

India and Asian Geopolitics

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Summary

In this second-part of the Policy Paper series, P Stobdan suggests that in the recent Indian strategic discourse, commentators have been exulting the US 'Asia Pivot' and seriously hoped that the idea will offset China's regional outreach, for it also appeared similar to India's own 'Look East' policy, which to an extent enabled New Delhi to ruffle a few feathers in the East Asian region.

Amidst India's deep immersion into acrimonious internal political debate, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his address to the Combined Commanders' Conference on 22 November made a subtle shift in India's strategic perception. For a while, everyone thought India's foreign policy was failing due to domestic mess that the administrative strategic thinkers seemed unable to handle. The foreign policy, a shortfall people have long acknowledged, and something which foreigners have also sharply commented upon. For the first time India responded to the strategic shift of focus on Asia-Pacific and on the impending security competition among nations. Importantly, Prime Minister dispelled the notion that India was playing any ancillary role in the US rebalancing or 'pivoting' Asia strategy which he thought is a 'development fraught with uncertainty.'

Response to China's Regional Influence

In the recent Indian strategic discourse, commentators have been exulting the high profile US 'Asia Pivot' strategy and seriously hoped that the idea will offset China's rising regional outreach, for it also appeared similar to India's own 'Look East' policy, which to an extent enabled New Delhi to ruffle a few feathers in the East Asian region. Of course, Washington too made some rhetorical moves on the South China Sea dispute indicating its intentions to stay put in the Asia Pacific.

However, in the midst of all these, Indian strategic community failed to highlight the point that China had long 'Pivoted West' by seeking out backdoor territorial advantages since the Soviet collapse. The Chinese have moved beyond the former-Soviet space to enter Europe, Africa, West Asia, Latin America, and even in South Asia. Remarkably, Beijing has found development partners in all these continents without pursuing containment strategy. Even in the maritime domain, China has already made a significant move to counter the American 'Asia Pivot' strategy. When President Xi, visited Southeast Asia in October, he outlined a "maritime Silk Road" plan to expand sea-lane connectivity. Xi scored many strategic points during East Asia Summit where President Obama failed to turn up due to domestic reasons.

China's Continental March

Nearer in Asia, when the US, for over a decade now, was busy fighting war against terror; China was making plans for sourcing energy supplies from Russia's traditionally stronghold Central Asia. One does not hear much these days about the American strategic advocacy '*The Grand Chessboard*' theory of promoting containment and balance of power in Eurasia. In fact, none of the daunting list of US pronouncements: to wipe out the Taliban, to curb opium production, to control Central Asia resources, to thwart the rise of Russia or China - and so on, are brought to fruition. Not a single US company is involved in mining in Afghanistan. The sole US policy goal appears is to exit as quickly as possible.

Nothing is heard about the US 'New Silk Route' plans launched essentially for revitalizing and embedding Afghanistan as the link between Central and South Asia. Its key elements

among others included implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-100) hydropower line and the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) plan to connect existing regional roads and railways to Afghanistan. None of these, initiated to bring tangible results in Afghanistan, have been realized to date.

Interestingly, what the Americans failed to gain control over (Central Asian resources) by pursuing a grand strategy, China is achieving them by pursuing capital markets strategy. China's trade already eclipsed that of Russia's in the region. The business and security analysts are now trying to fathom the impact of President Xi Jinping's unveiling of another 'Silk Route' gambit in September when he visited Central Asian states laden with multiple agreements. By invoking the memory of First Century Chinese envoy, Zhang Qian, Xi called for creating "Silk Road Economic Belt"; committed tens of billions of dollars investment in energy deals and promised to create a web of overland continental transport and logistics linkages to reach out to Europe. Obviously, the strategy is to embed China's Western regions into a growth excitement and link them to European market. Washington has recently admitted that China's plans "mirrored the US own thinking on the New Silk Route."

China sent no troops to fight global terror outside. It only had to devise an Anti-Terror Structure under the SCO in Tashkent that affectively desisted Central Asian states from encouraging extremism. China might expand the ambit to bring Afghanistan into it. When the US moves out of Manas airport in Kyrgyzstan by July 2014, it will be seen as a victory for China.

In its Westward march, after purchasing the European treasury bonds, China's new pattern of strategic infiltration is to control European rural and urban assets. China seeks new access points in Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and other countries where not only it plans to build cities and manufacturing hubs but also intends to go for large-scale commercial farming. Western analysts may surely get concerned about the political impact of China's speedy foray.

In West Asia and Africa, the areas of traditionally Indian influence, Chinese interests appear focused on trading minerals, oil, and gas. China plans to pour more money in Latin America. Within the context of economic benefits of China's engagements world over, the cynics still view China scavenging around for materials. Sceptics are disquiet about the trend creating a strategic imbalance and lose of influence of other powers. But China's strategy seems not limited to resource exploitation. It has a much bigger vision than simply copy-cat Western-style imperialism. In all these places, China has made smart benign forward moves and already earned affable global image.

China Sets up New Norms of Relationship

China's global stride had though begun prior to the tumbling of US treasury, but opportunity for it to make a strategic mark came when Washington got mired into global war against terror. Therefore, judging from China's moves, its paramount interest appears less about outmanoeuvring others but they seem more about eagerness to learn from the mistakes of the West including from the process of economic downfall. Earlier, the Chinese learnt from the Soviet-type implosion, this time they seem to be learning from the mistakes of another superpower moving on the path of gradual decline.

In trying to understand the causes of existing global drift, the Chinese academic discourse frequently attribute, even the advent of global terrorism, to the lopsided process of globalization that has been underway in the world development pattern for decades. Globalization process, the Chinese notice, had allowed large-scale capital flows, transfer of technology, goods, and ideas across the world, which in the process brought about strategic disparities. The conflict of interests finally gave birth to terrorism to which the US had to face up in the form of 9/11.

Therefore, China's understanding of the world problems seems reflected in its response to the global challenges i.e., governance, security, trade, and environment etc. Notably, China became closer to the US in the 9/11 aftermath, but Beijing stayed away from participating in the global war against terror. Instead, China only profited by getting its Uighur separatists led by ETIM on the American terrorist watch list. By staying out, China avoided being indicted for pursuing anti-Islamic policy that would dent its political, commercial and investment clout in the Islamic world. All in all the lessons China appeared to have learnt include, a) how a superpower with global reach ultimately becomes prone to or target of terrorist attacks, b) how the Western-style counter-terror strategy fail, c) how terrorism entanglement can bring to the fore domestic economic downward spiral and risk for decline in power. Importantly, Chinese know that if the role of the US on the global stage narrows down further, rising superpower of China could risk a similar danger perhaps with grater magnitude.

Certainly, Chinese are keenly watching the residual impact of the evolving pattern of conflict of ideas and interests manifesting, for example, in the form of 'Arab Spring' which have brought extremists to sway power in some West Asian states. China's West Asia policy, therefore, seems firmly based on preventing chaos not only on the external front, but also for China own security.

It is not that China hasn't dealt with terrorism. Beijing has so far avoided putting terror on agenda because the issue is linked to China territorial interests. China's terror definition therefore largely remained indistinct and instead a nebulous phrase 'three evil' threat was coined to cover 'separatism, religious extremism and international terrorism'. Beijing also so far shun 'pre-emptive strike'-type counter-terror strategy knowing it would trigger more

social reactions; instead it had long relied on a diplomatic strategy of sustaining a comfy and incentivising nexus with states having potential to sponsor terror in China. However, amid 'real threat' being perceived lately, China, it seems, is considering a fresh draft bill for defining 'terrorism' more precisely to be approved by the State Council. But, China may still be loath to imitate Western strategy, even though it will continue to upgrade 'drone attack' deterrence capabilities. Internationally, China is likely to pursue more nuanced politico-economic idiom envisaged for achieving a relatively more balanced and equitable global development pattern as counter-terror strategy. This sounds more like laying a socialistic pattern, but the idea perhaps is to reduce the scope for social and political frictions.

China has unveiled a slew of economic reforms intending to curb state capitalism and move for more privatization. This is expected to create a better economic climate and ensure high growth in the next three or four decades. Out of necessity and to avoid Soviet-type implosion, China's recent economic reforms - disbanding of SOEs - could potentially alter the rules of global economic competition not limited to trade and investment. In its economic rebalancing act, China is going to shift the focus away from exports to domestic consumption. In a nutshell, it seeks transition to a western-style service and consumption driven economy that will boost urban population. This means China becomes less a manufacturer of goods and more an importer of commodities i.e., food, consumer commodities. This is bound to have global impact. It is here, when China wants to venture out globally, it seeks to prepare responses to face future global challenges and in the process establish new norms of relationship. Of course, India's efforts have been to think in this direction for the role it is seeking in the global order. Prime Minister has alluded to the impact globalization which is nurturing intense competition and rivalries among nations in the security domain. As the main players in the globalization process both China and India should try to understand the evolving pattern and at the moment both are moving in the direction of adopting a common approach to global issues of importance.