

CHINA'S RISE AND FUTURE TRENDS IN SINO-INDIAN RELATIONS

JAYADEVA RANADE

History certainly has left a legacy – to a large extent as propagated by the Chinese – but the world has changed and it is necessary to look ahead while formulating strategies. There was perhaps a period of opportunity when both countries shook off the colonial yoke and became free around the same time, but today, China is India's biggest challenge in terms of territorial security, global aspirations and environmental resources like water. When we look at Sino-Indian relations today, we cannot miss the new dynamics that have come into play.

Important in this context is the emergence nearly at the same time of strong, new leaders in Asia. Xi Jinping in China, Narendra Modi in India and Shinzo Abe in Japan are all pragmatic leaders with track records of being decisive and a capacity to take bold decisions. Each has articulated an ambitious vision for his country, with economic development as the centrepiece. All of them are strongly nationalist and equally intent on securing their country's national interests and strategic space. Coincidentally, all of them began to outline the strategic perimeters of their national interests soon after assuming office. Their appearance on the international stage has injected an element of competition in the region along with the potential to crowd the Indo-Pacific region.

Mr **Jayadeva Ranade**, a former Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, is a member of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and president of the recently established Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.

Looking to the future, China has initiated a bold, grand gamble which is potentially changing current realities. If successful, it will not only mean Chinese influence and power sweeping across our eastern and northern frontiers and enveloping portions of our northwest i.e. Ladakh and northern Kashmir, but the extension of Chinese power throughout Europe.

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With the global economic downturn in 2007-08 and the slowdown in the US economy, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership undertook an appraisal of US strength to decide on its future foreign policy. Views were divided on whether to write off the US as the sole world power. One view was that the US is a power irreversibly on the decline, while the other, which was accepted by the CCP leadership, argued that the intrinsic strength and resilience of the US will ensure its return to the world stage as a stronger and more effective power. There was consensus, however, that the ability of the US to project power simultaneously in different theatres around the globe is presently constrained, thus, offering China a window of opportunity that would last at most between 5-10 years, to alter the status quo in Asia.

The official Chinese assessment was concisely summed up in mid-August 2014 by the state-owned *Global Times*, a subsidiary newspaper of the official CCP mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*. The paper observed, "The US military has the power to sustain the US dominance internationally, but it is unable to command every country or nation. In East Asia, the US doesn't

have the determination to be fully committed to things that are not in its core interests.”

With the rapid rise of China and its military and economic might, which today ranks second only to the US, its national self-confidence was boosted. Chinese analysts began arguing more strongly in favour of an assertive Chinese foreign policy. Significant are the arguments advanced by some of China’s prominent and influential Chinese academics close to the leadership of the CCP. Tsinghua University Professor Yan Xuetong, a former doctoral tutor of Xi Jinping, with reportedly close proximity to him, has recommended that: (i) as the probability of conflict with other countries increases, China’s foreign policy should directly confront rather than avoid the issue of conflict; (ii) China should try to develop rather than just maintain its “strategic opportunity period” because waiting for a strategic opportunity period is always passive; (iii) China should begin to shape rather than just integrate into international society because it now has the capacity to do so; and (iv) China should change its non-alignment approach and make efforts to establish a “community of common destiny.”

Xu Jin of the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and another influential Chinese scholar, has asserted that several dominant “myths” in Chinese foreign policy need to be debunked. Xu Jin listed these six “myths” as: (i) China should keep a low profile; (ii) China should not seek alliances; (iii) China should not seek leadership; (iv) China will not become a superpower; (v) the Sino-American relationship is the most important one; and (vi) China’s foreign policy should serve China’s economic development. He believes that all these six “myths” should be discarded as a ‘new era’ calls for new ideas.

This self-confidence is reflected in China’s repeated demand for a “new type of big power relations” with the US, which actually implies acknowledgement by Washington DC of China’s status, and both countries jointly resolving tensions in regional and international ‘hotspots’. It is also from this time that China’s enhanced assertiveness in the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and with India, becomes noticeable.

The new passports published by China depict its claimed territories, as do its actions in the South China Sea and East China Sea and the expanding claims over Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). This directly impinges on India. Xi Jinping has set 2021, which is the centenary of the CCP, as the deadline for achieving the China Dream!

With such thinking gaining wider acceptance, China's foreign policy has begun to acquire a sharper and more muscular edge that will impact India, Japan, Vietnam and other countries with which it has territorial disputes. Internal arguments advocating a tougher, uncompromising approach have gained ground in the debate on China's international security environment.

The 18th Party Congress which stressed the CCP's supremacy and domestic stability, installed Xi Jinping as the general secretary of the CCP. It additionally appointed orthodox Party apparatchiks to the downsized Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) now comprising only seven members. It also, for the first time in over 30 years, simultaneously conferred all three top posts of Party chief, chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and president of China on Xi Jinping. Xi Jinping has used ideology and nationalism to fuel the push for the supremacy of the CCP and its monopoly on power and stability.

The 18th Party Congress also approved the China Dream which envisages: making the Chinese people wealthy; making China a strong nation; and the rejuvenation of China. This muscular aspiration for China spelt out by Xi Jinping at the 18th Party Congress has been adopted by the entire Party and has already entered the lexicon of the CCP. Pertinent to India-China relations is the reference to rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation, which is a call for the redressing of past humiliations which include the 'unequal treaties' and the 'recovery' of claimed territories. It additionally implies the restoration to China of its self-perceived rightful international status. The new passports published by China depict its claimed territories, as do its actions in the South China Sea and East China Sea and the expanding claims over Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). This directly impinges on India.

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In October 2013, Beijing organised an important Conference on Peripheral Diplomacy. The policy has obvious implications for India and Japan. China's policy of "Peripheral Diplomacy", for the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), categorises countries neighbouring China as 'friend' and 'enemy'. It promises huge financial and other benefits -- including those flowing from the global influence and diplomatic clout it exercises -- to 'friends' who support China's

regional ambitions and warns of sustained periods of pressure and isolation to 'enemies' or countries that oppose China. Chinese commentators point out that the end objective of the policy of "Peripheral Diplomacy" is to use alternative strategies "to achieve global leadership". Among those identified as China's 'friends' are Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Turkey.

The policy signalled that Beijing would intensify efforts for economic engagement with India, including making investments, and accompany this with high-level visits. It additionally envisages a network of sub-regional, regional and "cooperative" security relationships. China already has an all-encompassing military relationship with Pakistan. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has steadily upgraded ties with Nepal's army, and Sri Lanka and the Maldives have formally agreed to partner Beijing in the Maritime Silk Route. China and Bangladesh also signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement many years ago, which has remained inactivated.

Noteworthy in the context of security arrangements is the precedent set by China and Ukraine on December 4, 2013. The security agreement concluded between the two countries states that "China promises...to provide security guarantees to Ukraine if Ukraine is attacked by nuclear weapons or threatened by such aggression".

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Around this time, in September 2013, Xi Jinping proposed China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR), which combines the twin initiatives of the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It is a grand concept that envisions China girdling the globe. Potentially covering 55 percent of the world Gross National Product (GNP), 70 percent of the global population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves, it is essentially a plan for a China-built land and sea transportation artery to link China's production centres with markets and natural resource centres around the world. At the same time, it will harness much of China's hitherto idle financial reserves and economic potential, manpower and infrastructure-technology reserves available in its mammoth State-owned Enterprises (SoEs) that are presently unutilised, to get the much needed returns. The OBOR has the potential to bend borders and alter the status quo in China's neighbourhood – as it already has begun to do in South Asia – and adversely impacts India directly. The initiative blends geopolitical and diplomatic objectives and has a strong domestic agenda.

Some international and Chinese banks have been identified as agencies for the OBOR and nearly 20 European countries are engaged in talks with China on the OBOR. However, despite China's offers of economic assistance, the European Union (EU), in May 2016, declined to give China Market Economy Status (MES) based on the 2001 terms of China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). There are differences on the terms offered by the Chinese, including over interest rates. Thailand, for example, complained in March 2016 that interest rates are too high, putting the Chinese-Thai rail project in jeopardy but the problems were later ironed out. Similar has been the case with Sri Lanka.

Beijing has tried to assuage the concerns harboured by some countries about China's real objectives. At the China Development Forum in March 2015, and again a month later, China's Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui described China as fully integrated into the international system and reiterated that the OBOR is "not directed against any specific country or organisation" but intended to "complement" existing international and regional institutions. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his annual

address to the press on the sidelines of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee - National People's Congress (CPPCC-NPC) sessions in March 2015 and 2016, asserted that the OBOR was not a "tool of geopolitics" and should not be viewed through an "outdated Cold War mentality". Separately, in March 2016, he again emphasised that China is a responsible emerging country and promotes periphery diplomacy with reciprocal benefits.

Problems of harsh terrain, political instability, and geopolitical threats, are likely to get accentuated by the inherent political turbulence in many of the regions that the OBOR traverses. The rising tide of Islamic extremism in Pakistan, Afghanistan and potentially in the coming years in the Central Asian Republics, will threaten stability in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and other Muslim areas in China. Safeguarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's (CPEC's) 51 projects in Baluchistan -- among the world's most vulnerable and domestic insurgency-ridden territory -- will also be difficult. Chinese analysts have also pointed out to Beijing that the cooperation of countries like Russia, Japan and India -- all named as major powers in the region -- is essential if the OBOR is to succeed. Together, these cast serious doubts about the viability of the OBOR.

China is nevertheless pressing ahead with the approximately US\$ 1.4 trillion OBOR project. It has claimed it is willing to make a huge financial commitment upwards of US\$ 300 billion in infrastructure financing for the project in the coming years, though some multilateral and bilateral pledges may overlap. Underscoring China's commitment, the official *China Daily* reported on May 28, 2015, that Beijing plans to invest US\$ 900 billion. If China's OBOR succeeds, it will rival the US for global influence. The OBOR is planned to be completed over 35 years, in time for the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 2049!

The CPEC, which is the sixth leg of the OBOR and of great immediate significance for India, marks the initiation of a bold new policy. Announced during Chinese President Xi Jinping's well-publicised two-day (April 20-21, 2015) visit to Pakistan and with a value estimated by Pakistanis at US\$ 46 billion, the CPEC is a bold geoeconomic initiative which has begun to potentially bend borders with India and alter the strategic status quo in the

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region. The CPEC sets the stage for China to wield preeminent economic, military and diplomatic influence in Pakistan. It is also signalled that in the pursuit of national interest, Beijing no longer feels the need to retain even the diplomatic façade of showing sensitivity to India's concerns and that, in the backdrop of warming Indo-US relations, it will use Pakistan to exert greater pressure on India. Equally clear is that China's leadership has determined that elevating its comprehensive relationship with Pakistan would best serve its strategic interests and that this objective will overshadow any other foreign policy considerations, including that of ensuring a friendly, peaceful neighbourhood.

The agreement for Chinese companies to construct 51 Chinese-aided infrastructure, energy and military projects shows that Beijing's engagement with Pakistan is for the foreseeable long term. With power generation, transport, commerce, Research and Development (R&D) and the defence of Pakistan all getting increasingly tied to Chinese investment and interests, the CPEC seeks to bind Pakistan to China. Almost six months prior to Xi Jinping's visit to Islamabad, an influential senior Chinese academic, specialising in researching Afghanistan-Pakistan and who is occasionally called to brief the CCP Central Committee (CC) Politburo, said in a private conversation that "while we had earlier purchased the loyalty of the Pakistanis, now we will buy Pakistan!"

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China. Beijing has, thus, dispelled decades of ambiguity to side with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, ignoring India's concerns regarding sovereignty and territorial integrity. Within weeks of Xi Jinping's visit, senior Chinese leaders and officials began describing Pakistan as China's "ally" and "only friend". This enhanced relationship was publicised when Prof Yan Xuetong, director of the Institute for International Relations at Beijing's Tsinghua University and an influential Chinese strategic analyst close to Xi Jinping, told the *New York Times* on February 9, 2016, that "China has only one real ally, Pakistan." The CPEC has far-reaching implications.

Addressing India's concerns and reflecting China's attitude was Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Jianchao's condescending remark in mid-April 2015, that "the project between China and Pakistan does not concern the relevant dispute between India and Pakistan. I do not think the Indian side should be overconcerned about that". The comment is at obvious odds with Beijing's prickly reaction to India's offshore exploration efforts in Vietnamese waters and stand on the South China Sea dispute. Equally insensitive were suggestions by senior CCP officials and influential Chinese academics, just weeks after Prime Minister Modi's visit to Beijing, that India could join the CPEC and benefit!

In order to protect the sizeable Chinese investments in the PoK, Gilgit and Baltistan, Pakistan has begun integrating these areas more into Pakistan and the process has already begun to bend the borders and impact on India's territorial integrity. As a first step, Gilgit and Baltistan have been asked to send 'observers' to Pakistan's Federal Assembly before they are authorised to elect and send legislators. Presently, they have no representation in Pakistan's Federal Assembly, or Parliament. A senior 'government' official from Gilgit-Baltistan described this as intended to give "legal" cover to proposed Chinese investments since "China cannot afford to invest billions of dollars on a road that passes through a disputed territory claimed both by India and Pakistan." The move has other major implications as it will integrate this portion of Kashmir with Pakistan by giving it considerably enhanced legislative powers, control of its revenue and allowing it to be represented in Pakistan's federal Parliament by two

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members for the first time—albeit as observers. Pakistani strategic analyst Ayesha Siddiqa interpreted the move as possibly demonstrating “Islamabad’s desire to end the Kashmir conflict by formally absorbing the territory it controls—and, by extension, recognising New Delhi’s claims to parts of the region it controls, such as the Kashmir Valley”. She said: “If we begin to absorb it, so can India. It legitimises their absorption of the valley.” This could, however, well be the thin end of the wedge as Pakistan appears to have got emboldened following the upgrading of its relationship with China, as evident

from the upsurge of restiveness and violence in Kashmir over the past year.

China too is assisting the process of Pakistan consolidating its hold over these territories. A report in the CCP’s official newspaper, *People’s Daily*, on July 21, 2016, in an apparent endorsement of Pakistan’s claim, published a report depicting soldiers from Pakistan and China under the caption: “A frontier defense regiment of the PLA (People’s Liberation Army) in Xinjiang, along with a border police force from Pakistan, carries out a joint patrol along the China-Pakistan border.” Noteworthy is the fact that the area of the patrol, identified in the report as “the China-Pakistan border,” is the frontier region of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir — an area which is an integral part of India’s territory. China usually refers to the disputed area as “Pakistan-administered Kashmir”. China’s stance in reporting on developments relating to Kashmir has also become more critical.

Notably, the responsibilities of the PLA’s West Zone, established in January 2016, include safeguarding the borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, protecting Chinese investments and projects in the CPEC,

protecting China's land frontiers with India and focussing on "threats in Xinjiang and Tibet as well as Afghanistan and other states that host training bases for separatists and extremists". Instructions issued to the erstwhile Lanzhou Military Region in January 2015 confirmed that the West Zone's commitment in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the CPEC are long-term. The instructions directed that selected operational and border defence officers be trained in "informationization" and "joint operations command", that border defence colleges train officers in "border discussions" and the usage of mortars, and, specifically, that its "backbone personnel" be trained in the Pushto and Urdu languages.

Worrying too is the fact that the CPEC has a definite military content and provides for close military coordination between the Chinese and Pakistani armed forces. As part of the CPEC, a US\$ 44 million secure fibre optic underground cable is being established to link Kashgar, the headquarters of the PLA West Zone's South Xinjiang Military District, with the Pakistan Army General Headquarters (GHQ) at Rawalpindi. A number of PLA personnel are already deployed in the northern segment of the CPEC as engineers or to protect the Chinese working there. In early 2016, China informed Islamabad that it plans to raise a 10,000-strong 'private army' for deployment in Pakistan to protect Chinese workers and the sites of CPEC projects. This will be in addition to the Pakistan Army's special security division commanded by a major general, set up to guard CPEC construction sites and the Chinese labourers working there. Since 2010, reports have been seen in the Chinese media mentioning the possibility of China deploying special forces in the northern areas of Pakistan to protect China's investments and the various projects being built there.

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This new China under Xi Jinping is expanding its influence and strategic space and trying to become the only big power in Asia. For India, this has direct implications.

China has already been steadily expanding its territorial claims over India – first, Arunachal Pradesh, and since 2010, the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir. On May 14, 2013, *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (*China Youth News*), the influential high-circulation official mouthpiece of the Communist Youth League (CYL), published a lengthy article implicitly laying claim to Ladakh. It said that the Ladakh region “has been part of Tibet since ancient times ...” and that “Ladakh was under the jurisdiction of the central government of China’s Qing Dynasty until the 1830s.” It added, “Although it is under Kashmir, Ladakh shares similarities with Tibet in terms of culture, religion, customs, and language, and it has long been dubbed ‘Little Tibet’.” China has additionally expressed a willingness on two occasions since 2009 to mediate in J&K, and in 2010, a so-called Chinese Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) invited Mirwaiz Umar Farooq of the Hurriyat Conference to China. Mirwaiz Umar Farooq had then stated that China has a role in the settlement of the Kashmir issue. More recently, on March 14, 2016, the Syed Ali Shah Geelani-led Hurriyat Conference described China as a reliable friend of the people of Kashmir and said it is extremely thankful to Beijing for its “unconditional support” and for not recognising the Himalayan state’s “illegal and forced occupation by India”.

China has on separate occasions laid claim to Kashmir. An official Chinese map published in 1954 -- still used in Chinese school textbooks -- depicts territories taken by ‘imperialist’ powers and which China has said it would “recover”. Ladakh is part of these territories, along with Arunachal Pradesh and the Andaman Islands. On March 1, 1992, *Shijie Zhishi* (*World Affairs*) published a map showing India without the state of J&K and depicting Kashmir as part of China. There have been other such claims. From August 2010, China designated the entire state of J&K as ‘disputed’ and began to issue ‘stapled visas’ to residents of the state.

China’s unchanged position on the border and Arunachal Pradesh was amply clarified by China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his visit to

India in June 2014. In reply to a question by a journalist, he replied that the issue of stapled visas by China was a “unilateral” and “flexible” gesture of “goodwill” but if India does not want it, Beijing can stop. In other words, the status of Arunachal Pradesh and J&K remain unchanged. Later, Chinese President Xi Jinping said the border issue could be settled by the next generation. Viewed together with the incursions by PLA troops in April 2013 and September 2014 and the PLA’s military exercises across India’s borders, the signals clearly show that the tough stance adopted by Xi Jinping on the border issue will not change.

After his visit to Pakistan and announcement of the CPEC and subsequent meeting with Indian Prime Minister Modi in China, Xi Jinping and the Chinese leaders have declined to substantively discuss the border issue. Meetings between the special representatives have yielded negligible results and discussions regarding the border have been perfunctory. Revealing was the statement by a retired but influential Chinese general to a delegation that had travelled to get a feedback on Modi’s visit to China. At the conclusion of the Track-II discussions, the general said: “India must ease tensions with Pakistan, resolve the Kashmir issue and then look to improved relations with China!” A larger delegation of Indian think-tanks that travelled to China some months later and met Chinese Foreign Ministry officials and Chinese think-tanks were delivered the same message.

China has, at the same time, become increasingly tough on other bilateral issues and more supportive of Pakistan. It continues to closely collude with Pakistan to oppose India’s admission to an enlarged UN Security Council, staunchly opposes India’s entry to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and continues to block India’s requests at the UN Sanctions Committee regarding internationally recognised terrorists like Masood Azhar of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Hafez Saeed of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JUD) and Zaki-

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ur-Rahman of the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT). With regard to the NSG and India's requests at the UN Sanctions Committee, China did not alter its stance despite Modi speaking in person directly to Xi Jinping. China's stance is also not in accordance with its stated position regarding the need to combat terrorism. Another area of close Sino-Pak collusion and collaboration is Afghanistan where China is extending full support to Pakistan's ambition of controlling Afghanistan through the Taliban. Inescapable in this context is the high degree of convergence in the Chinese and US policies of support to Pakistan.

The extensive reorganisation and restructuring of the PLA undertaken by China is of direct relevance for India. Of particular interest for India is the recently established West Zone, which merges the erstwhile Lanzhou and Chengdu Military Regions (MRs). Comprising more than half of China's land area, 22 percent of its population and more than one-third of its land-based military, the newly constituted West Zone represents a strengthened military formation. The merger of the Lanzhou and Chengdu MRs will improve joint planning, coordination and operations. Incorporation of the Qinghai region in the West Zone will facilitate the rapid induction and deployment of high altitude acclimatised and trained troops into Tibet and across Ladakh. Establishment of the West Zone also reveals China's increased and abiding military interest in the region. It will additionally facilitate focus on "threats in Xinjiang and Tibet as well as Afghanistan and other states that host training bases for separatists and extremists". Its operational jurisdiction includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, the CPEC, borders with India and areas which have become sanctuaries for terrorists. Along with China's domestic security laws enacted last year, personnel of the PLA West Zone can now be deployed in the CPEC and Gwadar port. China handing over two warships to Pakistan on January 15,

2016, for the protection of Gwadar port, with two more to follow, points to the importance of Gwadar port for China. It is likely that Djibouti will come under its jurisdiction. If that happens, the West Zone can be expected to have adequate air force and maritime assets which will allow Chinese surveillance of the Arabian Sea.

That China's military leadership accords importance to the West Zone is discernible in the appointment of Gen Zhao Zongqi, till recently Jinan MR commander, as commander of the new West Zone. His credentials indicate he was handpicked for this post. Gen Zhao Zongqi is fluent in Arabic and has experience of Tibet. He is a war hero, having participated in the Sino-Vietnam War in 1979 when he is reported to have often disguised himself as a Vietnamese to gather information. He served over 20 years in Tibet as deputy chief of staff (1984-99) and chief of staff (1999-2004) of the Tibet Military District (TMD). Born in 1955, Gen Zhao Zongqi has foreign service experience and was posted in Tanzania as defence attaché.

In conclusion, while China is in overdrive to establish itself as the sole power in Asia, it will require India's cooperation if it is to succeed. India too has changed its policy, especially since the Modi government's coming to power. Along the borders, the clear directions are to stand firm and push back attempts at intrusion by Chinese personnel. India is also directly raising issues of concern with China's leaders, consolidating relations to expand its strategic space and is striving to create a balance in the Asia-Pacific. There are other areas too that have the potential to retard China's ambitions. Modi's implied support to the people of Baluchistan in their fight for self-determination can jeopardise the CPEC in which China has made a huge investment. The effort to develop Chahbahar port in Iran will, once implemented, give India and other interested countries a secure and alternate route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Dalai Lama's presence in India and his visits to Arunachal Pradesh, etc. are additional irritants and reminders to China. The next few years will be testing times and crucial in determining whether India and China can coexist peacefully.