

Is India a Monkey on China's Back?

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Date: 23 December 2020

Venue: Zoom Webinar, ICS Delhi

In this Seminar, the speaker identifies a shift in the way India is being perceived in certain Chinese media outlets and scholarly writings since the Fifth Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which concluded in October 2020 and more importantly, since mid-November as it became clear that Joe Biden will be assuming presidency in the US. The fifth plenum was important in not only highlighting the economic achievements and future goals of country but also in laying out the strategic issues and international relations challenges that China is expected to face in the near future. The fact that the Fifth Plenum was held just one week before the US presidential elections clearly indicates the message from the Chinese, that their policies would be along the same lines regardless of the outcome of US elections. From some of the widely read commentaries in China based on the Fifth Plenum communique, the speaker highlights three important aspects that they identify as crucial for the international situation; pandemic, economic slump and conflicts. These commentaries have acknowledged that the global situation in 2021 is not expected to improve significantly. Some commentaries, according to the speaker, emphasized the victory or the extremely successful handling and response by the CCP of the concurrent challenges faced by China; pandemic, economy and deteriorating foreign relations. Another important view that has quite clearly emerged in these commentaries is that despite Joe Biden's victory in the US elections, tensions between the US and China over trade and other political issues are not going to be resolved anytime soon. India has found mention in several Chinese commentaries in this context.

Many Chinese commentators have expressed that tensions between New Delhi and Beijing are expected to continue in 2021 and some have even said that strategic confrontation with India is now inevitable. The speaker highlighted the difference in the tone and tenor of these commentaries as compared to the past ones and that most of them acknowledged that the CCP has "managed" relations with India successfully and the onus is entirely on India to end the current crisis at the

border and normalize bilateral ties between the two countries. These commentaries, of course, cannot be viewed in isolation but in the context of deteriorating relations between the US and China and the change of guard in the US. India, according to the speakers' findings has become the second most important "challenge" for China after their first priority to "politically manage" well relations with the US. There are also some "minor irritants" for China for instance tensions with Australia or Japan, which according to many commentators can be dealt fairly easily.

The speaker has identified three major reasons in Chinese commentaries regarding the current impasse in India-China relations; local border disputes, regional antagonisms and colonial history. India's refusal to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has also found mention in several commentaries. Unlike the Doklam crisis, the current crisis at the border does not seem to be getting resolved. In this case, Chinese commentaries have recognized two possible response from India; first, riding high on nationalist sentiments and strategic ambitions, India will intensify military preparations and strategic confrontations with China, which includes New Delhi proactively backing free Tibet forces and aggressively restricting and cutting-down bilateral engagement and cooperation in various fields with China. India will also increasingly challenge China in the subcontinent as well as in the Indian Ocean Region and can take steps that can jeopardize China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Second, India will move closer to anti-China hegemonic forces because India on its own is incapable of matching China. It is in this context that many commentaries have targeted India's increasing engagement with the US since the end of Cold War. India has been projected in many writings as the vanguard of the US's Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China.

Further, many commentators have expressed that India, since past many years has been blocking and paralyzing regional institutions like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) so as to keep China away from being given a platform to engage with countries in the subcontinent. The speaker examines some of the steps that Chinese commentators have identified that can be taken by China to manage its relations with India. First, avoiding military confrontation and try to maintain peace and calm at the border. Second, China's focus should be on managing more strategically important US-China relations. Third, China must adopt positive measures to contain conflict with India and not just resort to passive and negative approach. Fourth, China can politically manage India by isolating it in international forums like BRICS, SCO etc. There seems

to be a dominant view among Chinese commentators that Western hegemonic forces are trying to draw a wedge between India and China and that China should be prepared for such an inevitable eventuality.

When asked about the use of the term “manage”, in the Chinese political discourse, the speaker responded that the term has been in use recently and was not part of the discourse in the past. This makes it important for countries like India to note and understand the meaning and implications when such a word is used. On the question if India was making a strategic mis-judgement by increasing its cooperation with the US, the speaker responded that phrase “strategic mis-judgement” and “strategic mis-calculation” has been used quite frequently by Chinese commentators, some even mentioning that India has been over-estimating itself and will deeply regret this decision.

This report was prepared by Sudarshan Gupta, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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