

# **Geopolitics of Sino-India Contestation In the Contemporary Context: An Analysis**

Dr. Prosenjit Pal

## **Abstract**

The entire globe seems to be reeling under a pathogenic threat, a global contagion is doing the rounds and has created a big buzzword. But, the news of India-China border confrontation at Galwan Valley in Mid June 2020 has also been grabbing headlines and created a volatile situation in Ladakh Valley. The question remains that when the entire globe is reeling under the pandemic threat, how come inter-state rivalry and contestation generate at this conjuncture? The pandemic seems to have left unaltered the fundamental nature and fulcrum of global politics. On the contrary, it seems to have widened the traditional geopolitical faultiness, deepened the contestations. The major powers seems to have been oriented towards taking advantage of this volatile situation when humanity is reeling under an existential crisis and the global economy is staggering. The article, in this backdrop, attempts to analyse the geopolitical dynamics of India-China contestation.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Sino-India Contestation, Global politics, etc.

## **Introduction**

The entire globe seems to be reeling under a pathogenic threat, a global contagion is doing the rounds, has been the buzzword. But, the news of India-China border confrontation at Galwan Valley in Mid June 2020 has also been grabbing headlines and created a volatile situation in Ladakh Valley. The question remains that when the entire globe is reeling under the pandemic threat, how come inter-state rivalry and contestation generate at this conjuncture? The pandemic seems to have left unaltered the fundamental nature and structure / fulcrum of global politics. On the contrary, it seems to have widened the traditional geopolitical faultlines, deepened the contestations. The major powers seems to have been oriented towards taking advantage of this volatile situation when humanity is reeling under an existential crisis and the global economy is staggering.

The Dragon is rising high and almost seems to have arrived at the global theatre, and in the Asian geopolitical theatre, recent face off at Galwan Valley in June 2020 apparently showcases that the Elephant seems to be dancing to the Dragons tunes and have failed to tame the Dragon. The geopolitical dynamics of the Sino-Indian contestation dates back to the 1962 War between

---

Assoc Prof and Former Head, Deptt of Pol Sc, Diamond Harbour Womens University, West Bengal

the two, catalysed by unsettled boundary dispute, the Tibet issue, Sino-Pakistan growing collusion and persistent Chinese attempts at encroaching into Indian territory in the volatile North Eastern sector, disputed areas of POK. Coupled with these, China's India policy has been quite aggressive, including attempts at meddling with India's South Asian neighbours. The 'rising' Dragon has instituted a policy of containing India in order to reach a hegemonic position in Asia, which would be a 'gateway' in its attempt to achieve the status of a global hegemonic superpower.

The Grand Chinese BRI initiative, covering large parts of the Indian Ocean, has been only an attempt in increasing Chinese foothold over the Asia-Pacific region. As part of these grand design, The CPEC (covering disputed areas of POK in Gilgit-Baluchistan areas and building infrastructure at the strategically located Gwadar port in order to get a Chinese leeway to the oil-rich West Asian region), and the String Of Pearls strategy of strategic encirclement of India by infrastructure boosting in ports across India's neighbours, has been China's planned strategic designs in containing India while engaging her on the trade and business front, taking advantage of huge opportunities latent in expanding Indian markets (both formal and the informal/grey sectors).

On the other hand, India's China policy has been somewhat of an ad hoc type, lacking any planned pre-emptive strategic design in 'taming' the 'Rising Dragon'. Despite the signing of The Peace And Tranquility Agreement in 1993, setting up of JWG s in 1988 and initiating formal diplomatic channels in resolving the dispute areas, India has virtually failed in mitigating Chinese aggression in the LAC region. China's all-weather strategic ally Pakistan has been a constant pain the neck for India. India-Pakistan disputes in the South Asian subcontinent has been catalysed by China, from Chinese backing of Pakistan in The Kashmir dispute, to funding Pakistan's Nuclear Programme to blocking India's attempt at entry into the NSG. India's Himalayan neighbourhood has also witnessed the footsteps of the Dragon. Border skirmishes have been things in common with occasional step-up in flare ups (Sumdorong Chu in 1987, Depsang in 2013, Doklam in 2017), as China attempts to gain strategic control over the Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh region, which could provide a strategic connect between Chinese Xinziang Province with Tibet (an area which China claims as her own sovereign area).

In the backdrop of the above and the contemporary COVID-19 Pandemic, the paper strives to analyze the recent Sino-Indian border skirmishes across the LAC in Ladakh (Galwan Valley).

A debate is raging on as to the tectonic shift in the global geopolitical plates, especially the equations among the major powers across the globe. Will there be a new cold war between the two top powers in the globe-USA and China? Will China supercede the USA in the post-covid global order as a new hegemonic power. China has grabbed the headlines as the virus-dissemination centre and is alleged to have instituted a global biological warfare in its attempt to stamp her hegemonic designs across the global order. Are we standing at the threshold of a new global order spearheaded by China?

China's recent overtures in Galwan valley against India, is ample pointer the fact that China's "Peaceful rise/ development" idea may be over. The Dragon seems to have 'arrived' at the International theatre. China's readiness to use force in addressing challenges, marks a visible departure from her stance in earlier stand-offs, which may be a part of China's grand strategic design to ward off international criticisms concerning the COVID crisis, including pressures from the USA which has threatened to form a global consortium of states against China.

### **China-India Conflict Dynamics in Contemporary Times**

#### **China's India Policy**

If one looks into the dynamics of Sino-Indian contestation, one should attempt to comprehend the nature of the Chinese threat by enquiring into the key elements in Chinese statecraft and strategic doctrine, which can account for the amount of 'militarism and aggression in China's India policy. Tsun Zi in his "The Art Of War" articulated that the strategy in warfare should be to subdue the enemy using brute aggression and even deceptive means. This has been the theoretical cornerstone of Chinese aggressionist military policy and it has helped to sustain her rise' in the International system. Strategic analysts argue that in this Covid global order, China seems to have 'arrived' at the global geopolitical theatre with a more reinvigorated military force projection posture. China has always stepped up the ante vis-a-vis India in the Asian continent and continually perceives India as a threat in the process of pursuit of her grand aggrandizement strategy. The Dragon has risen from the Asian continent, perceiving India as a major threat in the process and following Tsun Zuian tactics, have always kept India on her toes, using Salami Slicing tactics in seizing parts of Indian territory in the Himalayan region (be it Ladakh, or parts of disputed Kashmiri terrain), by initiating unprovoked military aggression

through her adept border troops in the disputed Sino-Indian border. China has kept the 4000 km long border issue unresolved, covertly supported Pakistan against India, pitting itself against India in international forums, making consistent forays in India's neighbourhood, wooing India's South Asian neighbours, in the garb of her 'peaceful' and 'developmental' rise. Scholars like Alka Acharya (JNU), recently have opined that China perceives that they have 'arrived' at the global geopolitical theatre, the 'rise' process is virtually over. China, of late, has been more aggressive and ready to showcase her military prowess. The Galwan valley incident, Chinese overtures in Honkong, Taiwan are ample pointers to the same. Mounting international pressure on China, following accusations of engendering the COVID crisis, seems to have bolstered her all the more as China is mounting hard retaliatory measures, it seems.

### **India's China Policy**

India's China policy has been of an ad hoc nature, her response often lacking in the required amount of aggression (in the realist sense of the term); India lacks the pre-emptive instinct in countering threat of the rising dragon. But the same is only a part of the shortcomings in the broader context of mainstream Indian foreign policy. Harsh V Pant, in his celebrated piece in the Orbis in 2003 and later in his writings has pointed out this lacunae which should have been an eyeopener. The same had opened up an arena of debate on the nature of Indian foreign and strategic policy

India, in the Indo-centric South Asian Region may be conceptualized as a pre-eminent yet reluctant power, strong in the capability quotient but lacking the endeavor to stamp assertively its dominance in the region; and its immediate neighbourhood policy also seems to reflect such a lack of an attitude identifiable with an emerging power in the contemporary world order. In the interplay between the theoretical aspects of Idealism and Realism in the realm of Indian foreign policy, pragmatism and hard-core realism has often been arrested by an adherence to inherent idealistic culture of peace, non-violence, open diplomacy and adherence to moral norms, and reluctance to project hard power in astute military sense of term.

As India seeks to become a major player on the international political stage, it will face two major internal constraints: First, India will have to recognize the need to exploit the extant structure of international system to its advantage more effectively. Structural constraints are the most formidable ones a state encounters in its drive towards the status of a major power.

Yet, Indian foreign policy continues to be reactive to the strategic environment rather than attempting to shape the strategic realities. While such an ad hoc response to the structural imperatives carried little costs when India seems poised to play a significant role in global politics. Second, India must come to grips with its discomfort with the very notion of power and in particular its wariness of the use of ‘hard-power’ (Pant, Orbis, 2009: p250). Throughout history, all the major powers have been required to employ the military instrument skillfully. India’s reluctance to accept a more sophisticated understanding of power, in general, and military power, in particular, will continue to undermine Indian foreign and as well as security policy (Pant, Orbis, 2009: p250).

India’s foreign policy has been plagued by the following shortcomings:

- *Discomfort with Power*
- *Inability to Use Force Effectively,*
- *Marginalization of Military*
- *Strategic Culture Deficit:*. (Pant, 2016: p10).
- *Lack of Institutionalization* (Pant, 2016: p11).
- *The Modi factor:* since coming to office in May 2014, the Narendra Modi government has been successful in gradually dismantling India’s default foreign policy legacy of non-alignment and pursuing the path of multialignment. Moving beyond ideological rhetoric, Modi is busy engaging confidently with all major global powers without inhibitions. The foreign policies of nations do not alter radically with changes in governments, but with the backing of the Indian electorate’s decisive mandate, Modi has an opportunity to bring about a realignment of Indian foreign policy priorities and goals.

To tap the dynamics of Indian foreign policy under Modi’s prime ministership, numerous scholars have studied the different dimensions of the Indian foreign policy. *However, their opinion is divided.* Some have talked about the substantial change and described him as a rescuer of Indian foreign policy, while others do not see any major shift. Rajesh Basrur has found that ‘foreign policy under Modi picks up from where his predecessors left off and is characterized by essential continuity’ (Chandra 2017:p99). *Ian Hall* virtually concurs with this view and argues that despite bringing a proactive turn in Indian foreign policy, ‘Modi has not made major modifications to the aims and methods of Indian foreign policy’ (Hall 2017:p

127). In contrast, another group represented by *C. Raja Mohan* sees the changes as ‘so seminal as to mark the beginning of the “**Third Republic**” in Indian foreign policy (C Raja Mohan 2015: p23). *Kanti Bajpai* (2015) has found a ‘new zeal’ and rebooting of Indian foreign policy under the new regime (Bajpai 2017: p23).

Yet India is unable to tame the Dragon from interfering in its neighbourhood, meddling in the India Ocean, wooing her Himalayan neighbours, inching into parts of her territory, keeping the border dispute in an unresolved status and stepping up volatility quotient, dumping cheap goods in Indian markets (in violation of WTO anti dumping clause), increasing footholds through debt diplomacy, data mining through Chinese apps and procuring imp security info, blocking Indias entry into NSG, constant backing of Pakistan, brazen possession of our territory in Aksai Chin, building CPEC through India claimed territory, claiming Arunachal Pradesh as Chinese territory of South Tibet, investing millions of dollars in POK, routinely salami slicing through our territory along LAC through unprovoked military aggression.

**What are the policy options of India in countering the threat from the Dragon or will the Elephant continue to dance to the tunes of the Dragon?**

1. Modi must not repeat the mistakes of his predecessors in making an estimate of the Chinese threat and Chinese aggressionist/aggrandizing designs and should not fall in line or be trapped by a policy of appeasement/ contagement of China or a **China-submissive** policy. **China’s inherent aggression, aggressive mindset of the Chinese needed to be decoded, deciphered.** Nehru had failed miserably in both self-sufficiency and military toughness with China. Modi must not repeat the same mistakes. IR Doctrines of Tit-for-tat, eyeball to eyeball confrontation, brinkmanship/rocking-the-boat tactics could be employed in the face of Chinese salami slicing and pre-emptive/unprovoked attack tactics, especially military vigilance and intelligence should be stepped up in border management area.
2. India can showcase its democratic credentials in forging alliances with the USA and other major powers and pave the way for making a strong coalition front to counter potential and actual Chinese aggression. The QUAD, G7 etc forums need to be engaged all the more. US-INDIA, IND-RUSSIA Ties can be strengthened. Power Assymetry with China needs to be reduced.
3. *If China is the land of Tsun Zu, then India is also the land of Kautilya, and if some of the*

*chromosomes of Kautilya are still intact, India should not be easily flummoxed by China's choreographed, deceptive engagement overtures. Wuhan, Mallapuram, Chennai Connect (Modi Xi Jinping summits)*

4. Galwan valley incident should be an eye opener for India and should compel her to undertake a major course correction in our strategic stance towards China. We should radically upgrade our border infrastructure around the LAC on a war footing. Defence preparedness and pre-emptive force posture, must be boosted up. Rapid combat forces must be readied to deal with intrusions in the border areas.
5. India should shed her reticence/ reluctance in diplomatically isolating China and strengthen forums like the QUAD, support pro-democracy movement in Hongkong, expand interactions with Taiwan and condemn Chinese bullying in the South China Sea area.
6. India, should reduce, in a calibrated manner, dependence on Chinese imports, systematically ban Chinese investments in infrastructure projects AND shoring up indigenous production and being 'atmanirbhar' to the best possible extent. Recent banning of Chinese apps to prevent data mining by China to the d stopping Chinese a few Chinese infrastructure investments have been a smart move. Foreign investments in infrastructure etc sectors can be harnessed from other countries who are the drivers of the global economy. Alternative trade and investment avenues may be explored. WTO can be used.
7. India should use forums like the WHO to keep pressure on China regarding accountability in the spread of COVID-19.

### **Countering China: India's biggest foreign policy challenge**

Outside the SAARC architecture, India's biggest foreign policy challenge in the neighborhood is China. With China trying to spread its wings in SAARC countries, this challenge becomes more acute. Not only Nepal, China woos Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives with financial and infrastructural support with a view to lessen India's importance in South Asia.

### **How India can counter Chinese moves in South Asia?**

To begin with, India must gradually turn into a manufacturing nation. At present, the Indian economy is over-reliant on the service sector. This scenario must be transformed. There is no alternative to manufacture your own needs, from domestic to military equipment. This will not only save valuable foreign exchanges but help the nation to gain confidence.

From the perspective of foreign policy, India must take into confidence its neighbors, and make them aware of Chinese neo-colonial plans. India must get itself involved in the infrastructural development of neighboring countries. India is currently doing it, but not as aggressively as the Chinese. Manufacturing will help India gradually increase its volume of exports in the neighborhood. But confidence-building measures are of crucial importance for India in South Asia.

India must increase its defence budget significantly in the coming years. When we face a crisis, we think of our military budgets. But it is a matter of continuing importance. Indian military must be equal to the Chinese in all respects, from manpower to sophisticated defence equipment. Indian Navy must be equipped to control the Indian Ocean, an important sea route for global and Chinese trade. This should be done on an emergency basis, say by 2024 latest. In terms of numbers, India must also match or exceed Chinese nuclear warheads.

### **India's pathway**

But most importantly, India must be self-sufficient and excellent in terms of economic and military strength. We must also aggressively bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, membership of the NSG and G-7, and seek the help of favorable countries (like the US, Russia, Japan, France, and others). In foreign policy issues, India is not unfavorably placed at this moment, globally, and in the neighborhood. India must be proactive to form more close allies and friends to effectively counter China.

### **Looking at the India-China crisis through the Theoretical lenses in International Relations**

The statist viewpoint of Realism has come to the forefront. *Realism* posits that states are still the main actors in international politics and the situation arising from Covid-19 just reaffirms that point. Citizens of every state are seeking protection against the crisis not from non-state actors, but from their own respective national governments. States have been the drivers, engines of the 'global fight' against Covid. The primacy of the states, state sovereignty, state borders, border controls seems to loom large, although military security dilemma (as championed by Realism) has somewhat taken a backseat and health and demographic security concerns are virtually tormenting statesmen and policymakers alike. The basic parameters of the China-India military conflict (border conflict coupled with other political issues) have been left unaltered, thereby stimulating the present crisis.



Researchers in IR often takes recourse to the *Constructivist paradigm* to find any alternative explanation of global events, once the Realist research agenda falls short. Constructivists argue that everything in IR is a conscious construction the states and the people who constitute them. If anarchy is created by the states, power politics is a social construction and material interests of states have a covering of ideas and values around them, then Constructivism could possibly provide a realistic explanation of the Covid pandemic as something originating in the Chinese mindset, getting shape in the Wuhan medical laboratories, then taking the material reality of the global pandemic stimulated frantic efforts of states to fight and contain this health emergency. Here, anarchy could refer to the utter crippling of the global regulatory agencies, in preventing the pandemic to take such a fatal shape. The Design of the Galwan action plan was well planned ahead by the Chinese military top brass, reflects the Chinese Aggressive mindset and put into material shape by the military (PLA). China had to hit back hard at international criticisms that ere doing rounds . It was being branded globally, as a virus dissemination centre. To showcase its aggression, military might and power status the Dragon conducted this operation against an emerging power in Asia, to showcase that China is not in a submissive mode

The Pluralists (Complex Interdependence/ cobweb model) may propose that economic interdependence between India and China may lead to a diffusion of military crisis between them but the politico-military complexities may remain unaltered.

But, the existing theories do not have as yet, as a part of their research agenda, any possible explanations of how the post-Covid global order may take shape which may be backdrop for the two Asian powers: India and China to continue their strategic contestation or to collaborate in some areas at least, in keeping with the spirit of complex interdependence, which can further the cause of the Asian continent and its human inhabitants, keeping in mind the harsh socio-economic, political and demographic realities which humanity has to grapple with once the ‘virus’ exits.

The hardwire and software of Indian foreign policy making needs to be overhauled and attuned to the hard core realities of the strategic environment confronting India, during the Covid dominated global order and even in the futuristic post-Covid order, the prospective nature of which has already sparked of debates in strategic and academic circles. India’s China policy is only a part of the broader architecture of Indian foreign policy making apparatus, the

inherent 'virus' of lack of pre-emptive strategic culture, reactivity, lack of proper planning, academia-elite gap in planning and implementing an adept foreign policy apparatus, needs to be done away with/defused-an urgent necessity in the post-Covid global order and even beyond.

## References

1. Mohan.C. Raja, (2015) *Modi's World-Expanding India's Sphere Of Influence*, Harper Collins Publishers, India.
2. Pant, Harsh V. (2016), *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswann.
3. Bajpai Kanti, (2015). 'Continuity-But With Zeal', *Seminar*, Vol 668, N0-2, April, 2017
4. Basrur Rajesh, (2017), 'Modi's Foreign Policy Fundamentals: A Trajectory Unchanged', *International Affairs*, Vol-93, No-1.
5. Behuria, Ashok K et al (2012), "Does India Have a Neighbourhood Policy?", *Strategic analysis*, Vol. 36, No. 2, March 2012.
6. Chatterjee, Aneek (2009), "Does India have a Foreign Policy? A review of Six Decades of Indian Foreign Policy", *Socialist Perspective*, Vol.37, No. 3-4, December 2009- March 2010.
7. Chandra, Vikash (2017), "Modi Government and Changing Patterns in Indian Foreign Policy", *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2017.
8. Hall, Ian (2015), "Is a 'Modi doctrine' emerging in Indian foreign policy?", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 2015.
9. Pant, Harsh V. (2009), "A Rising India's Search for a Foreign Policy", *Orbis*, Published By Elsevier Limited on behalf of Foreign Policy Research Institute
10. Raghavan, Srinath (2015), "Modified Foreign Policy", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 5, January 31, 2015.
11. Brahma Chellany (2020), "China Throws Down A Challenge To India", *Open*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2020.