Readjustments in China’s Diplomatic Practice

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It is very important for Indian foreign policy makers to pay serious attention to a lengthy article written recently (August 16, 2013) by Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi on China’s foreign policy. The article titled - “Innovations in China’s Diplomatic Theory and Practice under New Conditions” hints at a few things, gives clarity in very few areas and leaves much to the acumen of the interlocutors to decipher.

Yang Jiechi who heads China’s foreign policy establishment in the government, is also the director of the Central Leading group for Foreign Affairs of the Communist Party of China. This is the supreme body of China’s diplomatic and foreign policy brain, headed by President and Party General Secretary Xi Jinping who is also the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The deputy head is Li Yuanchao, Vice President of the country and a Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member. Foreign Minister Wang Yi is also a member of this group. Significantly, others who are ex-officio members of the group include the Commerce Ministry, Ministry of Public Security and the Deputy Chief of General Staff Headquarters. There would be other important ministries, agencies and think tanks who are co-opted. The total membership of the group is not public and hence, outsiders have to make out by collating stray reports in the Chinese media.

This reflects the width and depth of consultations that the Chinese establishment goes through when formulating diplomacy and foreign policy on the ground. In contrast, India’s foreign policy is generally reactive and personality driven. Less than a handful of people are involved in taking decisions. In fact, more acute, important and sensitive the issue, the fewer the number of officials involved in India. This is the contrast between India and Chinese foreign policy making, and the reason why India has failed to construct the base of a long term foreign policy.
Yet, Yang Jiechi’s article suggests that Xi Jinping is still fighting to establish his primacy in foreign policy making, and he has in his mind certain adjustments in approach within the established strategy. Almost all paragraphs of Yang’s article, which is an officially backed declaration, extols Xi Jinping and his leadership of the Party’s Central Committee. Published also in English, Yang sends out the message that it is Xi who will take the decisions. Internally, it appears to be a message to others pushing for a stake not to disturb his line, which is not soft but critically designed and in tune with the emerging global environment and trends at home.

Obviously, this strategic foreign policy is evolving. It is, however, predicated by “diplomatic theory with Chinese characteristics”. The significance of this statement does not simply mean “a good policy is that which serves China’s interests”. It goes much further and emphasises what China demands is right and everything else is wrong. This should worry China’s neighbours who have territorial disputes with China, and such disputes are likely to grow as Beijing expands its claims in consonance with its military and economic power.

The word “innovation” reveals that Xi Jinping and his colleagues are beginning to recognize that while protecting its interests China has the responsibility to contribute to the world. This would call for a huge change in the mindset of the Party’s Central Committee where members are from a wide spectrum of ideological shades. Currently, an ideological and political debate has engrossed the nation—how much liberalism and how much conservatism. The internal developments will certainly force Xi Jinping to shape foreign policy, especially diplomacy, accordingly.

It would need to be seen how China behaves diplomatically, especially in the use of language, when dealing with territorial disputes.

In his book “Creative Involvements: A New Direction in China’s Diplomacy”, Professor Wang Yizhou saw three basic issues that confronted China (See SAAG Paper No. 5038):

China’s power growth leaves no room for vigorous development, and China is a source of growing concern and expectation in the international community. There are growing international responsibilities as per its power. If China fails to respond, it will fundamentally damage its “soft power”.

China faces a series of pressing diplomatic issues. Can it shelve its disputes with its current power?

The traditional diplomacy of “hiding one’ strength and biding time” is proving incapable of protecting Chinese interests abroad.

Prof. Wang Yizhou’s words are proving to be prophetic. The more China cultivates ultra-nationalism as opposed to patriotism, and creates new demands on territory and regional domination, pressure from the people will grow, which may force the Beijing leadership to play a
wrong hand at the international high table.

In his article, Yang Jiechi mentioned Xi Jinping’s remarks to a politburo study session sending out a clear message that China’s new collective leadership was committed to reform and opening up, to peaceful development, to win-win cooperation with the outside world, **while resolutely upholding China’s core national interests.**

Starting with ‘core national interests” may be a better way to understand China’s immediate foreign policy thrust. “Core interests” have been officially described as protecting the supremacy of the Communist Party, and recognizing Tibet and Xinjiang as an integral part of China. It has been made clear that China will use a military option to protect its core interests, and no objections have come from outside China.

Taiwan is a special and complicated case. On the one side it is guided by joint declarations between the US and China, which would restrict US intervention in Taiwan, but leave space for peaceful return or integration of Taiwan. On the other, the 1978 Taiwan Relations Act of the US, which is a law, provides option for US military action if attacked.

There are indications that China is trying to expand its core national interests. The Chinese proposed to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to recognize the South China Sea (SCS) as China’s core interest. Clinton refused, adding that the neutrality of the SCS was of US national interest.

Beijing has created nine dashed lines on the SCS map to claim its sovereignty which impinges upon the partial claims of the Spratly Islands by Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia. While Beijing is a signatory to the United Nations Commission on Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), it refuses to accept them regarding its unfounded and concocted claims.

Similar is the case of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands in Japan’s control, and some new claims on Okinawa in the making. Attempts have been made to declare the Senkaku Islands a core interest of China. Aggressive stands including veiled military threats using aggressive coast guard, naval and air patrolling has vitiated the atmosphere in the Asia-Pacific region.

The result is the closing of ranks of these countries with the US, with Japan joining some of them. This has provoked or given an opportunity to Japan to think about reviewing its peaceful Constitution, pointing to China as a military threat, and strengthening its self-defence forces.

China’s rapid growth, as the No.2 economic power in the world after the US, with a rapidly growing military which hopes to deny access to the US in the immediate region may become a double edged sword. It has the second biggest military budget after the US and is continuing with a double digit growth. Its aggressive postures on the ground have become a case for international concern. On the other side, the huge expenditure on military and internal security, amounting to around $ 250 billion annually, means that development has to take a cut.

These developments also raise questions over the honesty of “peaceful rise of China” and win-win cooperation with foreign countries.
Among the developing regions that China is focused upon is the African continent and countries of Latin America.

In terms of strategic economy, Africa looms high on China’s radar. It has created a $100 billion Africa development fund. China’s diplomacy in Africa works at different levels. Raw material and oil are very important. Supply of small weapons to warring factions without questions or responsibility is another money and influence winner. Bribery to officials is rampant. It is also suspected through long term infrastructure projects that China is giving its own people jobs outside China. These Chinese citizens may settle down there permanently.

Western countries have also been guilty of exploiting African countries. Blood-diamond trade is particularly a distasteful activity. A shadow fight between western interests and Chinese interests is becoming ever more visible, creating space for emerging countries like India to enter Africa. It appears that because of its rich natural resources Africa may become a continent of contention. If that happens, other developments will follow leading to unwanted tensions.

Critical Relationships

China’s current global and near abroad strategy is underpinned by Xi Jinping’s active policy of “major-country relationships”. It involves both the United States and Russia. China has been playing a complicated strategic propaganda game form the 1980s on world power distribution and balance. It was a tri-polar world to start with, in which the US and Soviet Union were the dominant powers, with China as the third growing power. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was ruled out as a contending power. It then became a bipolar world with China trying to push itself up on the heels of the USA. The pole theory appears to have been given up or put in cold storage, in favour of great-power relationship. The players remain generally the same.

China-Russia relations were never very amicable. In Russia’s worst times China exploited Russia, using the Yuan and goods barter system to pay for import of Russian military technology and equipment. At one time in the 1990s there were more than 4000 high level Russian aero-technology, missile and material experts working in China’s defence industry. Beijing exploited Russia’s economic crash.

While the border issue between the two countries has been resolved, recriminations on both sides remain. With China assertively increasing its claims on territories based on questionable evidence, questions are being raised about what happens if China revises its 1860 claims.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is also playing a strategic game. He has recently improved relations with China by relaxing to an extent on oil and gas trade. The July China-Russia joint military exercise code-named “Joint Sea 2013” was the largest ever. It was not only an anti-terrorism or humanitarian assistance exercise, located in the far east and included anti-aircraft, anti-submarine, and anti-surface ship vessels defence, a fact which could not hide an anti-US pivot in Asia-Pacific.

Soon after, Russia launched an unannounced war game, the largest ever, in its far east involving 160,000 troops, 1000 tanks, 130 aircraft
and 70 ships. President Putin watched part of this exercise. Analysts view this as a signal to China that Russia will not allow Chinese population inflow in its far east and Siberia. Scenarios are being worked out by Russian strategic analysts of Chinese military blitz into this region.

The Russia-China mistrust is not new. It is enduring from history. But as they say, common threats make strange bedfellows. And such relationships last as long as the threats do. But even in bed they watch out for what the other is doing. In short, there is no real trust between China and Russia.

**US Pivot**

It was primarily Mao Zedong’s desire to conduct good relations with the US. He had very good reasons. The US had the money, technology and expertise and emerged as the dominant military power after world war-II.

The Sino-Soviet relationship was uneasy from the very beginning, and historical mistrust contributed much to it. The anti-communist movement in the US was equally responsible in keeping China away. At the first opportunity, therefore, Mao joined hands with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to form the anti-Soviet alliance. The relationship was unfortunately marred by the crushing of the student demonstrators in June, 1989, an event the Chinese leaders believe was a US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operation, known as “peaceful evolution”. This operation is enduring, first aimed at dismantling the Soviet Union and focused, as the Chinese Communist Party apprehends, to “westernize” and “divide” China. A new anti-westernisation campaign is currently on with attack on the “Supremacy of the Constitution”. The party must remain supreme.

Although the fear exists of the US sabotaging the Chinese socialist system, which means destroying the Communist Party, globalization has made the two countries interdependent in many ways. They enjoy a bilateral trade of around $400 billion. The Chinese hold nearly $ 2 trillion of US treasury bonds and loans. China cannot afford the US economy to collapse because its exports will go down with it. For similar reasons, the US cannot afford China going down either.

One particular theme resulting from China’s economic and military growth may hold at least one key: China-US mistrust. From around the middle of the last decade, Chinese hawks, especially the military related strategists, began claiming that the “US was in decline, and China was in ascendency”. This was further fuelled by US economic collapse of 2008 leading to global recession, which China succeeded in tiding over. This led to China’s assertive behavior which turned threatening at times towards its neighbours especially in the SCS and East China Sea, over disputed territories. China’s claims are weak but it wants to strengthen them with muscle power.

The threat to the balance of power in the Asia Pacific region and efforts to push the US out of the region, while it was engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan was not acceptable in Washington. The US has invested a lot in the region in terms of money, material and life for 65 years, and
it would not leave the region to China. Several Chinese strategists have warned that because of China’s assertive behavior towards its Asian neighbours, and protecting North Korea despite Pyongyang’s multiple misdemeanours and threats countries of the region were joining shoulders against China.

Myanmar could be included in this category of countries. China took advantage of an isolated Myanmar, looted its natural resources, and tried to convert it into a vassal state of high strategic importance. But political change in Myanmar has brought in the US along with European Union countries and Japan. USA’s Asia Pivot was intended to arrest what was turning out to be a rampaging China. President Barack Obama did not project the pivot only as an offensive move, but also to create jobs for Americans.

Till now, the pivot is still to come into position. The US already has 50 percent of its navy in the region. Deploying 60 percent of its navy does not make it that much more. Yet, the US is moving towards opening old airfields in the region for flexibility of operations if required.

It is unlikely that the US pivot will become any more aggressive. But it is holding military exercises not only with the Philippines with which it has a military treaty, but also with Vietnam, its old enemy. Security alliance with Japan has been bolstered, but Prime Minister Abe is being kept on a leash.

China-US military relations have taken a new step up with a joint anti-terrorism and search and reserve exercise coming up. Chinese minister for defence, General Chang Wanquan was in US in August, and tried to get an assurance that the US strategy in Asia was not aimed at China. China has also been invited for the first time to participate in this year’s Pacific Rim exercise in which more than 30 countries are expected to participate.

President Xi Jinping has gone many extra miles beyond his predecessor Hu Jintao. He has tried to reshape the language of diplomacy. So, where is the encirclement of China led by the US with Japan and India as active partners? The responsibility lies with China.

India Factor

It was interesting to note that India did not get a mention in Yang Jiechi’s commentary. Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, South Korea’s President Ms Park Geun-hye and Vietnam’s President Truang Tan Sang found brief mention for their visits to China. In terms of strengthening bilateral relations with neighbouring countries, South Asia did not find a mention while Central Asia and South East Asia did. By the process of elimination in Yang’s commentary, India is an honourable omission. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang made India the first destination of his maiden visit abroad as premier. The Chinese propaganda machinery highlighted Xi Jinping’s first visit to Russia and Li’s visit as China’s new age diplomacy.

Since then, Chinese military intrusions into Indian territory across the Line of Actual Control (LAC), a virtual line but well known to both sides,
has vitiated the atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the Indian Foreign Minister and the Defence Minister visited China, and the Special Representatives of the two sides on the border also met in Beijing. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is scheduled to visit China in October, when another border security agreement at the behest of China is to be signed. Then, an India-China joint counter terrorism military exercise is to be held in China.

All the above read very well. Substantially, they are not. Not only has India not earned any advantage, but has been at the losing end all the time. Trade remains highly on China's side. Meaningful Indian products especially in pharmaceuticals remain blocked in Chinese markets. And India has opened its doors to cheap shoddy goods from China at the expense of its own medium and small industries. Strategically, India is snubbed at every point by China. The much vaunted strategic and constructive partnership does not amount to anything when China has refused to budge on its opposition to India's membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). It is not only the LAC but the length of the India-China border that has not yet been resolved. China claims it is 2000 kms, but the reality is that it is around 4000 kms. China continues to weigh in favour of Pakistan on the Kashmir issue.

These are a few illustrations. Certainly India has to work with China. So does China with India. Nobody is talking about war except a few hawks on both sides.

The evolving scenario, however, suggests that India is giving way to China in the hope of a miracle peaceful settlement of the border. Certainly, the border issue can be resolved overnight if India gives in to Chinese demands including giving up Arunachal Pradesh. This, of course, is an absurdity and mentioned as a frustrated argument here.

The bottom line is when will India play according to its weight? At the moment it does not seem to be happening.

One dimension that is generally missed in China's India diplomacy, or for that matter towards many other countries and regions, is that the Chinese are using a well honed psychological warfare. This has been separated as media warfare, psychological warfare and legal warfare. The three may be resorted to simultaneously or individually. Here psychological warfare defines military demonstration of strength to demonstrate superiority over the opponent, but not enough to lead to a localized war.

In India's case military tinted psychological warfare is being used. Media warfare is being avoided so as not to excite their own public opinion. On legal issues China does not have an advantage and they have opted for a political solution of the border issue while keeping India under pressure. This serves their objective for now. They will agree to a resolution of the border issue only when it suits them, as they did in the case of Russia.

Geopolitical considerations like India's relations with the US, Japan and South East Asian countries, Indian Ocean security, the Afghanistan
problem among others are deterrents to China’s overaggressive stance.

**Prognosis**

Yang Jiechi’s commentary is to try and reassure the international community that China’s behavior will be responsible while protecting its core interests. But this does inspire confidence among foreigners, especially China’s neighbours, on how far “core interest” will be expanded. According to *Kyodo* (August 20), a scholar from the China Institute for International and Strategic Studies (CIISS) told Japanese lawmakers in Beijing that the Senkaku Islands are “within the core interests” of Beijing. The CIISS is headed by Lt. Gen. Qi Jianguo, serving Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the PLA. This reflects an official view of the PLA. This is dangerous.

President Xi Jinping, a powerful princeling, has had a long association with the PLA. He is now promoting the PLA in his capacity as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission. He requires the support of the PLA to exercise his powers in the country. The PLA’s power over the Chinese foreign ministry has been growing, including taking over some of the responsibilities of the ministry.

China cannot go into confrontation with the US, and the US will be happy to deal with a China that does not disturb the equilibrium in the Asia Pacific region. But Japan remains an embedded nightmare in China’s psyche. Japan also continues to rile China and South Korea with visits to the Yasukuni Shrine of the war dead which also hosts the graves of Japanese war criminals. Therefore, Prime Minister Abe shoulders some responsibility.

China’s external behavior will be shaped to a great extent by its internal politics, which currently is in some serious cross currents. Nothing can be projected at the moment with any certainty. The third plenary session of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress this autumn may throw some light.

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