



India's Strategic Choices to Engage China

SPEAKER: Dr. Rajiv Ranjan

CHAIR: Amb. Biren Nanda

DATE: 11 March 2020

VENUE: Seminar Room, ICS

The Chair opened the discussion by giving a detailed account of the key elements of the Chinese world view at this juncture. He stated that China perceives the present phase as demonstrating multipolarity and a decline in US power post the global financial crisis of 2017. This is the same as giving rise to a period of great strategic opportunity to seek the realization of China's rise. It entails challenging the dominant position of U.S. power in Asia, pursuing the rapid expansion of maritime power, seeking to dominate its periphery through BRI and pushing new Asian security architecture to diminish the role of great powers.

Dr. Rajeev Ranjan divided his presentation into three sections: Chinese scholars' perspective on China, power accumulation in India and China and how India should engage with China strategically. In his research, he observed that Chinese literature does not focus on the dominant strategies such as balancing and bandwagoning. Rather, the recent debates revolve around a third strategy, 'hedging'. Chinese scholars argue that India is hedging against China. Their contention is that Make in India initiative, Asia-African corridor, AIB, changing attitude towards BCIM are all tools of India's hedging strategy. One of the Chinese scholars argues that China should engage India with a clear and positive position. Scholars say that power disparity between the two countries makes it difficult for India to balance China. Therefore, India's actions in the Indo-Pacific are both hedging and wedging. U.S. has employed this wedging strategy in Indo-Pacific to balance China. It implies that Chinese scholars do not consider the Indo-Pacific strategy as India's strategy. However, they think that it is important to constructively engage with India on the Indo-Pacific issue. The speaker stated that China's support for Pakistan in SCO is a hedging strategy against India. Pakistan

as such is not in a position to balance India. Therefore, China and Pakistan are collectively hedging against India.

India and China are going through a process where they both are trying to accumulate power. And they both need each other's help for power accumulation. But distrust and zero-sum game are the impediments in the interdependence. Furthering the discussion on power accumulation, the speaker spoke about the three aspects of power political, economic and military in detail. Political power is gained by membership in international organizations. With the growing clout of China in international politics, there are chances that China can use its veto power against India to maximize its interest. Because of this sort of political power, India is also worried about China's use of maximized power against India. Secondly, in terms of military power too, India is trying to match up with China through heavy investments. India's closeness to the U.S. can be seen as an attempt to accumulate military power. Membership in the Wassenaar and MTCR boosted India up in terms of covering the power gap in the defence sector. China is attempting to maximize its political power by making allies. BRI, in present times, is one such tool of making allies across the world. And India does not want to lose its strategic space in the neighbourhood by becoming part of BRI.

The speaker further threw light upon the yardsticks of power. Chinese scholars are researching the methods to categorize countries in terms of superpower. Although, China is strong in all aspects of power whether it is military, economic or political but it is not strong in soft power. Following this, the speaker talked about power dilemma. It implies that China does not want India to gain permanent membership in the UNSC or NSG. Even though India is matching up in terms of economic and military power but the mere lack of political power makes it dependent on other countries to pursue its interests. Therefore, having nuclear power does not help India in getting things done until it has political power. Some scholars also believe that being a democratic country gives political power in international politics. This is the reason China is hesitant in helping India to get membership in NSG or UNSC. That would put India wholeheartedly in the western camp.

The last part of the speaker's presentation entailed a discussion on India's strategic response to China. Indian scholars think that hedging is bound to fail so India should only employ the balancing strategy. It would not be a rational policy for India to go back to the policy of balancing China because it will not give the best payoffs. Bandwagoning would also not work because the balance of power strategy works in favour of a superior power. A viable

strategy at this juncture should be soft balancing. Citing Prof. TV Paul, Dr. Ranjan argues that soft balancing can maximize Indian interests but it is the second-best option. In this kind of balancing, economic engagements with China are kept intact while simultaneously keeping military engagement with the U.S open. In response to this, Chinese scholars argue that soft balancing by India would be considered as balancing against China. This will make China hedge with other countries against India. Therefore, the best strategy is hedging which both India and China are trying to use against each other. Here, hard hedging runs counter to the main objective of maximizing interest and is tantamount to balancing. Hence, soft hedging minimizes the loss if something goes wrong and it is the best option for India. In this kind of hedging, India will not be dependent on China keeping in mind the history of India-China relations.

Following the presentation, a lengthy question and answer discussion took place. A question was raised regarding the possible example of soft hedging, its linkage with the national interest. Dr. Ranjan responded that in normal terms, hedging can also be called multi-alignment. We need to go with China on various fronts whether it is economic, people-to-people contact, cooperate at border level and simultaneously take advantage of the U.S. also. We should be engaging with the U.S. to serve our purposes and not to antagonize China. In the Indo-Pacific, even the Chinese think that it is a U.S. game. Going with the U.S. should not be at the cost of China. While the Indo-Pacific was thought to be an exclusive club, Prime Minister Modi said in Singapore that China can join it too. It was a message to China that this grouping is not against her. Whether the Chinese join or not, in this scenario, soft hedging implies keeping the doors open, the way China dealt with the U.S. during the economic reforms. India still being a developing power, it should be able to maximize national interest and not become dependent on anyone. Strategic autonomy needs to be maintained, the way Chinese engage with India or the U.S.

Further, questions and doubts were raised as to how soft hedging or hard hedging will be seen by China and balance between the national interest in its two forms of security and the development of its people. Dr. Ranjan replied that whatever policy India has designed, whether it is the Asia Africa Corridor, Mausam project, it is largely seen by Chinese scholars as hedging and not balancing. The speaker explained that national interests are not permanent. One of the national interests is sovereignty and India has a border dispute with China. It is largely seen that in India, there is a securitization of Chinese studies and everything boils down to border disputes. According to the speaker, it is important that while

negotiating over the border dispute, the unlikeliness of joining CPEC should be balanced with designing new corridors. If national security is always at the forefront while formulating policies then not much can be achieved in terms of innovative policy. Without resolving the border dispute, mutual trust cannot be developed.

A question was raised regarding Chinese scholars' perspective of India's China study programmes. Dr. Ranjan responded that those scholars who do not study India as a region but are students of International Relations and theory are very forthcoming and positive of India. In contrast, those whose studies revolve around Indian foreign policy are belligerent. There is also no coherence between PLA's thinking of India and academicians and think tank's thinking of India. They even differ in the Chinese world view.

The talk concluded with the comments by the Chair. He stated that India has developed a strategic partnership with many countries over the last few years. Hedging is an interesting concept but cannot be applied to a country of India's size. In the history of international relations, there is no mentioning of the hedging of large powers. And currently, we are in that phase of international politics where we are headed towards multipolar systems along with a lot of contestation. These contestations are taking place in the form of soft coercion. In the last 100 years of European history, two things can be taken out- that multipolar world is an extremely dangerous world and the only balance that survives is a bipolar one. The Asian reality is that China is shaping India's strategic policies.

This report was prepared by Reena Bhatiya, Research Assistant at the Institute of Chinese Studies.

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