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## The Chinese Conundrum



**Major General (Dr.) PK Chakravorty, VSM (Retd)**, is a Senior Fellow (Veteran) at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS).

### Introduction

In the digitised space of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China continues to remain an enigma for the world. This became all the more potent when the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Wuhan, China. Currently, China is busy trying to persuade its people to get vaccinated as it has administered just about 40 million Doses (as on April 08, 2021) which need to be accelerated to inoculate 350 million people by June 2021.<sup>1</sup> The probable reasons for not taking the vaccine could be the bouncing back to near normal situation or possibly, lack of awareness among the masses. During the last 17 months, when the world was fighting to control the coronavirus, China has moved assertively under the leadership of President Xi Jinping who has completed almost nine years in office. His drive for power has destabilised the

political consensus and power sharing norms that evolved since the 1980s; by removing the term limits on the office of the President and not nominating his successor, he has pushed China towards a potential 'destabilising succession crisis', with profound implications for international order and global commerce.<sup>2</sup> This unbridled power has led to China asserting itself on the world stage. It would be interesting to view the entire perspective and see how it impacts India particularly in its related problems with the border and economy. The aim is to

### Key Points

- China continues to remain an enigma in the digitised 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- As evident from the recently concluded Alaska talks, China wanted to be respected as a World power.
- China applying sporadic military pressure against Taiwan.
- Recent intrusions in the Philippines area of South China Sea, is an increasing evidence of China's aggressive nature.
- With India's current military might and 'never bow down nor give up approach', China is going to face a strong India.
- There is a need for both India and China to rethink their strategies in order to maintain a peaceful relation for global good and progress.



have a holistic perspective of the issues to understand how they are developing and thereafter suggesting a course of action for dealing with such issues.

### **The Chinese Conundrum**

The Chinese conundrum becomes clearer, when one starts to trace China's actions with respect to other countries.

#### ***US-China***

It was often thought that although China was a good manufacturing hub due to availability of cheap labour and raw materials, but did not possess the requisite technologies which it had to import from the West, thereby increasing the overall cost of production. A shift in the thought process is being observed recently, wherein as per leading United States (US) experts China's dominance in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) based applications has made it a technology power house—its technological capabilities are original and not based on imitation and borrowing. US-China 'technomic' war is very evident especially with respect to dominance in AI—both countries are aiming for technological supremacy by investing on installation of devices that has been connected to the internet and primarily functions in collecting and disseminating data. There is an underlying competition of capturing the critical nodes—these nodes include financial communications, supply chains, weapon control and the internet. Therefore, there is a high probability that the internet world will be divided into two systems— US and China. The Anchorage meeting between representatives of China and the United States (held on 18-19 March 2021), he ended in mutual public denunciation by both sides.<sup>3</sup>There was also no joint statement released after the conference. The US shared concerns over some of China's actions and also wanted to highlight their policies, priorities and world views.<sup>4</sup>The issues publicly raised included a wide spectrum—Taiwanese security, Political suppression in Hongkong, persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, economic & military coercion of American allies, alleged interference in China's internal affairs and many more.<sup>5</sup>

However, when it came to China, the sentiments were unlikely as the Chinese media described the talks as historic as it marked a transition in power relations between the two countries—this was possibly due to the China's refusal to accept that the United States could negotiate from a position of power. It is interesting to note that China today considers the US and itself as two major world powers.<sup>6</sup> This, without doubt, proves that China is on an assertive path due to its capability to rise despite the pandemic.



### ***Taiwan***

The unification of Taiwan is one of the most important objective for the People's Republic of China. An unofficial US delegation visited Taiwan during the second week of April 2021 in a reaffirmation of the US' commitment to Taiwan's security. China responded to the delegation's visit with live military drills and launched a record of jets that flew across the Taiwan Straits— this indicated China's growing reliance on military means to check Taiwan's behaviour of seeking independence.

The current security stance presents a dilemma to US— on one hand, the current policy of strategic ambiguity allows US to avoid committing to the defence of Taiwan against a Chinese invasion; and on the other hand, China's assertiveness compels the US to act 'bluntly' and provide consistent support to Taiwan so as to send a clear message to other partners that Washington would not abandon Taiwan, its dream of independence. However, as of now it appears that China will continue its military coercion against Taiwan irrespective of US' support.

### ***South China Sea***

The Union Banks and Whitsun Reef, located within 200 nautical miles of Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone, witnessed a possible standoff between China and Philippines in March-April 2021 wherein a flotilla of 220 Chinese vessels was seen in early March 2021. On receiving a complaint from the Philippines Government, the Chinese Embassy in Manila gave a 'perfunctory reply' and stated that the vessels are very much in Chinese territory and have been fishing in the area for many years. Further they denied the presence of Chinese Maritime Militia.<sup>7</sup>

To this, the Philippines Government strongly condemned the continued presence of Chinese Maritime Militia in the area and saw it as China's efforts to further occupy features in the West Philippine Sea. It is pertinent to note that Philippines has a long standing Mutual Defence Treaty with the US as per which US would militarily support the Philippines should the country come under attack. Research have also been undertaken by the Naval War College, USA and indicated that some of the Chinese ships are of the Fancheng Nine series—they are 62.8 metres long trawlers which have Small Arms in their locker rooms and manned by retired PLA Navy personnel as they perform clandestine missions for the Maritime Militia. In early March 2021, there were 44 vessels in the Whitsun Reef, 115 at Kennan Reef, 45 near Thitu Island and another 50 dispersed among Mischoief, Fiery and



Subi Reefs. The appearance of Chinese boats in South China Sea to occupy territory is a time tested strategy. Philippines Coast Guard is currently conducting drills in the South China Sea near Thitu Island and Scarborough Shoal— the exercises involved training in navigation, small boat operations, maintenance and logistical operations. Prior to the event, the Philippine Armed Forces also held a joint exercise with US soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Although not completely, but to some extent this show of strength may act as a check to China's aggressive behaviour.

### ***East China Sea***

US Naval Expert— Dr.Toshi Yoshihara— has cautioned that China will, without question, continue to pursue a strategy aimed at capturing Senkaku islands in the Okinawa Prefecture. Yoshihara drew special attention to China's recent implementation of the Coast Guard Law which permits China's Coast Guard to use weapons against foreign vessels in waters it 'claims' in this case, the Senkaku islands.<sup>9</sup> The Senkaku island is strategically important for China as their authorities have concluded that if they can gain effective control over the East China Sea, they would be able to effectively block US military operations. China, generally, has a tendency to apply domestic laws to advance its extra territorial claims. The other aspect is use of force to protect sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> The recent Coast Guard Law must be viewed as part of China's 'salami slicing' tactics to gradually creep forward and slowly seize the Senkaku islands. Therefore, in order to avoid loss of territory, Japan should immediately take proactive measures to assert national sovereignty.

### ***Bhutan***

Bhutan falls to the South of Lhasa in Tibet and China has been keenly trying to claim parts of territory in the country since boundary talks began between the two countries, 37 years ago in 1984. It is pertinent to note that, both countries held their 10<sup>th</sup> round of expert group meeting (EGM) in Kunming between April 06 and 09 this year—the first such talk post the Doklam standoff in 2017 and China's claim to Bhutan's Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in June 2020. However, no effective outcome was reported from the EGM.

It is pertinent to note that Bhutan does not have an Embassy in Beijing— but has a Consulate in Hong Kong which continues to run smoothly. Bhutan, at present has an external debt of less than USD 3 billion and to lower its unemployment rate, either India's private sector have to move in, else China will gradually creep in and fill the gap. China has been ranked top most in the Global Diplomacy Index by the Lowy Institute of Australia<sup>11</sup> —



they are agile as diplomats and easily get involved once they see any opportunity— through trade they wean their way to other negotiations.

### **Implications on India**

China and India's relations are by all means unpredictable— as is evident from the fact that, during the 'First wave' of COVID, China undertook transgressions of a high order in Ladakh and currently while India is battling Second Wave, they are providing Oxygen Concentrators and Active Pharmaceutical ingredients for large quantity of medical drugs but with an underlying tag of increased cost of production. Further, the Chinese rocket— Long March 5B, which is a large rocket and failed to be boosted in Outer Space resulting in loss of control, re-entered the atmosphere over the Mediterranean Sea before flying over West Asia to finally fall near Maldives. The administrator of NASA—Bill Nelson accused China of failing to meet responsible standards regarding their space debris.<sup>12</sup> It is not an unknown fact that, China is keeping a close eye on India's actions. India's Telecom Ministry has dropped out Chinese equipment makers— Huawei and ZTE— from its 5G trials.

Viewing aspects on the LAC, the 11<sup>th</sup> India-China military talks were held on 09 April 2021, however, no joint statement was released despite of the fact that, the talks went on for 11 hours. It appears that there is a stalemate on the current deployment and it is learnt that India has made it clear that pulling back troops from friction points could be done only after the Chinese Army disengages from areas like Hot Springs, Gogra Post and Depsang plains—currently, China is not ready for disengagement from these areas.<sup>13</sup> The only disengagement so far has been in North Pangong Tso where Chinese troops withdrew to Finger 8 and in South Pangong Tso where Indian troops withdrew from the Kailash Ranges. It is pertinent to note that although the Quad will assist us in the maritime domain, but on the land borders China will continue the art of salami slicing and the Indian Armed Forces have to be alert and vigilant. It is natural that China is rotating its troops and bringing in Air Defence Systems, a variety of Unmanned Aerial Systems and is capable of introducing Cyber Warfare— we have to be prepared to fight in Multiple Domains to stop the Chinese from their misadventures. However, with India's current military might and 'never bow down nor give up approach', China is going to face a strong India and there is a need for both India and China to rethink their strategies in order to maintain a peaceful relation for global good and progress.



## End Notes

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