

# South China Sea Dispute: An Assessment of India's Response

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to analyze India China relations with special reference to 'South China Sea' dispute. At a time when countries having border, land or water disputes with China increasingly uniting themselves against her and India itself has a serious border dispute with China (Business Today, 2017), would it be feasible for India to join the 'Rising anti China Coalition' for which China thinks is instrumented and devised by US to contain her rise in different sectors. The research tries to weigh up in Indian context, the costs and the benefits in either conditions of getting involved against China or remaining neutral in the fray. The research takes into account factors responsible for determining India's approach in the anti-China coalition. History or Indian tradition of non-violence and being non-interventionist (Bandyopadhyaya, 1970) economic engagements with China, security concerns from the north-west and nuclear factor, BRICS Cooperation, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "Maritime Silk Road", The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor etc have been seen in different ways while analyzing the India's approach towards 'Rising anti China Coalition'.*

**Keywords:** India, South China Sea, BRICS, B CIM, Maritime Silk Road, IMF, AIB

## 1. Introduction

Starting from president Xi Jinping's visit to India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's high profile visit to United States and ending the recent flare up in Laddakh by withdrawal of armed forces from the disputed border area to an earlier positions, it could be asserted that, India is not going to join "Rising Anti China Coalition" atleast for now (Aneja, 2014), (Scimia, E., 2016). Infact finding a way around and dealing separately with the border issues has been an emerging policy trend of India and China in the recent decade. *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese government, in a recent article is also of the view that, "unsolved territorial disputes will not affect the development of Sino-India relations".

Washington's "Pivot to Asia" is being seen as a policy to contain emerging China (Khan, 2015). Coincidentally, South and East China Sea disputes have endowed United States a better opportunity to mobilize the China's neighboring countries- with others, Japan, Australia and Philippines. On the sideline talks of G20 Summit US, Japan and Australia revived there already agreed security commitments in the region which China feels is to counter her rise. The three jointly stated that they had agreed to "deepen the already strong security and defense cooperation" with the focus on "boosting maritime security capacity building" in an area where situation is already tense between China and her neighbors over the water and territorial disputes. In his speech at the University of Queensland President Obama clearly mentioned about China "by virtue of its size and its remarkable growth, China will inevitably play a critical role in the future of this region" (Obama, 2014) and further he doubted the leadership of China by saying "and the question is, what kind of role will it (China) play?" In the US framework of "Pivot to Asia", whether India is fitting or not could be an interesting topic for the researchers as well as for practitioners of foreign policy.

There are different assumptions and reports regarding India's stand on 'increasing anti China coalition' but India has not shown any indication of going against China. The following discussions could be seen as determining factors behind India's neutral position of not joining 'rising anti China coalition'.

## 2. Historical and Traditional Reason

A notion of history produces certain stereotypes of behaviour and attitudes that common experience sanctifies and that are transmitted from generation to generation. These stereotypes consist of notional likes and dislikes and what the psychologists call favourable or unfavourable "associations". The result of this heritage has brought about not only national customs but also fairly consistent attitudes towards foreign peoples. (London, 1950).

Historically India and China have lived together with amicable passions. It is to recall Nehru when he says "*Their perils are ours, their suffering hurts us, and we shall hold together whatever good or ill fortune may befall us*" (Nehru J. L., 1961). Deep relations and shared social and spiritual life between the two civilizations since ancient times are not less than a binding force from both the sides.

About the India's foreign policy orientations, a glimpse of India's long-established view could better help in understanding the approaches towards her foreign policy. Quoting *Jaina* writer 'Somadeva', "wars cannot achieve much that is always better to use sugar than poison to gain desired ends". Furthermore, Jainism and Buddhism discourage Machiavellian politics and deglamourized war on the whole. A new dimension of interstate relations was instituted by Ashoka after the devastation caused by the Kalinga war when he became a Buddhist and gave up conquest and war as instruments of his foreign policy. Impressed by Ashoka, who advocated peace, freedom and equality, India during her renaissance of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century opted for Ashoka's tradition and

incorporated even into the 'Directive Principles of State Policy' as the ideals of international peace, and pacific settlement of international disputes. India's foreign policy has also been determined in accordance with the ideals of her freedom struggle, Gandhian philosophy and the fundamental principle of Indian tradition of Vasudhaiva Kutumbkum (the world as one family) (Murthy, 1964).

### Economic relations

The present China's position in the world economy cannot be ignored. There are different predictions about China with many successful realities. A congressional research, carried out by 'Wayne M. Morrison' Specialist in Asian Trade and Finance, to advise the legislature in United States, on August 21/ 2014, entitled "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States", highlights different scientific facts as "Since 1979, China has been among the world's fastest-growing economies, with real annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaging nearly 10% through 2013. It is currently the world's second-largest economy, largest trading economy, second largest destination of foreign direct investment (FDI), largest manufacturer, and largest holder of foreign exchange reserves" (Wayne M. Morrison, 2014). Similarly a study under the aegis of Reserve Bank of India by Prof. S. K. Mohanty, (Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) New Delhi in July 2014, had highlighted that within a short period of time, China has become India's single most important trading partner, replacing United States in March 2008. Mohanty, further highlights a report of International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2013, which says "India's bilateral trade deficit with China reached an unsustainable level of US\$ 39.1 billion in 2012" (S K Mohanty, 2014). As per latest data "The trade deficit in 2018, according to Chinese official data, climbed to USD 57.86 billion from USD 51.72 billion in 2017 in about USD 95.54 total bilateral trade" (The Economic Times, 2019).

Besides the above mentioned reports and researches, the report of International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Chinese economy which was based on 'Purchasing Power Parity' (PPP) clearly mentioned that China has overtook the US and has become the world's largest economy now. America has fallen into second place for the first time since 1872. Now Chinese economy is worth £11 trillion the US 10.8 trillion. Again IMF estimates that Chinese economy would be worth £16.7 trillion by 2019 and it will be 20% bigger than the US economy which is forecast to be worth £13.8 trillion by then (IMF, 2015).

Realizing the above facts might have been the reason, India did not join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The countries participating in the TPP include Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam. Instead of joining the group India has focused on bilateral friendship and has probably found ways to reduce its bilateral trade deficit with China. In his visit to India, president Xi has agreed that Beijing will help India in cutting and reducing the trade deficit by importing different manufactured goods and medicines from India. Moreover "The trade deficit in 2018, according to Chinese official data, climbed to USD 57.86 billion from USD 51.72 billion in 2017 in about USD 95.54 total bilateral trade" (The

Economic Times, 2019). This is seen as an added burden on Indian Economy.

Modi's visits to United States don't show any attempt of restraining China's economic increase. Rather India focuses inwards, seeks foreign direct investments to strengthen its domestic economy. China's daily in its editorial observes "India has established an economic and financial partnership with America. One of (Mr.) Modi's tasks during his visits had been the promotion of Indian economic recovery plan. The Indian government has therefore arranged a set of joint activities with American business elite in order to attract more American investment". The daily pointed out that "rooted in its non-aligned culture, India will not develop its ties with the U.S. at China's expense". "India adheres to an all-round foreign policy strategy. Not only does India give priority to the India-U.S. relationship, it also attaches great importance to Sino-India relationships," the daily observed.

### Regional integrity

The economic and political developments in China as well as in India are and have been of enormous importance to the world community. From the ancient times both the countries have been important destinations for each other in different ways. India closely linked China's future to India. India strongly advocated China's admission to the UN. India's first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru once said "but for the USA to come in to the picture as defenders of Formosa is clearly an intervention by an outside power in favor of a regime which has been knocked out of China. It is a challenge to the China with which we wish to be friend" (Nehru, The Statesman, 1965).

The concept of Asian unity, solidarity and security was spelt out in Asian Relations Conference, held in Delhi in 1947 at the instance of Jawaharlal Nehru, who projected for the first time, the vision of Asian unity and solidarity. Nehru proposed a close union of countries bordering on the Indian Ocean, both for defense and trade purposes. Nehru, while welcoming the delegates to the conference made a particular reference to China. He said: "We welcome you, delegates and representatives from China, that great country to which Asia owes so much and from which so much is expected" (Nehru J. L., 1961). After the successful revolution of 1949, the Peoples Republic of China was recognized by India as a sovereign country. It was also one of the first few nations to support China's entry into the United Nations. Furthermore, when Nehru demanded place for China in the Security Council and Korean crisis was on its height United States offered India a permanent seat in the Security Council around 1953 but Nehru declined that proposal and suggested that the seat, till then held by Taiwan, must be offered to Beijing (Nehru J. L., 1961).

The latest view of Chinese president Xi when he visited India, "Both China and India are influential countries in the world. When our two nations speak with one voice, the whole world will listen attentively". This statement successfully reminds the speeches and sessions at Asian relations conference when Nehru asserted several ideas like what president Xi is realizing and expressing now. While assessing the attitudes of different governments in India towards China starting from Nehru, no government has gone

to the extent of waging a war against China rather they have focused on coexistence and improving the relations. The whole edifice of five principles of co-existence has been getting place in bilateral conducts since Nehru.

#### Other cooperations

Besides intimating each other in their bilateral conducts, initiatives at different multilateral levels in various forums are also crucial for both the countries in terms of playing a vital role in the region and elsewhere and with their neighboring countries in particular. BRICS cooperation and establishment of an Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIB) in Beijing with India as its first president, one of the first projects of the new bank is expected to be financing infrastructure projects along the “silk road economic belt” and the “maritime silk road” reestablishment according to the BRICS Post. The 4,000-miles Silk Road linked ancient Chinese, Indian, Babylonian, Arabic, Greek and Roman civilizations. Now the new Chinese campaign for the Silk Road run through Central China to the northern Xinjiang from where it travels through Central Asia entering Kazakhstan and onto Iraq, Iran, Syria and then Istanbul in Turkey from where it runs across Europe cutting across Germany, Netherlands and Italy and the maritime Silk Road begins in China’s Fujian and ends at Venice, Italy, according to a new map revealed by Xinhua.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001, the SCO groups China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, now has India as observer. Besides BRICS, SCO, AIB, “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “Maritime Silk Road”, The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor is being seen as a game changer for South Asian trade as it can certainly increase socio-economic progress and trade in South Asia. The main target of the initiative is to improve infrastructure and connectivity, energy resources, agriculture, and trade and investment. It aims to connect the Chinese province of Yunnan, India’s Northeast, Myanmar and Bangladesh through a network of railways, waterways roads, and airways. From 7.99 percent of world trade in 2005 between Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar trade has been increased tremendously in the region and with outside countries. The BCIM countries together accommodate 40 per cent of the global population on 9 per cent of the global landmass.

In the context India is positioned as a leading services exporter, Myanmar as a primary goods exporter with plentiful cheap labor, China as the largest manufacturing exporter in the world; and Bangladesh engages in both services export and low-end manufactured goods. All the four countries are having heavy potential of complimenting each other by providing services, manufactured goods and raw materials with easy access.

#### Security factor

After analyzing different relevant economic historical and other factors, mapping the current border and possible root of invasions particularly from the Kashmir region could be given proper attention. Presence of China with Pakistan in different joint ventures of development in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK) alongside the Indian territory of Kashmir

cannot be overlooked as Kashmir has always been an important region for the security of India, explained Nehru in a speech to the constituent Assembly on November 25, 1947: “Kashmir because of its geographical position, with its frontiers with three countries, namely, the Soviet Union, China and Afghanistan, is intimately connected with the security and international contacts of India. Economically also Kashmir is intimately related to India. The caravan trade routes from Central Asia to India, pass through the Kashmir state” (Nehru, 1964, pp. 91-92). V.P. Menon, who played an important part in obtaining the accession from the Maharaja of Kashmir, wrote: “I had in mind one consideration and one consideration alone, viz., that the invasion of Kashmir by the raiders was a great threat to the integrity of India. Ever since the time of Mahmud Ghaznavi, that is to say for nearly eight centuries, with but a brief interval during the Moghul Epoch, India had been subjected to periodical invasions from the northwest. Mahmud Ghaznavi had led no less than seventeen of these incursions in person. And within less than ten weeks of the establishment of the new state of Pakistan, its very first act was to let loose a tribal invasion through the northwest. Srinagar today, Delhi tomorrow. A nation that forgets its history or its geography does so at its peril” (Menon, 1961).

At this juncture looking retrospectively the situation of 1962 war between India and China, reminds that threat from China was realized when India was occupied with Pakistan in the Kashmir. Again in the recent days, both the countries Pakistan and China had border incursions at the same time. Only good thing is that India’s defense capability has tremendously improved and has a better defense potential as compared to the post independence military and defense installations. The initiative by present government in India regarding allocation of a considerable amount of budget for defense and security installations and constructing a roads alongside the India China border region shows a timely counter in case of any future threat in the region.

After all, the important fact in this regard is that all three major actors in the region- China, India and Pakistan- are nuclear powers. It seems convincing that these countries are not going to fight a full scale war at any cost. If they do so, the horrified losses would be seen at all ends. PM Modi’s coinage “do east” instead of “look east” is a good move for the security of India. It is always in the vital interests of the countries to have cordial relations with the neighboring countries. So is also true in the case of India and China. It is more relevant in the case of India when it has a deteriorated relation with Pakistan.

### 3. Conclusions

Being in a good faith and not joining any campaign against each other is in the interest of all the regional entities and obviously will promote regional peace, development and integrity by reducing outside involvement in the region. Among all the neighbors with whom China has territorial disputes, India could be more challenging at present for China. Hence in case of any conflict of higher magnitude or power struggle both the countries may face severe repercussion ranging from regional disturbance to personal economic losses. Any unfortunate event or incidents must be

avoided by using peaceful means because they are heavily engaged in investments and trade by now.

It is important to notice that they are not going to fight a full scale war like they had in 1962. The situation in 1962 was totally different from what it is today. Chinese military position was far better than India that time. Now India has demonstrated a better improvement in defense and war affairs. Leadership from both the sides at present, it seems, has realized the costs of conflicts. Therefore it is hoped that they must demonstrate full maturity in their conducts instead of being seen as ‘fumbling, nervous youngsters meeting on a first date’.

On the other hand any outside involvement in the region by any means ranging from mobilizing the neighbors and deploying armed forces to reaffirmation of security ties against China could refuel the existing and already edgy situation in the pacific region. China also must realize that the more it is involved in the territorial disputes the more space for the outside powers is possible to influence the neighboring countries against her.

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