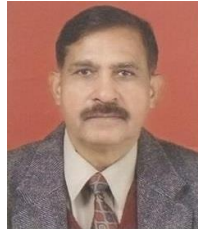


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER



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India pursues a policy of strategic autonomy in its exchanges with the world and have thus retained an ability to pursue its national interests without being constrained in any manner by the other states. This strategy has evolved over time from nonalignment of yester years to current policy of multi-alignment by following the strategic partnership model. Following this strategy, we seek to look after our core areas namely; socio-economic development of the country along with protection of our territorial integrity and national sovereignty. At the same time, we are playing a positive role in the global and regional affairs. Our foreign policy gives great importance to maintaining a friendly and supportive relationships with all our neighbours but, this has not always succeeded due to clash of interests and reasons of realpolitik. Our Nation also yearns for a large chunk of the territory which is under the illegal control of our Western and Northern Neighbours. Since late eighties, we are actively fighting the terror outfits who operate with covert support of our Western neighbour. Nation is committed to protect its territorial, and maritime interests and also prepared to face squarely the threats emanating from the militarization of the space and cyberspace. Till now, we have been successful in our endeavors and are moving ahead. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic fallout has probably

created irreversible changes in the world order; Topping it, China taking advantage of the turmoil caused by coronavirus has chosen to exhibit its expansionist streak. It has adopted a threatening demeanor with most of its neighbours both in maritime domain in South and East China Sea and on the continent at its Indo-Tibet land border at Ladakh.

Two questions are relevant here i.e. How do we get over the economic fallout of coronavirus crisis and save our countrymen from the crisis with minimal loss of life? Second, how do we ensure that China backtracks and reverts to status quo ante?

As far as the fight with coronavirus is concerned Central and state governments are taking appropriate actions to fight and educate the public at large to manage the crisis. The problem has hit almost all countries located far and wide. Compared to many of them, we have managed the crisis far better if one is to weigh the population, its density. Now after long lock downs some slackness or boredom has crept in public behavior and caution against the virus been replaced by casual or no escape is possible approach in general. This has led to very fast spread of the pandemic. State governments once again have resorted to limited/ selective lock downs to check the spread. However, the redeeming feature is that despite the spread the mortality rate is lower. It is agreed that ultimate answer lies in development of effective vaccine which is still ahead hence, till then we have to be cautious.

As regard to second issue about the Chinese aggressiveness on the Ladakh LAC, from all account, India is militarily well prepared to handle any situation imposed on it by PLA but, given the current economic downturn coupled with misery faced by our countrymen due to Coronavirus pandemic, it would not be wise to initiate any military action on our own at this stage. With diplomatic and military pressure, China hopefully will acquiesce as its continuation shows China in bad light in the world. In fact, by its action, China has undone all previous propaganda that it is on a peaceful rise. Its true character is visible to now all. If PLA does not withdraw willingly, India will to force PLA to retreat to avoid adverse fall out on our standing in the region.

Dissuasion of China

To deter China some sections are of the view that we should forge military alliances. As a policy India is reluctant to forge military alliances but, we

have entered in strategic partnership agreements with United States and 28 more states. Among these US, France, Russia, Israel, Japan and Australia are considered the closest. The first four also the source of weapons procurements and have close military cooperation in defence.

India along with other Strategic partners Japan, Australia and US have come together to face the Chinese dilemma by reviving Quadrilateral security grouping (QUAD) a quasi-military alliance. The close cooperation amongst these nations along with ASEAN states can keep Chinese expansionism under check. QUAD was first mooted in 2007 by the Japanese PM Shinzo Abe but, to avoid Chinese displeasure, it remained in limbo. With rise in Chinese assertiveness, it has been resurrected in Nov 2017 at Manila during the ASEAN meet and now upgraded to ministerial level in Sep 2019 after a meeting at New York at the sideline of the UN general Assembly to check the Chinese belligerence. The consultations among the group members still remains at low key. There is need to energize the group to QUAD+ by including more like-minded nations who look forward free Indo pacific region.

Military Engagements with Partners

To indicate its capacity and intent, India has been conducting joint exercises in the region with strategic partners. In that effort, the conduct of annual Malabar naval exercise stands out. It started as bilateral maritime exercise with US in 1992. Japan joined in 2015. This year Australia too is likely to be invited to ramp up inter operability amongst QUAD partners in the maritime domain. Similar exercises by QUAD partners on the land in vicinity of the disputed areas will send a clear message to the prospective adversaries.

Strategic Partnership or Alliance?

The next question is should we continue our cooperation with like minded nations at the strategic partnership level or there is a need to enhance it to the next level? United States is often hinting that raising it to the next level will increase bonding and enhance interoperability between forces and deter China which has discarded its decades long restraint. It is clear however, that strategic partnership by itself has not deterred China from border intrusions and pursuing its salami slicing tactics. On the other hand, US military alliance with its partners like Japan and South Korea once again has not softened Chinese aggression against these nations.

The answer lies in enhancing our military capacity to counter China. To do that, we need enhance our defence budget from the historical lowest level of 1.5% of GDP in a sustained manner. Our crisis defence purchases after Ladakh intrusion by PLA, shows us in poor light. These deficiencies were known but, we remain casual till the crisis over take the status quo.

US recognizes that in this region, India alone has the potential to stand against China. The ASEAN countries, Japan and Taiwan too trust Indian capacity. They too look at India for leadership role. By choosing this option, there remains a peril of war with China but, considering that China will continue to be aggressive on its claims in North and North west India, we should take the mantle of leadership. The anti-China lobby will have sobering effect on China. May be the Chinese intrusions were meant to give subtle message to India, ASEAN states and US.

Chinese military has acquired its military capacity by its economic strength which it has built by becoming a manufacturing hub and their exports. The reduction in manufacturing and its exports could restrict Chinese aggressiveness. The step of banning the Chinese 59 Apps and regulating other imports by India has already got china worried and have changed the tone and tenor of the Global times, the mouth piece of CPC. India's imports constitute mere 5% of Chinese exports therefore, for substantial impact on the Chinese export-based economy, this has to be replicated by other nations too. But till now, there is only approval of Indian action and rhetoric for its replication but, there is no follow-up action on this account.

The other step is to shift away the Industry and future investments from China. After experiencing large scale disruption in the supply chain a large scale shifting of foreign Industry from China is being contemplated by Japan and West. It would be beneficial if we could attract some. Many strategists speculate that Chinese aggressiveness in Ladakh was designed to destabilize India to create disincentives for the industry planning shift from China to India. India has already approached nearly 1000 odd firms for shifting their manufacturing base to India and has even identified a land pool of 4,62 hectares in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra. ¹The response however, is mixed. According to a study by Japanese financial group

¹<https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/china-india-factories-companies-shifting-out-of-china-abhijit-banerjee-nobel-laureate/1956379/>

Nomura, the destination for most of these companies remain to the East and South-East Asia.²

India is fiercely independent in its foreign policy. During cold war period we followed Non-alliance. Blocks and alliances were anathema to us then. Several power centers have emerged now. We are even looking at reforms of world institutions. At this time, blocks and alliances have outlived their use and not relevant any more. We thus shun ideas of blocks and alliances and remain wedded to the multilateralism. The strategic partnership model complements this idea and also retains our strategic autonomy. Chinese government and their media taking advantage of our position and often admonishes India against US hegemony but, would not mind if India accepts Chinese hegemony. We have friends across the spectrum of nations. Just recently consequent to Ladakh incursion by the PLA, Russia who otherwise is in the Chinese camp, accepted to supply emergency purchase of 33 Aircraft (21 MiG 29 and 12 SU 30 aircraft) and fast track the supply of contracted S400 BMD knowing fully well that India is strategically close to US.³ This was possible as Russia is a trusted friend and also a Strategic partner of India. This does not bar us from developing still closer relationship with America. We have strategic partnership with 29 nations but our relationship is not at the same level with all⁴. Strategic partnership with one is not at the cost of other, these exist at their own merit. Since beginning, erstwhile Soviet Union/ Russia has supported India's defence with exports of weapons and also in pursuing joint weapon programme and even assisted India in the strategic areas of defence. Russia has led in helping India in various Make in India programme. In this area, US record has been dismal. US has not carried out promised transfer of technology, though now US has emerged as a major weapon source along with Israel. The most important feature of Strategic partnership with US is that it gives innate strength to our capacity which no other nation can impart. Both being democratic nations, US the oldest and India the largest, are the natural partners and have similarity of views on many world issues. Secondly, US remains a predominant power which alone can check China, our belligerent Northern neighbour. We definitely need US support to manage collusive threat from China – Pakistan axis. Russia in such a situation will maintain

²<https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/covid-spillover-firms-shifting-from-china-to-vietnam-has-lesson-for-india-1687344-2020-06-10>

³ivemint.com/news/india/india-to-buy-21-mig-29-and-12-sukhoi-fighter-jets-from-russia-report-11592495559415.html

⁴<https://thediplomat.com/2013/11/why-does-india-have-so-many-strategic-partners-and-no-allies/>

strategic silence due to its relationship with China and developing defence ties with Pakistan.

The economic engagement with US is the next reason for close relationship with America. Robust economy of the nation is the recipe for its strategic autonomy. There exists a great potential for high value trade with America and Europe. Both have nearly 500+ billion trade with China. Now world (Especially West) is wary with China and looking for shifting the industry to avoid supply chain disruption in future. There lies a trade opportunity for India. There is no scope for this from Russia with whom apart from one sided defence trade, there is a minimal economic engagement. India exported US\$322.8 billion worth of goods around the globe in 2019. US was the largest importer of goods from India worth US\$54.2 billion (16.8% of India's total exports) with in overall trade of USD 88.75 billion in 2019-20. This is followed by UAE with 29.7 billion and China 17 billion. France being the last with import of 5.4 billion. The fact that Russia did not figure in the list is a proof that US could boost our economy because US is one of the few countries with which India has a trade surplus. After we conclude the trade pacts with US and Europe, the exponential rise in trade is expected^{5,6}. In Foreign direct Investment the list is lead by Singapore with nearly 38% investment of the total 51 billion FDI in 2019.⁷ Though US is at the fourth position but, potential exists for much larger investment from the United States.

COVID-19 & New World Order

Coronavirus pandemic has ravaged the entire world including India. Nation's leadership took proactive measures to lessen the spread of the disease, as result compared to the most nations, we are better placed in terms of rate of infection and mortality considering the population and its density. In short term, we stare at heavy loss in our growth and economy but, in long term we may have opportunities for faster growth and rise in our world status. The world is wary of China as spreader of the disease and for its subsequent conduct. This has created a sense of mistrust against China which is not easy to fill up.

⁵<http://www.worldstopexports.com/indias-top-import-partners/>

⁶<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/u-s-remains-indias-top-trading-partner-in-2019-20/articleshow/76924711.cms?from=mdr>

⁷<https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/establish-overseas/india/foreign-investment>

Corona virus pandemic and resultant economic stress faced by the nations has greatly altered the functional environment. Apart from huge fatalities, it has affected the interstate trade, economic activities and businesses within the state resulting in loss of the jobs and livelihood of the people. For this, most states blame China and subservient role played by the WHO. In general, all states are facing severe economic stress. As per the latest IMF estimate the world GDP is expected to fall by 4.5% more than 3% predicted in April 20. World at large has taken fiscal measures totaling \$11 Trillion to support the workers and the businesses.⁸

West, in particular America and most European nations are also critical of Chinese opportunism, as when the world is battling the coronavirus in pursuance of its strategic plan, it has tried to browbeat the neighbours in south/East China Sea and on land border with India which shows it poor light. This clearly does not reflect the character of a rising power. As a result of this, all round support to China has dwindled signaling the geopolitical currents against China. During the UN human rights council meeting convened in Geneva on China's New Security Law for Hong Kong, China could not muster support barring 53 countries which comprised essentially finance seeking tiny small nations, 40 odd countries which have signed for participation in BRI projects and some autocratic nations.⁹

COVID exposed the problem of over dependence/centralization of the supply chain which actually opens up to blackmail. Now nations are looking at diversifying their supply chains. This will eventually bring relocation of the industry from China which is the current hub of the supply chain. With shifting of industry and the world pitched against it, China may never achieve its aim of becoming a super power.

Alliance with United States. Chinese rise which by far is an antithesis to the claimed peaceful rise, is perceived by the America as a threat to its number one status. It has sought to support India to checkmate China's rise. Just like China is obstructing India's rise in the region, US is replicating this by checking China's global rise. In fact, past few years, some strategists in India and America has supported close ties between the two nations. However, India has been reticent since Strategic autonomy had been our hallmark. Strategic autonomy does not mean isolation/exclusion. Our multi-

⁸<https://theprint.in/economy/imf-gives-a-more-pessimistic-projection-of-global-economy-expects-gdp-to-shrink-4-9/448140/>

⁹<https://www.axios.com/countries-supporting-china-hong-kong-law-0ec9bc6c-3aeb-4af0-8031-aa0f01a46a7c.html>

engagement model of Strategic partnership conforms with this idea. General anger against China has given us an opportunity to take our relationship to next deeper level with the United States.

United States was already deeply engaged in the trade war with China since 2018 for its alleged irregular trade practices, theft of intellectual property and manipulation of currency etc. has been hit hardest by coronavirus and is leading the world tally in infection and in mortality. The impact is so serious that it may even affect the result of the impending Presidential election in November due to serious economic disruption and rising unemployment.

Since beginning, US was against Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. To deter China earlier Obama administration had resolved to bolster the capacity of the littoral states of the region by adopting Pivot Asia but, except such declarations no substantial actions were taken. US has now actively intervened in support of its littoral states and allies in the region whose claims in the South China Sea has been trashed by China. This also gives US an opportunity to re-establish its influence in the Indo-pacific region which it had lost after China's rise. In an unprecedented move, United States even moved three Carrier Task forces to the Indo pacific region where two of these, USS Nimitz and USS Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Groups comprising more than 12000 personnel with their cruisers and destroyers conducted dual carrier operations/exercises in the South China Sea in support of free and open Indo-Pacific in June ¹⁰ Later, Indian Navy carried out military exercise with the Carrier task force near Andamans Nicobar islands in the Bay of Bengal.¹¹ China which till now showed exceedingly hostile demeanor, did not react much other than its usual commentary on US interference.

India's views converge with United States on the situation in Indo- Pacific. We are against the Chinese unilateral claims on South China Sea and on several islands, territories debunking the claims of the littoral states and support the freedom of navigation and over flights over the global commons. In furtherance to its strategic objective of deterring China, US seeks India's support to counter China. Since conclusion of the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2005 both countries have come closer and are the strategic partners. The cooperation between the two partners have naturally enhanced in several

¹⁰<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/17/asia/us-navy-aircraft-carriers-south-china-sea-intl-hnk-scli/index.htm>

¹¹<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/indo-us-naval-exercise-bay-of-bengal-with-eye-on-china-indian-us-navies-in-joint-exercises-in-bay-of-bengal-2265972>

areas including defence. It has accorded India a status of Major trade and Defense partner and for increasing interoperability of the defence forces have concluded foundational agreements practically raising the level of defence relationship with India at par with its NATO partners. India faces continental as well as maritime challenges in the IOR from the assertive China which has made great strides in the economic and defence arena. US-India Strategic partnership promises win-win situation for both India and United States. The close linkage itself will provide India innate strength to face the challenges of the region as well as to take the leadership role of the region. It also seems possible that apart from our robust response in Ladakh, US moral support and showing of Naval task forces in the South China Sea had a sobering effect on the Chinese aggression in Ladakh region. On its part US has got a reliable partner in this part of the world which can blunt Chinese assertiveness in the region.

Conclusion

There is a misconceived belief in China that 21st century is actually a Chinese century. It believes that the middle kingdom is set to dominate the world the other Asian states would remain subservient to the Chinese power. China sees emerging India a rival in the region whom it believes has to be checked and uses Pakistan, its all-weather friend for this. The intrusions in Ladakh apart from its usual salami slicing tactic is meant to shatter India's belief as an emerging regional power and also to signal United States of its power. But this plan got shattered with robust Indian response on its Ladakh border. Mike Pompeo in his statement to congress committee says that Chinese aggression on Ladakh border was a test case if so, it has failed and has actually boosted India's position in the region for standing strongly against the PLA and inflicting disproportional casualties which it cannot admit for its adverse fall out. Chinese media often admonishes India for being compliant to United States interests much against its proclaimed policy of Strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy means choosing partners as per the national interests. The intensity of this relationship will depend how much national interests these serve. Just like America, Russia is our dependable strategic partner. It however, being close associate of China, neither has strategic heft against China nor it has the economic forte to support India's trade. It however, provides much needed unconditional weapons support whenever needed. Strategic

partnership is not in conflict with our view of Strategic autonomy. In fact, the intensity of strategic partnership with US is as close as that of an alliance but with a difference that we agree to disagree on many issues based on our national interests. Similarly, the Quadrilateral (QUAD) is almost like a loose military alliance without being constrained in any manner by other partner.