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## China's Military Diplomacy in New Era and Implications for India



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*"You can do a lot with diplomacy but of course, you can do a lot more with diplomacy backed up with firmness and force".*

— Kofi Annan

### Introduction

Military Diplomacy highlights the fact that, the military has a role that goes beyond mere security and defence of the country through the use of force, with an aim to complement the objectives of the foreign policy. The role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with respect to military diplomacy was rather limited since the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Between 1950s and 1970s, PLA was primarily supporting armies of 'like-minded' revolutionary regimes like North Korea, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Military Diplomacy in China started gaining importance in the 1990s. During the initial years, the focus remained on strategic

partnerships and dialogues with other countries involving issues like counter terrorism and bilateral security cooperation. In the wake of more assertive and nationalist Chinese foreign

### Key Points

- PLA's role in military diplomacy has been on the rise since 2004 and has witnessed a boost since 2014 with Xi Jinping's advent to power.
- The focus of China's military diplomacy is to manage strategic relations with great powers, engage countries in the regional periphery and those part of BRI, and forging a 'South – South' relationship with the non-western world.
- Besides the stated military-diplomatic goal of its "military construction", PLA appears to strive to demonstrate its newly acquired military might and also reassure the world about its 'peaceful rise'.
- PLA's participation has graduated from bilateral to multilateral Joint/Combined exercises with themes related to both traditional and Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW).
- China's footprints in India's neighbourhood have grown significantly due to shady investments and the over-dependence of some countries on Chinese arms.
- To counter China's designs in the region, India needs to progress from the existing mindset of military cooperation to military diplomacy and leverage the military as an effective diplomatic tool.

policy, the PLA's role grew exponentially as a tool of national diplomacy. The Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2004, enhanced the PLA mandate from the traditional role of 'territorial defence' to 'power projection'.<sup>1</sup> This was further emphasised by Xi Jinping, under whose leadership, the role of PLA in military diplomacy increased many folds.

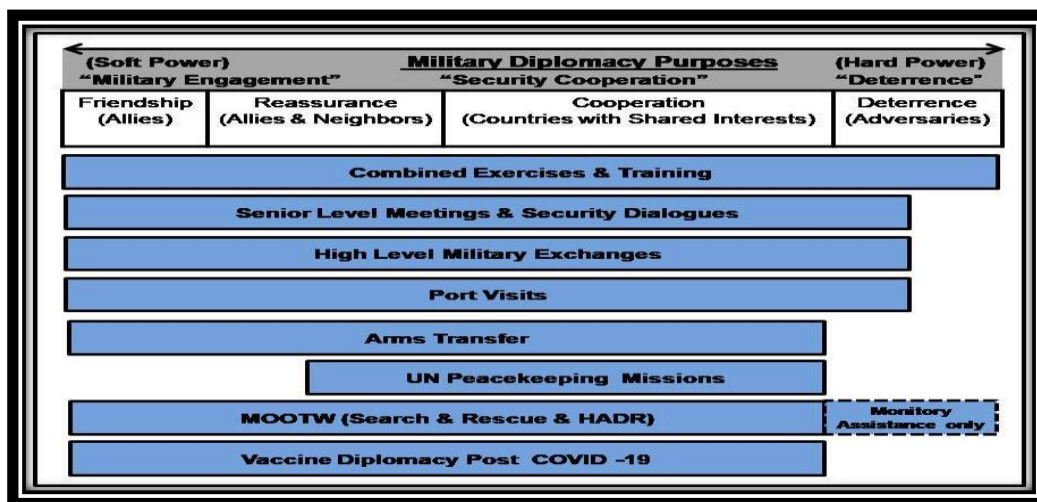
## Objectives of Chinese Military Diplomacy

PLA's military-diplomatic endeavours are aligned to advancing specific Chinese strategic interests. One of the areas of emphasis is on managing China's strategic relations with great powers like US and Russia. However, these interactions/engagements with Western European Armed Forces have been reduced to almost negligible levels in recent years.<sup>2</sup> The countries in China's regional periphery have been on its priority list for military engagements so that China is accepted as an 'undisputable regional power', and also can be seen as a move to counter US and other country's designs to contain China in the region. However, in the current scenario, all endeavours of diplomacy, including that of the military, has been preceded over by President Xi's grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and forging 'South-South' relations with the 'non-western' world to create a 'win-win cooperation'.

## Ways of Defence Diplomacy

Some of the important military diplomatic activities undertaken by China with all countries including friends and adversaries along with intended purpose and scope is illustrated below. China's military interactions with countries under UN sanctions (such as North Korea and Iran) are limited and not highly publicised.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: Military Diplomacy Purposes



Source: Adapted by author from Smith, Steven J, "Winning Friends and Influencing People with Guns: Understanding the Growth of China's Military Diplomacy", 2016. Accessible at <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/36456>.

## ***Combined Military Exercises and Training***

Combined/ Joint Military Exercises are one of the most visible and open forms of military diplomacy. As per an analysis by CSIS covered in a tabulated form, China participated in over 300 military exercises with more than 60 countries between 2003 to 2018.<sup>4</sup> As noticeable, since the first bilateral exercise with Kyrgyzstan in 2002, there has been a sharp increase in the frequency of bilateral exercises, and in recent years PLA has been part of many multilateral exercises as well.

**Figure 2: China's Joint Military Exercises**

Country	Joint/Combined Exercises	Port calls (PLAN)	Senior officers delegations/ visits	Total Interactions
RUSSIA	45	2	68	115
US	14	6	82	102
PAKISTAN	35	11	57	103
AUSTRALIA	20	8	44	72
THAILAND	20	7	49	76

*Source: Annotated by the Author*

- Despite some inherent distrust due to past baggage, 'Russia is emerging as the priority nation for military exchanges' and China's armed forces have gained valuable operational experience during these Joint exercises especially in aspects of counterterrorism drills as also operating in high seas for inexperienced PLA Navy which is aspiring to achieve blue water capabilities. The exercises with Russia also provide China an opportunity to operate in areas of strategic importance often frequented by the Russian navy like the Mediterranean Sea and general areas bordering the Sea of Japan.<sup>5</sup> The recently held China-Russia joint exercise ZAPAD/INTERACTION-2021 (09-13 August 2021) at a Combined Training Base in Qingtongxia in China is the fourth such consecutive training held between the two militaries after three earlier events in Russia in Vostok (2018), Tsentr (2019) and Kavkaz (2020). Such China-Russia interactions serve the purpose of strategic signalling and consolidate China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership aimed against the common adversary. Besides other intangible benefits, these exercises relieved both countries of a need for massive deployment along the 4000 km Sino-Russian borders. Post the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has strived to build relations with the Central Asian States, with an initial focus to settle the



Soviet legacy of disputed borders. The two days “Counterterrorism Collaboration 2021” exercises with anti-terrorism drills, conducted in August 2021, with Tajikistan highlights mutual growing security concerns due to the Taliban taking over Kabul.

- China has been actively participating in ‘joint/combined exercises with its other neighbours in South Asia’ to boost its influence, checkmate other regional competitors like India and also serve as a confidence-building measure with countries having border/maritime disputes with China, to avoid an unintended flare-up. Since 2014, China actively participates in the annual Cobra Gold series joint drills jointly led by the US and Thailand and has now become the largest joint military exercise in Southeast Asia. Sino-India “Hand in Hand” series of Joint Military Exercises under the theme of counter-terrorism, was conceived primarily as a confidence-building measure (CBM) between the two militaries given mutual suspicions over the border dispute. On the other hand, China has increased participation in a wider range of such bilateral combat exercises with ‘all-weather strategic cooperative partner’ Pakistan and is being used for signalling against the common adversary, India. The annual month-long Shaheen-IX” or Eagle-IX exercise was conducted in Dec 2020 amid increasing border tensions with India. Joint naval exercise with Pakistan has been a regular feature for few years. However, in early 2020, for the first time “Sea Guardians-2020” bilateral exercise in the North Arabian Sea has been now developed into a series of joint exercises covering the navy, army, and air force<sup>6</sup>. PLA has enhanced its participation in regularly conducted Warrior series of counter-terrorist theme-based military exercises with Pakistan Special Forces, because of increased terrorist attacks along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Nepal, for the first time, conducted ten days long military drill “Sagarmatha Friendship 2017” based on counter-terrorism with the PLA.<sup>7</sup> This shift is significant as traditionally Nepal participated in Joint military exercises only with India and the US. China besides waning India’s influence through these military exchanges also hopes to monitor and control activities of Tibetan in exile in Nepal. The training with Bangladesh is mostly limited to vacancies in the training courses. Despite growing closer relations between China and Myanmar, paragraph 41 of Myanmar’s 2008 constitution, which was drafted under the aegis of the military, doesn’t permit deployment of any foreign troops inside the country, possibly aimed against China due to underlying distrust on some issues.<sup>8</sup> China has also initiated Joint Naval exercises with ASEAN countries to develop mutual trust and accommodate China’s grown presence and influence in Southeast Asia, and not least in the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup> The first multilateral military exercise by China with ASEAN was conducted in Oct 2018, and this was closely followed by the



ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise, or AUMX 2019 next year, signifying growing Sino-US competition in the region.

### ***Military Dialogues***

After the success of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) with the erstwhile Soviet Union, China has been practicing the mechanism regionally and globally albeit with mixed results. Participating in security dialogues at various levels with military dialogue as its subset is an important component of such measures. Some recent Defence White papers have emphasised China's participation in key security dialogue forums including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and many other mechanisms to build confidence, improve trust and thereby "promote international and regional peace and stability". The relatively obscure Xiangshan Forum conceived in 2006 has been transformed from a small academic exchange to a high-profile security and defence forum in 2014 with the attendance of defence chiefs of South Korea, North Korea, and Japan with the likely intention to rival the annual Shangri-La Dialogue hosted by Singapore. China's participation in these dialogues is by both civilian leaders holding national security responsibilities as well as uniformed military officers, considering close PLA-party symbiotic relationship.<sup>10</sup> China's CBMs with India commenced with the signing of the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA) in 1993 and since then such follow on CBMs have been mutually agreed upon in 1996, 2005, 2012 and 2013 with certain elaborations.

### ***Naval Port Calls***

The objectives of PLA's military diplomacy have gradually aligned to shift in China's strategic maritime orientation and power projection capability to meet its global aspirations. In the past two decades, there has been exponential capability building in the PLA Navy, in its quest to transform itself as blue water Navy. As a result, Naval port calls to strengthen diplomatic ties between countries have become preferred military diplomacy especially along the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) which is part of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has established its first overseas military base in Djibouti, on the Gulf of Eden and has invested heavily in commercial ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, to address its vulnerabilities and boost regional and global influence. Since 2008, PLA Navy has been maintaining Anti-Piracy Escort Force (APEF) on a rotational basis in the Gulf of Eden, even when incidents of piracy in and around the Horn of Africa have almost ebbed to nil. To date, at least 35 such task forces have been deployed which are 'mostly involved in port calls diplomacy across the Indo-Pacific and as far away as Europe'. China is now planning to





develop a port at Senegal, on the West African Coast, with the stated aim to help Senegal Navy in tackling the emerged global hot spot of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, with the ulterior motive of PLAN convenient access to South Atlantic<sup>11</sup>. The MSR was intended to connect China with the rest of Asia and Europe but in 2015, expanded to South Pacific also. One of the largest ports has been constructed on a small island in Vanuatu in South Pacific with Chinese investment. Vanuatu is too close to Australia for comfort<sup>12</sup>. PLAN port calls frequency and places of visit are likely to increase in the future, with support of new 'strategic strong points', the term used by PLA for overseas ports and military bases. In addition, some port calls are associated with friendly visits or non-traditional security missions. The Peace Ark hospital ship, also from the PLA Navy, is one of such highest-profile non-AEPF type of diplomatic missions aimed to enhance China's soft power, providing medical assistance to countries of Latin America, IOR, Africa, and the South Pacific.

### ***Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Operations/ MOOTW***

PLA is now proactively participating in Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Operations also called Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW), the term first used in 2006 in the Defence White Paper. As China's national interests become more global, MOOTW has expanded to include UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) and international HADR commitments.<sup>13</sup> The PLA during the current phase of modernisation since 2015, has reorganised itself and is undergoing organised training to take up these missions more efficiently. China's involvement and support for the United Nations (UN) have grown considerably in recent years and may continue to grow as the US scales back its contributions to the UN. It is presently the second-largest contributor to both the UN's regular as well as the peacekeeping budget.<sup>14</sup> Deployment of Chinese soldiers and police in peacekeeping operations has surged from only five soldiers in 1990 to a peak of 3,084 personnel by mid-2015 and settled to 2,534 June last year, which is maximum participation as compared to any of the P5 members as also among the top ten U.N. personnel contributor countries.<sup>15</sup> As per the commitment made in 2015, China has created and registered a force of 8,000 for UNPKOs and a permanent UN peacekeeping police squad.

The simple analysis would reveal that while Beijing is shy of deployment in high-risk UNPKOs missions like Syria, and its contributions are more liberal where China has geostrategic interests and has made investments. For example, China's largest deployment is of infantry battalion group in South Sudan where it has a major stake in oil resources. Around 232 China's peacekeeping personnel have been committed to MONUSCO, the UN mission in the Congo where China has almost 80 per cent stake in one of the world's largest



copper and cobalt mines besides other investments. Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief operations (HADR) mission is another important component of MOOTW where China's response besides the furtherance of its foreign policy objectives is also aimed at projecting a benign image and allaying fears of a 'China threat'.

### ***Functional and Military Educational Exchanges***

PLA educational and academic exchanges include visits by military educational institution leaders, cadets, and professional military education student delegation, training foreign military personnel at PLA military educational institutions, and individual PLA officers studying or undergoing courses in foreign military education institutions. Functional exchanges are professional exchanges between PLA and foreign military personnel on specific subjects and are a rare part of PLA military diplomacy now.<sup>16</sup> Over 1,700 PLA personnel have studied in more than 50 countries across the globe since 2012. Meanwhile, more than 10,000 foreign military personnel from over 130 countries have studied in Chinese military universities and colleges.<sup>17</sup> Realising the importance of such exchanges, China over the past decade has restructured nearly half of its 70 military academies to accommodate the training of foreign students. China in the present form may not be able to leverage its intent of such military exchange due to Mandarin-language barriers as also lack open discussions and has tighter control which has created an "imaginary wall" separating Chinese and international students.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Military-to-Military COVID-19 Related Engagement***

Military-to-military COVID-19-related engagement by the PLA has played an important role in complementing China's diplomacy to douse widespread criticism of China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak. In an attempt to repair the tarnished image, military diplomacy began as early as March 2020, when the PLA sent protective equipment and clothing to Iran. China's all-weather friend, Pakistan, and the Cambodian militaries were the first to receive the Chinese vaccines. Between March 2020 and April 2021, the PLA has provided military medical assistance or donations to 56 countries around the world and a United Nations peacekeeping mission.<sup>19</sup> Most of the countries which received this aid are developing countries from Africa and the Asia Pacific are the same has been distributed through China's "Health Silk Road" programme with a focus on countries that are part of BRI. Shortage of COVID vaccine due to the ban of export of the same by India in May 2021 as a result of a devastating second wave, forced Bangladesh and Nepal to sign a non-disclosure agreement (generally meant for sensitive defence equipment, etc) with China for the commercial purchase of Chinese vaccine.<sup>20</sup>

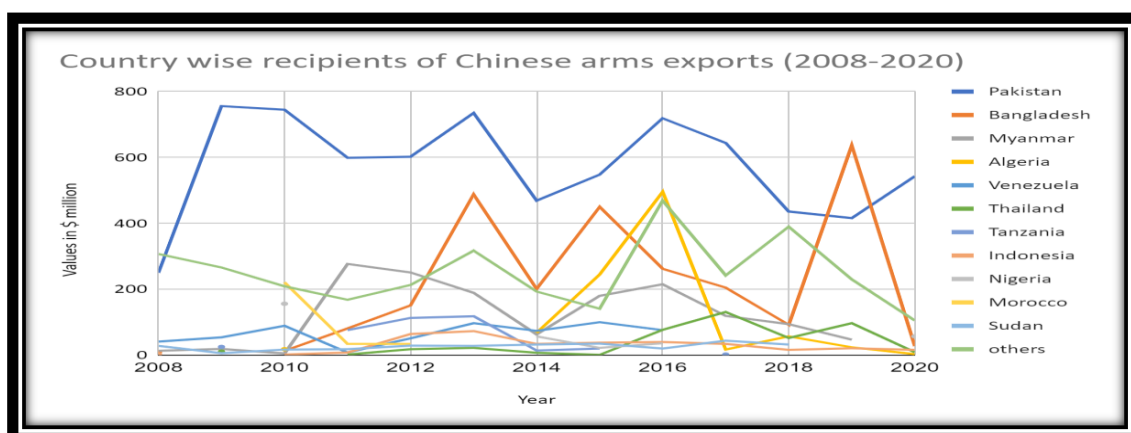
## Arms Transfers as a Tool of Defence Diplomacy

Until the defence reforms initiated in the 1990s by Jiang Zemin, the PLA was authorised to market major weapons to overseas buyers as part of business ventures. Since 2008, The State Administration for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defence (SASTIND) is responsible to arrange and monitor the commercial sale of weapons. Even then, the PLA as part of its military assistance programs continued to maintain some discretion over gifts, leases, and loans of military equipment.<sup>21</sup> In the present times, PLA's has a limited role in training foreign militaries in the use of weapons purchased from Chinese defence conglomerates as part of “functional and educational military exchanges”.

The region-wise analysis reflects that presently two-third of arms sale of China is to Asian and Middle East countries. While China remains a net importer of advanced military technologies it is able to enter new markets in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa particularly by way of low cost, affordable service, lack of geopolitical strings, and upgrade packages.<sup>22</sup> Africa has of late emerged as one of the preferred destinations. Enhanced multilateral China-Africa defence cooperation has commenced with the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in the year 2000. As per SIPRI data compiled for the period 2014-2019, China has emerged as the second-largest supplier of arms to sub-Saharan Africa, after Russia.<sup>23</sup> China's arms export to these countries is now shifting from small arms to more advanced technologies like the recent transfer of tanks and UAV (CH-3 variety) to Nigeria to fight Boko Haram.

In the *regional context*, China has attempted to reduce India's influence by establishing dependence by selling not only conventional arms to its neighbours but also transferring critical technologies, thereby establishing strong military ties.

Figure 3: Country Wise Recipients of Chinese Arms Exports (2008-2020)



Source : SIPRI Arms Transfer Database Mar 2021





As per the latest report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China is the world's fifth-largest arms exporter and two of the three largest recipients of Chinese arms are India's neighbours, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the third being Algeria.<sup>24</sup> Whereas most of China's conventional weapons sales since 2010 (82.8 percent) has been to its neighbours, a combined 63.4 percent of total sales found their way to India's neighbours Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.<sup>25</sup> The SIPRI figures possibly don't completely cater for the sale of arms by tightly state controlled Chinese Arms industry to non-state actors like the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and armies of other ethnic groups operating against the Tatmadaw in Myanmar as also to some autocratic regimes across the world.

Owing to their close military ties, China supplies the largest number of arms to Pakistan than any other country. Between 2015 and 2019, Pakistan imported around 73% of its arms from China. Pakistan Army has inducted the latest VT 4 Main Battle Tanks (MBT) from China in 2020. In the same year, indigenously produced Al-Khalid-1 Tanks were introduced in the Pakistan Army which again has been built with Chinese assistance.<sup>26</sup> Pakistan Army is a recipient of many variants of UAVs, series of Air Defence weapon systems, advanced artillery systems like 155mm S 15 Howitzers and A-100 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) to name a few. Pakistan has also announced the production of the latest Block III variant of the advanced fighter aircraft JF-17 Thunder, a product of the collaboration between China and Pakistan. In 2018, China and Pakistan reportedly signed an agreement to co-produce 48 Wing-Loong II UCAV which is of Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) a category designed by China and capable of carrying strike payload.<sup>27</sup> Pakistan Navy as part of Project S-26 contract with China in 2015, is scheduled to receive, 08 x Yuan Class AIP Conventional Submarines from 2022 onwards. The multi-billion project is however now under a shadow as Germany has denied engines to China for these submarines.<sup>28</sup> China is also the supplier of some of the 'critical technologies to Pakistan to counter balance India'. For example, in March 2018, soon after India's successful test of the Agni-V long-range ballistic missile capable of reaching China's heartland, it announced the sale of sophisticated optical tracking systems to Pakistan that is used for developing nuclear missiles with multiple warheads.

Bangladesh is even more dependent on Chinese arms than Pakistan for its massive expansion and modernisation plan of its Army, Navy, and Air Force under ambitious "Forces Goal 2030". Between 2010– 2019, almost 74 per cent of Bangladesh's arms imports were from China. Some of the major purchases include Main Battle Tanks (MBT-2000), FM-90 Surface to Air short-range and FN-6 handheld anti-aircraft missiles as also WS-22 Multiple



Rocket Launcher Systems (MRLS). Bangladesh Air Force has acquired many Yak-130 trainers and light attack aircraft and F-7 BG light attack fighter Jets along with some radar systems.<sup>29</sup> The biggest surprise to India was the purchase of two used Type-035G Ming-class submarines from China with a cost of \$100 million each, as Bangladesh is surrounded by three sides by only India. Since 2006, China has supplied almost 16,000 rifles and 4,100 pistols to Bangladesh with the majority of its small arms imports during this period.

The Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army) has been a regular recipient of low-grade Chinese arms till the 1990s. This heavy dependency on low-quality Chinese arms and emerging evidence that China was providing arms to various rebel groups fighting the Tatmadaw, led to discontentment amongst the mid-level officers. At present China remains the primary arms supplier to Myanmar which also happens to be the third-largest market for Chinese arms exports in Asia. Since 2013, major weapons and equipment procured from China includes 17 JF-17 aircraft (a joint venture of China and Pakistan), as per an agreement signed in 2015, 12 Chinese Rainbow UAVs, two Y-8 transport aircraft, two Type-43 Frigates, and 76 Type-92 armoured vehicles.<sup>30</sup> The Tatmadaw deployed Chinese-made CH-3A tactical UAVs to keep surveillance over the protests that flared up in the wake of the February 2021 military coup. Currently, China accounts for approx. 48% of all Myanmar's arms imports, followed by India (16%) and then Russia (15%).<sup>31</sup> With Russia openly supported the junta in the recent Military take-over, 'it is emerging as the best alternative for Myanmar to counterbalance its overdependence on China for military hardware'.

The 'Chinese footprints in Sri Lanka', another country in India's neighbourhood and important participant of China's BRI, range from investments in infrastructure, economic and military aid, investments and trade. Since the 1950s, China has been the prime exporter of arms to Sri Lanka and was the only country that supplied the required arsenal to defeat the LTTE. India provided only "non-lethal weapons" considering domestic political implications. China also provided strong diplomatic support to the country especially on the issue of human rights accountability post the Lankan Civil War. In 2007, Sri Lanka purchased \$37.6 million worth of China's weaponry including J 7 fighter jets, anti-aircraft guns, APC, and others during the crucial phase of the battle with the LTTE.<sup>32</sup> Sri Lanka has been accommodating China's geostrategic interest albeit which is being viewed with suspicion and apprehension by India. China's proxy Pakistan is attempting through many military diplomatic activities to wane India's influence which includes providing maintenance facilities to Sri Lanka's C-130 Hercules transport planes, besides routine maintenance of other service aircraft.<sup>33</sup>



The Maldives offers strategic monitoring points along the vital shipping lanes and therefore plays a critical role in China's BRI.<sup>34</sup> In its quest to dominate IOR and replicate the successful 'debt trap diplomacy' of Sri Lanka, China has invested heavily in the Maldives between years 2012 to 2018, during the anti-India and pro-China regime of President Yameen. As a result of some mega projects, the Maldives has incurred heavy Chinese debt of around USD 1.3 billion which continues to cast a shadow on Maldives economy. With the change of regime and Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) coming to power in democratic elections in Sep 2018 many of China's controversial projects like building a Joint Ocean Observation station in a strategic location in the northwest Maldives, close to India dominating important sea lanes<sup>35</sup> have been put on hold.

China's fundamental interest is in Afghanistan's stability as any volatility in the region may result in radicalisation spilling over to its Xinjiang region of China through the narrow 76 km long inhospitable Wakhan corridor. China has benefited from the US presence over the years in Afghanistan by way of curtailment and spread of anti-China terrorist groups especially the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Anticipating the current situation post-withdrawal of the US, China has been working on a hedging strategy which includes working with the Taliban. While China has stepped up defences along the narrow Afghan-Chinese frontier, but it is more concerned about the spillover through its less guarded other neighbours, such as Tajikistan.<sup>36</sup> China attempt to help raise a military mountain brigade in the Wakhan Corridor to check the influx of ETIM insurgents to its Xinjian province by pledging \$70 million of military assistance between 2016-2018 could not fructify due to certain conditions put up by then US forces in Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup> In case the Taliban ensures this security commitment of not allowing ETIM insurgents to operate through Afghanistan soil, the US final withdrawal may provide an opportunity for China to make progress in its BRI projects and exploit mining of vast mineral reserves (including lithium and rare earth) with varying estimates ranging from \$1 trillion to \$3 trillion. The extension of BRI into Afghanistan under the Taliban through CPEC in Pakistan is a high probability.

### **Chinese Equipment: Criticisms**

In the recent past, there has been much adverse feedback and criticism on the quality of Chinese equipment from the recipients. There are major issues of technical malfunction in refurbished Chinese-built F22P frigates in Pakistan Navy, which was instead sent to Turkey for mid-Life upgrade/overhaul. Two of the nine AD systems (LY-80 LOMADS) procured by the Pakistan Army from China were non-functional on delivery. After trials in 2018, Turkish TAI T129 ATAK attack helicopter was selected over China's Z 10ME helicopter by Pakistan.



The \$1.5 bn deal with Turkey is however in limbo, due to US hesitancy in issuing an export license<sup>38</sup>. There are major serviceability issues in Bangladesh with two Ming class Type 035G submarines, freshly delivered K-8W aircraft in 2020, and FM-90 Air Defence system delivered in 2018 from China.<sup>39</sup> “Tayokeset tayet-soke” (“Chinese machine; broken in a day”) is a well-known phrase used in Myanmar.<sup>40</sup> The Tatmadaw's senior leadership is not satisfied with the quality of Chinese equipment and on other hand, is unhappy for China providing high-quality sophisticated weapons (including SAMs) to insurgent groups fighting their Army. Stories related to poor quality Chinese equipment are common amongst smaller buyers too. Dozens of Kenyan soldiers have been killed during a test firing in Norinco VN-4 armoured personnel carriers bought from China. Many Chinese CH-4B UCAVs have crashed in Algeria and Jordan has put the same UCAV for resale due to its unsatisfactory performance.

### **India's Response and Way Ahead**

***India's Concerns and Opportunities.*** There is no gainsaying the fact that the first and foremost step to fully optimise military engagements as one of the most potent tools of diplomacy is to correctly identify the strategic partners and important countries aligned to our strategic interests. As covered earlier, China has been able to make inroads in most of India's neighbours, with different levels of influence and is still growing. China already works with some Himalayan nations on security and strategic cooperation, partnerships it could now seek to “institutionalise”<sup>41</sup>, possible by way of ‘Himalayan Quad’.<sup>42</sup> For the reason that India has unsettled land borders with China, countries like Nepal and Bhutan have special significance for India. Myanmar and Bangladesh, besides sharing land borders with India have a distinct place in not only supporting India's ‘Act East Policy’ but also impact on the internal security situation of our North-Eastern states. In addition to other equally important neighbours like, Sri Lanka, The Maldives, Afghanistan etc., India needs to take note of the hypothesis of “String of Pearls (Indian Ocean)” proposed by the US political researchers in 2004 which include countries from the Chinese mainland to the Horn of Africa. Taliban Ruled Taliban with China led triad ( Beijing – Islamabad – Kabul) is an emerging challenge for India. Because of increased PLA Navy presence in IOR, countries adjoining the Straits of Malacca have their importance in India's strategic and security calculus with the added significance of Indonesia with its spread across two vital alternate sea lanes of Sunda and Lombok. While China may have already garnered considerable influence in countries like Laos and Cambodia, another important country is Vietnam, strategically located in the soft underbelly of China making it a preferred strategic partner. Then we have an emerging



'QUAD' based relationship with major players in the region including the US, Australia and Japan.

### India's Present Engagements

- **Increasing Military Exercises.** Realising the importance of South East Asia, India for the first time in 1995 had hosted the Exercise MILAN with the participation of some of the major ASEAN Navies in the Andaman Sea. Such bilateral and trilateral exercises with various nations of the region have become a regular affair since then, such as the 'Simbex' with Singapore and the 'Sitmex' with both Singapore and Thailand.<sup>43</sup> India's proposal in 2018 to join the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP), a quadrilateral arrangement established in 2004 between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand through the narrow and strategic important Malacca Strait, was not been accepted due to the objection of a member state, with possibly China as a reason.<sup>44</sup> However, ASEAN states like Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia are always positively inclined to the enhanced role of India in the region to counterbalance China. As part of the 'Quad' alliance, the Indian Navy has been hosting Malabar series of exercises. India recently participated in major amphibious operations exercise off the coast of Guam as part of Malabar 2021 involving Quad Navies, besides undertaking Freedom of Navigation Operations bilateral exercises with other ASEAN countries and the Australian Navy in the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea. Even beyond the 'Quad', in 2021, the Indian Navy participated in the "La Pérouse" drill led by the French Navy and with the US navies carried out a two-day 'PASSEX' naval exercise in the eastern Indian Ocean Region. India conducts more than 20 Army Exercises with foreign countries. Some of these important engagements in the recent past and upcoming this year include Surya Kiran (Nepal), Mitra Shakti (Sri Lanka), Kazind (Kazakhstan), Yudh Abhyas (US), Indra (Russia) and more importantly a new initiative of such exercise conducted in 2019 in India involving 19 Africa countries.
- **Limited Arms Exports.** India has however assisted neighbouring countries in overall capability building in the past before the region was overwhelmed by the induction of cheap Chinese arms. Besides exporting limited arms in the past, India for the first time gifted a Kilo-class submarine to Myanmar in 2020, three years after Bangladesh acquired two Ming class submarines from China.<sup>45</sup> Bangladesh appears to be reluctant to utilise an Indian \$500 million line of credit defence equipment export offer promised in 2017, due to various reasons, including geopolitical factors. Since 1952 India has been providing military wherewithal including advisory support to Nepal. In 1998, to fight Maoist insurgency, India under a 70% assistance scheme, provided the Nepal Army (NA) more than 26,000 weapons of various kinds (21000 INSAS rifles, mortars and other



military hardware) plus four Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH).<sup>46</sup> However, of late the military support is mostly related to non-lethal weapons and some kind of specialists' vehicles. India has a special relation with Bhutan as per the 1949 Treaty of Friendship and the Indian Army maintains the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) since 1963, on request of Bhutan.<sup>47</sup> India proactive assistance to the Maldives in 1988 by way of Operation Cactus was followed up with a noticeable contribution to the capability development of its newly raised Maldives National Defence Forces (MNDF) in 2006. Even during the period of perceived pro-China President Yameen, two brand new Advance Light Helicopters (ALH) were donated to MNDF in 2013. India's enhanced security cooperation with Sri Lanka including the gifting of two advanced custom made offshore patrol vessels (AOPV) in 2017 and 2018 as per the requirement of the Sri Lankan Coast Guard (CG) is still perceived inadequate as compared to assistance by china and its proxy, Pakistan.

- **Preferred Training Destination.** India, although with limited assistance in military hardware, remains the top training destination for Sri Lankan officers and conducts regular training exercises with Army, Navy, and Coast Guard. India is concerned with the exploitation of the situation in Afghanistan by inimical forces and has been involved in the capability building of the Afghan National Defence & Security Forces (ANDSF). India has over the years supplied military hardware, including four Mi 25 helicopters as well as trained thousands of ANDSF personnel in counter-terrorism, intelligence operations, and information technology.<sup>48</sup>

### Way Ahead

- **Countering China's Geo-Political Influence.** India, rather than matching China's strategic investments in the region has instead preferred small but people-friendly projects with no strings attached which have helped to capitalise on its soft power. However, Japan with surplus capital and as an emerging strong ally of India has the potential to offset and match China's investments in the region. India is reaching out to many ASEAN and other countries in IOR, under the overarching Indo-Pacific strategic initiative, to emerge as a reliable "*net security provider*" in the region. As part of the vision document of 2016 on Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), India is in the process to boost its maritime presence and is currently developing a military base on the Agalega Island in Mauritius and negotiations are underway for a naval base at Seychelles' Assumption Island.<sup>49</sup> As part of the 'Defence Cooperation Agreement' signed during PM Modi's visit to Indonesia In May 2018, India would assist in the





development and later use the north Sumatran port of Sabang strategically located on the mouth of Malacca Straits.<sup>50</sup>

- **Defence Exports: A Silver Lining.** The defence exports in India have witnessed a steep rise since 2014 from Rs. 2,000 crore to Rs. 17,000 crore in 2020 as a result of the formulation and promulgation of a specific export strategy in September 2014<sup>51</sup> with an ambitious target of \$5bn (about Rs 35,000 crore) by 2025. The improved capability could help to reduce their dependencies on Chinese weapons and equipment in the region as also globally. India as an interim strategy should focus on low-end technology weapons and equipment, non-lethal military equipment, and selective medium/high technology equipment for exports to countries with no manufacturing base in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Presently, these countries are forced to import military equipment from Western countries, China and Russia at high rates. The SIPRI report 'Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020' acknowledges India's efforts of indigenisation by creating a new "Buy (Global-Manufacture in India)" procurement category, promulgating an embargo on importing 101 weapons systems to encourage indigenous production and increasing limit in defence production in the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to 74 and taking measures to 'widen the export base'.<sup>52</sup> Besides the push by the present government on '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*' to achieve self-reliance in the defence sector, India promulgated a list of 152 defence items that are available to friendly nations at competitive prices. Till India is dependent on arms imports, big-ticket purchases should be leveraged for improving strategic relations, negotiate for better offsets, and demand transfer of technology (both Know-how and know-why) for our defence industry.
- **International military education exchanges** are being used by regional and global powers to build lasting collaboration with other nations. For India, it is also one of the cost-effective options to counter China's growing influence. Many foreign alumni of India's National Defence College (NDC) have reached important positions in their respective countries including 74 Service Chiefs of their Armed Forces and three heads of the states<sup>53</sup>. India has thus, since 2020, allocated additional seats for foreign participants<sup>54</sup>. Such long duration courses attended by mid-level officers with their spouses in other institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, College of Defence Management (CDM), etc enhance contacts between military personnel in formal, informal, and social settings creates long-lasting bonding as also helps in developing shared perspectives on global and regional security issues. Even short-duration interactions during participation in exchanges, official visits, seminars, meetings, conventions, etc, and presentation of papers or talks at these events educate the participants and helps in the exchange of perceptions on various security-related issues.



To optimally leverage these Military Exchanges, it is important to 'institutionalise the alumni associations' and through the same maintain regular contact with foreign participants.

- **Defence Attaches (Face of Military Diplomacy).** Appointment of defence attaches (DAs) to foreign countries has been again a time tested and effective tool of military diplomacy. China and the US have amongst the maximum number of defence attaches in a foreign country covering most of the globe. India, on the other hand, has 100 Defence attaches even after considering a recently announced increase in number to enhance defence exports. This conservative approach for many decades has costed India and as a result, many opportunities to extend and gain from interactive military diplomacy has been lost. Many of the above-average armed forces officers who have not been made to higher ranks due to a very steep pyramidal structure in armed forces, maybe usefully utilised in this field. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) should accept these selected Defence Attaches at the same grade rather than the current practice of accepting them at lower grades and status than their parent service to ensure effective utilisation of their calibre. The system of region specialist officer cadre, as followed by some of the developed countries, has its merit and may be deliberated after considering all pros and cons holistically. Many of the defence officers can be laterally absorbed in the Ministry of External Affairs as part of the long-pending 'Peel Factor' recommendation by Ajai Vikram Singh Committee (AVSC) committee report on cadre review.<sup>55</sup> This would also address the current major deficiency in the strength of the IFS cadre. The grade and rank of the DAs should be commensurate to the importance of the country in India's strategic calculus. Thus there is a case in point to upgrade the DAs in some of the countries like China, Myanmar and Nepal.
- **Increasing Military Dependencies.** Till our defence equipment production becomes competitive, India should aim to export low technology equipment (including uniforms, bulletproof vests etc.) to some of the developing countries in Africa, who are presently procuring the same at higher costs from China and Russia. Some of these countries including the Middle East have old soviet equipment and the Indian military has the technical expertise and can fully meet their requirements of repairs and maintenance thus improving the footprints. To deal with the *emerging situation in Afghanistan*, India needs to enhance all military diplomatic activities including military exercises with Central Asian countries (especially with Tajikistan & Turkmenistan) and Iran.
- **Leveraging India's Contribution in UNPKOs.** India role as the fourth largest troop-contributing country in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) is lauded worldwide. India was the first country to deploy an all-women contingent in 2007. India's



deployment has been in the most challenging missions and has sacrificed 160 precious lives, unlike China and other countries, which has avoided high-risk missions. This widely recognised contribution along with other endeavours should be further leveraged in our bid for a permanent seat in the Security Council. The present Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK) in India needs to be upgraded in terms of infrastructure and content as the 'Centre of Excellence' as done by China and even other smaller countries like Bangladesh and Ghana. Enhancing the recently made India's pledge of an Infantry Battalion Group as part of Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System (PCRS) for rapid deployment would boost India's credibility and say in the UN.<sup>56</sup>

- ***Changing Mindset.*** Lastly and most importantly, the existing approach of 'Military Cooperation' needs to change to 'Military Diplomacy' to optimise the huge potential. This would involve more proactive and meaningful participation of the military in support of diplomacy to achieve national objectives. The military directly or even some civilian leaders with a military background have an important say in many of the countries in our immediate neighbourhood. Even developed democratic countries strategically important to Indian interests have crafted a meaningful role for the military as an effective tool of diplomacy. In such conditions, the military face in certain endeavours of diplomacy is more effective to 'break the ice' when dealing with personalities with a similar background.

## Conclusion

For decades, from the 1980s onwards, China's foreign policy was guided by a Chinese phrase 'tao guang yang hui', which may be translated into English as 'hide your light and bide your time', and a result witnessed a tangible shift to a muscular and assertive approach initiated by a slogan 'fen fa you wei' coined by President Xi in late 2013, meaning 'strive for achievement'. This gave way to transformative military reforms beginning 2015 and a more assertive military diplomacy. Xi insisted during an address to the military officers in 2015 to "start a new phase of military diplomacy" to advance China's overall diplomatic goals, safeguarding national security, and promoting the construction of China's military. A new Office of International Military Cooperation (OIMC) was established as part of restructured CMC in Jan 2016, to support an enhanced level of military diplomacy. The OIMC still maintains a dual function in conjunction with the Ministry of National Defense (MND) to coordinate activities of military cooperation.<sup>57</sup>

Indian Armed Forces is indeed a potent tool of defence diplomacy and can effectively complement our foreign policy objectives. It is pertinent to highlight John F. Kennedy



statement, “Diplomacy and defence are not substitutes for one another, either alone would fail”. Thus, synchronisation of military diplomacy activities with foreign policy is even more important now to contain expanding China’s footprints in our immediate neighbourhood. Despite an increase in India’s military diplomacy activities in recent years, there are significant inequalities between China and India’s military-diplomatic profiles. In addition to the big disparity in the sheer number of defence attaches deployed worldwide between both countries, the number of military exercises conducted by India (31 in 2018) lags behind that of China (60 in 2018).<sup>58</sup> To strengthen its security posture, India has signed or renewed defence agreements with Brunei (2016), Singapore (2017), Malaysia (2015), and Vietnam (2016). China perceives the QUAD alliance like an Asian NATO to checkmate China, as maritime space is more important to its growing ambitions than engaging in opportunistic land grab attempts in the Himalayas. India needs to assess the implication of the formation of the AUKUS military alliance involving Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. India may thus use this opportunity to invite other partner countries in Indo-Pacific like Indonesia, Singapore in the grouping. Similarly, India may enhance its military engagements with Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and support Bhutan more proactively, as explained earlier.

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