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X-Factor in Sino-Indian Detente and Deterrence

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Abstract

The X-factor that makes China view India more seriously now than at any time before is the rising interest in both Washington and New Delhi for reciprocal defence cooperation. There is, of course, no direct evidence, at the official levels, to suggest that the United States and India have already begun to act in concert against China. At the same time, the latest 'classified' recommendations of India's Task Force on National Security, led by Naresh Chandra, have stirred a debate. In this evolving milieu, the recent offer by the US to help India upgrade its military capabilities – in qualitative terms – is, potentially, a new factor in New Delhi's long-cherished calculus of strategic autonomy. India's moves towards the US in this context will be watched closely by the larger international community.

Introduction: Task Force on India's Security²

People's Republic of China and the Republic of India have shared a chequered and complex relationship with each other since their emergence as two independent players on the international stage in the mid-20th Century.

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² India's Task Force on National Security, headed by Mr Naresh Chandra, presented its report to India's Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, in New Delhi on 23 May 2012. http://www.pmindia.gov.in/content_print.php?nodeid=1436&nodetype=1. Accessed on 28 July 2012.

By 2012, when they are poised for global roles, this being true of China more than India as of now, their relationship has already been marked by a continuous phase of deterrence and diplomacy which began in 1998. This phase, which in fact marks the fourth definitive stage in Sino-Indian ties since the 1950s, may last into the foreseeable future. The reason is simple. Today's uneven competition between the two countries, if it continues, is likely to sustain the ongoing bilateral dynamics.

Significantly, the United States (US) is becoming a factor in the India-China equation, with Washington and New Delhi being inclined to consider acting in concert whenever possible to hedge against Beijing's continuing rise. In the event, an extension of the current phase into the future will signify a period of greater diplomatic duality: India-China political detente or political diplomacy and Sino-Indian military deterrence.

In fact, it is evident that such a possibility guides the thinking in some key circles of strategic and security affairs in India at this time. This seems to be true of India's Task Force on National Security, whose recommendations are being selectively purveyed in the Indian public domain now. Officially, the entire report of this panel, however, remains a 'classified' document.

Headed by Naresh Chandra, formerly a civil servant as well as a diplomat and a constitutional office-bearer, the panel is the first of its kind set up in normal times to review India's entire defence and national security establishment. In one significant sense, the main recommendations of the panel are believed to cover the many details of this establishment.

It is also learnt by this author, on good authority, that a serious look by the Naresh Chandra committee at India's external environment, in strategic and security terms, set the stage for the panel's main study and related proposals. Much of what is now selectively known in the public domain pertains to this grand sweep of India's external strategic and security environment. Evident from these snippets is the scenario that the panel wants India to pursue a dual policy of detente and deterrence in dealing with China.

Arguably, the panel may or may not have used these precise words in the same sequence and with the same exactness of meaning as perceived and narrated here by this writer. However, the committee's basic approach is reported to be an advocacy that India must raise its military profile in order to be able to face an increasingly powerful China which is also willing to project and exert that power.

In simple terms of political science, the principle of India-China detente translates into the idea that they can and must co-exist peacefully as Himalayan neighbours now and also into the future. This simple but profound proposition is not nullified by the fact that China is enormously ahead

of India as a rising power in many respects. Several international observers have already begun to see China as a fully-risen power in many key economic and military aspects.

Equivalence, Not Equality

As for the military doctrine of deterrence, there is a very subtle nuance to be noted in the India-China context. Even before the Naresh Chandra panel was set up, India started seeking a credible degree of equivalence, not absolute equality, with reference to China's defensive and offensive military capabilities inclusive of its nuclear posture. Indeed, India's recent success in test-firing Agni-V ballistic missile testifies to this aspect of New Delhi's actions.

Official India, still smarting under the psychological impact of the 1962 war with China, has not so far chosen to publicise the report of Naresh Chandra panel. Unsurprisingly, in addition, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has not announced so far any action plan on the basis of proposals made by this Task Force, which submitted its unprecedented report to him on 23 May 2012. However, the current public debate in India on this issue reflects strong support for a muscular military posture by New Delhi with reference to China. Genuine advocacy of caution will, therefore, be needed to temper this debate.

In addition to the moral dimension of an arms race anywhere in the world at any time, India simply cannot afford a costly arms race with China, weapon-system for weapon-system. The current gap between the economic resources of these two mega-state-aspirants for global roles puts India at a huge disadvantage. There are also prudent geo-political reasons why India should tread firmly but cautiously in pursuing its genuine national interest.

A US Offer to India

Unsurprisingly in this context, a new international reality has emerged in recent years, or more precisely, in recent months. The United States has now offered to help India enhance its military capabilities in qualitative terms as different, in nuance, from a quantitative build-up of New Delhi's arsenal.

Concerned about the skyrocketing economic and military rise of China as a mega-state, the US is eager to mobilise friends and allies on its side to meet a possible day of reckoning with reference to China sometime in the future. For the American strategic and military officials, therefore, a fellow-democracy like India is an obvious choice as a potential friend in their strategic calculus

for global dominance. For the US, a more tempting factor is India's geo-strategic location as China's Himalayan neighbour in the Indo-Pacific region. India's potential, not actual, economic strength is another factor that the US does count on at this stage. In the perception of pro-US or US-sympathetic Indian experts, too, Washington's strategic interest in New Delhi can promote India's own national interest of not remaining far behind China far into the future.

Changing Seasons on India-China Front

It was in the mid-20th Century that Nehru's India and Mao's China began their engagement on a promising note of friendship which, for a variety of reasons, turned into a fight in 1962. These two aspects defined the first definitive phase – Friendship to a Fight – in Sino-Indian ties since the 1950s. Inevitably, as it were, the bitterness of the 1962 War, on both sides, paved the way for the second phase – a Long Winter in Sino-Indian relations – which lasted until 1988.

In that year, India's young leader of the time, Rajiv Gandhi, travelled to Beijing for a historic meeting with China's paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping. In many ways, it was that summit which set the stage for the third phase – a New Spring, which lasted nearly a decade. The New Spring reached a high point during the time China's Jiang Zemin and India's P V Narasimha Rao launched Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) for peace and tranquillity along the disputed Sino-Indian border.

The two countries were beginning to think out of the box during that period – the third phase. Not all of those out-of-the-box thoughts were acceptable to both sides, though. Notable during that period (1988-1998) was the fact that Rao stopped in his tracks, for whatever reason, after firmly deciding to test nuclear weapons. His initial decision to take India up the atomic arms avenue and his subsequent U-Turn were classic examples of some out-of-the-box thinking that aroused mixed feelings in the Sino-Indian domain. Many Indians, regardless of their pro- or anti-nuclear-weapons positions, were dismayed that Rao stopped in his nuclear tracks at the "behest" of an external power like the US. For Official China on that occasion, India's incoherent actions only confirmed its incompetence.

A Signpost to Diplomatic Duality

As a nuance, Rao's approach of launching CBMs with China and dallying with the option of testing nuclear weapons served as a signpost to the possibility that India would choose the duality of detente and deterrence in dealing with China.

Eventually, the generally positive mood of the New Spring in Sino-Indian relations got buried under the political fallout of the nuclear-weapons tests that India, under A B Vajpayee as Prime Minister, conducted in 1998. It is public knowledge that China took a stridently dim view of the event. In significant contrast, China's first nuclear-weapon test in 1964 and India's controversial 'peaceful nuclear explosion' in 1974 occurred during the Long Winter in Sino-Indian relations (1962-1988).

Viewed thus, Beijing's decision to take serious note of New Delhi's 1998 nuclear-weapon tests and India's move to project them as an essay in military deterrence against China marked the start of the fourth phase in Sino-Indian ties. It is easy to notice that a big political bang from the Indian side set off this fourth phase, which is still ongoing.

As for the politics of this current phase, India's general preference for the military-deterrence card against China since 1998 has gradually led to some qualitative diplomacy between the two countries. It is in this context that India now clearly hopes to re-order its relationship with China on the basis of the complementary principles of political detente and military deterrence. Such a new strategic insight rings true, but not necessarily as the only possible prescription, in the present-day context of China-India engagement on a host of issues.

In fact, the duality of detente and deterrence makes sense when viewed from both New Delhi's standpoint and Beijing's commanding heights, despite the current asymmetry between India and China in their military profiles. Theoretically, China, the decisively stronger economic and military power as of now, need not have the same degree of strategic compulsion as India's for reciprocal deterrence. In today's real world, however, there is no mystery about the strategic compulsions of both India and China to try and deter each other.

An X-Factor

The X-factor that makes China view India more seriously than at any time before is the rising interest in both Washington and New Delhi for reciprocal defence cooperation. There is, of course, no direct evidence, at the official levels, to suggest that the United States and India have already begun to act in concert against China.

Fu Xiaoqiang, an expert on South Asian affairs at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, has commented on India in the context of the current developments in the South China region. His comment in the Global Times, relevant to that context, is of illuminating value to our present discussion as well. As published on 22 May 2012, a day before

the Naresh Chandra panel report was presented to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Fu said: “India’s ‘Look East Policy’ has gradually become a strategy of acting in the east. Although it [India] won’t make itself a second US in the region, at least it believes it should set itself higher targets. It will speak out in more international affairs and try to extend its influence”.³

Noting, too, that Beijing’s neighbours “have more concerns about China [now than before] and will seek support from the US”, Fu said these neighbours “retain close economic ties with China” at the same time. “Breaking that contradiction is a task that China faces”, Fu emphasised. Significantly, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao told his Indian counterpart in Rio de Janeiro on 20 June 2012 that China and India should enhance political and strategic mutual trust so as to advance bilateral ties on the right track.⁴

This comment acquires importance because of some media reports that the Naresh Chandra panel has drawn attention to the long-standing perception, in some Indian quarters, about China’s policy of containment of India. The panel is also reported to have drawn attention to the possibility that the US might eventually turn cautious towards an increasingly powerful China and even accommodate or accept its global stature.

A School of Thought

It is in this milieu that an emerging school of thought tends to advocate that India must now seize the moment and seek to capitalise on the latest US offer to enhance the qualitative dimension of India’s military machine. In this line of thinking, there can be a window of opportunity for India to benefit from – before the US begins to accept the finality of a fully-risen China. Surely, Official India has not even whispered a word about any move to ride on US shoulders in this fashion. However, the relevant US offer is a matter of definitive public record.

Speaking in New Delhi on 6 June 2012, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta categorically stated as follows: “I want to stress that the United States is firmly committed to providing the best defence technology possible to India. We are both leaders in technology development, and we can do incredible work together. Indeed, I think, a close partnership with America will be [the] key to meeting India’s own stated aims of a modern and effective defence force”.⁵ Building up the theme, Panetta said: “In terms of regional security, our [US] vision is a peaceful Indian

³ Global Times, Wang Wenwen, Published on May 22, 2012. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.as...> Accessed on 28 July 2012

⁴ Global times (Quoted from Xinhua and Agencies). [http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.as ...](http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.as...) (Published on June 21, 2012). Accessed on 28 July 2012.

⁵ <http://www.defense.gov/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/...> Accessed on 9 June 2012.

Ocean region supported by growing Indian capabilities. ... At a strategic level, we have worked together to counter piracy, to counter terrorism". More significantly, he also spoke of cyber security and outer space exploration as two post-modern areas of possible collaboration between the US and India.

Conclusion: India's Nuclear Profile and Strategic Autonomy

A strand of out-of-the box thinking remains totally unsaid by Panetta and is totally absent from the official and non-official discourse in India as well as the US at this time. This relates to the technological capability of the US to help India safeguard its nuclear deterrence, more precisely nuclear weapons, in a credible state of good repair over the longer term. It occurs to this writer that New Delhi may eventually feel compelled to think of such a US-related option for two reasons: one, India's own military compulsions to keep its nuclear weapons in a credible state of good repair far into the future; and two, the international expectation that India will continue to honour its current public commitment of observing a voluntary and unilateral moratorium on nuclear-weapons testing.

Such an insightful option, which India can think of, is surely not on offer by Washington at this stage. Nor has Official India dropped any hint whatsoever about any such option. However, the US and several other major powers have already come to accept the current status of India as a *de facto nuclear-armed state*. It follows, therefore, that the US, if it seeks the company of India to hedge against China's continuing anti-gravity rise as a potential superpower, cannot afford to let New Delhi's nuclear deterrence wither because of a genuine moratorium on further Indian n-tests. In the same breath, it must be said that the envisioning of such a scenario is not an argument in favour of any particular course of action in regard to the sensitive issue of the future of India's nuclear deterrence.

In fact, while there is room for many conventional possibilities in the light of Panetta's recent offer to India and on the basis of Naresh Chandra panel's report, it is in India's enlightened self-interest to retain strategic autonomy as far as possible.

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