

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

India and China are the two ancient civilizations of the Asian continent. For a very long period of history, interaction between China and India had been absent or negligible due to geographical barriers in all directions. India, as a country, entered the Chinese world view after we exported Buddhism via the Silk route and several Chinese scholars came to India to study Buddhist philosophy and returned with Buddhist manuscripts.

In the modern times, both India and China gained independence from colonial rule almost simultaneously. The two Asian Giants with more than 1 billion population celebrated the 70th year of diplomatic relationship in 2020. However, this bilateral relation has been dotted with phases of cooperation, conflict & competition.

Touching upon the major flash points between the two countries briefly, this research paper focuses on the fact that since war (hard diplomacy) has the ugly possibility of Nuclear escalation and is impractical and undesirable given India's economic dependence on China, how Soft / Cultural Diplomacy can help deal with Xi's aggressive China. It will discuss how far Cultural Diplomacy—whether the informal summits at Wuhan and Mamallapuram, or Buddhism or Yoga or Bollywood have helped de-escalation at various points in time and how they may aid India's security concerns in the upcoming China led world order.

KEYWORDS: World Order, Territorial Sovereignty, BRI, RCEP, Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the ancient times, China and India had very limited interaction due to the impassability geographic barriers i.e. the Kunlun and Karakoram mountains in the North, the cold Tibet plateau in the east and the Indo Pacific ocean tract in the south. China has always been insular and inward looking considering itself as the Middle Kingdom, with little awareness and sparse respect for its neighbors. India entered the Chinese world view only after we exported our greatest cultural export of the times, 'Buddhism' to China, which is till date the most prevalent religion of the country. Physically, we have come to share boundaries with China only after it unethically occupied Tibet, which had been until now a good buffer state. (Saran 106)

Post independence, India became the first non communist democratic country to recognize the People's Republic of China and to establish diplomatic relations with it. 'Hindi Cheeni Bhai Bhai' became a cliché as India supported the Communist China's claim to the permanent seat at UNSC. (Arpi 2015) These actions were guided by the utopian world view of Indian high command, without understanding China's strategic culture and the ambiguous policy

responses of Mao and Deng towards India and its security concerns.

Then came upon India the 1962 war which was an eye opener for India. India was least prepared for the war- both militarily and psychologically. It was and continues to be a loss of massive piece of territory. The Aksai Chin which the Chinese administer under the Khotan province is an area of around 38000sq km, very close to the size of Switzerland. Not just that, it had been a cause of humiliation but also a dent to Indian psyche. It was a personal loss to Nehru. Here began the series of caution, conflict and confrontation with China. (Lintner 2018)

There have been skirmishes from time to time at various points at the border – Chushul, Depsang, Sikkim, Doklam etc. but they had been resolved without bloodshed. Further, China has restrained India's entry to UNSC Permanent Seat.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE RELATIONS

Political Relations

After Mao's Cultural Revolution 1966-76 to enforce communism, it became clear that the political ideologies of the two countries, are far from convergence, rather confrontational. India is famed for being open, secular, and democratic and with limited influence of state led socialism. With the opening up of economy in 1991, India has turned towards liberalization and privatization.

After the 1962 war, the political – diplomatic relations faced a severe blow. They were partly healed by the path breaking and metaphorically “wall breaking” visit to Beijing, of the then PM Sh. Rajiv Gandhi in December 1988, 34 years after the first PM Jawahar Lal Nehru. Bhabani Sen Gupta, in his biography of the PM quotes what Deng says – “Let us forget the past. There is much we can achieve together.” (Rajiv 2017)

In the past decade or so, the relations between India and China have diversified. During the visit of President Xi Jinping in 2014, the two sides defined their bilateral relations as Closer Development Partnership. 16 agreements were signed in varied sectors including trade, railways, space, pharmaceuticals etc. We also signed an MOU on Kailash Mansarovar Yatra via the Nathu La pass in Uttarakhand. The top leaders have conducted several meetings on the sidelines of multilateral forums like BRICS, SCO along with the popular informal summits at Wuhan and Mamallapuram (Chennai), which had a visible cultural angle. (PM 2018)

Economic Relations

India China trade relations have expanded considerably and exponentially, since the beginning of this century. China emerged as our largest trading partner in 2008 and continues to be so till present times. However, India was the 12th largest partner of China in 2018. Covid has led to a reduction of 13.1% from January to September 2020 as compared to 2019 data. (MEA)

Though flourishing bilateral trade is a matter to cherish, it is a matter of concern in case of India and China, due to the lopsided nature of this trade. India has a huge trade deficit with China. This can be attributed to the meager number and the low value of commodities we export to China like agricultural products, pharma products etc. On the other hand, we import expensive and value added goods machinery, telecom products, fertilizers etc. and services.

It is a matter of thought that Indian banks in China are closing down while on the other hand, Chinese investments in India have shot up pervasively, in sectors like infrastructure, automobiles, consumer goods, fintech, E-commerce etc. 18 out of 30 unicorns of India (High Cost startups) are heavily funded by Chinese investments. This includes household names like PayTM, Big Basket, Zomato, Swiggy, Byjus, Ola, Unacademy, OYO, Lenskart and many more.

As China raised its stake in the HDFC from 0.8 to 1.1 %, those in New Delhi were concerned about hostile takeovers from China. Also, FDI from countries sharing borders with India have been restricted. Post the Galwan Clashes, India banned 59 Chinese apps permanently, citing security reasons. (Bhounick 2021)

MAJOR FLASHPOINTS IN THE RECENT TIMES

1. The ambitious Belt and Road Initiative is a direct assault on India's territorial integrity and sovereignty as its CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) component passes through the PoK region. Despite India lodging protests at multiple forums, Chinese have not given any attention to our concerns. (Jaishankar 2021)
2. The recent clashes at Galwan was the first time in 45 years when everything except bullets were exchanged at LAC. The People's Army of China claimed the areas in the Pangong Tso and Depsang plains that have traditionally and without dispute been under India's sovereignty. They also mobilized large number of troops in the forward areas which was unwarranted. (Galwan 2022)
3. Chinese adventures in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean region, better known as its wolf warrior diplomacy are also a cause of concern as China builds its Strings of Pearls to encircle India in the ocean. This is also an attempt to overcome the Chinese Malaccan Dilemma, which is major choke point in the Indian Ocean Region. (Mudunuri 2020)
4. China is rigorously pursuing its debt trap diplomacy with India's neighbours. Chinese promise of infrastructure development in countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan are fraught with coercive tactics where payment failure amounts to loss of sovereignty and control over the asset. Hambantota port in Sri Lanka is a shining example. (Laxmi 2021)
5. Soon after the pandemic hit the world and India alike, it came to limelight how China had concealed relevant information whose timely broadcasting could have limited the impact of the virus. Chinese aggression acquired greater dimensions during the Covid as the Chinese Communist Party was losing legitimacy during the crisis and increasing HR violations. (Thousands 2021)
6. India has not joined the RCEP, the largest trading bloc of the region due to concerns of China dominating the group and devastating Indian market and investment culture. (Why 2020)

If not an adversary, one can with some confidence call this nation a challenge.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY WITH CHINA

What is culture?

Culture in the holistic sense means the way of life of the entire society. It includes code of manners, language, philosophy, religion, art, language, dress, food and what not.

What is diplomacy?

In the most simplistic sense, Diplomacy means the art of persuasion. It is the power of attraction rather power of coercion. Though the term has been in the political discussion since Gramsci's conception of Hegemony, it gained coinage with Joseph Nye's work Soft Power. (Nye, 2013)

Thus, Cultural Diplomacy entails the use and propulsion of culture or cultural tools like art, religion, festivals etc. to further our strategic / national interests. Origin may be traced to Joseph Nye's 'soft power'. America became America because of its popular culture. It built a huge narrative that USA is the most developed nation due to its liberal democratic culture. It has McDonald and it has Microsoft.

Why India must pursue Cultural Diplomacy?

We can safely assert that India is the cultural capital of the world. It is the land of Indus Valley Civilization. It is the birthplace of major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism. Other religions (minorities) like Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism have found safe havens in India when they were persecuted elsewhere. India is an ethnic hotspot as there are hundreds of tribes with their own language, custom, religion, festival and ways of life. India has given to the world the ethics of the Sanatana Dharma, the knowledge of the Vedas and the philosophy of Buddha and Gandhi. We have given to the world Yoga and Ayurveda. We have given to the world the Bhagwad Gita, the most translated text of all times.

Historically, India and China have had major cultural relations with Buddhism as the focal point. Born in India in 6th century, the philosophy and ideas of Buddhism became widespread. Chinese scholars like Fa Hein and Hieun Tsang came to India to study at Nalanda and took away thousands of Buddhist manuscripts with them.

Like Aurobindo Ghosh, who asserted that India has the 'Divine' spirit of the world, in his "New Lamps for the Old", Indian leaders have since independence recognized the utility as well as the intrinsic value of India's volley of cultural tools. The first Prime Minister of India Pt. Nehru established the ICCR right in 1950. Lots of cultural activities such as art exhibitions and film weeks have been held in each other's countries. In 1988, China and India signed the Cultural Cooperative Agreement. In 1992 and in 1994 respectively, China and India successively held large-scale art festivals in each other's country, and the cultural exchanges between the two countries reached a high tide. 2011 was the "China-India Exchange Year". Both sides held a series of people-to-people and cultural exchange activities, and signed a memorandum on joint compilation for the "Encyclopedia of India-China Cultural Contacts".

Chinese language learning is becoming a popular trend in India. Confucius Institutes and 3 Chinese language centers have been established in India. Some 20 universities offer Chinese courses, and 8 provide a major in Chinese studies. (Krishnan 2020)

However, the global political order today is in flux. The poles of power are shifting from the West (USA) to the East (China). China's tremendous rise with its revisionist ideology creates a Security Dilemma for India. And India's balancing gestures like Quad and Malabar Exercise are a

challenge to Chinese hegemony.

STRATEGIC REASONS TO PURSUE CULTURAL DIPLOMACY WITH CHINA

1. INCREASING MILITARY GAP –

India has the third highest defense expenditure in the world but China spends nearly 4 times more. Though the official figure of Chinese Military Budget is \$177 billion, actual figure may range up to \$ 260 Billion. (SIPRI)

Comparing manpower, China has 21,83,000 active personnel while India has only 14,44,000 men only. (Global Firepower)

In terms of arsenal, China has 3500 tanks, 33,000 armoured vehicles, 3800 self propelled artillery, 2650 rocket projectors. On the other hand, India has 4292 tanks, 8686 armoured vehicles, 235 self propelled artillery and 266 rocket projectors.

Chinese air fleet has 1232 fighter jets, 371 dedicated attack crafts, 281 attack helicopters. On the other hand India has 538 fighter jets, 172 dedicated attack crafts, 23 attack helicopters.

Chinese navy has 2 aircraft carriers, 36 destroyers, 220 patrol vehicles, 74 submarines. India, on the contrary, has 1 aircraft carrier, 10 destroyers, 139 patrol vehicles, 16 submarines.

On the nuclear front, China has 320 nuclear warheads whereas India has only 150. (SIPRI 2020 yearbook)

China has the strongest military force in the world while India stands at number four, according to a study by defense website Military Direct. The study says that "ultimate military strength index" is calculated after considering various factors including budgets, number of inactive and active military personnel, total air, sea, land and nuclear resources, average salaries, and weight of equipment. It is of strategic importance to note that China has the strongest military in the world, scoring 82 out of 100 points in the index.

2. INCREASING ECONOMIC GAP

Currently, the difference in China's growth rate and that of India is large. In nominal terms, Chinese GDP is at \$14.9 trillion while India is at \$2.6 trillion.

Expressed in comparable PPP terms, China is at \$24.2 trillion while India is at \$8.7 trillion. The latest GDP reports show that the U.S. economy fell by 2.3% in 2020, while China's grew by 2.3% amid the coronavirus pandemic.

In the recent times, with the coming of a rightist government in India, we are calling upon our cultural legacy to our aid in a rigorous way. With respect to China, these dimensions have been multifold:

1. **Bollywood** – Indian movies have been a rage in other parts of the world for decades. In 2017, Xi Jinping publically praised Aamir Khan starrer Dangal, which was also a commercial success across China. (Shaikh Void)

2. **Yoga** – In China, the 7th International day of Yoga 2021 was celebrated at Indian Embassy with great fervor. India's ambassador Vikram Misri spoke about the importance of Yoga especially in

time of Covid, a practice that unfolds the infinite potential of human mind and soul. Thousands of Yoga studios have sprung up all over China. Thus, Yoga has been a significant cultural export from India to China. (Rajamohan 2015)

3. Mamallapuram Summit - Many articles including pottery have been found in Mamallapuram and the neighbouring areas showing close trade relation with the Chinese. There is the story of a Tamil prince who is revered in China by millions as Bodhidharma. Chinese texts place him in direction chain beginning from Gautam Buddha. Bodhidharma travelled to China apparently as a messenger of Buddhism. Ahead of the Modi-Xi meet, a statue of Buddha had been installed near the Shore temple in Mamallapuram to highlight the cultural relations between India and China. (Narsimhan 2019)

4. People-to-People Exchanges - China and India have held 2 rounds of meetings of China-India High-Level People-to-People and Cultural Exchanges Mechanism. The contest of the "Chinese Bridge" Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign Secondary School Students (Indian) has been held for 12 sessions. Moreover, people to people contacts have increased in the business fraternity.

CONCLUSION

With clear data on China's unparalleled military and economic strength in the current scenario, it is prudent for Indian policy makers to go for Cultural Diplomacy, where India may have a show of strength. (Katju 2021) This is also prudent as this may help India to build friendly relations with our countries so as to attain Balance of Power with our neighbor. India's waiver from the NSG is the epitome of how India's ethics and cultural values can further our strategic aims. This view has also been echoed by Dr. Shashi Tharoor in his book 'PaxIndica'. (Tharoor 2013) After the Covid pandemic, and the Galwan clashes amidst this crisis, there is a feeling of contempt towards China's aggressive policy decisions. Similarly, USA's retreat and comparative decline in power has turned the world's eyes towards India to reinforce rules based world order. India's philosophy of Vasudhaiva Katumbakam is an ideal to pursue and culture, the overarching mesh of humanity is the possible way ahead given the limitations of coercive and monetary diplomacy.

The relevance of soft power has been proven in history. We build superpowers based on culture or cultural narrative—whether it was Europe's white man's burden or USA's pop culture, and now India's narrative of being the Vishwaguru, the cultural superpower. We need to learn from the adversary itself - Deng said, "Hide strength and bide time". That will be smart power, a combination of hard and soft power.

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- QUAD is the group of 4 diamond democracies in Indo Pacific i.e. India, Japan, Australia, USA against Chinese aggression. They conduct the joint military exercise called MALABAR.
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