China & India: Inconceivable for Elephant and Dragon to Dance together

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Post-Dokalam Standoff in which China defused the confrontation as a political expedient to save the BRICS Summit in Beijing in September 2017, the new Chinese flavour of the season advocated by the Chinese Ambassador to India is that China believes that the “Elephant and the Dragon Can Dance Together”—totally inconceivable.

Conceding that even if this inconceivable sentiment becomes a reality at some date in the future, China has to first peel off the layers of “STRATEGIC DISTRUST” that it has generated in India of its motives and intentions. The first stepping stone to pave the way for Chinese noble intentions vis-à-vis India would be to (1) Recast its South Asia policy heavily Pak Army-Centric in its orientation, and (2) Cease the over-militarisation of the Tibetan Plateau in China Occupied Tibet. China’s feverish military buildup in Occupied Tibet betrays China’s offensive orientations against India. Can China rise to these heights of visionary statesmanship?

This inconceivable sentiment had been earlier mouthed in 2015 also by then acting ambassador and now repeated by China’s articulate Ambassador in India Luo Zhaohui. The onus for this mistaken belief that the “Elephant and Dragon Can Dance Together” was placed by the Chinese Ambassador on the outcome of the meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Modi on September 5, 2017 in China. The Chinese Ambassador stated that “They believe....” And further presumably expressing his own sentiment that India and China could “make one plus one eleven,”

China and India as “One plus one equal to Eleven” can emerge as a reality when China concedes India strategic equivalence with China---something which China itself feverishly seeks from the United States. Despite some asymmetric metrics in power, China undeniably has to learn to increasingly live with the fact that in global perceptions India is viewed as an existential counterweight to China. This itself is an
implicit global admission that India enjoys a strategic equivalence with China. Will China learn?

Indian PM Modi with diplomatic niceties may have made pronouncements at BRICS Summit in Xiamen on the imperatives of good China-India relations but no evidence is available that PM Modi resorted to the effusiveness which the Chinese Ambassador in India has projected. India seems to be measured and deliberate in its policy approaches to China co-relating them to China’s military developments on the India-China Occupied Tibet Border and also in the Indian Ocean

It is inconceivable for China and India to dance together, simply, because as contending powers in the Asian security environment, there are far too many strategic divergences at play than strategic convergences. Increase in economic and cultural exchanges—a favourite by-line of Indian academia and many in the Indian strategic community, cannot be a substitute to paper over strategic divergences.

No official Chinese Statements incorporating this sentiment could be found on Chinese Foreign Ministry website or Indian official websites, beyond the usual platitudes that prevail on conclusion of major political events. Surely, a drastic overhaul of China-India relations is a desirable imperative but the onus for the same rests on China as the prime destabiliser of the Indian security environment, primarily, and the South Asia security environment additionally.

Before moving to an analysis of the Indian Elephant and Chinese Dragon dancing together, it would be appropriate to refer to dictionary meanings and amplifications on the ‘Elephant’ and ‘Dragon’ to highlight how inconceivable is this sentiment even in literal terms putting aside more pious thoughts.

In brief, the amplifications for the word ‘Elephant’ emphasise that an elephant is one of nature’s most intelligent creatures with exceptional memory and that elephants “can distinguish from voices a potential threat and elephants then switch into a defensive mode.”

Amplifications on the word ‘Dragon’ signifies that it is a mythical creature ranked highest in the Chinese hierarchy of animals, strongly associated with the Emperor and the power and majesty of China. Further, it is described as a ‘fire-spewing’ animal and in European tradition the ‘Dragon’ is typically “fire breathing and tends to symbolise chaos and evil.”

Analysing the above and placing it in the context of the Asian geopolitical and security environment and the demonstrated records of China’s and India’s strategic and military postures that have unfolded in the recent years (2008-17), what stands out is that China has not desisted from spewing fire in all its confrontations extending from the Seas of the Western Pacific and extending to the High Himalayas that form the LAC on the India-China Occupied Frontiers.

In glaring contrast to China’s record of generating tensions and chaos on its borders with neighbouring countries, India has intelligently and with great forbearance sought to soothe the security tensions and confrontations that China has lately wreaked on the Indo Pacific Region.
Yet, in the last three to four years, India like the proverbial elephantine sense of impending danger and taking note of the China Threat more acutely has moved into a proactive defensive mode.

In 2017 during the Dokalam Standoff what came into play was not only China’s desire to save the BRICS Summit in China in September 2017, but also a belated Chinese military realisation that India’s military postures as now operating endowed it with a capacity and capability of not being a military pushover against Chinese brinkmanship and aggression.

Geopolitically too, as pointed out in my recent SAAG Papers on Dokalam that China in 2017 stood geopolitically isolated as a result of its belligerent postures and underwriting the military adventurism of its nuclear weapons proxy creations of Pakistan and North Korea. In tandem with China, both Pakistan and North Korea have become notorious for being regional spoiler states acting on China’s behest. China only stands diminished in global stature when harbouring such acolytes and in its bid for Superpower status.

Perceptions being the building blocks of contemporary international relations, in 2017, China perceptionally has heaped on itself layers of military confrontations, aggressive brinkmanship and supporting Pakistan’s proxy terrorist outfits attempting to destabilise India. The current perceptions on China, globally, are all NEGATIVE in block capitals.

Perceptually, India is increasingly being viewed regionally and globally as assiduously engaged in fostering regional and global security and stability. Many nations, in one way or the other, are involved in India’s emergence as a global power convinced that it will be a global force for good. Current global perceptions of India are POSITIVE in block capitals.

Moving to the direct equations of China & India relations in 2017, what stands out glaringly is that ever since 1962 more specifically, China has avowedly lost India’s trust in terms of Chinese motives, China’s protestations of friendship and China’s desire for good relations with India. Simply, because “China has NOT Walked the Talk” in its policy attitudes and manifestations towards India.

The Great Wall of China which stands between China and India is India’s marked “STRATEGIC DISTRUST OF CHINA”. The question of Strategic Distrust of China is not an India-specific phenomenon but a widely held Asian perception, even articulated in international forums like the Shangri La Dialogues.

The first small step, but a giant step towards good India–China relations, is for China to make the first moves in eradicating the “STRATEGIC DISTRUST OF CHINA” that heavily pervades not only India’s policy establishment but also the entire citizenry of the Indian Republic, minus a small fringe Indian China-apologists.

Harking back to my SAAG Papers of more than a decade earlier, China has no other option but to recast its entire South Asia policy and recognise the natural primacy and predominance of India in the Indian Subcontinent. China has to cease to view South Asia from Pakistan’s
prism.

In 2017, China’s policy of building Pakistan over six decades as a Chinese counterweight to and proxy state against India, even with Chinese nuclear weapons and Chinese missiles arsenal has failed, simply because Pakistan does not possess the ‘Natural attributes of Power’. Further, Chinese nuclear weapons and Chinese missiles, have not made Pakistan and North Korea into ‘Major Powers’. They are viewed as ‘Rogue Nuclear Weapons States’ created by an irresponsible China. Has not China’s Grand Strategy, especially in the South Asia context failed miserably?

Have nuclearized Pakistan and North Korea added any strategic weight to China’s geopolitical standing? China can best answer this question. Both these nations have been non-performing assets for China’s foreign policy.

In Conclusion, what needs to be emphasised is that in terms of China and India good relations, and a bright future thereof, what needs to be realised is that India with its historical traditions, benign approaches, and contemporary global standing cannot transform itself into the mould of the Chinese Dragon, BUT China can certainly make concerted efforts to transform itself from the mould of a fire-spewing Chinese Dragon to the gentler mould of an ‘Elephant’ —majestic yet benign. Elephants can Dance together. But it is not possible for the Dragon and the Elephant to Dance Together.

This is China’s 21st Century Challenge and it needs to be watched as to whether such a transformation of the Chinese Dragon into a gentle yet powerful Elephant fits-in with the ‘Great Chinese Dream’ of China’s current President Xi Jinping.

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