennedy succinctly remarked in his masterpiece on "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" that when a nation overextends itself militarily as Great Britain

did, it has to give way to an emergent power like then the United States [1, Kennedy P., p. 438]. A similar situation now exists between the United States and China.

The media has quoted the Indian Chief of the Naval Staff's alleged statement at the Raisina Dialogue, "If anyone operates in our region, they have to notify us first."¹⁵ The statement may have been at the behest of the government or he may have been ill-advised by his staff. Article 17 of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS] states that, the right of innocent passage for foreign vessels within the territorial sea of a coastal State is defined as "navigation through the territorial sea (up to 12 nautical miles) for the purpose of (a) traversing that sea without entering internal waters or calling at a roadstead or port facility outside internal waters; or (b) proceeding to or from internal waters or a call at such roadstead or port facility [2, UNCLOS, p. 26]." Passage must be "continuous and expeditious," but it may include stopping and anchoring when incidental to ordinary navigation or rendered necessary by unusual circumstances [2, UNCLOS, p. 26]. Article 19 of UNCLOS declares that passage is "innocent" so long as it is not prejudicial to the peace, good order, or security of the coastal State and further outlines a list of 12 activities that are considered "prejudicial [2, UNCLOS, p. 27]." To the best of knowledge of this author Chinese naval ships have never transited within India's territorial waters. Freedom of the seas is laid down in Articles 87 to 90 which the United States attempts to enforce in the South China Sea [2, UNCLOS, p. 54]. Article 90, Right of Navigation states that "*every state, whether coastal or land-locked has the right to sail ships flying its flag on the high seas* [2, UNCLOS, p. 54]." Article 89 declares that "*no state may validly purport to subject any part of the high seas to its sovereignty* [2, UNCLOS, p. 54]." Consequently, according to UNCLOS, there is no legal basis for preventing China from operating in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Navy too could operate in the South China Sea provided the political leadership is ready to make a challenge. However, all in the security establishment aware that China has only carried out transit operations to protect its merchant shipping, carry out operational turnarounds (OTRs) at vital ports of interest and in the process demonstrated its reach and sustenance. It has also probably collected vital hydrographic data and become familiar with the operating environment as any Navy would do. What needs to be borne in mind is that even the South East Asian countries affected by the South China Sea dispute have not called upon the United States to formally intercede in the dispute after the judgment of the Permanent International Court of Arbitration on the

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴James Dean, Fed worries over stability of US financial system, The Times, London, 21 May 2020. URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fed-worries-over-stability-of-american-financial-system-k0gfnfx2s> (accessed 21 May 2020).

¹⁵Brian Mcgllenen, India issues warning after China antagonizes New Delhi with warships in Indian Ocean, London, 14 April 2020. URL: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1268940/india-china-war-conflict-navy-indian-ocean> (accessed 21 May 2020).

South China Sea dispute between China and the Philippines had ruled that there was no legal basis for China's claim in the South China Sea. This author does not support Chinese action in the South China Sea but the issue has no linkage with the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) which is about operating on the high seas. If the United States and other NATO navies can operate here in the IOR then so can China under the aegis of international law. It may also be recalled that under Operation Enduring Freedom the NATO navies were operating at will in the North Arabian Sea and India accepted the situation even though it was within our area of operations. Indian submarines particularly faced a difficult situation when on their peacetime missions.

In contrast to the frequent shrilled pronouncements in the Indian media about so-called intrusions into the Indian Ocean Region (actually "the high seas"), despite alleged harassment by Chinese vessels against drilling operations in five oil blocks by Petronas, Malaysian Foreign minister Hishammuddin Hussein stated on 23 April 2020 in his first official remarks on the standoff which had reportedly gone on for months, "*While international law guarantees the freedom of navigation, the presence of warships and vessels in the South China Sea has the potential to increase tensions that in turn may result in miscalculations which may affect peace, security and stability in the region*".¹⁶ Hishammuddin further stated that Malaysia maintained "open and continuous communication"¹⁷ with all relevant parties, including China and the United States. Of course, the United States, though a non-signatory to UNCLOS as the self-styled policeman of the world claims that it is duty bound to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

An annual Freedom of Navigation report is submitted to the US Congress [3, US DOD, p. 3]. The latest version of the Maritime Claims Reference Manual (MCRM) was issued by the DoD Representative for Ocean Policy Affairs (REPOPA) on 20 October 2014 under the authority of DoD Instruction S-2005.01, Freedom of Navigation (FON) Program [4, US Navy, p. 1]. It provides a general reference concerning what the United States calls the excess maritime claims of coastal nations which (The Russian Federation, China, Saudi Arabia, India and other countries constitute the list) includes prior notification for transit in territorial waters held by the United States as a violation of the Freedom of Navigation. Its principal purpose is to facilitate the DoD Freedom of Navigation Program executed by the United States Navy [3, US DOD, p. 3]. As per the document the

United States does not recognise Indian regulations regarding territorial sea, Archipelagic straight base lines and historic claims, contiguous zone, continental shelf, fishing zone / EEZ enacted vide "*The Territorial Waters, Continental Shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone and other Maritime Zones Act, 1976, Act No. 80 of 28 May 1976*" [5, GOI, p. 1]. The right for prior notification in case of a transit through territorial waters is similar to what China has enacted, except of course it's so-called historical claim to the South China Sea. Article 4(2) of the Act declares that "*Foreign warships including submarines and other underwater vehicles may enter or pass through the territorial waters after giving prior notice to the Central Government*" [5, GOI, p. 1]. The United States has stated on the website that it carried out its last FON program in India's territorial sea in 2011 and last FON program in the EEZ in 2014 [3, US Navy, p. 4]. The Ministry of Defence and the Indian Navy have not made any public remarks on this document and the operations claimed by the United States Navy on its website. Similarly there is no media report of an official protest made by the Ministry of External Affairs when there was a violation of the sovereignty of India as defined in Article 3 of the Act. However, since India is now a strategic ally, Freedom of Navigation operations have not been carried out against India since 2014 [3, US Navy, p. 4].

In another interesting example, despite many mutually shared interests, the U.S. and Canada have conflicting views on the disposition of the Northwest Passage. The U.S. and other nations believe it to be an international strait subject to transit passage, while Canada sees the passage falling under its sovereignty as internal waters, requiring adherence to the more prescriptive innocent passage regime in UNCLOS [2, UNCLOS, p. 26]. However, only the South China Sea is highlighted by the Western media and faithfully reproduced in the Indian media.

PLA Navy Force Level and Capability

In terms of force levels there is no comparison between India and China. The last two decades have seen an exponential growth in Chinese military spending coinciding with consistently high economic growth. The PLA Navy has been a particularly beneficiary of this increased military spending. According to Ying Yu Lin, an expert on the PLA, "*The successive commissioning of two aircraft carriers and stands for the PLA's determination to establish a far seas presence*".¹⁸ A recent US Congressional naval analyst report (March 2020) on Chinese developments highlighted that, "*China's navy, which China has been steadily modernizing for more than 25 years, since the early to mid-1990s, has become a formidable military force within China's near-seas region, and it is*

¹⁶Channel News Asia, South China Sea: Malaysia says resolve dispute by Peaceful means, 23 April 2020. URL:

www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/south-china-sea-malaysia-disputes-resolved-peaceful-means-12670036&sa=D&sntz=1&usq=AFQjCNHG4tXZs17VnmGQvHrodSYnZ1zpfw

(accessed 24 April 2020).

¹⁷Channel News Asia, South China Sea: Malaysia says resolve dispute by Peaceful means, op.cit.

¹⁸Center for Strategic and International Studies, How does China's Aircraft Carrier stackup?, Website <https://www.eng.chinapower.csis.org/>, 2019, available at URL: <https://chinapower.csis.org/aircraft-carrier/> (accessed 19 December 2019).

conducting a growing number of operations in more-distant waters, including the broader waters of the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and waters around Europe. China's navy is viewed as posing a major challenge to the U.S. Navy's ability to achieve and maintain wartime control of blue-water ocean areas in the Western Pacific—the first such challenge the U.S. Navy has faced since the end of the Cold War—and forms a key element of a Chinese challenge to the longstanding status of the United States as the leading military power in the Western Pacific. China's naval modernization effort encompasses a wide array of platform and weapon acquisition programs, including anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), submarines, surface ships, aircraft, unmanned vehicles (UVs), and supporting C4ISR (command and control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) systems. China's naval modernization effort also includes improvements in maintenance and logistics, doctrine, personnel quality, education and training, and exercises" [6, Rourke R., p. 2].

Further, according to a recent article in *The Times* (UK), "The United States would be defeated in a sea

war with China and would struggle to stop an invasion of Taiwan, based upon a series of "eye-opening" war games by the Pentagon. American defence sources informed the newspaper that simulated conflicts conducted by the US concluded that their forces would be overwhelmed".¹⁹ One war game focused on the year 2030, by which time the Chinese navy would operate new attack submarines, aircraft carriers and destroyers.²⁰ The analysis also found that Beijing's accumulation of medium-range ballistic missiles has already made every US base and any American carrier battle group operating in the Indo-Pacific Command region vulnerable to overwhelming strikes.²¹ An underwater warfare analyst, has highlighted that open-source intelligence analysts could pinpoint a United States or Chinese aircraft carrier hundreds of miles out to sea.²² The closer the aircraft carrier gets to land the more vulnerable it is particularly against a resolute enemy with a layered defence of maritime patrol aircraft, submarines and shore-based anti-ship missiles. And if it stays out at sea, then the reach of its aircraft is limited.²³



This satellite image shows the 105,000-ton aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln at sea. Even ... [+] SATELLITE IMAGE FROM SENTINEL HUB, INSERT US NAVY

¹⁹ Michael Evans, The US would lose any war fought in the Pacific, *The Times*, London, 16 May 2020. URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/us-would-lose-any-war-fought-in-the-pacific-with-china-7j90bjs5b> (accessed 21 May 2020).

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²HI Sutton, The Realities of Tracking Aircraft Carriers with Satellites, *Forbes*, 07 May 2020. URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/05/07/the-realities-of-tracking-aircraft-carriers-with-civilian-satellites/#43fbd34a4224> (accessed 21 May 2020).

²³Ibid.

Figure 1: Satellite image of USS Abraham Lincoln at sea²⁴

In 2015, the Pentagon did not deny a report that a Chinese submarine had shadowed the US aircraft carrier Ronald Reagan off the Sea of Japan and it would also be relevant to recall the famous incident of a Chinese submarine surfacing within torpedo firing range of the US carrier Kitty Hawk in 2006 which called into question the anti-submarine warfare capability of the carrier strike group.²⁵ The National Interest Blog reported on 04 March 2015 that in an earlier incident, *the French Navy reported in a Twitter blog post that the submarine Saphir (“Sapphire”), one of the smallest nuclear submarines ever put to sea had simulated stalking and killing the carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (50 times its size).*²⁶ *The post mentioned that not only was the nuclear powered aircraft carrier sunk but an unknown number of her escorts.*²⁷ The objective of this exercise was to train an American carrier strike group (CSG 12 for Carrier Strike Group 12) composed of the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, several Ticonderoga or Arleigh Burke type frigates and a Los type submarine Angeles, before their operational deployment.²⁸ The exercise took place off the coast off Florida which familiar waters for the US Navy and also included the P3C and P8 Poseidon ASW aircraft.²⁹ *The post was later deleted without comment from the blog.*³⁰ The incidents have highlighted that the US Navy’s anti-submarine warfare skills have greatly deteriorated since the end of the Cold War, particularly since 9/11.³¹ These examples may be noted by the Defence Acquisition Panel. Such encounters in favour of our submarines are common in the Indian Navy’s own actual and simulated war games, though the Indian aircraft carrier has been always

treated as a “holy cow” (or unsinkable ship) by game control which buries its head in the sand like an ostrich. It is also relevant to mention that the much hyped P8I aircraft has had little success against submarines in the IOR except some detections in structured exercises. Rationally speaking there is no possibility of even limited sea control in the Indian Ocean for the Indian Navy. Similarly, Chinese ballistic missiles both conventional and nuclear can reach all parts of India. India has yet to develop such missiles though plans have been underway for some time. Therefore, realistically considering the PLAN force level and capabilities or deficiencies highlighted above, the Indian Navy may struggle to exert influence on the flow of trade to China through the Indian Ocean.

China’s Malacca Dilemma?

Another common fallacy is that the Chinese Navy needs to operate in the Northern Indian Ocean, especially the Malacca straits in a conflict situation to safeguard their shipping. Unlike India which has only 10 days strategic reserves of oil China has several months of reserves and they have strategically thought of several various resource options. There are several alternate routes available namely the Sunda, Lombok and Ombai Wetar straits which if used by the Chinese navy will severely test the reach of the Indian Navy. Targeting data is a major problem area in any international shipping lane and there is no solution other than to establish a Total Exclusion Zone but that is an unviable option in the Indian Ocean with so many nations dependent upon oil, gas from the Middle East and other products through the Suez Canal.

China’s Resource Gambit

²⁴HI Sutton, The Realities of Tracking Aircraft Carriers with Satellites, Forbes, 07 May 2020, op.cit.

²⁵Franz Stefan-Gady, Closest Encounter since 2006: Chinese Submarine Tailed US Aircraft Carrier, The Diplomat, 04 November 2015. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/closest-encounter-since-2006-chinese-submarine-tailed-us-aircraft-carrier/> (accessed 11 May 2020).

²⁶Kyle Mizokami, 2015: French Submarine Sank Americas Mightiest Warship Aircraft Carrier, 23 December 2019. URL: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/2015-french-submarine-sunk-americas-mightiest-warship-aircraft-carrier-108076> (accessed 21 May 2020).

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Kyle Mizokami, 2015: French Submarine Sank Americas Mightiest Warship Aircraft Carrier, op.cit.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

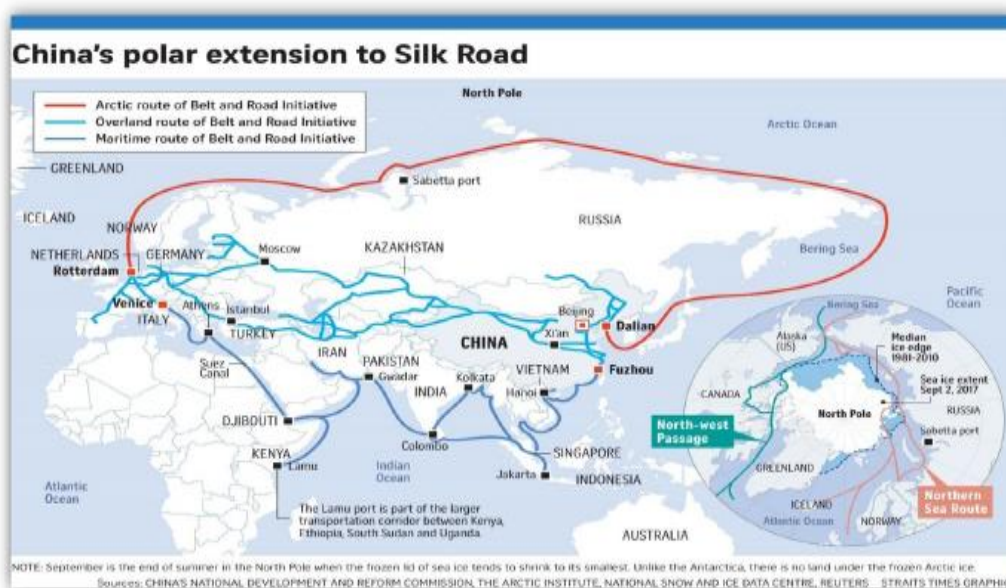


Figure 2: Representation of China's Polar Silk Road³²

China has steadily developed its One Belt One Road concept. One of the aspects of this policy has been to ensure that alternate routes are available for the transportation of oil, gas and strategic minerals to China [7, Zhang X., p. 370-395]. The political instability in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East has encouraged countries of Northeast Asia; including

China to cooperate with Russia in development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) or the Polar Silk Road [8, Kalfaoglu R., p. 114]. China has formalized its involvement in the development and exploration of the Arctic by its inclusion of northern maritime routes into a network of blue maritime passages of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [7, Zhang X., p. 370-395].

³² China National Development Corporation, quoted in Mathew Ehret, *The Polar Silk Road comes to life as a New Epoch in History*, URL: <https://southfront.org/the-polar-silk-road-comes-to-life-as-a-new-epoch-in-history-begins/> (accessed 21 May 2020).



Fig. 3. Pictorial depiction of the Northern Sea Route vis-à-vis the Suez Canal route³³

A fundamental part of the future Polar Silk Road is the Northern Sea Route (NSR) which runs along Russia's Arctic coast and provides easier access for cross-continental shipping in polar waters [8, Kalfaoglu R., p. 115]. For China particularly, in view of the present dangerous geopolitical situation, with a declared trade war, the threat to the Oil producing countries of West Asia, the use of the "Pandemic COVID-19" as a form of trade and economic warfare, the threat of blockade since sanctions can be arguably considered as blockade; the NSR though it involves a larger financial outlay and creation of the necessary

infrastructure, is a safer and shorter alternative strategic route which must be developed along with the land route across Central Asia and Eurasia [9, Bhagwat J., p. 5]. North East Asia has already developed as a region of significant economic importance. It is therefore an opportunity for China to contribute its technologies and investment and to benefit from collaboration with Russia in this sphere. Consequently, as sea-ice continues to retreat, the volume of traffic on the NSR will undoubtedly grow, especially to North East Asia.

³³Russia Today. Russian Arctic Sea Route Shipping exceeds 10 million tons in Q1, 13 May 2020. URL: <https://www.rt.com/business/488519-northern-sea-route-freight/> (accessed 21 May 2020).

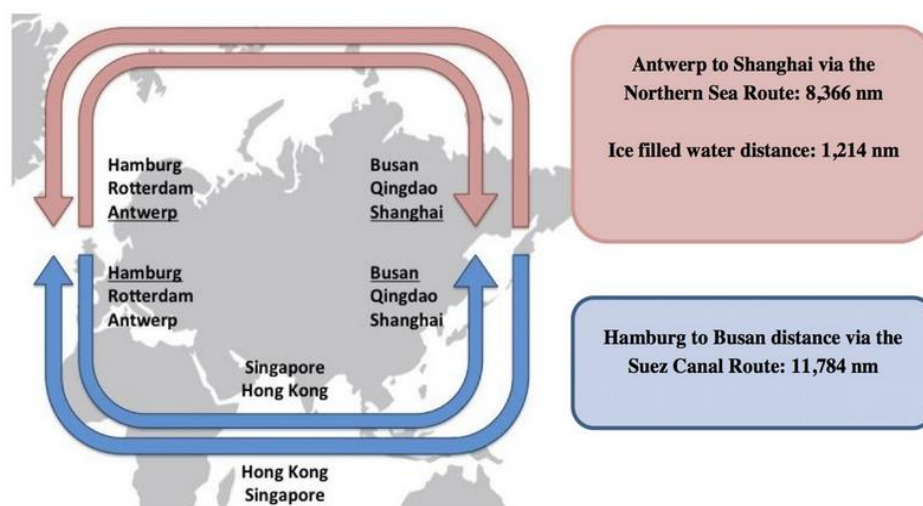


Fig. 4. Distance advantage of the Northern Sea Route vis-à-vis the Suez Canal route³⁴

Russia and China agreed on gas supplies via the Power of Siberia 3000 km pipeline in 2014, when Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a 30-year contract to deliver 38 billion tons of gas per year by 2025 from Irkutsk and Yakutia³⁵. The pipeline called “the world’s biggest construction project” was launched on December 02, 2019, by the Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Another significant project according to an Oxford Energy study has been, “the Yamal LNG {CEO has been the most successful LNG project in the world during the past

decade. Novatek’s CEO Leonid V. Mikhelson actively promoted by the Russian government brought together an international consortium (see Table 1) comprising one international company with LNG expertise (TOTAL), one major buyer of LNG (CNPC from China) and one major source of finance (Silk Road Fund) whose investment paved the way for Chinese lenders to cooperate with the project [10, Henderson J. and Yermakov V., p. 14].” This propelled the project to completion ahead of time and brought in Japanese investment in 2019 for phase 2 of the project.

Table 1.

Shareholder structure of Novatek LNG projects [10, Henderson J. and Yermakov V., p. 14]

Yamal LNG		
Shareholder	Country	Interest (%)
Novatek	Russia	50.1
Total	France	20.0
CNPC	China	20.0
Silk Road Fund	China	9.9
Arctic LNG 2		
Shareholder	Country	Interest (%)
Novatek	Russia	60.0
Total	France	10.0
CNPC	China	10.0
CNOOC	China	10.0
Japan Arctic LNG (JOGMEC/ Mitsui)	Japan	10.0

Consequently, China is expected to become Russia’s second-largest gas customer after Germany, which bought 58.5 billion m³ of gas from Russia in

2018 after this pipeline becomes fully operational in 2025.³⁶ Russia is now China’s largest oil supplier.³⁷ It can therefore be deduced that China has effectively

³⁴Pavel Devyatkin, Russia’s Arctic Strategy; Maritime Shipping (Part IV), 27 February 2018. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/russias-arctic-strategy-maritime-shipping-part-iv/> (accessed 21 May 2020).

³⁵Russia Today. Putin and Xi to launch strategic natural gas pipeline from Russia to China in December. 12 November 2019. URL: <http://www.rt.com/business/473218-putin-xi-power-of-siberia> (accessed 05 May 2020).

³⁶Deutsche Welle (DW), Russia, China launch gas pipeline ‘Power of Siberia. 02 December 2019. URL: <http://m.dw.com/en/russia-china-launch-gas-pipeline-power-of-siberia/a-51500187> (accessed 05 May 2020).

³⁷Christopher Weidacher Hsiung. The Emergence of a Sino-Russian Economic Partnership in the Arctic. 19 May 2020. URL: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/emergence-sino-russian-economic-partnership-arctic/> (accessed 20 May 2020).

checkmated the so-called Malacca dilemma. The use of sanctions by the United States against both Russia and China has binded them together not only economically but also from the security aspect. India will need to come up with an effective strategy to counter this.

Strategy

In the view of the above, in the pragmatic view of this author the Government of India and the Indian armed forces, especially the Navy needs to do a serious rethink on its China strategy. According to Mohan Malik, *"A limited conflict could set India's economic development back by a decade or two and further widen power symmetry. Beijing will have then achieved its objective of neutralising any challenge to Chinese supremacy in Asia."*³⁸ As far as the Indian Navy goes it would do well to restart exercising with the PLA Navy post resolution of current issues just as the Indian Army did in December 2019 as it is essential to know the opponent if India continues to think of China in those terms. The government needs to resolve the border dispute at the earliest. For this it will need to be pragmatic in its approach as in the view of many experts and this author is that the border dispute with China is a hangover of the colonial past.³⁹ According to various accounts, the 1962 War was a fallout of the then Indian government decision to establish 40 forward posts.⁴⁰ post the 1959 skirmish when China hardened its position after India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama.⁴¹ Though there was an offer from China for a status quo settlement probably due to immense pressure from Parliament and the public who were not really aware of the background of the issue.⁴² Despite the advice of the then Army Chief General Thimaya to seek a diplomatic solution, the pragmatic frontier-flagging 'Forward Policy' of the 1950s was abandoned by a more aggressive 'Forward Policy' in 1961 which involved forward movement of troops, who were ill-prepared for the task. As Srinath Raghavan highlighted in his analysis regarding the myths of Nehru's interference and intelligence failure, neither did the civilian leadership nor did the military apply themselves seriously to the possibility of a full-scale war despite intelligence inputs in May and September 1962.⁴³ One of the important points that Raghavan puts forward is that the Intelligence Bureau's reports were not subject to rigorous military and political analysis. He also brought a critical point, *"It is when people with similar institutional backgrounds and worldviews dominate the entire chain of intelligence collection and policy formulation, group-think and tunnel vision are*

*unavoidable consequences. This lesson of 1962 is still worth remembering."*⁴⁴

As an immediate first step, both India and China need to revert to status quo ante as per 1993 bilateral agreement which was implemented for 28 years on the ground both de jure and de facto. It may be recalled that after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's landmark visit in 1988 both countries had agreed to work towards a boundary settlement and the 1993 agreement was the first step towards achieving this vision.⁴⁵ Our political leadership and diplomatic establishment need to do some serious introspection as to how Russia and Vietnam have resolved their border issues with China and we continue to linger on jingoistic issues and act as a hedge against China at the behest of the United States. Working towards non-aggression and no first use of nuclear weapon weapons pacts may be vital steps in this regards. Neither country must participate in trade wars against either country while rebalancing trade in the interests of poverty alleviation and development.

India's ready participation in the US Indo-Pacific construct has already alienated Russia as it is working hard in conjunction with China to ensure that there is a semblance of a multi-polar world. The political leadership and the military establishment need to take into account that apart from public statements the United States may not be able to influence China in any way in case of skirmish or border war between China and India. It may be relevant to mention that China continues to vigorously support Iran and Venezuela despite US reservations on the issues. In addition, unlike in 1962, Russia is likely to stay neutral. The entire political, diplomatic and military establishment needs to factor in the extremely close security and economic relationship between Russia and China.

The military and particularly the Navy may consider more detailed studies on the victories of Japan in the Russo-Japanese conflict of 1905, the defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu by Vietnamese forces led by General Giap and the surrender of the United States at Saigon in 1975 to devise cost effective strategies rather than be carried away by the military-industrial complex of the United States and other nations bending over backwards to get a share of India's defence spending. In addition, the Chief of the Defence Staff, and service chiefs cannot remain oblivious of the state of the country and they are duty bound to ensure that defence spending which comes from all the tax payers (direct and indirect) must be realistic They must not be swayed by an obsession to

³⁸Mohan Malik. Straight Talk on China-India rivalry. April 2018. URL: https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/DrMalik_StraightTalk4-18_Fweb.pdf (accessed 20 May 2020).

³⁹HS Panang. Not China, 1962 War called India's Bluff. 12 October 2018. URL: <https://theprint.in/opinion/not-china-1962-war-called-indias-bluff/133196/> (accessed 20 May 2020).

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Srinath Raghavan. Persistent Myths about 1962 War are Intelligence Failure and Nehru's meddling. 16 October 2018. URL: <https://theprint.in/opinion/2-persistent-myths-about-1962-china-war-are-intelligence-failure-nehru-meddling/135302/> (accessed 20 May 2020).

⁴⁴Srinath Raghavan. Persistent Myths about 1962 War are Intelligence Failure and Nehru's meddling. op.cit.

⁴⁵Sushant Singh. Why 2017 is not 1987. URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/dok-lam-standoff-india-china-army-troops-war-bhutan-4781309/> (accessed 20 May 2020).

fight a battle with big expensive toys which may actually turn out to be a liability. Unfortunately, the government, military and the media have been heavily influenced by a concerted US effort to influence decision making in strategic circles and toe the anti-Chinese line of the Western world. The effusive charm employed by United States President Donald Trump during his India trip is merely one of the many force multipliers exercised by an economically beleaguered Washington seeking to sell New Delhi varied military equipment for billions of dollars, and affirming bilateral strategic ties as a hedge against a resurgent China. According to security analyst, Rahul Bedi, *“The other more protracted and consequently effective inducements are*

the raft of scholarships to American universities handed out to the offspring of top Indian politicians, civil servants and defence and intelligence officers, and the patronage extended to Service officers under the long established Military Education and Training (IMET) programme”.⁴⁶ Apart from this, the holding of Indo-Pacific seminars at New Delhi and a yearly visit by a team of China experts from the United States Naval War College to the Naval War College, Goa to influence the Naval Higher Command Course are just two examples of this persistent US effort to strangle independent military thinking focused purely on national interests.



Fig. 5. President, US Naval War College Rear Admiral Jeffrey A Harley leading the delegation including Former CNS Admiral NK Verma (distinguished International Fellow, USNWC) to build bridges with the Indian Naval War College, Goa⁴⁷

Conclusion

China is the preeminent economic and naval power in Asia. COVID-19 has reaffirmed the shift in the balance of world power from the United States to China, particularly in Asia. India needs to accept this stark reality. At present India does not have a realistic strategy to peacefully coexist with China. General HS Panang in his succinct analysis of the 1962 conflict, *“Rather than calling the bluff of the Chinese, our own bluff was called.”*⁴⁸ History has repeated itself due to the lack of serious introspection by the security establishment. It is being used as a pawn by the United States in the new Cold war. As a way out of this impasse India could coordinate with Russia a strategy for a multi-polar world to balance the asymmetry in the present balance of power in Asia. However, first and

foremost India needs to urgently re-examine the border question to arrive at a realistic and viable solution. At the same time the military, especially the Army and the Navy would do well to study the examples of conflicts where weaker nations vanquished militarily stronger nations and develop a realistic strategy taking into account budgetary cuts.

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⁴⁶Rahul Bedi, Patronage as a US Force Multiplier, *The Hindu*, Visakhapatnam, 13 December 2010, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Patronage-as-a-U.S.-force-multiplier/article15591876.ece>, (accessed 21 May 2020).

⁴⁷Indian Navy, US Naval War College Delegation visits Naval War College, Goa, 15 March 2018, available at URL: <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/us-naval-war-college-delegation-visits-naval-war-college-go>, (accessed 21 May 2020).

⁴⁸HS Panang. *Not China, 1962 War called India's Bluff*. op.cit.

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