VIF Brief | February 2021

The US-China Bout

Who's on the Ropes?

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Vivekananda International Foundation

Published in 2021 by

Vivekananda International Foundation

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AVM Rajesh Isser was commissioned in the Indian Air Force (IAF) in Dec 82 and has over 8000 hours of flying to his credit, including combat experience in Sri Lanka (Indian Peace Keeping Forces 1987-88), Siachen Glacier, Kargil (1999) and Congo (UNPK 2003-04). He is a Category A flying instructor. He has operated with all Special Forces of the Indian Armed Forces in various operations since 1983. He has also trained with the NSG as helicopter crew for special missions. He has held numerous operational commands and staff appointments in his career of 37 years.

He has been the IAF's HADR Task Force Commander in many rescue and relief ops all over India, including Uttrakhand 2013, Ladakh-Leh 2010, Andhra-Karnataka 2009 and Arunachal Pradesh 2000. He has also done HADR coordination in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan over the years. He has commanded an Aviation Unit in UN Peacekeeping Mission in DR Congo (MONUC) under Chapter VII. He flew and coordinated a number of humanitarian missions in DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda.

As a Director of Net Assessment at HQ IDS, he has coordinated numerous strategic projects and has authored strategy reports on many critical issues. He is an author of three books and has a number of articles to his credit in national and international journals on diverse subjects such as disaster response, peacekeeping, airpower in counter-insurgency, irregular conflicts etc. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies on leadership challenges in disaster response.

The US-China Bout: Who's on the Ropes?

Abstract

The world is witnessing momentous shifts in geopolitics, and in fact, in every facet of human life. The US-China zero-sum game for dominance may well define pathways nations take to bring prosperity to their people in the next decade. This paper attempts to track current issues of this 'race' especially after a change of presidency in the US. In particular, issues in the Indo-Pacific in terms of fast-changing policies of both powers are explored from the Indian perspective. A new rivalry encompassing trade restrictions, currency battles, technological race and denial, cyber war, and hybrid wars that combine all these, has emerged with pulls and pushes affecting all nations. The end-result is a series of questions that leads to a short narrative of a plausible conflict.

Introduction

S Jaishankar, the Indian Foreign Minister very eruditely explains in his book *The India Way* that "momentous shifts" are portended ahead which include increasing nationalism and risk-taking by nations. India cannot afford to be a bystander in this, and therefore, he advocates more "realism" for Indian policy makers ahead. He cites China as an example where contrary to the expectation; a dominant superpower (US) assisted the aspiring one to rise. India's opportunity for leapfrogging is evident in this thread. Ram Madhav, an Indian Parliamentarian states in the India *Foundation Journal*, "Just as the centrality of the ASEAN to the Indo-Pacific cannot be overlooked, centrality of India to the Indian Ocean too cannot be underplayed."[1]

While the terms of the competition or confrontation are still evolving, and this will be a continual process, some major segments have been clearly highlighted by both nations as to who will hold the keys to the top floor in the hierarchy of power, influence and prosperity. These fall under domestic recovery post-Covid19, economic performance in a new normal, resilience against future such shocks, harnessing of emerging technologies, R&D, social stability, military power and capabilities in an environment where the character of war and competition is changing rapidly, and an ability for efficient and effective whole-of-govt (or even society) approaches.

A new rivalry encompassing trade restrictions, currency battles, technological race and denial, cyber war, and hybrid wars that combine all these, has emerged with pulls and pushes affecting all nations. Factors that will have a bearing on each nation's trajectory are many, however, there are those that will strengthen or weaken a nation's comprehensive ability for world-wide influence and dominance. For example: demographic structure and skilling; national behaviours and international alignments; innovation ecosystem; governance capabilities and core competencies; and, in an 'informationised' world, an ability to control and manage public narratives.

Xi and a generation of CCP leaders have acutely studied the Soviet Union's collapse by mistakes of a corrupt and incompetent Soviet Communist Party that loosened political control and failed to put down nationalist impulses. It was also seen as a successful design of the US and other western powers.[2] Therefore, Xi and CCP used anxiety to shore up party member's loyalty and convince the public for the need of its protection. This narrative required an 'enemy' i.e. US/West. China's spate of strong military and economic actions, against its adversaries, were neither rushed nor a reaction to threats.[3] Opening up many fronts to disrupt and create disequilibrium, indicated that either China was preparing decisive military action against one adversary (Taiwan or India) or alternatively seeking to project a message to the world. Subduing India after a change in status quo of LAC, either with or without employment of military power, could send a strong global message.[4] Chinese force levels in Ladakh appear to be for tying down Indian forces and put pressure on the Indian government against supporting anti-China moves afoot.

Gautam Bambawale, a former Indian ambassador to China said, "For a minor tactical gain on the ground, China has lost India and forced it to reassess its China policy." Its insecurity of an India-US close embrace to be countered became a self-fulfilling prophecy. In 2020, a retired senior CCP Professor Cai Xia, accused Xi of "grasping the knife handle, the gun barrel and faults within the system itself to turn 90 million Party Members into slaves," and predicted that China will go through another period of major chaos in the next five years.

US Analyst-speak

There is a sense of opportunity for a US rebound after Trump's retreat from leading the world.[5] Besides the inherent strengths of an open society such as innovation-promoting diversity and better transparency, it is the Chinese "overreach" that is explained in Samantha Powers' article in *Foreign Affairs*. She quotes Gallup polling where in over 130 countries China's approval ratings have not changed from a poor 32 percent, and have fallen further with perceptions of poor-handling of Covid-19. Bullying episodes, unilateral military actions, perceptions of BRI debt-trap among others do not bode well for a leadership role in the world. A key vulnerability of authoritarian and hard regimes that align with China is institutionalised and personal corruption. The US, by virtue of being a central hub of a global financial system, with excellent tracking, exposing, and prosecuting tools at hand, can truly undermine their ability to hold on to power. One of the reasons for China's bid for dominance in digital currencies is to beat this.

Analysts like Hal Brands say that Trump must be credited for destroying the illusory liberal bubble over China, and in embracing the coming great-power competition.[6] This manifested in among other things, a clear identification of Chinese strategic and military threats, increasing US defence spending to counter, and in taking punitive military drills to deter. Trump's blunt and sharp moves against China may actually provide Biden a jump-start to carry out alliance- or collaboration-based internationalism albeit under a relatively benign cloak of American hegemony.

All geopolitics, international relations, pacts and alliances would be primarily driven by economic benefits, especially after the devastating impact of Covid-19. Most countries are busy calculating a survival and future growth strategy beyond this calamitous event. It is not only about great power rivalry or the convergence of middle-powers at a moment of great uncertainty. China may have stolen a march by its better Covid-19 handling and economic resurgence against a seemingly inept and confused USA, but by no means is it a short sprint. On the contrary, a long marathon of a mix of confrontation, competition, collaboration and scheming lies ahead as the US girds up its loins with single-minded purpose and focus on containing China.

There are many reputed analysts who are convinced that the Trump administration gets full marks for opening up the lid on China's unfair trade practices, military aid to Ukraine, a solid North American trade deal and revolutionary Middle-East policies.[7] Even his supposed failures of cavorting with autocrats like N Korea's Kim and Philippine's Duterte may have been a transactional ploy to undermine Chinese leverages with them. Trump's pressures on NATO allies could be an effort to firm up the China-containment plank, especially since Germany was by far the biggest beneficiary of trade with China.

But there are also voices in the US urging a more 'restrained' grand strategy, a euphemism for major pullout from world policing roles and downsizing the military. A recent RAND Report *Implementing Restraint* explores this proposition and its proponents in some detail. The advocacy centres around themes of more reliance on diplomacy, smaller military and higher bar for its use, region specific templates of US deployment, a cooperative approach with Russia and Iran, allow other allies to lead, among others. But even these advocates of restraint espouse concern and disagreements with regard to Asia-Pacific. The report is clear that specifics are missing such as risk mitigation strategies to hedge against the possibility that one of their core assumptions prove wrong, and what changes in great-power capabilities and behaviour would constitute a serious threat to vital U.S. interests.

US-China & Indo-Pacific

Many hard-core CCP strategists around Xi and the PLA consider "the United States as a wasting titan, if yet a formidable one."[8] The global financial crisis was an inflection point combined with US failure to extricate itself from the Middle East's expensive commitment. With time on their side, the CCP is bracing for a prolonged competition. A fundamental premise is of no critical requirement of outside help in developing core and emerging technologies, supported by a vast domestic market and hard-working citizens. However, they discount important factors like: US' historically demonstrated regenerative capacity; bleak possibility of replacing the US Dollar as a reserve currency; an innovative ecosystem that embraces diversity; alliances and powerful friends; and, superior military power projection capability.

The US' backing of Indo-Pacific has to be underlined by an economic plan of engagement, though rejoining the TPP (rechristened Comprehensive & Progressive Trans Pacific Partnership) may not be on the cards. Quite clearly, after some disruptive and seemingly chaotic economic policies that upset both friends and foes, Biden's team would aim for a more coordinated disciplined policymaking process. Their declared slogan of a Foreign-Policy-for-the-Middle-Class will aim for win-win bilaterals with nations aligned on China concerns, and therein are the opportunities for India which has been clearly pushed into this camp by China.

However, the Biden administration faces three major challenges in its economic revival scheme.[9] Firstly, the above tension of domestic and multilateral push-pulls. Undoubtedly, recovery from the Covid-shock is going to be the bedrock of any other policies. Secondly, an economic engagement in the region is a preamble to security and other collaborations in the Indo-Pacific. And the final elephant in the room is the relationship with China. The US clearly realises that this is the last chance to stop China galloping away to primacy in world affairs at its cost. Reining in of China's progress, especially in the military and emerging domains, is an imperative that is understood across the diverse political landscape. The US would aim for a selective decoupling, but the Chinese are wiser in demonstrating long-term strategies such as Deng's "Hide and Bide."

Xi's team plans to up the ante, if required, on various fronts to shape the world's perception that China has already arrived. It includes using economic and trade leverages, wolf-warrior and other coercive diplomatic offensives, weakening any US-driven alliances against it, offering the economically and politically weaker nations a way-out through an authoritarian model, and putting question marks on the US' capability to dominate and sustain operations in Asia.[10] This is why it is important for the CCP to undermine successful democracies such as Taiwan or India.

Xi Jinping views the CCP as a most critical hub for China's future. He came to power on the plank of first rejuvenating the party, and therefore, a focus and aggressive campaign of "strengthening and reinforcing organisational resilience at all levels."[11] In a reversal of decades-old loosening of controls, the CCP has its fingers in every pie of society and economic activity. This has been greatly boosted by communications and surveillance technology that allow an Orwellian modern-day '1984.' The CCP's domestic narrative revolves around themes such as failures of democratic models e.g. US under Trump, the sham of western values in light of demonstrated corporate greed, and a conspiracy to keep the Chinese nation down.[12] This only builds on the existing 'century of humiliation' victimisation framework.

China has thrown the gauntlet in light of seeming continuity in policies by the new administration. Taiwan airspace (median line) has repeatedly been intruded by very capable multi-aircraft missions. So have been the maritime pressures around Senkaku Islands of Japan. The CCP probably feels that crises will force the US to rethink with already so much on their plate, and force it into risk-reduction mechanisms to minimize the danger of inadvertent escalation that are suitable to China.

One area of vulnerability in the Chinese global game-plan is the anti-corruption plank. As Senator Sheldon Whitehouse and General David Petraeus observed in 2019, "the fight against corruption is more than a legal and moral issue; it has become a strategic one — and a battleground in a great power competition."[13] Biden administration will take this agenda global by making countering-kleptocracy a core issue in the planned Summit for Democracy. It will require close coordination and consensus with like-minded partners including the European Union, Five-Eyes nations, and Japan and India. This can indirectly weaken China's agenda with economically weaker countries.

A recent RAND survey report *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific,* indicates how effective China's game-plan has been in Southeast Asia. Regional countries saw the United States with more diplomatic and military influence, but ranked China higher in economic influence. At the same time, most countries ranked economic development over security concerns, and are more worried about Chinese economic influence than military threats. Quite logically, most do not believe that US military influence is a counterweight to Chinese economic influence. They also converged in accepting that China had far more 'sticks and carrots' influence over them. And therefore, partner alignments on all issues will be a problem for the US.

Chinese strategic think-tanks pooh-pooh the "Thucydides Trap" theories and instead propagate a "divided peace" (DP) conceptualisation. It differs from the Thucydides Trap by stressing that China has: a non-expansionist and -militarist strategic culture; is a peer competitor to the US in power; and, its core interests are domestic, not international. Xi Jinping's aggressive challenge to America's primacy in economic and political power in Asia is a far cry from the "hide & bide" days. It has economic leverages with critical nations in Southeast Asia and North Korea, and has made forays into West Asia, Africa and South America for long-term influence through debt-diplomacy. With immediate neighbours, it also has the tool of military coercion e.g. India and Vietnam; however, that may backfire as it did with Vietnam in 1979, or even the current imbroglio with India. It is indulging into politics of many nations in South Asia, and has tasted success in some like Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. However, since much of it is also underlined with corruption and other nefarious practices, a pushback is slowly unfolding e.g. Maldives, and even Nepal.

Climate Change Collaboration: The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, which Biden has joined back as one of his first acts, will revive multilateral action on climate change. It leaves countries free to establish their own policies and nationally-determined contributions, sans top-down targets and implementation timetables. For example, the EU Green Deal aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and reach interim carbon emission reductions targets of 55 percent by 2030. It is ambitious involving phase-out of carbon-intensive sectors, scaling electrification of transport, buildings and other sectors.

Similarly, China announced a de-carbonization roadmap that will achieve peak greenhouse gas emissions on or before 2030 and carbon-neutrality by 2060. Could the climate-change deliverables pressure on Biden force the US to compromise on its China-containment plan? Xi has clearly recognised the predicament, and is committed to low-carbon technologies and a transition towards greener growth, including targeted investment in electric vehicles, batteries, solar and wind power. Also on targets are measures related to energy density, re-forestation and increasing the non-fossil-fuel primary energy target.[14] China sees this plank as a leverage to subside the rhetoric and moves against 'containing' it.

Biden Team-speak

Kurt Campbell, the new coordinator for Indo-Pacific in the US National Security Council, in recent article in Foreign Affairs (12th Jan), has compared the confrontational overhang of 19th Century Europe and today's Indo-Pacific. Both "featured a rising state, rivalrous great powers, multiple paths to conflict, growing nationalism, clashes between liberalism and authoritarianism, and fragile regional institutions."[15] However, as the article brings out, the key difference is the primacy of economic dependencies and regional interlinking between the Asian players. This has brought out great economic wealth and alleviated considerable poverty around. However, China's rise, economically and militarily, and its overt display of force and bully-behaviour across has opened a can of worms that threaten this so far relatively benign order.

Quite naturally, like all in the democratic camp, Trump is primarily being blamed for style and substance of the counter-China moves, which in effect ceded ground to China. But the basic premise of the policy itself is not questioned. For example, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his confirmation hearing talked of bipartisan consensus on China stating its "hiding and biding has gone away." The biggest sign of continuity was his endorsement of his predecessor's (Pompeo) declaration of the Uighur genocide in Xinjiang. Even the new chief of National Intelligence Agency declared a full commitment to counter China's "unfair, illegal, aggressive and coercive actions, as well as its human rights violations."

In terms of alliance management criticism, actually the Trump administration did tremendous ground breaking work in the Indo-Pacific. As HR McMaster ex-US NSA highlighted, "Cooperation has grown since 2017, as can be seen in the invigoration of "the Quad" format (India, Japan, Australia and the United States), and growing law enforcement and intelligence cooperation against Chinese cyber warfare and cyber espionage."[16] The alliance criticism may apply to its European allies who do not see the same priorities in Indo-Pacific. McMaster, in fact, believes that transparent competition without gravitating towards conflict or passive accommodation is possible by creating conditions for China to heed, hinting at a free-world alliance.

An important issue is the recognition to adopt asymmetric approaches against China, paying it back in the same coin as its A2AD (Anti Access/Area Denial) strategy against US forces. There would be concerted effort to move away from large vulnerable platform-centric warfare to more distributed, unmanned and dispensable assets, and more investments in cruise missiles, high-speed weapons etc. It is believed that uncertainties and dilemmas created in the Chinese calculus would provide deterrence to unruly behaviour. Critically, Campbell advocates helping Indo-Pacific states to develop such asymmetries to counter the PLA. Jake Sullivan acknowledges the expanding competition across multiple domains such as cyberspace, space, economics and energy. He called out clearly in a 2019 article that the emerging competition is about economics, technology, innovation and ideas.[17] As the new National Security Advisor (NSA) of Biden, he is likely to adapt to newer and emerging models of competition ahead, especially empowering partners of the common cause.

Along similar lines, the new chief of the Treasury Department, Janet Yellen, in her confirmation presentation, acknowledged China's "horrendous human rights abuses" and accused it of widespread theft of intellectual property rights (IPR), dumping products, erecting trade barriers and giving illegal subsidies to corporations, among other issues to undermine US' national interests.

But Gen Austin (retd) as the new US Defense Secretary is key to most important moves to establish American credibility, capabilities, and influence in the Indo-Pacific. In his hearing, he clearly identified China as "the most significant threat going forward because China is ascending." Very importantly, he fully endorsed the Trump-driven National Defense Strategy (2017), which openly accepted the great power competition with China. While highlighting the role of "next-generation technologies, including the use of quantum computing, the use of AI, the advent of connected battlefields, the space-based platforms as a credible deterrent that allows the US to hold large pieces of Chinese military inventory at risk", he categorically named India for furthering robust defence diplomacy, cooperation and full operationalisation as a Major Defence Partner.[18]

As Walter Russel Mead brings out in The Wall Street Journal of 26th January that the noises post-inauguration from the Biden team, indicate no let-up on China. Actions range from: invite to the de facto Taiwanese ambassador to the US for the inauguration - a first time after 1979; assurance of arms sale continuity to Taiwan; snub to the Chinese govt for a high-level meet which would only be after consultation with allies; Blinken in agreement with Pompeo on the Xinxiang genocide; and, sticking to the plan of sending a Naval Strike Group to the South China Sea. As late as January 23rd, the State Department issued a statement affirming "rock-solid" support for Taiwan and expressing "concern" after China sent several bombers and jet planes into Taiwan's airspace late last week. Similarly, in the latest round of consultation with his counterparts in Philippines, Anthony Blinken has emphasised full-fledged support in case of an attack by China on its maritime area, and treat it as equivalent to an attack on American soil. This is quite a substantial move from its earlier ambiguous stand.

Discordant Noises

According to a Brookings analysis, The Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are really about middle power diplomacy. The largest beneficiaries of RCEP are China ($85 billion), Japan ($48 billion), South Korea ($23 billion), and ASEAN nations ($17 billion). RCEP is also a rebuttal to the decoupling narrative. Being fastest in recovering from Covid-19, the Chinese economy is a star attraction for nations wanting to invest. Besides nominal concessions, Beijing did not have to compromise any of its policies such as of state-owned or -supported industries.[19]

Germany's lead in the latest Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China and its Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline proposal with Russia will raise the hackles of the new setup in the US. This European search for "sovereignty and strategic autonomy"[20] could be an advance leveraging in light of a US climb-down from Trump's disruptive moves earlier. In all likelihood, the hard choices in front of Europe (and Germany) would be made clear by President Biden.[21] France is already expressing readiness to engage in the Indo-Pacific while looking at partners such as India.

The CAI has not only provided a much-needed legitimacy cloak for Xi's aggression and repression, both domestically and externally, it has also spiked the inflow of foreign direct investment making China the leader in attracting FDI. Merkel's agenda has resulted in poor consensus about the threat that China poses to the international order which will adversely affect NATO and transatlantic relations, and an "obstacle to building a workable joint strategy to outcompete China and preserve the West's dominant position." [22]

Europe does not want to see China as a looming security threat. In acknowledging its economic power and potential for trade, Europe is at the same time wary of China's trustworthiness in respecting a rules-based order, or even an effort to change it with 'Chinese characteristics' including illegal technology stealing. The greater fear is a Chinese takeover of niche and dominant markets and industrial dominance. China's strength is support to its state-based monoliths, and no agreement will make it fundamentally stop betting on this winning horse of the CCP. As per its proven mantra of 'bide your time', China will renege at a time of its choosing. Britain too in its post-Brexit and Covid-19 struggles is deciding on its choices without closing the door on trade and investment with the world's second-largest economy. China's example-setting with Australia looms large.

Even Australia and Japan signing the RCEP is at odds with the momentum of the 'QUAD' thrust. After all, China's greatest priority would be stopping this convergence against it. The question is whether economics, security and alignments can be kept in separate compartments? Or is it simply a tactic to create leverages on the US in the coming power struggle? The over-hyped 'de-coupling' does not seem to be moving fast enough with corporates in democracies not wanting to get off the gravy train, especially in light of China's economic rebound. Kishore Mahbubani **in an article in** *Foreign Policy* emphasises the overriding primacy of economics in the future of Asia, and feels that RCEP will be more important than Quad.[23]

China's Vulnerabilities

Xi's trend of amalgamating power and control are in line with other autocratic historical cases: a single leader emerges under a facade of collective leadership; perception management around personalisation and cult-creation of the leader;

weakening or removal of any rivals; and, ensuring a personal commitment and a belief in the infallibility the leader. Targeting of the Chinese private sector and its prominent entrepreneurs like Ren Zhiqiang and Jack Ma supports the theory that insecurities of the CCP and Xi are ensuring that they have full control over every aspect of China, public or private. All this despite the fact that the private sector has played a major role in China's rise for the last three decades. An estimate claims it contributes 60 percent of China's GDP, generates 70 percent of its innovation, constitutes 80 percent of urban employment, and creates 90 percent of the country's new jobs.[24] How all this is calibrated in the coming decade to allow creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial spirit is a big question since the competition in emerging technologies and areas is going to decide prosperity ahead.

A recent Pew Research Center global survey brings out that attitudes toward China have turned negative to all-time lows in nations such as Canada, Germany, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Chinese diplomats are forced to adopt an aggressive yet inefficient style by the CCP. This is a direct result of "government's insecurity and confidence". Except for marginal countries that are dependent on China, the message has mostly backfired.[25]

The BRI is seen more as a chink in Xi's personal armour by his opponents, both domestically and internationally. Some analysts have also seen it as a strategic overreach leading to sink-hole vulnerability. The US DoD report (2020) *China Military Power* clearly indicates that the 12 countries where China wants to set up bases and infrastructure are beset with political uncertainty and instability. These are important great power assets that help in protecting national interests i.e. Chinese working abroad, investments and to enable military deterrence. The identified countries are Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, United Arab Emirates, and Tajikistan.[26] Chinese policymakers are realising that issues of political stability, economic health, and level of bilateral ties do not guarantee future returns on the investment being made.

Examples include CPEC linked to Gwadar Port in Pakistan that is under constant threat from multiple vectors i.e. political instability as a whole and a separatist movement in Balochistan, terrorism, an underdeveloped economy with a weak industrial base, poor infrastructure, and strong socio-cultural roadblocks to modernization. The proposed $60 billion infrastructure building plan amid rising corruption, militant attacks and post-Covid-19 situation appears to be on the backfoot. Similarly, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, brother of the PM, has asked for a cancellation of the Hambantota lease. In this case, India seems to be looming large with its own leverages as was hinted in a recent trip of the Indian Foreign Minister.

Leapfrogging the 'middle-income trap' will require China to ensure real economic growth through models such as the Xi-espoused 'dual-circulation' design. It will demand tremendous investments into technological innovation to dominate the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as well as changing into a consumption-driven economy. This will be made additionally difficult by active competition and rivalry from the West in a post-Covid-19 world. As perceived by many Chinese thinkers, an ideological clash based on values is something that China wishes desperately to avoid but knows it is inevitable.[27] It instead wants the world, or at least most of it, fixated on a vision of economic miracles.

But everything is not hunky-dory with Chinese economic plans within its borders.[28] Number crunching by some analysts have shown that the reality could be different from the facade that CCP projects. For example, a majority of new graduates are unemployed which is difficult to accept with over five percent growth. There are reports of warehousing new graduates in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the military.[29] Other examples are opening up of the domestic bond market, cash-credit flow statistical trends, and payment delays by local governments to contractors.[30] It is possible that this illusion bubble may pressurise the CCP to indulge in some serious distractions.

Another important issue is that any major reversal or failure could cost Xi his position. In comparison, democratic leaders are held accountable only every 4-5 years. This would reduce the risk-taking aptitude in terms of large disruptive actions. Therefore, a LAC standoff with India has made them sit back and examine whether the payoffs are worthwhile. As a noted American commentator, Hal Brands put, "If Beijing blundered into a conflict in the South China Sea where it suffered high costs at the hands of a Southeast Asian country like Vietnam or stumbled into a debt crisis triggered by the One Belt One Road initiative, the Chinese Communist Party's diminished image could become a prelude to debilitating intra-party factionalism, or even dynastic decline."

In terms of ability to carry out grey zone tactics and hybrid warfare, China has a rich history and philosophical thought supporting its asymmetric thinking and adaptability. It has consistently used proxies and supported insurgencies in its periphery, the Indian Northeast. A current example is using proxy militias such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA) on the Sino-Myanmar border, a major hub in the Asian narcotics trade. With direct support from the PRC, the UWSA is now the largest non-state military force in Asia. It is a well-equipped and trained, and is a major power broker in Myanmar, and leverage for the Chinese. The PRC-backed Kokang rebels who are of Chinese descent are proxies occupying the Kokang region of Myanmar who could serve a purpose in any future takeover like the Russian annexation of Crimea.

China has mastered the art of 'winning without fighting', a core dictum Sun Tzu. Across the economic, military, and political domains, salami-slicing tactics and cabbage strategies have become core components of the Chinese art of war. Ladakh currently is an example of Salami Slicing gone slightly awry in that it has caused a pushback and international reaction. China's action in South China Sea, such as on Mischief Reef since 1994, are Cabbage tactics where occupation of rocks and islets is followed by basing of infrastructure and military, just as a cabbage is surrounded by leaves.\

Cornerstones: India, Russia & Taiwan

India's Threats & Opportunities: Many analysts have observed that China is too big to be ignored and too wealthy to displease; too big to punish; and, simply too big to fail.[31] The imminent change in world order cannot be reversed by the US, and populism, fragmentation, information disorder, technological and industrial developments, and ecological crises will force change. China is projecting a solution albeit based on authoritarianism and curtailing of individual freedom. The erstwhile 'liberal' order will have to rethink and offer a better one. Some Indian analysts feel that there is consensus in China that despite persistent and ever-enlarging US efforts to contain it, it can be overcome with patience and banking on US corporate greed to reset relations. This is based on the truth that the Democrats are more invested in big companies that profit from China. But many question this premise and believe that the trajectory is more likely to be "trade war - decoupling - full-scale cold war."[32]

This is quite in line with how China used its entry into the WTO and exploited fully the windows of globalisation without opening any of its political reform doors. Moving 600 million Chinese out of poverty gave the necessary degree of domestic legitimacy. CCP leaders fully grasp the art and science of realpolitik, and have no illusions about the value systems of the West. It is also becoming clearer that there is no 'set' ideology that is its core, beyond espousing Marxism, and currently, Xi's thoughts, for domestic control. In fact, the CCP's greatest worry is ideological 'infection' from democracies, having learnt its own Tiananmen and Hong Kong lessons, as well as Gorbachov's mistakes in the Soviet Union.

Ashley J. Tellis, a prominent US figure behind the Indo-US bonhomie, feels that major changes to US policies toward China and Pakistan could disrupt India's current strategy and require quick re-thinking and re-positioning. Also, trade policies and excessive pressures on domestic issues could derail stronger collaboration with the US on China. Recently, Heather Hurlburt in Foreign Policy has quoted ex-President Obama certifying Biden's single-minded and focussed approach to issues rather than get stuck with ideologies.[33] In light of this, it can be hoped that Brahma Chellaney's recent essay on this being an opportune moment for Biden to seal a "soft" alliance with India, rings true.[34]

Many Chinese strategists and think-tanks were convinced before the LAC-standoff that India lacks the will and the military might to go to war with China. Xi and his strategist were probably confident that China's economy and military gap with India will discourage it. A plus-point for India, and not in the Chinese calculus, is that the Indian military is battle-tested in mountain combat. Infrastructure development around the LAC has improved exponentially with the current govt, thereby removing most logistical hurdles to sustain operations. Also, so far there is a decisive edge with India in airpower employment. Glaring lessons for India will now change the Indian Army's modus operandi at the LAC, such as immediate challenge to salami slicing, a proactive setting of early terms of engagement, and countering China's capability to conduct hybrid warfare.

Historically, the CCP has initiated its military campaigns in windows where either the incumbent superpowers are distracted or when there is great internal turmoil. Example are its actions in Taiwan Strait in 1950s (US-Soviet nuclear overhang), with India in 1962 (Mao's internal troubles and US-Soviet Cuba missile crisis) and with Vietnam in 1979 (US-Soviet Afghan conflict). Another clear trend is that it aims at a quick and decisive blow with ruthless intensity, before withdrawing after achieving a psychological advantage. This happened in the border clash with Soviet Border Guards in March 1969 where they were mercilessly butchered and repeated in India's Galwan Valley recently. And therefore, both India and Taiwan need to brace for a possible quick and psychologically 'deadly' conflict with either of them in case these conditions present to China. Any capacity to give back a bloody-nose or prolong the fighting will deter this proposition.

Taiwan: As a flashpoint, Taiwan is quite useful for the Chinese in future. As the crisis and takeover in Hong Kong demonstrates agreements or pacts do not stop the CCP on taking surprise moves of immediate benefit.[35] ***United States policy of "strategic ambiguity" in Taiwan's defence is clearly over, and China will only be deterred by credible capabilities of retribution.***[36] An article in Foreign Affairs argues that the premise of only a long-drawn Sino-US competition may be wrong. Domestic fissures and pressures, a failing BRI and other Chinese initiatives across the world, and moves by US-framed alliances may result in a potential surge of Chinese aggression and expansion in the short-term. According to Brands & Beckley, the most pressing danger is an attack on Taiwan and a runaway success in emerging technologies.[37] They advocate a three-pronged strategy for emergent situations: "focus on denying China near-term successes that would radically alter the long-term balance of power; tools and partnerships available now or in the near future rather than assets that require years to develop; focus on selectively degrading Chinese power rather than changing Chinese behaviour."

Peter Jennings, a respected Australian analyst, has warned a United States Congressional inquiry that "China may trigger a major military crisis over Taiwan in the coming year as the Chinese Communist Party's centenary looms and the US faces a terrible domestic health situation due to the Covid-19 pandemic."[38] China's plan is straightforward. In testing US resolve over continued intrusions into erstwhile accepted red-lines, it loses nothing since any escalation can be easily diffused by scaling back its actions. A US hesitation or delay would only put question marks on its credibility. Grey-zone tactics such as "maritime blockades, closing airspace, cyber assaults, missile launchings around (and over) Taiwan, use of fifth column assets inside Taiwan, use of PLA force in a range of deniable grey-zone activities and potentially seizing offshore territory—Quemoy and Matsu, Pratas, and Kinmen Islands", could be the cards that it can play at will.

It is aware that the world, especially countries on the fence, are watching and deliberating on how to hedge. In particular, Southeast Asia is a region seen as key to Chinese economic and military security. Any doubts on US capabilities and intent will push them towards PRC. On the other hand, American demonstration of superiority and reliability, and even coercion, could unravel Beijing's calculations. Even for Japan and Australia, the free passage of trade through and over the South China Sea is an existential strategic interest, and China calculates that as a strategic leverage.

Russia the Elephant: The elephant in the room is Russia where Putin seeks to revive its influence and relevance. The worst-case scenario is an alliance-type of rapprochement with Beijing. With Russia's economy in doldrums, low-prices and prospects for oil and gas ahead, and Covid-19 after-effects, it is clearly in danger of playing second-fiddle to a domineering China. This will not be palatable to the Russian public, fed on a national rejuvenation and strength of Putin. There are other historical and current issues such as China's non-recognition of Abkhazia or South Ossetia as independent nations, and differences on Crimea. In turn, Russia does not recognise Chinese claims in the South China Sea, and differs on its territorial disputes especially with friend India.[39] Is Putin only using this as leverage for western concessions on sanctions, trade and issue of NATO-expansion?

The Arctic is of crucial importance to China's nuclear deterrence against the US. In a 2018 White Paper, China has squarely projected its claim as a stakeholder. The Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship will expire this year, and a dreadful scenario could be a joint defence pact or alliance.[40] However, most Indian analysts, for a number of reasons, consider this unlikely. The Russians would be clearly worried about Chinese domination especially in its Far East and Central Asian Republics.[41] A big worry for the western compact would be the depth of ongoing joint Russian-Chinese collaboration on key projects such as hypersonics and vertical/short-take-off (VSTOL) aircraft, and other high-technology weaponry.[42]

QUAD - Launched?

The Chinese onslaught on Australia via trade ad-hocism is an example of throwing rules-based framework to the winds. It is well calibrated by Xi and serves both purposes i.e. teaching a lesson to 'errant' countries and feeding the nationalism narrative of strength and capability.[43] The reason of such hostility against Australia is its leaders directing the "country's security alliance with the US against China".[44] The economic retaliation might cause short-term pain but in the long term Australia will be able to diversify its market and more than offset its losses. Its physical distance from China and a strong alliance with the US **gives it more security than even India and Japan.**[45] "A partnership among Quad countries with powerful navies will cause China to stretch its naval resources across the Indo-Pacific, thus providing relief to Japan".[46] India has signed a spate of foundational agreements with the US, Japan and Australia covering wide areas of communications, inter-operability and logistics.

The current NDA Govt seems to have made up its mind on different-template soft alliance in the QUAD. As Bharat Kumar notes, "On the one hand, the US-Indian military alliance was struggling to take off, notwithstanding the 2008 nuclear deal, but it began accelerating after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. On the other hand, the Sino-Indian relationship that had acquired a degree of predictability during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) rule steadily, inexplicably, began degrading under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's watch and has been reduced to a state of acute rivalry bordering on motiveless malignity".[47] There has been strong joint strategic signalling through military exercises. Exercise Malabar's focus on anti-submarine warfare (ASW) in the past, as well as in India-Australia bilateral naval exercises, sends a clear signal to China about intent.[48]

Beyond the security cooperation, Quad's economic agenda (either as a whole or bi- and tri-laterally) must be focussed on vulnerable target countries where economic dependence on China is high. Some Indian experts favour a gradual evolution of QUAD in light of Indian sensitivity to strategic autonomy and independent foreign policy formulation.[49] India's Foreign minister, Jaishankar made a valid point during 2nd ministerial meeting of the Quad countries in Tokyo on 6th

October 2020, "As vibrant and pluralistic democracies with shared values, our nations have collectively affirmed the importance of maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific." India clearly understands the Chinese advantage in one-on-one scenarios, and therefore seeks a cost-effective multilateral or plurilateral platform to counterbalance China.[50] India's stand has given confidence to many nations in Asia and Africa that silent agreement to the 'Chinese Way' is not the only option.

An expansion to Quad Plus is imminent. As a start, Foreign Secretary/Vice Minister level talks between New Zealand, Republic of Korea and Vietnam are virtually done every week to share Covid-19 issues. There is wide advocacy to expand the coverage of issues to "include but not be limited to 5G technology, quality infrastructure, and resilient supply chains, connectivity, HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief), cyber-security, rare-earths, counter-terrorism, countering disinformation, combating piracy and others".[51] Vietnam, Indonesia, UK, France and others may also respond to reach-outs for better inclusivity and credibility.

But there are serious challenges ahead for QUAD to ponder. Does it want to remain a potent and unique bloc or be diluted with a number of regional arrangements already in place? While there is wide ranging consensus on many issues, the main being free and open Indo-Pacific, degree of convergence in their shared interests is still a work in progress. Most importantly, China poses different dilemmas for each nation in terms of threats and opportunities. Also, being fixated on just China may allow it to moderate its behaviour to stall the momentum of QUAD. Finally, the insistence on 'values' such as democracy and human rights may unravel the partnership since these are subjective and society-dependant. For example, an ex-Indian naval chief feels national security and information compromises may "barter away the last vestiges of India's strategic autonomy.[52]

Prognosis

The Covid-19 pandemic could continue to be fickle and unpredictable till mid-2022. In different nations and regions it may disappear and later reoccur, continue endemically under vaccine control, or simply attenuate and vanish. The economy and healthcare systems will return to a new normal, some parts more quickly than others. The world has realised the importance of continued and verified vigilance, enhancing the integration and effectiveness of public health systems, healthcare, and emergency management through education, supply chains, incentives and drills. International scientific collaboration on tracking, treatment and prevention hopefully will increase, as also a complete revamp of WHO in terms of effectiveness and accountability.

Politicians and leaders have learned the importance of correct and varied messaging for better public response. Comprehensive protocols will develop across the spectrum of actions to be taken based on important lessons learnt in managing Covid-19. It will include travel restrictions and passenger screening, implementing of early and well-supported containment, testing, and aggressive contact tracing, vaccination programmes, stockpiling necessary medication and equipment, and in general boosting national capacities for quick response to pandemics.

Questions to Ponder

There are important questions in a superpower zero-sum race for superiority. Will the main economic hub of the world, consisting of the prosperous part, coalesce around a Counter-China plank? Will decoupling from China happen at all or will it only be restricted to high and emerging technologies? Will the US and allies be able to exploit the vulnerabilities of China including internal debt, BRI issues e.g. default and non-servicing of what is owed to China, exposing corrupt regimes which had taken bribes and favours from China, and collapse of the Chinese 5G/High tech game-plan when most countries that could pay stayed away?

As China's credibility take repeated hits and a better option is available, will most client-states in Africa, South America and Asia look at a crumbling model, and prepare to ditch a sinking ship. Will a WTO reform cancel Chinese undue advantage of intellectual theft and state supported behemoths? Will de-globalisation or gated globalisation hurt China's grandiose plans and economy or will it only make the poor nations poorer? Can India leverage its USP to create a win-win partnership for the contain-China plank and itself? Will the elephant in the room i.e. Russia be taken on board by the US-EU combine in exchange of agreements that help it to stay economically afloat and independent of a distrustful China?

If the perception war against China becomes effective because of credible narratives, will leaders in South Asia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal move towards India in win-win deals with help of US/EU. Can Pakistan, a key in the BRI scheme and an all-weather friend of PRC, change tracks because of popular uprisings against corrupt politicians and army leaders, besides some forceful persuasion from US with its stack of well-kept secrets of the Pakistan Army? If this were to happen, SAARC would surely take-off bringing in prosperity to South Asia.

In losing the domestic perception war on all the above, and under existential pressures, will CCP turn reckless and desperate, and look for a conflict to distract with aroused nationalism? Importantly, if the truth of the origin and handling of the Pandemic were to point fingers at China squarely, this would add unbearable stresses on Xi and his team.

A Conflict Narrative

If the answers to above do not favour China then a war scenario follows for which India must prepare for. Such a possible scenario is outlined below.

A short but intense war with India in Ladakh and Arunachal in 2022 to distract public attention and arouse nationalism resulted in a stalemate with both sides suffering great attrition. China's superior mobility and numbers were equally matched by Indian deployment with a decisive edge in airpower. As this was happening, a 'chance' encounter in East China Sea resulted in the sinking of a Japanese Self Defence Force coastguard vessel, which had been acting against Chinese supported pirates/terrorists operating all over China's seaboard. This led to a response from the Japanese and US' forces by shooting down of 15 PLAAF airplanes and sinking of three PLAN ships. The US made its intent and deterrence clear to China, effectively negating the hype built around Chinese Anti-Access & Area Denial. The QUAD and other counter-China alliance were fully geared up and ready to strike across China's periphery in the Indo-Pacific.

There were popular uprisings all over China between 2022, including Tibet and Xinxiang due to the economic fallout, and especially due to the revelations of the truth behind Covid-19 deaths which were hidden along with its mismanagement of its aftermath. Factions of anti-Xi party members were able to get a firm hold, and the PLA, seeing the writing on the wall, engineered a usurping and replacement of Xi and all his loyalists. A peace deal with the Counter-China coalition led by US, under some radical and difficult conditions was accepted. Multilateral frameworks, financial institutions, United Nations, and many such others were revamped to reflect new realities. And the world moved on to a new phase of a rule-based order, while China bid its time.

An Alternate Narrative with India?

In the scenario above, it is quite evident that a number of variables, assumptions and imponderables could modify the trajectory of the world and individual nations. But the scenario does provide an adaptive and flexible framework around which short, mid and long-term planning can be done. Is this a decisive moment of breakaway or can India still hedge her bets? Important considerations, among others, would be:

- The future of South-South collaboration in ensuring protection from gross exploitation by a caucus of the North for emerging and low-income economies is at stake. India continues to be trusted by most nations of the South, while China influences BRI countries. It could be difficult for India to get favourable FTAs on its own from developed economies. Can India leverage its market as well as China had done in luring the West?

- How trustworthy is the US in a non-alliance partnership? Because of a combination of factors i.e. Covid-19 and projected economic differentials with China, the US is forcing a contain-China coalition of sorts. Will this translate into tangible gains of technology transfer (especially in space technologies, artificial intelligence, defence, and cyber) and trade benefits for India in the short- and mid-term?

- During the 2017 Doklam crisis, India had to go it alone; however, this time the support is open especially from the US. Can the West be relied upon to provide tangible support in terms of intelligence, hi-tech equipment, defence systems to counter Chinese developed systems etc?

- Can the QUAD framework be possible without an overarching security alliance that India wants to avoid? Can China (and Russia) afford the compromises that will need to be done to keep India from gravitating to the counter-China fold? This will include issues such as correcting trade imbalance, LAC withdrawal to pre-May status, controlling Pakistan on the J&K terror-support, and support for India's aspirations as an influential middle-power.

- Is India crucial to Chinese trade plans, BRI, 5G game plan etc in light of the counters being set up by the US and allies? This will dictate the levels of compromise possible.

Conclusion

Forecasting is difficult in geopolitics where the "rules of the game are poorly understood, information is invariably incomplete, and expertise often confers surprisingly little advantage in predicting future events."[53] Narratives extracted from scenario-planning exercises can create bias because of confusing plausibility with probability. And, geopolitics has an uncanny ability to produce surprises and shocks, making the conundrum even more vexing. Developing linked forecasting questions from scenarios or narratives and then deliberating is a way out. This paper, after examining the current developments after President Biden's inauguration, has attempted to do that.

Important questions are derived from the study which leads to one proposition of how events may unfold. The scenario depicts China pushed into a corner largely due to its own doings and aggressive manoeuvring. These are due to survival instincts and insecurities of the CCP, because Covid-19 allowed a host of negative factors and perceptions to converge economically and geopolitically. But it is evident, that this is premised on a solid Indian economic recovery, fundamental and effective reforms, and other issues. Some relevant questions and issues are flagged that may throw up additional trajectories of the future.

So who is on the ropes? The one who will overreach and try to make do with perception and narrative shaping without substance to back it? The article certainly leaves more questions than anything. But then 'Asking the right questions is the core of any strategy.'

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