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China-India Defence Diplomacy: Weaving a New Sense of Stability

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Abstract

The real storyline of the Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister's latest talks with Indian leaders in New Delhi is in the timing and the broad-based themes of his visit to India – the first in eight years by a military dignitary in his position. Significantly, a passage in a report on this visit, as carried on the official website of the Chinese Ministry of National Defence, says that the coming together of China and India “could tilt balances” in global geopolitics. Inevitably, therefore, the emerging US factor in the China-India equation becomes a matter of debate.

Introduction: Military Charm Offensive

For China's leaders and diplomats, brevity has often been the soul of wit in their public discourse on their varied engagements with India's representatives. Such brevity has also served as a reflection of the asymmetry between the fast-rising China and the slow-rising India in the economic and military domains. So, it is unusual that China's Ministry of National Defence has now publicised, through five positive reports on its website, the five-

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day visit to India by the Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister, General Liang Guanglie, from 2 to 6 September 2012.

If a colourful phraseology of marketplace is applied to the rarefied atmosphere of Sino-Indian defence diplomacy, it stands to reason that China is not at all animated by irrational exuberance of any kind towards India now. Indeed, irrational exuberance is quite alien to Beijing's practised art of defence diplomacy, which is different from the perceived Chinese military activism in the zone of South China Sea, in recent years. Such a categorical view is evident from the methodical fashion in which an increasingly rich China is investing in its military modernisation of a very high order. Chinese military modernisation is routinely well-chronicled by the United States and several independent strategic-affairs institutions.

In the latest China-India context, noteworthy is the fact that the Joint Press Communique on Gen Liang's talks with his Indian counterpart A K Antony does not, in a turn of the political metaphor, set either the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean on fire. So, what is the true nature of the latest dynamics in China's military-to-military ties with India?

The real storyline is in the timing as much as in the broad-based themes of Gen Liang's meetings with Antony and India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi on this occasion. Critics of this line of thinking will of course argue that the timing of any such visit is often decided well in advance to suit the respective calendars of the leaders concerned. To this extent, the timing of any key state-to-state discussion is often down-played in official discourses on international diplomacy.

Transcending such a counter-argument, it is in fact easy to discern that Beijing's defence diplomacy towards New Delhi at this time coincides with the ongoing run-up to a major political transition in China in the second half of 2012. Officially unstated but self-evident is the perception that China will be glad to weave a sense of stable ties, not necessarily a web of "all-weather friendships", with as many major powers as possible in the wider Asia Pacific region during this run-up and beyond.

In such a perspective, the Joint Press Communique² – issued during the latest visit to India by Gen Liang, the first such visit by a Chinese military leader of high political standing after a time-lag of eight years – does help promote a degree of stability in the bilateral defence domain. However, the Press Communique must not be misread as a newly minted Sino-Indian defence pact or even as a lower-order bilateral memorandum of understanding. This worthy piece of paper does not belong to either of these categories.

² <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx>. Accessed on 7/9/2012.

Beyond the Past Paradigm

An inference of this kind is traceable to the following political punch-line in the Press Communique: “The two Defence Ministers agreed to work together to enhance mutual trust in the security field and continue to maintain peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas. They noted that the leaders of India and China have designated 2012 as the Year of India-China Friendship and Cooperation”.

Beyond this, the Chinese Ministry of National Defence quoted, on 7 September 2012, Gen Liang as saying that he and his Indian interlocutors “have positively evaluated China-India relations and the ties between the armed forces of the two countries”³. In that Beijing-dated report by China’s state news networks, he also emphasised that “we have affirmed cooperation between the armed forces”⁴ of the two countries. The leaders of the two armed forces, too, “attach great importance to developing the military ties”⁵, he added for good measure.

On 6 September 2012, the Chinese ministry endorsed a more significant Beijing-dated report from the same state news networks. The report sought to place the latest China-India military-related engagement in some new light beyond the hitherto-known paradigm of bilateral defence diplomacy. The relevant passage reads as: “The two countries [China and India] ... discussed sensitive issues including improving border [-related] relations and the situation in South Asia and the Asia Pacific region”⁶.

This was followed by a totally unusual comment: “The two sides also talked about America’s look east policy which includes plans to shift a large part of [US] navy to Asia Pacific region and India’s take on the same. As the world geo-political situation goes through a massive change, the coming together of the two largest countries [China and India] that also have the strength of their economies could tilt balances”⁷.

This theory that China and India could together “tilt balances” in global geopolitics shows how the timing of Gen Liang’s visit to New Delhi is viewed by the Chinese officialdom beyond the coming political transition in Beijing. Here, the timing of the latest China-India Press Communique has been given an international dimension, with a recent offer to India by United States Defence Secretary Leon Panetta serving as the key reference point. In a speech in New Delhi on 6 June 2012, Panetta had offered America’s “best defence technology

³ http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2012-09/07/content_4397869.htm. Accessed on 8/9/2012

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2012-09/06/content_4397715.htm. Accessed on 8/9/2012

⁷ *ibid*

possible”⁸ to India. Of equal or greater relevance to China, Panetta underscored that “a close partnership with America will be key to meeting India’s own stated aims of a modern and effective defence force”⁹.

An Open Secret

It is an open secret that India’s military planners have China very much on their minds while wanting to build what Panetta has described as “a modern and effective defence force”. India first articulated such a military focus after testing nuclear weapons in 1998, with the then Indian Prime Minister, A B Vajpayee, writing to the then US President, Bill Clinton, that the tests were carried out to galvanise Indian defences against China. The dynamics of global geopolitics have changed a lot since that time, with China’s military capabilities rising dramatically and those of India rising slowly but steadily.

Official Beijing is perhaps more aware than many ‘realist’ scholars that linear projections about the future-sustainability of China’s economic and military growth might, in fact, go wrong because of several still-unresolved issues concerning the Chinese society. Evidently, therefore, China’s present leadership is focusing on a host of priorities. One of them clearly is to keep the country’s military flanks secure, both internally and externally, during the planned political transition in 2012 and beyond. It is in this context that China has now gone out on a military charm offensive in India.

This does not signify, implicitly or otherwise, that Beijing sees in India a potential military ally in China’s efforts to face what it tends to regard as a ballooning ‘America threat’. Several complicating factors, including the Chinese-Pakistani “all-weather friendship”, show that Beijing does not envision, and observers cannot assume, a simplistic China-India nexus, real or potential, against America at this stage. On the whole, Gen Liang’s latest charm offensive in New Delhi has had a more modest effect of recognising India as a potential military power worthy of China’s careful attention. No more than a theoretical possibility, as of now, is this semi-official (or non-official) Chinese idea that a China-India tie-up could indeed “tilt balances” in the current global geopolitical situation.

In such reasoning, it is evident that Gen Liang’s just-concluded visit to India acquires additional importance because of US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta’s likely visit to China by mid-September 2012. In a manner of speaking, the China-US military-to-military engagement belongs to another planet, compared to the Beijing-New Delhi defence

⁸ <http://www.defense.gov/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/...> Accessed on 9/6/2012

⁹ *ibid*

diplomacy. Yet, intrinsically relevant to the China-US engagement is the latest semi-official (or non-official) Chinese idea that a Beijing-New Delhi tie-up could in fact “tilt balances” in today’s global geopolitical situation.

With Gen Liang and his Indian interlocutors having discussed “India’s take” on US “plans to shift a large part of [American] navy to Asia Pacific region”, it is possible that he may ask Panetta about Washington’s knowhow-offer to boost New Delhi’s military capabilities. Overall, Panetta’s likely visit to China (as this is written) and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s talks with Chinese leaders in Beijing on 4 and 5 September 2012 help the two countries finesse their ties ahead of a crucial political transition in China’s power structure.

Fielding the usual flurry of questions about US-China issues, Hillary Clinton said in Beijing on 5 September 2012: “Our two nations are trying to do something that has never been done in history, which is to write a new answer to the question of what happens when an established power [the US] and a rising power [China] meet. We are going to have critics in both of our countries who are going to second-guess decisions that we are making. But I feel strongly that we are on the right track in building a positive, cooperative, comprehensive [US-China] relationship for the 21st century”¹⁰. This comment is meant to finesse US-China ties at this stage.

Conclusion: Who ‘Tilts Balances’ in Asia?

The fine print of the latest China-India defence-related Press Communique is just basic in scope and does not address the totally unusual view in China about the players who could “tilt [global] balances” or at least the balance in the Asia Pacific region. Designed essentially as a confidence-boosting document, the Joint Press Communique outlines a future menu of agreed exchanges between the two sides on the civilian and military sides of the defence establishments of the two countries.

As for the Sino-Indian boundary dispute, nothing new has been said by either side at this time. The Special Representatives of the two countries remain tasked to find a mutually acceptable formula that could help settle the dispute itself. There is also a relatively new Working Mechanism in place, since January 2012, to address ground-level issues along the Line of Actual Control in the harsh Himalayan terrain.

The two countries have now agreed to “conduct the next round of [confidence-building] joint military exercises at the earliest”¹¹. The aim is to break a four-year logjam in this regard, several issues of political sensitivity having caused the disruption.

¹⁰ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/09/197343.htm>. Accessed on 8/9/2012

¹¹ <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx>. Accessed on 7/9/2012

Politically more significant are two other decisions by India and China at this stage. One, they have reached “consensus”¹² to “further enhance and strengthen cooperation between the naval forces of both sides, in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia”¹³. Secondly, China and India have struck “consensus” to “work together [closer home] to maintain peace and stability of the Asia Pacific region”¹⁴.

It is in the Asia Pacific theatre that triangular interactions among the US, China, and India might, if at all, come into play in “tilting [the global] balances”. China has now recognised, either semi-officially or only unofficially, that Beijing and New Delhi could potentially tilt the global balance. At the same time, India and the US have increasingly shown signs of gravitating towards each other. It is, therefore, significant that the official website of China’s Ministry of National Defence has purveyed a report by the Chinese state news networks on the potential of Beijing and New Delhi to work together to “tilt [the existing global] balances”.

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¹² ibid

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ibid