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THE DRAGON DARES THE ELEPHANT - ONCE AGAIN

Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia (Retd), Director CENJOWS

"There lies a sleeping giant. Let her sleep; for once she awakens she will shake the world."

Napoleon on China

Napoleon's prophecy may be coming true, as China challenges the US supremacy and seeks equal power status. The paradigm shift in China's philosophy under Deng Xiaoping from 'Hiding one's strength and biding one's time' is evident in Chinese stance and actions in South China Sea, North Korea, the Belt Road Initiative(BRI) / One Belt One Road (OBOR), and importantly, the display of military might including the transformation of its military organization and command structures. China today is no longer biding time nor hiding its strength. It is challenging the US hegemony seeking global leadership, and equal nation status. China as an emerging superpower will be more assertive in its India policy, forcing India to review its China policy.

India's perception and understanding of China is based on the Western perspective of China and is clouded by the baggage of the 1962 debacle. Very few even among the strategic community, academia and the military make an honest effort to understand China from India's perspective and concerns.

India and China share a 3488 km long disputed border. China also lays

claim to a little over 110,000 Sq. Kms of India's territory, and as per China's stance the disputed border is only 2000 Kms. The Sino-Indian border is a peculiar set of contradictions, being the longest disputed border in the world and at the same time also the most peaceful disputed border, with the last shot in anger having been fired way back in October 1975. A fragile peace exists ever since, with the disputed borders being the ever present potential driver for conflict between the two nuclear armed neighbours - home to one third of humanity. On account of the unsettled borders India and China share an adversarial relationship, despite having mutual concerns, common development goals and shared interests in many spheres.

Of late the India- China relations seem to have hit a nadir and hence there is an imperative to analyse the reasons and the causative factors from an Indian perspective.

Addressing the Indian Ambassadors and top diplomats at Delhi on 06 May 2017, Prime Minister Modi gave out the key goals of his foreign policy. First, to drive Indian Economic presence in newer markets; second, to enhance Indian Security in a difficult neighbourhood; and third, to build India into a leading power and a net security provider. Prime Minister Modi's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' has so far yielded mixed returns. As India takes on the role of a regional leader and net security provider, the neighbouring countries have all been on board. The recent launch of the South Asia satellite is one more major contribution to the people of the region, this was duly acknowledged by the leaders of all South Asian nations (less Pakistan) in a video conference. However, India's relations with two of our adversaries, Pakistan and China seem to have hit the rock bottom. Prime Minister Modi has invested considerable political capital in seeking to normalise relations with Pakistan, from inviting PM Nawaz Sharif to his swearing in ceremony, meetings at New York and Ufa and of course the surprise and bold visit to Lahore on 25 Dec 2015. All paid back, as these often are, by a wave of high profile, high visibility terrorist attacks perpetuated by the Pakistan Army supported and trained terrorists. This was as expected and understandable as the Pakistan Army drives the India policy and is not going to give up on its 'low cost high effect' proxy war with the aim of bleeding India with a thousand cuts. The Pakistan army will not permit a meaningful political/ diplomatic dialogue.

The India-China relations under PM Modi were expected to be at an all-time high with two strong leaders with a personal chemistry. What has actually transpired in the last three years despite a record nine meetings

between PM Modi and President Xi Jinping, is that the India-China relations are at a nadir. China has been more assertive in all domains, be it political, diplomatic and military. In an effort to confine India to the region, China has thwarted India's attempts to gain its rightful place in the UN Security Council and opposed or rather blocked India's entry to the NSG. It has also vetoed the UN resolution to declare Maulana Masood Azhar, Chief of Jaish-e-Mohammed, a terrorist, at the behest of Pakistan, and now cancelled the scheduled planning of the combined military Exercise Hand-in-Hand.

Seemingly rattled by India's firm stance on the visit of HH Dalai Lama to Tawang, the Chinese foreign ministry went to the extent of summoning Indian ambassador Vijay Gokhale in Beijing to lodge an angry protest, the first such summon after 2008. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying sending a stern message said, *"We demand India stop using the Dalai Lama to do anything that undermines China's interests, and we also demand the Indian side not hype up sensitive issues between India and China."* China seemed concerned by HH Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang and upping the ante, it went on to state that using the Dalai Lama card will adversely impact bilateral relations between the two countries.

China also openly raised the issue of its claim over Tawang. Dai Bingguo special representative on the boundary negotiations with India from 2003 to 2013, gave a media statement saying *"If the Indian side takes care of China's concerns in the eastern sector of their border, the Chinese side will respond accordingly and address India's concerns elsewhere."* Elaborating China's stand, Dai further added *"The disputed territory in the eastern sector of the China-India boundary, including Tawang, is inalienable from China's Tibet in terms of cultural background and administrative jurisdiction."*

China also conducted a first ever major joint exercise in the Tibet Plateau, post the transformation and re-organisation of the PLA. Ex 136, the first such joint exercise conducted in the Xinxiang and Tibetan Plateau in Sep 2016, was witnessed by most members of the CMC. China always plays to a plan. Despite China's sensitivities and challenges in South China Sea and North Korea, China has been trying to pressurise India. It is important to analyse the possible reasons for China's renewed actions.

Within two weeks of assuming the mantle of being the supreme leader of China, wearing the three all-important hats of Chairman CMC, President

of China and the leader of the Communist Party. President Xi changed China's established position on the India-China Boundary Question. For some unknown reasons the significant change in position went mostly unnoticed and unanalysed among the strategic community and the media. Much of what has followed during the last four years of President Xi's tenure and India Policy can be attributed to the change in the established position. In keeping with the philosophy of Mao De Dzung of ensuring inclusive land borders, China over the years has resolved border disputes with 12 of the 14 countries, peacefully and through negotiations. The two countries with which China continues to have unsettled or disputed borders are India and Bhutan. On 28 March 2013 President Xi Jinping met the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at Durban on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit. Changing a long standing position on the Boundary Question – Xi said "China and India should improve and make good use of the mechanism of the Special Representatives to strive for a *fair, rationale solution and framework acceptable to both sides* **As Early As Possible**". The decades old position till then had been that the "Boundary Question is a complex historical legacy which will take time to resolve" and should not hamper the China-India relations. '**As Early As Possible**' was a departure from the past and should have rung warning bells in India, somehow it did not. This was also reiterated and restated during the meetings between President Xi and PM Modi. The events that followed which have rocked the India-China relationship and nearly shattered the fragile peace and tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) need to be analysed in the context of China's desire for an early resolution of the Boundary Question.

The 28/29 Mar 2013 meeting between the two leaders was followed by a 20 day long 'face off' between the two largest armies in the world, both nuclear armed, at Depsang in Eastern Ladakh, wherein the PLA disturbing the status quo and equilibrium pitched tents on the Indian side of the LAC near Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) on 14 Apr 2013. The face off ended on 5 May when the PLA withdrew to their positions as held earlier, avoiding an embarrassment which could have led to the cancellation of PM Li Keqiang's first visit abroad – he was scheduled to visit India in mid- May that year.

The many events to follow indicate that the military and diplomatic coercion by China are aimed to pressurise India to negotiate for an early settlement of the Boundary Question. This also includes the PLA's incursion into Chumar which coincided with the first visit to India of President Xi. There were major expectations of improved relations

between the two Asian giants with PM Modi personally hosting President Xi in his home state of Gujarat. This visit was also among the first and most important high profile visit of a head of state to India during PM Modi's tenure and much was expected in terms of outcomes. The visit was marred by the PLAs intrusion into Chumar. Some strategic analyst misreading the indicators termed it as an internal struggle wherein the PLA acted in a stand-alone mode saying Xi may not be aware of the intrusions. This assessment was totally incorrect and if there was any doubt this got corrected on Xi's return to China. On his return on 22nd Sep 2014 President Xi addressing the PLA said "*PLA should improve their combat readiness and sharpen their ability to win a regional war in the age of information technology*". It is another matter that Xi and his delegation could not have expected a firm and a forthright stance from PM Modi on the border incursion at Chumar, leading to the PLA withdrawing to their earlier positions.

A major game changer in the Sino- Indian relationship is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is imperative to analyse this in some detail to understand certain actions by China. On 17th March 2013 President Xi Jinping assumed the mantle of 'paramount leader', wearing all three hats simultaneously. Within 24 hours of assuming the all-powerful office Xi Jinping cleared the China - Pakistan Gwadar agreement giving China 40 years of management rights to Pakistan's Gwadar port. The management and control of the Gwadar port gives China the much-needed strategic access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is open to debate by China watchers, that the immediate clearing of the Gwadar agreement is a deliberate move signaling China's priority, or just a case of a project being cleared in the normal course wherein all processes and formalities had already been completed.

President Xi also gave a concrete shape to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) during his first visit to Pakistan, in April 2015 by signing 51 agreements amounting to \$46 billion. CPEC is pivotal to China's "One Belt One Road (OBOR)" as an instrument of China's global economic reach and grand strategy. The strategic importance and priority of CPEC can be gauged by the fact that it provides a link between the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road (through Gwadar Port). Without any consideration to India's sensitivities China is developing CPEC which cuts across the Indian territory of J&K under illegal occupation of Pakistan. The CPEC has direct strategic and security implications for India. Though China's stated position is that the 'Kashmir' is a bilateral issue between India and

Pakistan, however, now with the CPEC, Chinese economic and strategic interests make it a direct stakeholder in a hither-to-fore bilateral issue. While the Sino-Pakistan axis is not new, the sheer magnitude of the CPEC makes it clear that it is not only dictated by economic considerations but also to exploit strategic payoffs. CPEC enhances the collaborative and collusive threat China and Pakistan pose to India. In the event of a military confrontation, CPEC will facilitate flow of military aid to Pakistan.

A major concern to India is the deployment of PLA troops in POK to safeguard Chinese interests and assets, any perceived threat to these assets may elicit a military response and has the potential to spiral into a conflict, duly aided or orchestrated by Pakistan. Representatives of 65 nations including 29 heads of state and government leaders are expected to attend Xi's forum on the Belt and Road initiative at Beijing starting 14 May. India stands invited to be part of the conference and the initiative. As China has disregarded India's concerns of violating its sovereignty in constructing the CPEC through Indian Territory illegally occupied by Pakistan, India cannot be a part of the project, though China would like India to be part of this.

Over the years, China has made concerted efforts to carry out the strategic encirclement of India by investing in ports and other associated infrastructure projects in Srilanka, Myanmar, Maldives, Bangladesh and of course Pakistan and other Indian Ocean countries. This investment strategy has given China captive bases, thus not only contributing to the "String of Pearls" but also giving China the much-needed operational access and domination of the Indian Ocean.

The options with India to counter China are both limited and complex. These are necessarily not of either conflict or confrontation neither of eternal friendship nor tolerance. It will continue to remain one of competition and cooperation, central to which must be maintaining peace and tranquility along the LAC and ensuring equilibrium. Being a neighbour with an adversarial relationship, it is an imperative for India to comprehend and analyse what the rise of China entails in India's context specially so in the security domain and our policy options to shape this relationship.

India should continue to strengthen the CBMs and ensure peace and tranquility as propagated in the Panchsheel and in the various agreements it has signed with China, which are:

- Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas September 7, 1993.
- Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas November 29, 1996. This agreement has been termed as a sort of no war pact, as Article 1 of the agreement states *'Neither side shall use its military capability against the other side. No armed forces deployed by either side in the border areas along the line of actual control as part of their respective military strength shall be used to attack the other side, or engage in military activities that threaten the other side or undermine peace, tranquility and stability in the India-China border areas.'*
- Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question April 2005.
- Border Defence Cooperation Agreement between India and China Oct 2013.

In addition to ensuring peace and tranquility, India should work towards a common understanding of the LAC followed by defining and then delineation of the boundary, through the established medium of Special Representatives of the two countries. China respects strength and India needs to build capabilities and enhance capacities specially so in the military domain to be able to build a deterrence and a credible war prevention strategy. India should broaden exchanges and cooperation between their armed forces and deepen mutual military and security trust, as part of the CBMs.

In the foreign policy domain the 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policy should form the basis of 'Bind to Balance". For this structural and systems will need to be refined to ensure that promised and planned projects are executed on time and are mutually beneficial. The much delayed development of the Chabahar port is a case in point. The reverse 'string of pearls' or India's 'String of Diamonds' is needed to counterbalance the strategic encirclement of India, and strengthen its influence in the Indian Ocean, the choke point for China's energy supplies, Malacca Straits the proverbial China's Achilles' heel, which transports nearly 80% of China's oil and gas from West Asia. The need to focus on the strategic relations with Japan and Vietnam, Laos,

Cambodia and Mongolia in addition to CAR, however, India will need deep pockets to sustain the relations and goodwill, which may be difficult due to competing demands and conflicting priorities. The challenge is to ensure the availability and optimum utilisation of resources.

India should also ensure that its relations with US should not be perceived as a zero sum game and hamper relations with China, and similarly relations with China should not be perceived to be at the cost of US. India, like China, is an emerging power and a risen responsible nation, and is also the 'Balancing Power' along with Russia in the emerging strategic construct for global leadership, and will need to play the great game to protect and project its national interests.

