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By Bhaskar Roy

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his tenure just over two years ago with a message of goodwill and partnership in development with India's neighbours, including China. Soon after, Chinese president Xi Jinping made his maiden visit to India.

The red-carpet welcome to Xi in Modi's home state of Gujarat was unprecedented in warmth - photographs of the two of them sitting on a swing conveyed a sense that India and China were setting aside their differences and building on their common desires - "a win-win" situation. But behind this bonhomie, in typical Chinese style, Chinese troops showed their flag in Indian perceived territory, in the western sector of the India- China border.

Although the Indian government downplayed the incident, the Chinese position was made abundantly clear. A similar PLA incursion took place just before Chinese premier Li Keqiang visited India in 2013. Hectic diplomatic efforts by both sides saved the visit, but India made itself look like a supplicant. The recent Chinese incursions in Barahoti, Uttarakhand on the 22nd and 25th of July included air intrusion, mainly meant to photograph Indian border forces positions. Both sides withdrew without any incident.

Barahoti falls in the Middle Sector (the smallest sector comprising approximately 20 thousand sq kms) the only sector where maps have been exchanged and both sides know their claim-lines. Hence, the intrusion is suspected to be an attempt to test Indian reaction.

China has steadfastly refused to exchange maps of the Eastern and Western Sectors, the two major sectors where China claims huge portions of Indian territory including the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. Such incursions by the Chinese will continue and may increase in intensity.

The Chinese official media, Global Times, subsidiary of the Communist party's flagship, The People's Daily, is being used as an official attack dog. The Global Times, published in English for access to foreigners, has a vitriolic editorial policy. It recently criticized the deployment of tanks by the Indian army in the Western Sector (Ladakh), forgetting that the PLA had deployed its tanks quite some time ago in the same sector. India lags far behind China in border infrastructure construction for many reasons, including reluctance on the part of the army.

The Indian government, especially military planners, must take serious note of the new theatre command structuring of the PLA. The theatre commands are designed for forward thrusts under the nomenclature of "forward defense" an euphemism for attacks beyond the country's immediate borders. The Tibet Military District has been reconfigured as Tibet Theatre Command with enhanced capability and responsibility. This is the first theatre sub-command to be upgraded. This reveals a scenario which should worry the Indian authorities. A lesson may be learnt from China's position on the South China Sea dispute, where it claims almost 90 per cent of the sea on the basis of what it calls "historic" evidence. China periodically states that the strategically placed Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh should go to China as the 4th Dalai Lama was born there. India should not be surprised if China conjures up a "historic claim" on Tawang.

From time to time Chinese leaders declare that they want an early settlement of the border issue. The Indians jump, truly believing the Chinese. They do not realize that the Chinese are running rings around them, allaying Indian apprehensions when need be, then pulling the strings. If China honestly wanted an early settlement of the border issue it would have done so much earlier. China's territorial ambitions are currently focused on the South China Sea and Taiwan. The new DPP government in Taiwan appears to be retracting some of the agreements made between the previous KMT government and China, which had drawn the two sides closer, suggesting eventual integration. But new Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen has indicated that integration is not on her agenda, leading to the question whether the DPP government could pull out of the 1992 agreement, which said there was only one China, but either side was free to interpret it in its own way.

China considers Taiwan a renegade province and reserves the right to use force if efforts towards peaceful integration fails. It has deployed between 900 and 1300 M-9 missiles (range up to 300 kms) targeting Taiwan. Chinese navy and air force are being deployed and missiles being manufactured at a fast pace to close the Taiwan Strait from US intervention in case of a crisis.

Under these conditions China is in no hurry to open a front against India. At the moment it has adopted a two pronged strategy for India. Secure in the assessment that if and when the India-China border flares up the time will be of China's choosing, it is stretching economic deals with India to offload its surplus capacity, while keeping up pressure in other areas.

Where India is concerned China and Pakistan were always joined at the hip. China fathered Pakistan's nuclear weapon and missile programmes. Reliable reports suggest that China is still assisting Pakistan especially in miniaturizing its nuclear weapons/warheads.

China is not yet a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). Following US sanctions in 1991 it agreed to adhere to internationally agreed guidelines on missile technology. But this promise has been kept more in violation than adherence. In a report in the HIS Jane's Defence Weekly (29 June 2016) well known China military expert, Richard D. Fisher reveals Pakistan's Shaheen- iii medium range missile (MRBM) is carried on a Chinese built 16-wheel transporter-erector-launcher (TEL). Negotiations for this vehicle started in 2012 and Pakistan took delivery in 2016. China provided WS-51200 TELs to North Korea in 2011. Six of these vehicles carry North Korea's KN-8 and KN-14 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), according to Fisher.

Pakistan's dependence on China for military hardware is well known, though it has received new generation aircraft like the nuclear-capable F-16 fighters. This suggests that advanced fighter aircraft from China does not match the capability of advanced western systems. What China cannot match in quality it more than makes up for in quantity. Pakistan's most significant acquisition, eight Type-41 Yuan-class diesel-electric submarines from China will impact the Indian Ocean and the Gulf region.

This acquisition may not be a game changer in the Indian Ocean but may be viewed as an extension of a virtual Chinese arm from the west. The Chinese built and maintained Gwadar port is a declared defence entity. It is also a virtual Chinese naval facility. It connects with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for which Beijing has promised US\$46 billion. It is intriguing, however, that Pakistan's Federal Minister for Planning and Development, Ahsan Iqbal recently informed the senate that the CPEC "agreement with China is sensitive and it cannot be disclosed". Normally such civilian infrastructure projects are not veiled in secrecy. Secrecy suggests that the CPEC is not only an economic road but also a military-strategic enterprise. The 3000 kilometre road and railway network and oil pipelines runs from Gwadar to the Chinese city of Kashgar in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region. The road, which is part of Chinese president Xi Jinping's new 21st Century Maritime Silk Route, also passes through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) which is disputed territory, claimed by India. Militarization of this corridor is expected sooner rather than later. With the Chinese army placed there, it would be a security threat to India. The Indian government is aware of this and would have to take adequate precautions.

The Chinese entry in POK needs to be juxtaposed with the Chinese position on Kashmir. On July 17 the Chinese foreign ministry issued a press note on the recent disturbance in Kashmir, which Beijing calls “Indian-controlled Kashmir,” following the death of Hizbul Mujahiddin commander, Burhan Wani. While the statement called Hizbul a “militant” group, it raised concerns about the deaths and injuries caused by the incident. It called for proper settlement of the clashes and hoped the relevant parties would resolve the issue through peaceful means. Kashmir is a sovereign territory of India and a settled issue as far as India is concerned. The Chinese official statement amounted to interference in India’s internal affairs and should have been rejected by the Indian government, which decided to pussy-foot around it. How would China react to Indian statements on incidents in Tibet and Xinjiang?

No Chinese statements have been issued on Pakistan’s tough approach and human rights violations in POK. There are ample reasons to apprehend China wading into the Kashmir issue. It must be understood that by its activities and construction work in POK that China has given de facto sovereignty to Pakistan over POK.

Current issues in focus between India and China include India’s membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG); denoting Masood Azhar (head of terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JEM) as an international terrorist in the United Nations Committee under rule 1267; and the Indian view on the South China Sea dispute.

China is on the back foot after the July 8 International Tribunal award. It is in dire need of credible countries to support its position that nearly ninety per cent of the sea belongs to it. The majority of the ASEAN, particularly countries that are involved like the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia have firmly opposed China’s position. India’s opinion matters and China interprets India’s position to be in China’s favour. China’s charge d’Affaires in India, Liu Jinsong, told The Hindu (July 15) that Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj took a common position at the Russia-China-India conference in Moscow earlier this year.

At a presentation on the South China Sea issue, at the Chinese- Embassy on April 19, Liu Jinsong remarked that in future someone may dispute ownership of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Was this statement officially sanctioned from Beijing as a threat that if India did not back China on the South China Sea, they could create problems for India. Liu also offered an olive branch-that if India backed the Chinese position, then Beijing could accommodate New Delhi on the McMahon Line on the Eastern Sector of the India-China disputed border. The next month members of a Indian think tank visited China, and the Chinese hosts repeated the quip on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Indian Defence News, July 14)

When Chinese officials make such statements, they are officially directed, and there is considerable research and arguments behind that. In India, there is a tendency to dismiss such Chinese statements. The Chinese are not going to spring this on India tomorrow, but may do so when their thrust in the Indian Ocean becomes much stronger. India should be forewarned.

On the Masood Azhar issue, Liu Jinsong has said it is not a “political” hold by China to obstruct India’s demand but a “technical” hold. He suggested India should talk to Pakistan, the host country of Azhar. It is a very clever ploy of blocking India and protecting Pakistan’s terrorist

army.

China continues to argue against India's entry into the 48-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) on the specious ground that India has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a condition for NSG membership. The NPT is a discriminatory treaty brought in to prevent India from becoming a legitimate member of the nuclear weapons club.

India has taken a principled stand not to sign the NPT. Today the NPT is not worth the paper it is written on, given the fact how many signatories have violated the treaty mainly with the help of China. India's record on nuclear proliferation is without blemish. That is why it got the waiver for the India-US nuclear agreement.

China would have lifted its hold had Pakistan been allowed to join the NSG. but Pakistan's record on proliferation is so murky that it just cannot make the cut. Chinese officials say that India should keep engaged with the issue, and India has decided to do so.

It is imperative that the members revisit the NSG rules the soonest possible. The consensus decision does not work in today's world especially when some of the current members have vested interests in keeping away new applicants who have much better records in non-proliferation.

Members must also ask the question whether a current member guilty of nuclear proliferation strictly according to rules should remain a member. This is a very serious issue, otherwise the NSG will break down, and no amount of sanctions will help.

India is facing a joint China-Pakistan front in extended South Asia which includes Afghanistan. China will protect, support and encourage Pakistan short of an India-Pakistan war. China is a much empowered country compared to a decade ago. Its president Xi Jinping is very determined to leap-frog China's power. India is seen as an obstacle in China's overlordship of Asia.

Currently, China's distrust of India is acute because of the growing India-US relationship. At the same time it does not want to derail the relationship. It sees India's investment hunger as an opening to download. Its huge excess capacity- India has to be careful here as history tells us there are other things that come in rather invisibly, imbedded in these packages. But engagement must continue with the adage "trust, but verify".

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