



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

14/20

THE UNAVOIDABLE “*CHINESE MEDICINE*” & ITS SIDE-EFFECTS

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Keywords: COVID-19, PRC, Chinese Medicines, supply chain

The “East-Asian”¹ Cargo Air Bridge

As a part of India’s efforts in fighting the COVID-19 global pandemic, a total of 751 tons² of cargo was airlifted to various parts of India by aircraft belonging to Air-India, Blue Dart and Spicejet between April 04 & 25, 2020. The load, comprising of medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, was airlifted using the “cargo air-bridge” with East Asia established by the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA).³

The importance of “*Chinese Medicine*”⁴ in the ongoing efforts to combat the Covid-19 pandemic in India is highlighted by the fact that over 93 percent (700 tons) of this effort was airlifted from People’s Republic of China (PRC) cities of Shanghai, Hong Kong & Guangzhou. The rest of just over six percent of the load was sourced from Seoul and Singapore. This is indicative of the fact that “*East-Asian air bridge*” is mainly connecting China. PRC has also been a major logistic supplier of the equipment necessary to fight the pandemic globally also.

However, China, opportunistic as ever, has also moved quickly to exploit the unfolding situation. Intending to corner all the major global supply chains which cater to pandemic related logistics—especially with a time criticality factor—PRC is also aiming to appear a saviour in the eyes of the recipient nations. The recipient nations have no choice but to accept and consume this dose of “*Chinese Medicine*”, well aware that there are bound to be “*side-effects*” of the medicine professed. While on the one hand the Chinese have moved quickly to exploit the human misery wreaked by the pandemic – along with the economic potential offered by it – they are also utilising the global distraction to implement their security strategy. One such example is the virtually unopposed establishment of new “research stations” on *Fiery Cross* and *Subi Reef*, as a part of their efforts of consolidating its maritime boundaries to the “*nine-dash*” line in South of China Sea.⁵

Faced with a Hobson’s choice, the countries around the globe – including the United States (US) – are consuming the “*Chinese*

medicine” in order to save the lives of its citizens. At the same time, they are watching with trepidation, the unfolding strategic landscape in which PRC is a major stakeholder. One of the first things which is discernible, is the way PRC has managed to contain the pandemic and has moved to strategically exploit the situation, much to the consternation of other nation states.

A Perplexing Situation

In January 2020, when the pandemic was at its worst for PRC, People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Pakistan Navy (PN) were training together off the Karachi coast in Pakistan as a part of exercise “Sea Guardian-2020”. The PLAN had deployed an air defence destroyer (Type-052D with HHQ-9 long range Surface to Air Missiles), a frigate, as well as a submarine rescue ship.⁶ In contrast, Exercise *Pitch-Black 2020*, which is a multilateral air combat training exercise in which Indian Air Force (IAF) was to participate and which was to be held in Australia from July 27 to August 14, has already been cancelled.⁷ The Australian concerns in respect to China were also expressed by its High Commissioner-Designate Mr Barry O’Farrell in a speech to the National Defence College, New Delhi on April 22, 2020 (via teleconferencing).⁸ While speaking on the topic “*Australia-India relations and the Western Pacific*” he commented upon the developing international security landscape and stated that there are “*deepening rivalries and growing strategic competition, which is driving exploitation of the more fragile*

developing states”. He further stated that the nations are becoming more tempted to use power coercively before adding that the COVID-19 may not necessarily change the nature of threats being faced but “*will*” hasten the pace at which they are developing.⁹

An example of this coercive use of power was the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel off Paracel Islands by PRC Coast Guard by “*ramming*” it on April 02, 2020.¹⁰ The US response, besides the issuance of a press release on April 6, 2020, was to conduct a freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) mission, undertaken by a Japan-based US guided missile destroyer, *USS Barry* (DDG-52) to the Paracel Island chain. It also transited the Taiwan strait twice. The PRC reaction was to send its Liaoning Carrier Strike Group through the Taiwan Strait.¹¹ Additionally, US Naval ships *USS Bunker Hill* and *USS America* are also in the region supporting the Malaysians amidst their ongoing dispute over mineral exploration with PRC.¹² Therefore, while it is business as usual for the Chinese, the rest of the world has to grapple with how to balance its fight with an invisible contagion at home and manage the resulting adverse impact on its economy. And at the same time manage an increasingly belligerent PRC.

Thus, the world continues to be quite perplexed about the way PRC has tackled the pandemic and has come out of it virtually unscathed (with a relatively low casualty figure). This concern has translated into an Australian

proposal for an international inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak, without naming PRC. The proposal, backed by the US, has met with an angry reaction on the part of Chinese, who, through their Ambassador in Australia, have threatened a boycott of Australian products and universities. While Australia has termed the action as “economic coercion,”¹³ the issue is unlikely to receive closure in a near term.

However, amidst such a fast-paced strategic competition, in which coercion and bullying of weaker nations is openly being used as a part of statecraft by PRC, the question, which is of immediate concern to us is, what are the likely side-effects of the “*Chinese Medicine*” on India’s Security interests.

India’s Options

India, as is the case with the rest of the world, is grappling with an unprecedented crisis which has multi-dimensional security and economic implications. Amidst the crisis, on April 30, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a detailed meeting which discussed the roadmap to meet the short and long-term requirements of the Indian defence forces. The meet focussed on the need for economising defence expenditure and promoting the “Make in India” effort, thereby channelising the accrued savings towards strategic defence capital acquisitions.¹⁴ As a part of this effort, significant amount of R&D effort is also required to fund manufacturing of the

indigenised version of the presently imported “*Chinese medicine*”.

While the incoming paid help from PRC should be appreciated, it still needs to be evaluated for *Trojan Horses* and the orders as well as the consumption limited only to the extent required. The exploitative investments by PRC undertakings in India, owing to the economic conditions – and especially the ones into the start-ups and firms dealing with futuristic technologies with defence related implications – need to be thoroughly scrutinised. The traditional security threats, even in these strained times, must remain a part of India’s strategic calculus.

The aggressive reaction on the part of PRC, as has been seen over the past few months, is to be expected as standard response to any issue it deems as provocative. India must ensure that its economic interests remain delineated from its security related ones when it comes to any offer made by the PRC – even if made as a part of diplomatic discussions – no matter how lucrative it might appear. India must evaluate its relationship with PRC bilaterally and display a similar aggressive reaction in order to keep the bilateral relationship insulated from the bogie¹⁵ of “Kashmir as Nuclear flashpoint”,¹⁶ that is raked up by Pakistan, regularly (again possibly working in tandem with the PRC).

The PRC’s game plan of domination without waging a military conflict has been on display

during the past few months. Its efforts to dominate by consolidating its hold on global supply chains, backed up by a technologically advanced manufacturing capacity and labour intensive yet efficient processes, is unfolding even in these trying times. However, the current pandemic may yet be an opportunity for nations to tide over the international schisms, which continue to be exploited by PRC to advance its strategic and economic interests. The question if, when and how this would happen would only be answered once the world understands what transpired during the COVID-19 pandemic and recalibrates its strategy independently and without being coerced by PRC's efforts.

(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])

Notes

¹ PIB,GoI, "392 flights operated under Lifeline Udan by Air India, Alliance Air, IAF and private carriers" April 27,2020, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1618740> accessed on April 29,2020

² Ibid. Air India: 593 tons, Blue Dart: 5Tons, Spicejet:153 Tons

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Chinese Medicine" is a term used colloquially here, collectively referring to the Personal Protection Equipment, test kits and pharmaceuticals products sourced from China.

⁵ US Deptt of State, " PRC's Reported Sinking of a Vietnamese Fishing Vessel in the South China Sea" April 6,2020 <https://www.state.gov/prcs-reported-sinking-of-a-vietnamese-fishing-vessel-in-the-south-china-sea/> accessed on April 29,2020

⁶ HI Sutton, www.forbes.com, "Satellite Imagery Shows Chinese Navy In Pakistan", April 08, 2020, [https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/04/08/sat](https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/04/08/satellite-imagery-shows-chinese-navy-in-pakistan/#6f4c95d93b62)

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⁷ Dinaker Peri, www.thehindu.com, " COVID-19: Australia cancels premier multilateral air combat training exercise", April 26,2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/covid-19-australia-cancels-premier-multilateral-air-combat-training-exercise/article31437582.ece> accessed on April 30,2020

⁸ Australian High Commission New Delhi, "High Commissioner-Designate Mr Barry O'Farrell's speech to the National Defence College" April 22,2020, <https://india.highcommission.gov.au/ndli/HOMSpeech220420.html> accessed on April 30,2020

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Vietnam Insider, www.vietnaminsider.vn, "US voices serious concern over China's actions in East Sea of Vietnam", April 7, 2020, <https://vietnaminsider.vn/us-voices-serious-concern-over-chinas-actions-in-east-sea-of-vietnam/> accessed on April 30,2020

¹¹ Sam LaGrone, USNI News, "China Says PLA Scrambled Aircraft, Ships to 'Expel' U.S. Warship from South China Sea Island Chain", April 28,2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/04/28/china-says-pla-scrambled-aircraft-ships-to-expel-u-s-warship-from-south-china-sea-island-chain> accessed on April 30,2020

¹² AL Jazeera, "Two US warships in South China Sea amid China-Malaysia standoff", <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/warships-south-china-sea-china-malaysia-standoff-200421055333993.html> accessed on April 30,2020

¹³ [www.Straitsimes.com](http://www.straitstimes.com), "China accuses Australia of petty tricks amid inquiry row", April 30,2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/china-accuses-australia-of-petty-tricks-amid-inquiry-row> accessed April 30,2020

¹⁴ PIB, GoI, " PM Modi holds a meeting to discuss ways to boost Defence & Aerospace Sector", April 30,2020, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1619822> accessed on May 01,2020

¹⁵ The term bogie in a military parlance, as referred to here is a false blip on a radar display. The term is also used to describe radar echoes that occur for unknown reasons, especially in the military, where such a signal might indicate hostile aircraft.

¹⁶ PTI, "Kashmir A Nuclear Flashpoint': Pakistan Army Chief Says India Has Endangered Immediate Neighbourhood", April 27,2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/world->

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