

Complex Cold Warriors: US-China Relations & Implications for India

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Introduction

US-China relations have assumed a new dimension in recent years and reflect the various tensions and mutual suspicions that are inevitable in a relationship between an existing super power and a rising super power.

The existing super power interprets every act of assertiveness by a rising super power as a challenge to its so far uncontested supremacy in international politics. The rising super power, on the other hand, perceives the assurances given by the super power to its partners and allies as yet another ploy to contain it.

The super power considers military modernisation programmes, expansion of military goals and areas of operation; and the growing defence expenditure of the rising super power as challenges to its power and influence. The rising super power, on the other hand, seeks to justify the expansion of its military agenda as an indispensable part of its preparedness to defend its growing global interests.

When the rising super power strengthens its trade and investment relationships with the allies and partners of the super power, the latter perceives it as a diminishing of its influence in those countries. The super power then responds by reiterating its security commitments with the allies and partners at the slightest hint of diplomatic or military muscle flexing by the rising super power.

The “allies and partners” are thus sandwiched between two pressures—the need to protect economic interests with the new rising super power and the imperative of continuing the security ties with the super power. The complexity is further compounded when the existing and the emerging super power are bound together by a robust economic relationship. While the economic interests and the fear of losing out constrains the reactions of both, the need of the emerging super

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power to assert and the apprehensions of the existing super power over the loss of influence spark tensions, reminiscent of the Cold War.

Complex Cold War

In the above scenario China is very conscious of its emerging status as a global power largely in view of its unprecedented economic growth and successful military modernisation programmes. Chinese domestic debate reflects the desire of China to be an established super power in the years to come. The perception among many Chinese analysts that America is a declining power and the fear of Chinese leaders that the US would erect barriers to prevent China from assuming its new role in world affairs have in recent years generated considerable mutual fears and misperceptions.

American domestic debates on international politics, on the other hand, have off late, focussed on American failures and difficulties and Chinese economic achievements and military developments. There are concerns that China may be able to pose serious threats to US national interests at the current level of its growth in “comprehensive national power”. It is not difficult to discern in the American debate a lurking anxiety over losing the status of the sole super power and a desire to maintain the status quo.

What clouds thinking both in the US and China is related to overestimation of the strengths and an underestimation of the weaknesses of each other. In the absence of any accurate estimation of strength and weaknesses, mutual suspicions can be increasingly witnessed in US-China relations.

American Grievances and Criticisms

Seen from American perspective, the following developments are not in keeping with the American national interests.

- China is rapidly modernising its military in the absence of a credible threat. Its ASAT weapons, cyber security activities, ballistic missile programmes, antisubmarine warfare capabilities are all aimed at denial of access to the US military.
- China has violated international law by declaring South China Sea to be part of its “core” interest and extending Chinese sovereignty to the entire island groups claimed by many countries.
- China coddles North Korea in the face of the latter’s aggressive moves on WMD issues as well as against South Korea. While China facilitated the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear weapons programme, it was inflexibly against the imposition of sanctions against Pyongyang. Beijing

maintained a wilful silence when North Korea sunk a South Korean naval vessel killing more than forty sailors and its troops fired at a South Korean Island killing a number of civilians.

- China does not cooperate fully in dealing with Iranian intransigence on nuclear issues. While it demonstrates diplomatic suppleness in the UN Security Council and supports the resolutions against suspected Iranian nuclear activities, it joins hands with Russia to ensure that the sanctions are either weak or insignificant.
- China continues to support the Pakistan's WMD programme despite the persistent threat of nuclear terrorism in that country.
- China has gone beyond merely searching for energy in Latin America and has built up security ties with anti-American regimes, such as the Hugo Chavez regime in Venezuela.
- China has raked up border and maritime disputes with most of America's allies and partners in Asia—Vietnam, Japan, India and South Korea—in a show of inflexibility and assertiveness.
- China does not fully cooperate in addressing the global economic crisis. By keeping its currency undervalued, China seeks to make the most of the current crisis with little concern for global stability.
- The list is longer, but China also has its share of grievances. Chinese worries are largely the following:
 - US alliances with Japan, South Korea and many other Asia-Pacific countries are clearly aimed at containing China. The end of the Cold War rivalry with the former Soviet Union and the unprecedented economic cooperation with China have not persuaded the US to dismantle the alliances.
 - The US has been spying on China through its surveillance ships and aircraft sometimes even violating Chinese territorial sovereignty in so doing.
 - The US supplies sophisticated military equipment to Taiwan and, by implication, encourages elements in Taiwan that do not want the merger with mainland China.
 - US leaders- even the president - meet with Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama and interfere in the internal affairs of the country by encouraging the dissidents.
 - China views the US military presence in Afghanistan/Pakistan with suspicion considers it as part of the 'encirclement of China' strategy.
 - China has been noting the emerging US-India strategic partnership and considers it a part of American strategy of containment and encirclement. China neither wholeheartedly endorsed US-India nuclear deal nor could it stomach the Obama administration's decision to support the Indian

membership of the UN Security Council, the Nuclear Suppliers' Group and other international non-proliferation regimes.

- China does not hide its resentment over American observations on the human rights record of the country. Beijing not only considers this interference in its internal affairs but also sees in it an American game plan to ultimately overthrow the communist regime.

Strategic Signalling

In the backdrop of these negative perceptions of each other, Washington and Beijing have been indulging in action-reaction-counter-reaction exercises that are reminiscent of the Cold War mind set and moves of yesteryears. Such instances are many and a new pattern in the relationship is slowly becoming apparent. The following incidents are noteworthy in this connection:

- China tested its first stealth aircraft when defence secretary Robert Gates was visiting China for normalising the military to military dialogue process. The US responded by shooting down one of its satellite that had become dysfunctional. While the parties may give other justifications for their respective actions and may deny any correlation, observers have not missed the strategic signals.
- The Taiwan issue has remained a sensitive subject even after three decades of the passage of Taiwan Relations Act in the US Congress. It is China's core interest to annex Taiwan by peaceful means or by using force. The US appears determined to prevent China from doing so and keeps arming Taiwan to enhance its defensive capabilities. China in recent years has responded more vehemently to US arms supplies to Taiwan by cutting off its military to military interactions with the US as and when Washington announces an arms sale to Taiwan. Admittedly, Taiwan remains a dangerous flashpoint that may spark a US-China military confrontation.
- China put the issue of its sovereignty over the South China Sea islands on hold for about a decade when it wanted to demonstrate the peaceful nature of its rise to the world. But it has now declared the region to be part of its "core interest" and that simply means that the sovereignty issue is no longer negotiable. This goes against the very principle of peaceful resolution of the issue through multilateral dialogue that Beijing agreed to in 2002. In response to the Chinese move, the United States has not only been calling for multilateral negotiations to resolve the issue but also has considered maintaining safety of sea lanes passing through South China Sea as part of its national interest.
- The US decided to upgrade its security ties with Vietnam. It has also offered to enter into a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with Hanoi. In a curious

turn of events in the region, the US supported Vietnam when Chinese ships attacked Vietnamese fishing ships or oil exploration vessels. While not taking a position on Vietnam's claim in the South China Sea, Washington has objected to Chinese ultimatums against the hiring of US oil companies by Vietnam or any other country to explore for oil and gas in the waters of South China Sea.

- When China overreacted to the arrest of a Chinese captain of a fishing vessel by going to the extent of banning the export of rare earths to Japan, the US threw its diplomatic weight behind Japan.

Implications and Options for India

India has a host of issues to settle with China. China certainly does not consider India as a friendly country. It has openly sided with Pakistan in the latter's anti-India policies and actions. Pakistan's mischievous anti-India policies and military misadventures drew psychological support if not direct material support from the Sino-Pakistan strategic alliance. That China uses Pakistan to box India into South Asian conflicts is a well accepted fact.

India's fast emergence as a global player, an economic power house, a new strategic partner of the US and a new political and economic actor in the Asia Pacific region has not gone down well with Chinese throat. While China has long considered India as anything but a threat, India's decision to go nuclear and the US support for India's growing role in world affairs have altered the Chinese perception of India. It has come to see India as a competitor and views the Indo-US strategic partnership as an anti-China development. It harbours apprehensions that the US wants to bolster India's profile as part of its hedging strategy against China.

China's continuing protest against India's treatment of Tibetan minorities, the alleged political role played by the Dalai Lama from Indian soil; Beijing's recent moves to issue stapled visas to Kashmiris and deny a visa to an Indian military officer in charge of the Kashmir region; its claim over Arunachal Pradesh and protest against the Indian prime minister's visit to the state; the presence of a large number of Chinese people in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir on some pretext or another and many other issues have recently exacerbated bilateral tensions. One may add to this - the Chinese reluctance to endorse India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council; China's discomfort over President Barrack Obama's support to India's membership of international non-proliferation regimes and China's behind the scenes opposition to India's inclusion in regional groupings in the Asia Pacific.

In the backdrop of these, it will be an Indian hallucination to consider China as a partner who would work in tandem with India and other countries for establishing a multi-polar world. What then are India's options in meeting the emerging challenges?

India's current policy is based on bilateralism. India has developed positive economic ties with China and desires to resolve all other outstanding issues peacefully through dialogue and negotiations. This policy has limited benefits, since economic ties that have enabled China to maintain a substantial trade surplus have had no positive effect on its perception of India while India has willingly engaged China economically at the cost of growing and worrying trade deficit. The Indian government mistakenly hopes that trade and economic relations with China will dissuade Beijing from pursuing anti-India policies.

China has a policy and position on many issues that affects India's core national security concerns. But India does not seem to have similar positions on issues related to China's concerns. India has no stated position on Taiwan, the South China Sea dispute, the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of interests and the Senkaku Island dispute between China and Japan. But China on the other hand takes a position on India-Pakistan issues as well as other issues in South Asia. India has to revise its approach towards Asia Pacific and take stands on issues commensurate with its increasing role in that region.

India has the option of complementing its policy of bilateralism with a multilateral approach by teaming up with the US and other like-minded countries in the region to work in a hedging strategy involving not the containment of China but to prevent it from acting unilaterally to pressurise on others. China's rise is increasingly being viewed by regional countries as destabilising, particularly after its recent flexing of military and diplomatic muscles. While many Asian countries, threatened by China, are already looking to the US to underwrite their security, India's position has been vague.

At one time, scholars argued that emergence of a powerful China would be a positive development that would end the unipolar power structure of the world and counter US unilateralism. But China's recent strategic and political behaviour indicates that it would just focus on its narrow national interest rather than bother about the larger issues of global peace, equity and stability.

China apparently loves the concept of G-2, although it speaks of the need of a multi-polar structure along with Russia, France and others. China desires a bipolar

world where it would be considered the second pole. The economic downturn in Europe, the decline of Japan as a major international actor and the slow return of Russia as a significant player in global politics makes it possible for the Chinese desire to be realised.

But given the current US-China relationship with each other it is very likely their posturing that a G-2 world is more likely to be a tension-ridden and Cold War type world than a world that would witness a global condominium by the US and China. The US-China tension, nonetheless, will be limited, constrained and to certain extent regulated by the economic imperative. The US-USSR Cold War was direct, forthright and bereft of major economic considerations. But the US and China are so entangled in a web of economic tie-ups that they cannot afford to have military confrontation. Moreover, America's strategic allies and partners also have strong economic ties with China and would find their policy and positions on issues guided by economic considerations.

While the US would not like any rival power centre to challenge its supremacy; and China appears to be seeking the second place in the global power hierarchy, India needs to work towards a multi-polar world order. France, Britain, Russia and the European Union as a whole and many other Asian, African and Latin American middle powers will most likely join India in this endeavour. Such a smart non-alignment would enable a multi-polar power arrangement where it will not only be the US and China that would influence events; other actors too would have a role. This would prevent unilateralism, whether Chinese or American - and, more significantly - would prevent any escalation of tensions between the two. 