

EDITOR'S NOTE

A more aggressive China and strong statements emanating from the US administration are creating conditions of a continued economic and geostrategic face-off. Analysts around the world are talking of possible military invasion of Taiwan by China. There are others who are worried of possible US compromise over Taiwan. It is far too soon to resign ourselves to such grim options. Liberal democracies must and can protect Taiwan. Meanwhile China has openly challenged Washington's role as global rule-setter. President Xi Jinping says they have taken multi-pronged measures to counter perceived efforts by a US-led "coalition of democracies" to contain China. People's Liberation Army (PLA) has increased the frequency of its "patrols" in the South China Sea (SCS) as well as air force and naval incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone and surrounding waters. Through regular incursions, China is conveying signals that it could invade Taiwan. Initially Taiwan was reacting by scrambling its aircraft, but subsequently changed its strategy by putting ground based air defence units on high alert to track the incoming aircraft. US currently has two aircraft carrier groups in the SCS, and US Navy ships are regularly exercising Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the region.

Formally adopted earlier this year on March 11, China's 14th Five-Year Plan marks a shift away from the quantitative growth-focus of Beijing's previous plans. Instead, it aims to usher in a more inward-looking "new developmental stage" that targets "quality development." The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) now believes that there is a need to engage in a global struggle for China's "image sovereignty". They now recognise that "the main battlefield for public opinion" is on the internet, and that requires

a specialised force. China, has created “internet commentators”, and trolls tasked to amplify content favourable to the CCP.

The Chinese leadership’s plan for China’s development from 2021 to 2025 prioritises what it calls the “internal cycle.” They aim to strengthen the domestic economy and consolidate social development. The goal is to cut as quickly as possible the reliance on foreign technology and dependence on imported resources, and to double down on existing plans for industrial modernisation and technological innovation. China’s long pursuit of “indigenous innovation” faced urgency when the US government cut off the supply of semiconductors to ZTE and then Huawei. Washington clearly demonstrated its ability and willingness to destroy leading Chinese tech companies.

China continues its Belt and Road Initiative, and forays into Africa. They have built a seaport in Kenya’s coastal island of Lamu that will be operational in June. But China is facing serious difficulties in Pakistan both for implementation and credit interest. Mismatch between Chinese expectations and Pakistan’s dithering actions on ground have contributed to relative unease in the ties. Very upsetting for China has been the recent uproar over the fencing issue in Gwadar.

China has been under international pressure on human rights in Xinjiang. China has integrated surveillance technologies as part of its strategy of preventive counterterrorism and what they call ‘de-extremisation’ through ideological and political re-education. Chinese consumers finally rallied around a state-media-backed campaign to boycott foreign fashion brands, including H&M, Nike, Adidas, Puma, for their avoidance of Xinjiang cotton due to forced labour allegations. Meanwhile, China is trying sinicisation of Tibet by gradually destroying local culture and introducing “Han” traditions.

Finally, America’s military is leaving Afghanistan in September 2021. Drawdown of the remaining forces will begin in May and “plan is to have all U.S. troops out of the country before the 20th anniversary of 9/11,” according to the White House. Currently there are 9,600 NATO troops and around 2,500 of them are American. NATO troops will also depart; but exactly how many

is unclear. Eliot A. Cohen of SAIS at Johns Hopkins University writes "This is not the end of the war; it is merely the end of its direct American phase."

As Russia and Ukraine forces amass around their borders, in pretext of military exercises, is American and NATO support to Ukraine adequate? Russia's military move is also a test of whether the US will protect its European allies against Russia, as promised, while the US is challenged by China in the South China Sea.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to India, in April, clarified issues related to the S-400 deliveries being on track. Most diplomatically, he did mention that Russia is concerned over Indo-Pacific alliance, the Quad, being an anti-China alliance. He suggested border disputes with China be resolved within BRICS or RIC meetings. His visit to Pakistan immediately after India did raise concerns in India, but he clarified that issues were mostly related to counterterrorism. Ground reality is that the two countries agreed to boost their relationship in area such as trade, counterterrorism, energy, and defence.

The US threat of invoking CAATSA against India in case of purchase of Russian S-400 system still continues. Many security analysts on both sides have opined that sanctioning India would jeopardise the Quad, and have recommended that the US let India buy its weapons from Moscow. The real strategic threat is Beijing. As the only Quad country that shares a land border with China, India's unique role within the group cannot be overstated. Media reports indicate that France, India and Australia could step up Quad-style cooperation, with China on the horizon. The three countries, are reportedly planning to increase their joint presence in the Indo-Pacific.

There are reports that China is preparing its Navy for a new carrier-launched variant of the J-31. The F-35 look alike doesn't have V/STOL capability. It is more likely be "fourth generation", though China refers to the new J-31 variant as being "comparable" to the US F-22 and Russian Su-57 stealth fighter jets.

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) successfully completed the multinational air exercise Aces Meet 2021-1 at PAF base Mushaf. The two-week long exercise

saw active participation from the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) and the United States Air Force (USAF).

China and Russia have been watching US actions in Afghanistan. Both have problematic relations with Erdogan, and are concerned about Turkey's rise on the Afghan-Central Asian region. A Turkish court rejected China's request to extradite a Uyghur religious teacher. Russia seeks Pakistan's support for its Afghan peace initiative worried that the US and Turkey may beat Moscow to the geopolitical push. There is a move to promote Iran's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Meanwhile, Iran has said that it will enrich Uranium to 60 per cent, in effort to strengthen its hand in nuclear talks.

The US Seventh Fleet's announcement that they had asserted navigational rights and freedom near the Lakshadweep Islands, inside India's exclusive economic zone, without requesting India's prior consent, and that this was consistent with international law, irked India. India requires prior consent for military exercises or manoeuvres in its exclusive economic zone or continental shelf. It was bad timing for the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) amidst deepening maritime collaboration between India and the US and growing enthusiasm for the Quad. Was that a US way of signalling to China, some are wondering?

Meanwhile, we in CAPS had two major events in the last two months. There was a webinar on "Stock-check Nuclear Power: Ten Years after Fukushima" our annual national event on Nuclear Power held on March 19, 2021. High-level presentations were made by representatives of DAE and NPCIL, as well as our own scholars who have been examining the role of nuclear energy at the national and global level for many years. Over 70 participants showed a high level of engagement on the issue. Later, for two weeks starting April 5, CAPS conducted a Squadron Officer's Capsule for IAF's mid-level officers preparing to go for their staff course in India and abroad.

This issue of the journal covers a wide variety of subjects related to air power and military strategy. With rising China, Indo-Pacific is the theatre for all geo-strategic action. With China's threatening military moves against

Taiwan, questions are already being asked whether US will be able to defend an invasion of Taiwan. There is thus a need to understand the ground realities and "Strategic Balance in the Indo Pacific".

There is an article on "Electronic Warfare-Changing Operational Concepts". Exercising control over the electromagnetic and denying the use to the enemy is crucial in this high technology war era. EW supports command and control (C2). EW is an important component of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) campaigns. The gambit includes communication radio frequencies; microwaves for tactical data-links, radars, and satellite communications; infrared for intelligence and targeting; and lasers. EW affects all military domains, land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace, and each of the military services has to have its own EW capabilities and programs.

There is an article on "Lessons for air power in Ladakh". As the Air Chief has said, "Over the past few months, the proactive deployment of our offensive capabilities in response to developments in eastern Ladakh, both in terms of deployment of air assets as well as rapid airlifting of army combat elements, demonstrated the IAF's operational readiness today." IAF had also learnt many lessons during the high altitude Kargil war, and these could be applied in Ladakh. IAF clearly has an edge in case of a localised war with ability to pump in much more missions from much more numbers of airbases.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in military aviation shall provide enhanced air warfare capabilities such as target identification, designation and tracking, optimised attack manoeuvre and autonomous combat engagements. AI will greatly support the transition from fighter jets to autonomous Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles (UCAVs). As US and China compete over AI-enabled military hardware, AI technologies are being incorporated into autonomous drones, new generation missiles with autonomous targeting capabilities and autonomous robotic submarines.

Atmanirbharta is a national goal. Make-in-India must succeed for India to one day become a global power. The defence industry, both public and private, has IAF's backing and active support. India has had to adopt joint

venture route with some foreign defence technology giants. It seems to have worked. With success of LCA and ALH, Indian industry is at an inflection point. The way ahead is only up. This is covered in the article "Welcome Steps towards an Indigenously Equipped Indian Air Force".

Airlifts are becoming the lifeblood of military operations and HADR missions. This has been most recently demonstrated during the massive airlift of oxygen containers from across the globe, and within India to support the Covid pandemic relief operations. Over the years, improved aircraft capabilities and new techniques have turned airlift into much specialised operations.

While we in CAPS work tirelessly to create good academic quality content on air power and strategic subjects, it is always our endeavour to promote the habit of reading. Reading not only fuels the development of all aspects of language ability, but also brings clarity on various aspects of human life and its interactions. "Children are made readers on the laps of their parents" said Emilie Buchwald. We in CAPS put content in books and journals on your tables and also soft copies on your electronic devices. Books open new doors. For the strategic community, CAPS publications are a one stop place. We try to promote passion for reading.

Wishing you happy reading!



Air Marshal **Anil Chopra**
Director General, CAPS