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INDIA-CHINA MILITARY SPACE COOPERATION

Traversing the Path Never Taken

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"There are no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests"

- Lord Henry John Temple Palmerstone, House of Commons, March 1, 1848.

Background

Everybody knows that India suffered a humiliating defeat in the Sino-India war of 1962. Few know that India sacked China a century prior to that. In 1841-42, the Sikh-Dogra army of Maharajah Ranjit Singh sacked western China and in 1788 the Gorkhas of Rana Bahadur Shah sacked eastern China. The point is not to review history but to indicate that both China and India are ancient civilisations that have their share of victories and defeats. At the same time, both nations have displayed tremendous resilience in moving beyond these episodic bouts in the larger interests of development and nation building. As we move into the new millennium, it augurs well to dispense with the emotional baggage of 1962 and move ahead. Times have changed, India is no longer the India of the previous millennium and neither is China. Strength matches strength and as a corollary, respects it. In fact, numerous reports ranging from McKinsey to Global Policy predict a shift of the world's economic centre of gravity to Asia, particularly India and China by around 2025. Pitting strength against strength damages either party and it makes more sense to combine strength rather than dissipate it in petty squabbles. Towards this end, the May 2015 Joint statement of the Indian Prime Minister and Chinese premier on bilateral cooperation is a game changer. Amongst other things, the apparent emphasis on outer space cooperation



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provides an opportunity to either country to leapfrog differences, mitigate challenges and solidify strengths.

India-China: From Conflict to Cooperation

Cooperation is the building block of peaceful co-existence. A sound military capability is equally so. Strength respects strength and blended with good intention opens the way to gainful and purposeful cooperation. It enables transition to greater strength and well-being. Enabling this transition is the Joint Statement between the India and China during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China on 15 May 2015¹. The joint statement is quite elaborate at forty-one points revealing the amount of effort that must have gone into it. However, a few months post-declaration, it has rescinded into the background and doesn't receive the kind of attention it merits. At least, there exists very little debate and discussion on the issue. Further, the hilarious "Eleven Jinping"² (Xi Jinping) *faux-pax* made enormous news and this frivolous affair ensured little attention on the substance of the visit. Notwithstanding the gaiety, the fact remains that the visit has enormous potential to translate into substantial mutual gain for either country. Over forty areas of cooperation and mutual gain have been agreed to that stand to benefit either party. What is path breaking is the extraordinary emphasis on outer space cooperation. Amongst the six new avenues of cooperation listed out, two areas relate to space; one deals with cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space and the other relates to reinforcing the space cooperation mechanism of year 2014. Quite apparently, with regards to outer space, the intentions are in place, the means and methods need to be worked out.

On the other hand, military cooperation has also been treated afresh. Rather than keeping the militaries aloof and allowing animosities to fester, both sides have embarked on increased interaction and military ties to build mutual trust and confidence. A variety of



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visits and exchanges have accordingly been planned that signify a warming of relations and more importantly, intent to cooperate.

The intent quite clearly is to move beyond the inhibiting parameters of conflict to cooperation for mutual gain. With the intent in place, it would be in order to explore the means and methods to arrive at the goal. The proposed means and method herein are limited to the narrow context of space cooperation and are by no means exhaustive. They are illustrative, at best of the enormous potential inherent in the endeavour.

Evolving to Military Space Cooperation

To begin with, it augurs well for India to get over its usual reticence and look at how China has employed 'peaceful use' of space for military purpose. Generally speaking, peaceful use and military use are apparently antithetical. But, legally speaking, a different interpretation is in vogue. The term peaceful use has not been defined in international space law. This leaves it open to interpretation opening the way to two prominent schools of thought. The first is a school of thought, primarily promoted by the United States that non-aggressive uses of space like satellites used for communication, navigation, earth observation, etc., are peaceful regardless of whether they are used for military or civilian purposes. A contrary school of thought also exists that interprets peaceful in its narrowest terms and considers military use as being non-peaceful. The academic debate on whether military use of satellites for communication, navigation, etc., amounts to peaceful use remains unsettled. However, no operational doubts prevail. Global trends clearly indicate a wide spread and growing acceptance of the US position that "peaceful use" is the equivalent of non-aggressive use rather than non-military use. Put briefly, going by custom and established practice ever since the opening of the space age, use of satellites for military purpose is a peaceful use.



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It is the above use that the Indian military seeks. It has been seeking space competencies for force enhancement, to enhance conventional capabilities with space competencies so as to optimally exploit its modern platforms like long range aircrafts, ships etc. The crux of all military modernisation is the synergy of air and space capabilities for “*informationalistic*” as the Chinese term it. Space application systems like satellites for communication enable aircrafts, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, ships and other platforms to communicate efficiently over various types of terrain well beyond national boundaries. The recent provisioning of a dedicated military satellite for the Indian navy was part of the same quest. Similarly, observation satellites enable observation without infringing political boundaries or airspace of other countries and navigation satellites enable precise, quick and efficient delivery of men and material to the exact point of interest. In a nutshell, it enables a bigger bite for the buck. The same equipment, platform gives a greater output, is more optimally utilised and all-in-all enables greater accountability of the tax-payers money.

The above is the trend across the world and there exists no reason for India to not learn from the Chinese. The opportunity is of use not just for civil development, but also for the armed forces, especially in view of the fact that the same joint statement of the Indian and Chinese premiers extoll the need for enhanced military ties to build mutual trust and confidence. The other means expressed in the paper are of training in counter terrorism and exchange visits by ships, both of which are extremely temporary measures that do little apart from ceremonials. The more lasting and purposeful cooperation would be transfer of civil space uses from India to China and China’s transfer of know-how on how militaries can use space for peaceful purposes. The gain from ceremonials is not known to stand the test of time, but cooperation in space projects that have typically huge gestation



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periods of up to five years and an operational life that is equal or even more are more long lasting and cost effective. The gain is also mutual and eminently serves either nation.

Conclusion

The national leadership of India and China have inked their intention. It is up to the interested parties to take it forward. Quite apparently, it augurs well for the Indian military to grab the opportunity and explore the means of modernisation from an unconventional quarter. There exists but little harm in looking at another's experiment and drawing lessons. The Chinese have evolved space capabilities over four decades as in case of India. They took a different path, which again brought them to their destination. Going by Robert Frost, the road less travelled makes all the difference, no harm in checking whether the Chinese got it right.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ Ref report of Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, "Joint Statement between India and China during Indian Prime Minister's visit to China", *Press Information Bureau*, 15 May 2015 available at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=121755>

² Ref *BBC News*, "Elevel Jinping: Indian TV fires anchor over blooper", 19 Sep 2014 and the *Times of India*, "DD Anchor calls Chinese President 'Eleven' Jinping, sacked", 19 Sep 2014.
