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INDIA-CHINA BROADER FLARE-UP: A CHALLENGE TO IRAN

Mukhtar Ahmad Bhat¹

ABSTRACT

In the new phase of global re-alignment, the two largest South Asia countries, China and India are at large heads with each other because of changing geo-political arrangements and recent border clashes. The current border crisis is the worst situation and highest escalation between the two countries after the 1962 war. Although in past the border forces of the countries have clashed with each other but those clashes never resulted in killing of soldiers and change in status quo of the border. However, the recent clashes between the forces have resulted in everything that did not happen in past, not only left twenty Indian soldiers died, more than fifty were injured and imprisonment of ten Indian soldiers but it also changed the status quo of the de facto border namely the 'Line of Actual Control' by capturing 40 square miles by China of the territory claimed by India, development of infrastructure in shape of construction of roads and permanent banks in the territory which was regarded as buffer zone as well as unprecedented increase in the number of troops along weapons and artillery on both the sides. India and China border dispute involves about 13,500 square miles on India's Northern side along the Ladakh and 35,000 square miles on India's Eastern side along the state of Arunachal Pradesh (Shukla, 2020). Since the 1962 war between India and China, both the countries managed their border disputes very well, therefore the question arises why it happened now? And what kind of challenge it is posing to the future of decades old Iran-India relations. Here an attempt has been made to analyse the regional and global events that has resulted in the border clashes and crisis in the China-India relationship.

Keywords: China's Response and India's capacity, strengthening alliance with the US, Implications on Iran-India Relations.

¹ Centre for West Asian Studies JMI New Delhi, mukhtarbaht24@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Over the years particularly since 1962 war India and China managed their broader disputes quite very efficiently, continued to put them on backburner with an objective of strengthening their mutual trade relations. The current border flare-up not only is the result of the rapidly changing regional geo-politics but also the changing dynamics of India's internal politics as well. As far as the changing regional geo-politics, the two important things that are going to have a huge impact and will determine the role not only of China and India but also of the other regional countries in the future regional and global power structure. The first is the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and second is the fast growing India-US Strategic Partnership. The Belt and Road Initiative under its 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' connects countries of different regions, which constitutes sixty percent of the world population and thirty three percent GDP of the global wealth (China-British Business Council). Therefore it would give a new shape to the global and regional politics in coming years. India from the very beginning has been seriously concerned with the Chinese BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) and has expressed its concerns to Chinese authorities both formally and informally. The main issue that India formally raised is the China-Pakistan economic corridor which goes through the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir, openness and transparency (Rajya Sabha, 2017). There are also think tanks and academicians who consider the Chinese initiative as a strategic and collective move on the part of China to encircle India and to strengthen and increase Chinese dominance in the South Asian region (figure-1). They consider the Chinese investment not only as a soft tool to imperialise the poor and underdeveloped countries but also to get easy access to vast natural resources, untapped market, huge low cost manpower and developing the ports for military purpose in long run. Further the Chinese support and backing to Pakistan makes India even more suspicious about the strategies of China (Kanwal, 2017) India consider the backing of China to Pakistan both on the domestic and external front by providing military, economic and diplomatic support is sabotaging the India's initiatives against Pakistan. And the involvement of China in Kashmir through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will make China to change her stand on the issues as well as add China as a third party to the dispute which further internationalise the Kashmir dispute (Kapila, 2016)



Figure 1

The other very crucial issue that will play a determining role in shaping the future regional politics is the fast growing India and the US strategic partnership from bilateral to multi-national in backdrop of the US's Indo Pacific Strategy and establishment of Quadrilateral Group of India, Japan, Australia and the US (the Quad) for the containment of Chinese expanding influence both regionally and globally. The recent Indo-Pacific Strategy report clearly mentions that the main objective of the Indo-Pacific Strategy is to disrupt the China's attempts to re-shape and establish favourable regional and global order in which the countries of Quadrilateral Group would play a very important role (Saran, 2018). With the objective of providing an alternative of the Chinese BRI and consolidating the US hegemony in the region, the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy is focused on two main points (a) Economic Integration and (b) Defence Cooperation with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region (Shiucn and Colombage, 2019). While China on the other hand consider the Indo-Pacific Strategy not only a serious threat to its national security but also as policy of containment against China by the US.

While the dimension of the India's internal/ domestic politics as a cause to the current China-India border crisis is the Modi government's action of changing and downgrading the status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir which is international recognised disputed territory particularly between India and Pakistan. Even India and China are also not having demarcated border in the state of Jammu and Kashmir as well, the unilaterally changing the borders and status of

the Jammu and Kashmir, as well as showing the areas under the control of China as Indian by India did not go well with China. Further the upgrading of the infrastructure by construction of roads and airbases by India along the India-China border increased insecurity and security threats to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which is one of the crucial projects of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative passing through Pakistan. In response to the India's changing the status quo of the state, China openly and aggressively opposed India's move and declared it as undermining the China's territorial sovereignty and warned that such actions are unacceptable to China (Shukla, 2020).

China's Response and India's Capacity

The rapidly growing closeness between India and the US both at the bilateral and regional levels against China on the one hand and the India's actions of changing the status quo of the disputed territory unilaterally on the other hand increased the sense of insecurity and supposed as an emerging threat to China's national interests. Therefore with the objective of re-asserting and strengthening its position regionally and globally, China shifted from soft to aggressive foreign policy approach particularly in dealing with India by heating up the border disputes first on its Eastern side in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (Doklam Crisis) and now on its Northern side in Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir). Although having much higher superiority over India both economically and militarily China never tried to heat up the border issues with India in past. However, it is the growing closeness of India with the US and becoming alliance partner of the US against China, pushed China to warn India of severe consequences for threatening the China's national interests and territorial integrity. Keeping in view the changing regional situation and US's anti-China engagement with other South East Asian nations, the China's attempt to screw India which is the second biggest economic and military power in region would also pass a warning message to the South East Asian nations which are much weaker both economically and militarily than India.

In comparison to China, India is having very weak position both militarily and economically and in situation of out-break of war it would be unable to secure its territory. China is having three time higher defence budget than then Indian. In 2019 China defence budget was increased to \$ 177.61 billion from the \$ 165 billion in year 2018. The increase was lower than the increase in defence budget of 2018. In 2018 it increased the defence budget by 8.1 per cent and in 2019 the

increase was by 7.1 per cent (Financial Express, 2019). India's defence budget of 2020 has been reduced to \$ 61.96 billion from \$ 62.8 billion in 2019 and irony is that a large chunk of the money is spent on salaries of the security forces rather than procurement and modernization of equipment and weapons (Laxman, 2019). In recent years China under its major military reforms has modernised, advanced and enhanced its military capability to a great extent. Despite cutting down three lakh troops of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), it is still having the world's largest military with two million personnel (Press Trust of India, 2019). While India on the other hand in its military capability is far behind China both in its modernization and availability of weaponry. In 2018 the then Vice Chief of Army Staff of India told the Parliamentary Standing Committee of Defence that 70 per cent of the Indian Army's equipment is vintage and had ammunition reserves for ten days only of war fighting. With the strength of 1.2 million army personnel it was having only strength of 30 squadrons of fighter aircraft in 2018 (Financial Express, 2019). Indian Army is facing huge and serious shortage of modernized equipment, surveillance systems like long range shore based radar, long range maritime surveillance aircrafts, sub marines. Indian air force's fighter aircrafts are mostly outdated seriously need their upgradation. The insufficient defence budget and lack of funds has severely affected the warfighting preparations and stocking, as well as in maritime domain capabilities of Indian defence forces to fight a war with Pakistan and China. In such a situation India is going to face very grim condition in case of the outbreak of a two front war with China and Pakistan. In such scenario India need minimum 42 fighter squadrons and as in September 2019 it was having on 30 squadrons, the Maritime Capability Perspective Plan 2012-2027 envisions a force of 200 warships and 500 aircrafts to control Indian Ocean in case of encroachments from Pakistan and China, however India is having just 140 warships and 220 aircrafts. Therefore, the Indian defence experts are clearly saying that India cannot win the two front wars and preventing such eventuality should be the objective of India in its diplomacy and global strategy (Gady, 2019). More importantly in situation of two front war and India's incapability to defend itself from the defeat would not only result in loss of territory and humiliation but also damage India's image of a rising power and a competitor of China on which India has invested a lot over the years. Therefore it is imperative for India to adopt such an option and policy that would restrict the damage to a lowest possible for India.

Options for India

The warming up of the India's borders with China has raised huge alarm in the Indian political, intelligence and military leadership. India is not in position to fight a war with China which is very much superior in military and economy in comparison to India. In addition to that the changing of the status quo of the state of Jammu and Kashmir has also brought China and Pakistan more close to each other against India which created a new threat of two front wars that India cannot afford. Therefore India from the very beginning tried to down play the broader crisis with China by having low level military to military dialogues in the area and then diplomatic level talks which utterly failed to find any solution and to re-establish the status quo. The failure of the talks on the one hand and the incapability of fighting a war with much superior Chinese military and the threat of losing India's territorial control over the area on the other hand has landed India into caught-22 situation. Therefore, the objective to minimize India's loss in such situation would push India more towards the US and both the countries are also having great convergence of in their national interests regarding containing China and pressuring Pakistan.

Strengthening alliance with the US

With China and Pakistan, India has already fought wars and collaboration of the two countries against India poses an existential threat to India. To overcome not only the current crisis with china and the threat of two front wars with China and Pakistan in future will push India further towards the US. The nature of the US's relations with China and Pakistan are not hidden to any one and even both India and the US are having convergence of interests not only in promoting global security, stability and economic prosperity through trade, investment and connectivity but also in having joint collaboration in dealing with China and Pakistan. The US has already declared the rising China as a threat to its national interests and to its global hegemony. China and US are already at large heads on many fronts particularly on establishing, strengthening alternate and opposite global economic and political structures, expanding their areas of influence through long term investments in under-developed countries so on and so forth. While the US-Pakistan relations are also at its low and despite Pakistan participation in the US's war on terror in Afghanistan, Pakistan is regarded as a liability on the US. In fact over the year, the US has played a great role for India in pressuring and controlling Pakistan's activities in Indian occupied Kashmir by using diffe-

rent tactics particularly the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Even the US has supported India not only by pressurising Pakistan, and by changing its (US's) stand on Kashmir from a 'disputed area to Indian state' but also on other various unilateral actions of India particularly on the Balakot Strikes carried out by India and getting the Indian pilot released from the Pakistani custody etc.

Over the year particularly since the beginning of the twentieth first century both countries (India and the US) have taken their relations to new heights. The US openly extended its support for making India an influential regional and global power. US backed India's call for reforms in the UN and his permanent membership in the UNSC and NSG. In addition to that, for strengthening India defence and military capacities, the US extended unprecedented defence and security cooperation with India. Currently the US and India bilateral relations are broad based and multi-sectoral, involving numerous areas from civil nuclear energy, space technology, defence and security, trade and investment, cyber security, science and technology, to agriculture, health, education, and environment etc. (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). Therefore in the situation when India is facing existential threat particularly in the shape of China-Pakistan joint collaboration against India, will push India further for strengthening and taking the India-US Strategic cooperation to new levels. The strong India-US partnership would facilitate India a security cover not only for safeguarding India's territorial integrity but also to its short term and long term regional and global interests. Both the US and India have agreed to transform their bilateral strategic partnership into a 'Global Strategic Partnership'.

Implications on Iran–India Relations

Despite expanding level of cooperation with the US, over the years India also tried to adopted an independent and neutral policies and stand on various global issues like Iranian nuclear issue, environment, US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq etc. For instance on issue of Iranian nuclear program during the Bush and Obama Administrations, India openly called for resolving the issue through dialogue and to some extent supported Iran's enrichment of uranium for civilian purposes under the Non-Proliferation treaty. While addressing the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington after voting the former Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh said that,

“As far as Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions are concerned I have stated it unambiguously on several occasions that we do not support

nuclear ambition of Iran. While as a signatory to NPT it has all the rights that flow from the NPT for the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, it has obligations that go with its membership....and we are quite clear in our thinking that Iran should not go in for nuclear weapon or all that is inconsistent with obligations as member of NPT.”

(The Hindu, 2009)

On voting against Iran at the IAEA and UN in 2005 and 2008 respectively, the then Indian government faced stiff resistance both inside and outside the Indian Parliament, the opposition parties regraded the voting against Iran as a shameful act and surrender of India of Indian government under the US pressure (Communist Party of India, 2005). During the period of strict economic sanctions imposed by the Bush and Obama Administration and despite facing many problems in transportation, , crude oil insurance and on making financial transactions, India continued its oil imports from Iran by bypassing the sanctions through exploring other options like for making oil payments to Iran India used the German, Turkish and the UAE banks. Even India continued its oil imports by delaying the oil payments to Iran when the banks were targeted by the US (Purushthamam, 2012). On the Trump’s withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, the former spokesperson of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in its statement reiterated Indian stand on the issue and said,

“India has always maintained that the Iranian nuclear issue should be resolved peacefully through dialogue and diplomacy by respecting Iran’s right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy as also the international community’s strong interest in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme.”

(Mitra, 2018)

Despite re-imposition of the US sanctions on Iran, Indian government repeatedly reiterated India’s stand to continue to strengthen its relations with Iran. In a recent visit to Iran, the Indian foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif co-chaired a joint commission meeting on the 22nd of December, 2019 in Iran, during the meeting both sides agreed on strengthening their economic relations and to accelerate the progress of the Chabahar Port. Also, during the meeting between the Indian Prime Minister and the Iranian President on the side-lines of UNGA summit 2019, both leaders agreed to strengthen their relations.

However, the rapidly changing South Asian geo-politics particularly after the abrogation of special status of the Indian occupied state of Jammu and Kashmir and Chinese incursion in the border areas with India have built huge pressure on India to overcome such crisis situation. On the one hand, the nature of security challenges and the inadequate capacity of self-defence because of its social, economic and military weaknesses and strengthening the India-US Strategic Partnership on the other hand would ultimately affect the India's foreign policy options and capacity of taking neutral or independent decisions on international issues particularly on the Iran-US relations. India under the Modi regime has showed more tilt towards the US, both the countries have taken their cooperation to new levels by signing the defence deals like Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) for providing logistic support to each other, to transfer of technology an agreement on communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) was also signed and to facilitate partnership between Indian private defence manufacturing companies and the US defence manufacturing industries Industrial Security Annex to the General Security of Military Information Agreement (ISA-GSOMIA) was also signed (Bhushan, 2020). Under the Modi regime, both the countries have agreed to transform their mutual Strategic Partnership into an "Enduring Global Partnership in Twentieth First Century". (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017).

While the Iran-US relations are also not showing any sign of improvement particularly after the US withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Deal. The reimposition of sanctions, increasing closeness between India and the US and China-India border crisis would ultimately affect badly India-Iran relations in future. Under the US pressure, India has not only halted its oil imports from the Iran but also has halted the construction work and development of the strategically important Chabahar Port. Despite repeated assurances given to Iran by India, for strengthening their mutual relations and continuing developmental work at the Chabhar Port nothing has been done on the ground till now. Further Iran traditional stand on Kashmir dispute and the Iranian stand on the Modi's anti-Muslim policies have added more hurdles to growth of the India-Iran bilateral relations. Iran has expressed its concerns in relation to the India's policies towards Indian Muslims. The Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei while expressing his grave concerns, warned India of isolation from the Muslim world, through his official twitter handle with the hashtag of "Indian Muslims in danger" and said that,

“The hearts of Muslims all over the world are grieving over the massacre of Muslims in India. The govt of India should confront extremist Hindus & their parties & stop the massacre of Muslims in order to prevent India’s isolation from the world of Islam.”

(The Wire, 2020)

Earlier, the Foreign Minister of Iran, Javad Zarif also issued a statement through his twitter account in which he expressed his deep concerns and urged the Modi government to ensure safety and security for Indian Muslims. He wrote,

“Iran condemns the wave of organised violence against Indian Muslims. For centuries, Iran has been a friend of India. We urge Indian authorities to ensure the wellbeing of all Indians and not let senseless thuggery prevail. Path forward lies in peaceful dialogue and rule of law.”

Javad Zarif

CONCLUSION

The rapidly changing regional and global political scenario, particularly developing India’s alliance with the US and closeness with the pro-US regimes of the Middle East particularly with the Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand and the increasing the existential threat to India in shape of China-Pakistan joint coloration against India as well as the India’s incapability to handle it, would push India willingly or unwillingly further in the US bloc. All these developments would definitely not only help the US to isolate Iran but also to deprive Iran from its second largest oil market as well (Kamat, 2019). In these circumstances, it is not only the US factor that would play a greater role in determining the nature of India-Iran relations but with the changing regional and global scenario particularly India-china relations, will also play a defining role added more pressure on the already strained India and Iran bilateral relations. Therefore it will be very difficult for India to adopt an independent posture and to neglect the concerns of the US, with whom India is having a great convergence of interests. Further in comparison to Iran, India is having very crucial national interests at stake with the US and allies in the Middle East as well as in the South East Asia. Therefore, it will be a very challenging job for Iranian policy makers to bring the derailed India-Iran relations back on the wright track and maintain a balance while securing its national interests. Therefore it is time for Iran to make its move for re-adjusting itself in the changing regional and global power structure.

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