

The China Threat: How Real Is It?

Diplomatically, India should also try to match China's long shadow over Africa and make inroads into Southeast Asia, where Chinese domination is much resented. These measures will stand India in good stead as a future investment, should a more bellicose avatar of China emerge. By Sreeram Chaulia

In his inaugural address to the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party on October 15th, General Secretary and President Hu Jintao allayed fears of a menacing 'China threat'. His message for neighbouring countries was that Beijing will "never seek hegemony or engage in expansion" and that it wants "practical cooperation." Further, Hu promised that China would not "engage in an arms race or pose a military threat to any other country."

Party Congresses are quadrennial watersheds in Red China's history that are followed attentively by the rest of the world. Hu's choice of an event of this magnitude to protest innocence and convey harmlessness was meant to maximise the impression of China's 'peaceful rise'. As is the wont of non-nonsense Chinese leaders, Hu went on to show logic behind this irenic foreign policy path. He said that it was "in light of the development trend of the times" and China's determination to "unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development."

Much water may have flown past the Yangtze river since Deng Xiaoping's softening of Chinese foreign policy tactics in the 1970s, but Hu's rationale remains the same. The present Chinese politburo aims to quadruple the country's per capita income from the current \$7,600 to \$30,000 by the year 2020. With such ambitious domestic welfare enhancement on the cards, Hu is asking the world to eschew beliefs of a China that could commit foreign aggrandisement. He is reselling the post-Mao Zedong compact of 'harmony' outside the borders and 'progress' within the borders.



Can this talk be taken at face value? The main problem with accepting Hu's either-development-or-aggression dichotomy is that China is growing militarily as well as developing economically. We are not dealing here with a Germany or a Japan, both of which foreswore military pursuits after World War II in order to concentrate solely on development. The 'guns versus butter' model suggests a choice between two options due to finite resources. Thanks to the undemocratic and highly non-transparent nature of China's defence sector, Hu seems to be having the cake and eating it too. China is a prime exemplar of the idea that a strong

military and strong economy can coexist and advance together.

At the Party Congress speech, Hu commented that "China follows a national defence policy that is defensive in nature." Paradoxically, as is the wont of dialecticians, he lauded the new "revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics", a reference to the unprecedented modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), courtesy an annual defence budget of \$45 billion. Notwithstanding Hu's assurances, China's offensive weapons capability for satellite-busting and anti-missile warfare has been a big

beneficiary of this massive revamp.

Why does China need ever-more-sophisticated offensive weapons and a fleet-footed army? Taiwan is its stated prey and Beijing has plans to obtain temporary 'theatre dominance' over the Taiwan Straits just long enough to present the United States with a fait accompli of a reunited 'One China'. Matching Japan's recent military assertiveness is another purpose. Possible deployment to grab the coveted Spratly Islands in Southeast Asia can be foreseen. The big question is how much of the PLA's muscle building will hurt India, China's most important neighbour with which it has already fought one war and with whom relations are ever edgy.

Should New Delhi respond with empathy to Hu's plea for understanding his country's peaceful motivations? World politics is littered with cheap talk and deadly deeds. Actions speak louder and clearer than rhetorical flourishes. Chou En Lai, China's Premier from 1949 to 1976, was a maestro of sweet talk that disguised shrewd intentions. Time magazine reported in 1955 that Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was so spellbound by Chou's "professions of peace" that he concluded that the "Americans must be causing all the trouble." In 1962, India learnt more than one lesson in Chinese disingenuousness.

One might brush aside these bad memories with the argument that 1962 was a Mao-era impropriety and that China has basically become less aggressive since Deng. To what extent, from New Delhi's point of view, has the new China walked the talk of being accommodative and consensual? Since 1981, China has engaged India in 8 rounds of governmental talks, 14 rounds of Joint Working Group Meetings, and 11 rounds of Special Representative talks to resolve the border disputes over Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh. A final settlement still eludes.

An optimist could maintain that post-Mao China is at least negotiating instead of rolling over tanks as in the past. More accurately, China has not attempted any large-scale 1962-like territorial operation against India because the latter has beefed up its defence systems along the border. Chinese realpolitik practitioners, for all their soft soaping, understand the language of force. It is interesting to note that in early

October 2007, Beijing asked New Delhi to withdraw three of its border posts in Sikkim on the grounds that the facilities "violated" bilateral agreements on maintaining peace. The allegation came barely a week after the Chinese state-run media broadcast that the border with India was growing "more amicable". This is not a contradiction if one studies the Chinese strategic mentality.

In 1986, the two countries nearly fought a second war over alleged Chinese incursions into Arunachal Pradesh. Reported sightings of Chinese soldiers in Indian territory keep recurring from time to time, the latest being in May 2007. Far from quietened, this front has been kept burning with news that there are renewed Chinese incursions into Bhutan, an ally of India that has frequently faced the insolence of the PLA. If not for the strong deterrent measures taken by New Delhi, there is little guarantee that 'Red Star Over Bhutan' or 'Red Star Over Nepal' will not materialise in the footsteps of Tibet.

Apart from the border conflict, China belies its self-professed 'peaceful' approach by virtue of its special military relationship with Pakistan. Hu can disavow involvement in any arms races, but Beijing's phenomenal military supplies to Pakistan over 40 years have established a de facto arms race by proxy. China deliberately ties down India in an internecine struggle with Pakistan as a way of weakening its strongest potential rival in Asia. In the time-honoured tradition of Chinese war theoretician Sun Tzu, Beijing is trying to "subjugate the enemy's army without doing battle." On paper, China today is more 'balanced' on the Kashmir issue and in financing Northeast insurgents, but it certainly knows where and by what means to prick and bleed India.

Could there be a way out for India to meet the China threat? Thickening trade relations have always been held by liberals as magic wands that reduce tensions and threats. Apparently, "if goods don't cross borders, then armies will." India-China trade is at an all-time high and perhaps the two economies can get so interlinked that the enmities will dissolve. Such 'commercial peace' concepts assume that rising prosperity in China will restrain its Maoist military instincts and government-sponsored hyper-nationalism. Unfortunately,

China's trade-driven economic growth has not ebbed jingoism levels. As Sinologist Stefan Landsberger has noted, "patriotism has replaced class struggle contents of government propaganda" in the world's fastest growing economy.

Allying with the United States to contain China is an option on the table for New Delhi that carries its own hazards of serving American, not Indian, interests in Asia. There should be no illusions that the US and India have identical interests, given that Islamabad remains a very close ally of Washington. The only safe bet for New Delhi is to use Russia's newfound influence over China to sober it down vis-à-vis India. Sino-Russian ties are on an upswing and India should be able to exploit Beijing's need for Moscow for its own ends. A diversionary approach, whereby China cools its designs against India and trains its guns on the US will best profit India.

The ultimate long-term guarantee for India in its competitive struggle with China is self-help. The stronger India's economy and military become, the greater the deterrence against Hu or any of his successors attempting neo-Maoist solutions. Diplomatically, India should also try to match China's long shadow over Africa and make inroads into Southeast Asia, where Chinese domination is much resented. These measures will stand India in good stead as a future investment, should a more bellicose avatar of China emerge.

The diplomatic cliff-hanger of the 21st century is about China's ascent and the form that it will take. Gazing through the crystal ball, suppose the Communist Party bosses decide one day that they have economically developed enough, and that now they have the launch pad to retake all the territories that they claim from other countries. India has to be prepared for this eventuality. Alternatively, if the Party is unable to sustain the economic miracle, it may return to its Maoist roots and launch a more forceful challenge to its neighbours for retaining legitimacy at home. India has to brace itself for this too, since China's politics is a saga of glorious uncertainties. ■

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