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“China's Great Game”

Hearing on China's Growing Global Influence: Objectives and Strategies

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and consequently the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), has considered itself in a state of war since its inception. Sometimes its focus is on an internal rival, such as the Kuomintang, alternatively an invading force, such as the Japanese army, or a force that has invaded an ally, such as US forces in Korea. Or they could be "upstart" countries such as India (1962) or Vietnam (1979). What remains a constant is the state of siege. For such a mindset, the range of allowable options in the pursuit of its objectives is vast.

Although China has taken a strident tone against US "unipolarity", the reality is that the objective of the CCP is itself to create a unipolar Asia with the PRC at its core. This would in time enable the PRC to displace the US as the global unipolar power. In Asia, early on, the CCP saw Japan and India as the two major obstacles towards primacy in the continent, thus setting in train a series of policies - including strategic assistance to North Korea and Pakistan - designed to weaken the ability of the two Asian democracies to reach a level where they could overwhelm the "Comprehensive National Power" (CNP) of China. While Japan is being kept off-balance by the continuous rousing of prejudices caused by its past militarism, the containment of India in the South Asia box having failed, the new policy is to prevent an alliance between India and the US that would add a powerful third strand to the existing US-Japan alliance. The February 24, 2005 statement by a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson against the reported US proposal to sell anti-missile systems to India is an example of the sensitivity that this improving security relationship engenders in Beijing. Ironically, the spokesperson bemoaned the risk of an "arms race" in South Asia that would be caused by the US sale, forgetting the reality that the PRC is the principal supplier of armaments to almost all the countries of South Asia, with the exception of India, to which it is unwilling to transfer military equipment. Interestingly, the beginnings of military cooperation between the US and India is being described as "non-combat military action" by Chinese strategists, who also claim that this represents "a threat to the peripheral security of China."

The Chinese media, both under the PRC Constitution as well as that of the CCP, are legally obliged to further the aims and interests of the CCP and the PRC. Despite increasing talk of a strategic partnership with India, the regular Chinese media have continued to carry reports about the "hegemonistic" ambitions of India, and are eloquent about its desire to "dominate" South Asia and "form military alliances" with the countries of South-east Asia. While the PRC has worked hard to remind the countries of South-east and East Asia about Japanese wartime atrocities, a like campaign has been carried out in South Asia, that paints India as an aggressive, predatory power out to subjugate the region. In both situations, Beijing has put itself forward as the "balancer," the cultivation

of which can weaken the attempted hegemony of those undesirables, Japan and India. It is not accidental that both North Korea as well as Pakistan has been enabled by China to become nuclear and missile powers. The first helps to box in Japan, the second India.

In Pakistan, the PRC has been helping its nuclear ambitions since the 1971 Bangladesh war. Although successive governments in New Delhi refused to weaponize the nuclear device first exploded at Pokhran in 1974, conclusive intelligence that China was transferring tested design data of some of its nuclear weapons to Pakistan forced the hand of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who ordered a weaponization programme in 1985. While some of this is carried out under false flags and specially-created "independent" entities, what follows is a partial list of recent PRC-sourced assistance to Pakistan's nuclear programme:

- (a) The construction of the Kundian Nuclear Fuel Complex with substantial PRC assistance, including the supply of components and technology.
- (b) The supply of a large number of ring magnets to the Khan Research Laboratories at Kahuta, to be used in centrifuges for the enrichment of uranium.
- (c) The construction of the nuclear reactor at Kushab, for the production of plutonium.
- (d) Technical assistance in the manufacture of nuclear triggering devices, thus enabling Pakistan to move further up the ladder towards full weaponisation of its existing nuclear device capability.

As late as the latter half of 2004, those in India monitoring developments in Pakistan reported a continuing flow of (PRC-source) nuclear weapons-related materiel and components into Pakistan. These transactions have been clandestine and therefore denied by Beijing. The reality remains that it is mainly Chinese assistance that has enabled both North Korea and Pakistan to become nuclear powers, and that the continuation of such help would enable them to operationalise these capabilities. In this context, it is pertinent to note the recent transfer of 160-kilometre range missiles to Bangladesh, as well as the public signing of the Nuclear Cooperation Agreement between China and Bangladesh just days before Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited India. The North Korean and the Pakistan experience indicates that the CCP has a very elastic definition of the term "peaceful" (which was how the Bangladesh agreement was described), and that a strategy of plausible denial based on the creation of "independent" agencies and corporates is followed by the PRC in much the same way as the Pakistan army "rolls up" a jihadi outfit that has come under international scrutiny but immediately replaces it with a clone that in most cases has the same personnel.

Some dismiss the military modernization now being carried out by the PRC as being of too little import to pose a threat to the security interests of the US. As 9/11 has shown, quantitative and even technical inferiority may not provide protection in a situation where unconventional tactics, alliances and weaponry get used. All-out damage is not needed to impel a cease-fire, merely a much lower threshold of loss or risk. That the PLA is at present comprehensively inferior to the US armed forces in terms of

weaponry does not therefore mean that the latter cannot be put into an unacceptable situation by the former

The recent development of the Dong Hai-10 (a land-based cruise missile) and the successful test-firing of a JL-2 nuclear missile from a Golf Class submarine indicates that the PLA is rapidly coming of age, at least in the context of the two theatres where conflict between itself and US forces is most likely, the Taiwan Straits and North Korea. Some military planners in Beijing may see the deployment (expected by 2008) of the 094-Type nuclear submarine with JL-2 missiles with a 350-kg warhead and a range of nearly 8000 kilometers as being sufficient to deter a US intervention in the event of an attack on Taiwan, even without full deployment of the new generation Dong Feng 31A ICBMs.

In the specific case of India, among the more worrisome developments concerning the PRC are:

- (1) The passing of an Anti-Secession Law by the National Peoples Congress in March 2005, that can in practice be used not only against inhabitants of Taiwan but Tibetans residing in India as well as Indian nationals in places such as Arunachal Pradesh that are not recognized by the PRC as part of the Union of India.
- (2) The steady increase in the number and quality of the PLA's armory of short and medium - range ballistic missiles, much of which are within range not just of the Indian landmass but a wide swathe of the Indian Ocean.
- (3) The beginning of missile and nuclear cooperation with the avowedly Islamicist regime in Bangladesh, coming on the heels of the development of Pakistan into a nuclear and missile power. C 802 missiles are now being supplied to the Bangladesh navy, while elements within the Bangladesh army talk of "Going the Pakistan way" to meet the conventional superiority of India.
- (4) The development of Gwadar in Pakistan and Sittwe in Myanmar as PLAN bases, with the likely future addition of ports in Bangladesh and possibly Iran, which would give China strike capability in the Indian Ocean, a region that it considers key to its energy security.

Gwadar, in particular, can become the hub for operations that target Central Asia, West Asia and North Africa. It is close to the Jinnah Naval Base, in Ormara, with its warship and submarine berthing and maintenance capabilities. Much of the port is being constructed by Chinese engineers and workers and it is reported that the relevant PRC entities have also taken control of perimeter security within the zones they operate in. Apart from its military uses, Gwadar can also serve as a junction for Central Asian oil and gas for China. Interestingly, the entire complex was designated as a "Sensitive Defense Zone" by Pakistan.

- (5) The steady improvement of the HATF and SHAHEEN series in Pakistan, with continuous clandestine or indirect PRC involvement. This is multiplying the risk that some or the whole of this weaponry may fall into overt jihadist hands in the future. Despite repeated denials, information on the ground indicates a

continuation of PRC-sourced technology, materiel and technical manpower to Pakistan's missile programme.

(6) The continuing patronage of anti-India elements within the South Asian region, such as, for example, the setting up of a "Nepal-China Study Centre" staffed with India-phobic Nepalese and which has the majority of its workstations along the India-Nepal border rather than the Nepal-Tibet border. Interestingly, while the Maoists in Nepal have been vituperative towards the US and India, they have thus far refrained from any criticism of Chinese help to King Gyanendra, the same way that Mr. Osama Bin Laden has yet to condemn the activities of the Public Security Bureau in Xinjiang. Has there been a price tag to such silence?

An interesting scenario would be if the PRC were to adopt towards the US a strategy similar to that followed by Pakistan against India for decades, which is "bleeding the (larger) enemy through a thousand cuts", by covertly stoking up hotspots that would tie up US resources, thus leaving less for dealing with the principal Chinese challenge, to Taiwan and to the need for regime change in North Korea. Is it a coincidence that the PRC has been active in the provision of defense-related supplies to countries such as (Sadamite) Iraq, Iran and Sudan, just as it has been lavish in the giving away of its nuclear and missile technology to regimes that are authoritarian?

In its preoccupation with a possible Indian thrust in its soft southern underbelly in the event of war in East Asia, the PRC would like New Delhi to commit itself by treaty to not allowing either itself or its territory to be used against China in the event of such a conflict, a commitment already made explicitly by Pakistan (through the Treaty of Good-neighborly Relation and Cooperation, renewed by both countries for a further term of 20 years in April 2005). There is wariness in Beijing at the prospect of a US-led security alliance in Asia that could potentially intervene in such a conflict, and which would include India. The high decibel opposition even to newspaper reports of the suggestion for an "Asian NATO" - together with the premise beginning with the 2002 PRC Defense White Paper that there is a shift from a "largely tranquil world" to one with a "realistic threat of war" - indicates that the possibility of war and plans to prosecute it are regarded by the PLA and the CCP leadership as appreciable.

In Asia, unlike in societies that are more formalistic, the deciphering of the intent of an interlocutor is done only after analyzing not simply the spoken word but the manner in which it has been expressed, the body language, the expression on the face, and other telltale indicators of true intent. In the case of the PRC, there is a mismatch between "words" and "body language" that leads to questions about intent and aims. China need not be "contained". It should; however, be "constrained" from following the war-inducing policy of some other countries in the 1930s. A realistic policy towards the PRC would help prevent Asia from going the way Europe did in that dismal time.