

Sino-Indian strategic competition in the Indian Ocean region

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Indian Air Force Sukhoi Su-30MKI Flanker H.

THE strategic relationship between India and China, and its resulting manifestations in the Indian Ocean region are the subject of considerable strategic interest to Australia. Competitive strategic behaviour by both of these nascent regional superpowers will inevitably impact Australia's strategic position in the region by altering the regional balance of power and forcing adaptive behaviours and responses by smaller regional nations.

The political and strategic relationship between India and China, the world's two most populous nations, is complex and convoluted, and historically spans millennia although the period of most relevance is the most recent, following India's partition and independence from Britain, and the forming of the Communist led People's Republic of China. Both nation states appeared as independent entities at the same time as the West and Soviet Bloc drifted into four bitter decades of Cold War. The Cold War, with its intensively competitive selling of allegiance or alignment by developing nations, either to the Western Alliance or the Soviet Bloc, has strongly coloured Western public and media perceptions of the mutual relationships that existed and now exist between India and

China. Both nations tend to be portrayed in terms of alignment with outside forces, whereas their mutual relationship has tended to actually evolve along lines of direct bilateral mutual agreement or disagreement, with the latter dominating. The fundamental reality is that both China and India have acted and will continue to act in a manner driven by national self interest, wherever this may lead. That is apparent from even the most superficial study of recent history.

THE GEO-STRATEGIC EQUATION

China's growing dependency upon imported fossil fuels sourced in the Persian Gulf and Africa, as well as dependency upon raw material imports from Africa, make China critically dependent upon freedom of navigation through the Indian Ocean. Any nation in the position to constrict, interdict or indeed control the Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC) through the Indian Ocean can put China into a precarious position, by starving its economy of energy and to a lesser extent, other raw materials. China's large investment in the construction of deep water port facilities in Burma and Pakistan is motivated in part by the lower cost of shipping between the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean ports, but also by the ease with which the Straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok could be closed to shipping.



China's growing inventory of Ground Launched Cruise Missiles provides a capability which India has yet to counter.



China's first aircraft carrier, rebuilt from the former Russian Varyag, is now undergoing sea trials.



left: China's new turboprop powered H-6K Badger can carry up to seven Tomahawk-class cruise missiles.



far left: China is developing a range of specialised ISR capabilities, including this Shaanxi Y-8GX4 electronic intelligence platform.

The nation best placed geographically to shut down China's Indian Ocean SLOCs is India, whether it employs its air force, navy or both. Given that the relationship between China and India has been poor, and often described as acrimonious for most of the past half century, China's geo-strategic exposure to India's advantageous geographical position is a major strategic weakness.

By the same token, China's strategic need to have secure access to Indian Ocean ports has resulted in heavy Chinese involvement in Pakistan, India's principal adversary since 1947, and in Burma. This amounts to, from an Indian geo-strategic perspective, a semi-circular geo-strategic envelopment by China, as any conflict between China and India could see India fighting concurrently on three fronts – Eastern, Northern and Western.

India's position is a geo-strategic situation analogous to Britain's position as 'gatekeeper' of the SLOCs into the North Sea, Baltic Sea and Mediterranean during the two World Wars, an advantage exploited heavily, to the detriment of the continental powers of Europe.

China's advantage in much larger land forces than those deployed by India would be of limited utility in any conflict between these nations, due to the natural barrier formed by the Himalayas and their rugged and impassable foothills. There is no Fulda Gap available as a corridor for Chinese land forces to roll into India, or vice versa. The narrow ravines and mountainous, often heavily forested, terrain along the disputed Sino-Indian borders present as excellent defensive terrain for both sides' land forces.

China's best play in a high intensity conflict with India is no different to Germany's play in the two world wars, which is blockade and interdiction of India's SLOCs – as India, like China, is heavily dependent on imported energy supplies. This in turn means forward basing for anti-shipping aircraft and submarines. Supplementary bombardment of Indian military and economic targets using aircraft, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles would accelerate the collapse resulting from a successful blockade.

Any future conflict between China and India would be dominated by air/missile power and naval power. The experience of South East Asia Command during the 1940s, fighting the Japanese in Burma, Southern China, and South East Asia is illustrative, as is the United States / Australian experience two decades later in Vietnam.

One important difference against previous conflicts is China's Second Artillery Corps, equipped with a large inventory of highly mobile Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles, especially the terminally guided DF-21C/D variants, and more recently, Ground Launched Cruise Missiles like the CJ-10 series.



China's J-20 and India's FGFA based on the PAK-FA represent important advances in Asian air power.

This would provide China with a robust capability to disrupt Indian air and naval operations with IRBM and GLCM bombardment of basing. India lacks a corresponding capability on that scale, and also lacks the SAM/ABM capability to deal with this regime of attack. The intensive 1990s negotiation with Russia over the potent S-300V/VM / SA-12/23 SAM/ABM did not result in a procurement.

Another advantage held by China is that its key population centres and economic assets are mostly well out of the reach of the Indian Air Force, but the converse is true, for Chinese air basing in Tibet and accessible basing in Burma and Pakistan. In this respect India suffers the same 'strategic depth' problem Britain confronted in dealing with Germany during the two world wars. British and later American bombers would have to fight their way through deep air defences to reach targets in Germany, and fight their way out. German bombers operating from forward basing along the European coastline could, if not stopped by air defences, easily range across Britain.

China's force structure planning over the past two decades has been well aligned with the needs of a high intensity conflict to be fought against India. China's highly deployable IADS components could be readily moved into position to cover basing in Pakistan, Burma and Tibet. China's investment in a large fleet of Xian H-6 anti-shipping strike aircraft provides a robust capability to interdict shipping, out to 2,000 nautical miles using the turbofan H-6K. The Su-30MKK Flanker G and J-16 Sino-Flanker provide a robust strike capability, expected to be supplemented by the stealthy J-20. China's expanding fleet of nuclear and diesel-electric submarines could be used to good effect. The principal weakness in the Chinese force structure is an inadequate long range ASW capability, and long lines of resupply to Indian Ocean forward basing, vulnerable to interdiction.

India's force structure planning is not as well aligned with the needs of a high intensity conflict with China. The investment in 200+ Su-30MKI Flanker H aircraft, and planned procurement of 200+ FGFA T-50 PAK-FA variants are a good fit. The Il-78 Midas tanker fleet is a good fit but insufficient in numbers, as are the A-50I AWACS, and the P-8I Poseidon. The investment in new submarines is an excellent fit, less so is the investment in carrier aviation.

A key weakness in the Indian Orbat is the absence of long range SAM/ABM capability, which is curious given the past history involved. While many of India's investments are clearly intended to balance Chinese capabilities, many are not, and may



well be the result of a political and ideological preoccupation with Pakistan. It is not clear that India's planners fully understand the strategic ramifications of China's recent planning choices. For the foreseeable future, China will hold the upper hand in this strategic play.

CURRENT DISPUTES BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA

There can be little doubt given a wide range of public statements and publications that the basic relationship between India and China continues to be dominated by mistrust, and to an extent, what has been described as "strategic rivalry" over the position of which nation will be the dominant nascent power in Asia.

A central theme of ongoing disagreement is China's close relationship with Pakistan, which itself has remained at odds with India since partition. China's ongoing provision of military equipment, military and economic aid, and other assistance to Pakistan is not appreciated by India.

The recent entry of Chinese construction workers and protective troops into the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Northern Pakistan, itself part of the ongoing territorial dispute between China and India, has exacerbated this disagreement.

China's heavy involvement in the development of a large deep water port and shipping terminal in the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar in Balochistan, at the



India's deployment of the Il-78 Midas tanker to support its Su-30MKI fleet is an important advance, but numbers of these aircraft are insufficient to confer significant strategic weight.



India's replacement of Soviet era LRMP aircraft with state-of-the-art Boeing P-8I Poseidon aircraft is a well considered strategic choice for India.



The supersonic Brahmos is an Indian evolution of the Russian Yakhont cruise missile, and will be manufactured in ground, sea and air launched variants.



China recently supplied four CETC ZDK-03 Airborne Early Warning and Control systems to Pakistan, carried on Shaanxi Y-8 airframes. The systems compares closely to the C-130 AEW&C offered to Australia for the Wedgetail program a decade ago.

westernmost extremity of Pakistan's territory, has been interpreted as a likely future basing facility for PLA-N surface warships, and thus a military as well as economic play.

India continues to provide asylum to the Tibetan Dalai-Lama and over 100,000 Tibetan refugees, which remains a source of great unhappiness in Beijing. Tibet, like Taiwan, consumes disproportionate attention in the thinking of the Beijing leadership, and this is in turn reflected in foreign policy.

China's construction of the series of large dual use or military airfields across the Tibetan plateau has been a source of reciprocal unhappiness in India, as it puts key population centres and economic assets in Northern India within easy reach of Chinese tactical fighters based in Tibet, while as noted earlier, China's key economic and population centres are well outside the reach of Indian bombers.

Another important emerging source of disagreement is Beijing's interest in damming key rivers in the Himalayas to provide for increased water and electricity supplies in Western provinces of the PRC, to facilitate rapid development. As many of these rivers flow into Indian territory, diversion of water flows would result in significant damage to India's agriculture and thus economy.

Africa remains an important market and source of raw materials for both Indian and Chinese industries, and both nations have been actively competing in propagating their influence in Africa.



India's effort to develop the Agni series of ballistic missiles was a direct response to Pakistan's Hatf/Shahen series of ballistic missiles, derived from existing Chinese ballistic missile designs.

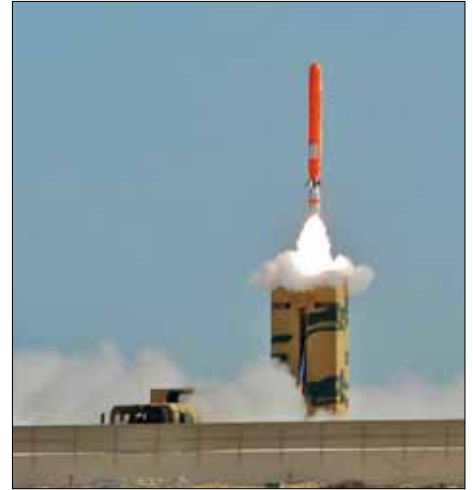
Burma remains another source of disagreement, with China's construction of a deepwater port, oil/gas terminal on Ma Dan Island, adjacent to Kyaukpya in Rakhine, and dual pipeline to China, often interpreted as a likely prelude to future PLA basing in Burma.

PAKISTAN

China continues to be Pakistan's principal supplier of military hardware and technical advice, and has played a major role in the development of a range of key Pakistani weapons systems, including the Babur cruise missile and Pakistan's ballistic missiles. Recent sales to Pakistan include the JF-17 Thunder tactical fighter and a range of guided bombs, the SD-10 Sino-AMRAAM, four CETC ZDK-03 AWACS on Shaanxi Y-8 turboprop airframes, and the modern HQ-9 SAM system, based on the Russian S-300PMU1 Gargoyle A.

Pakistan has a dense and well developed network of airbases, but these are mostly situated along the shared border with India. The principal airbase situated on the southern coast is PAF Masroor near Karachi. The chain of airfields along the Indian Ocean coast, comprising PAF Jiwani, PAF Pasni, PAF Ormara and Gwadar Airport are all FOBs with short runways and unsuitable for the basing of large tactical or LRMP aircraft for anti-shipping tasks.

Were China to seek a robust basing capability for larger aircraft in Pakistan, significant expansion of Pakistan's southern airbases would be required. Media reports in May 2011 indicated that Pakistan had requested that China construct a naval base at Gwadar, in a quid-pro-quo deal permitting PLA Navy assets to operate from Gwadar. Satellite imagery of the Gwadar deep water port development shows no evidence at this time of the specialised infrastructure required for forward basing of large surface warships or submarines.



Pakistan's Babur GLCM and Ra'ad ALCM were both developed with Chinese assistance.

BURMA

The dysfunctional military regime in Myanmar (Burma) is best known in the Western world for persistent human rights abuses, and a long running counter insurgency campaign in the northern provinces against several ethnic minorities. Less well known is the regime's long history of playing India and China, and more recently ASEAN, against each other in exchange for aid or favourable export arrangements for Burma's mineral and other products.

Given Burma's strategic importance to China, in providing access to the Indian Ocean, China has been especially generous in the provision of military and economic aid to the regime.

The best publicised development in Burma is the construction of a large scale oil terminal on Ma Dan Island, adjacent to Kyaukpya in Rakhine, the construction of a colocated gas terminal for trans-shipment of natural gas from Burma's Shwe offshore gasfields, and a high capacity dual pipeline across Burma into Southern China. The intent behind this installation is for supertankers to dock at the terminal, and offload crude which is then pumped to Kunming in China, concurrently with natural gas. The stated capacity is 20 million tonnes of crude annually. China is also constructing an 810 km railroad, which follows the pipeline, ostensibly to promote economic growth and support the pipeline installation.

Numerous observers have noted that the colocated pipeline and railroad would permit China to rapidly deploy PLA assets into Burma to protect the deep-water port and pipeline, if either or both were threatened.

While the Chinese-built railroad and pipeline can be easily explained as civilian infrastructure, what is less easily explained is a series of Chinese constructed military airfield upgrades across Burma. The Burmese air force comprises a

collection of mostly obsolete aircraft, the best of which are two squadrons of Russian surplus MiG-29 Fulcrums. Prior to China's intervention, Burma's airfield infrastructure comprised mostly former RAF and USAAC bases constructed during the 1940s, with runways of 5,000 – 6,000 ft length, many unsealed. Burma now hosts four military airfields with 11,000 ft or longer sealed runways, at Mingalodon AB, Shante AB, Nampong AB, and Namsang AB, with ostensibly civilian 11,000 ft runways constructed at Mandalay International, and Dawei International, the latter 130 nautical miles from Bangkok.

China's large scale investment in Burma is both a blessing and curse. While the terminal and pipeline installation will yield a significant economic payoff, and the basing infrastructure would provide an important forward capability for operations into the Indian Ocean region, Burma is not an entirely stable nation, and significant PLA assets would need to be deployed into Burma to protect the energy infrastructure from air attack in times of conflict. Whether Burma can be considered a reliable ally for China is an open question, given its growing engagement with ASEAN and the waning power of the military junta.

HISTORY - THE EVOLVING SINO-INDIAN RELATIONSHIP

The roots of most current sources of dispute between India and China lie in the distant, and more recent, past and are crucial to understanding the current largely dysfunctional relationship.

The 1950s were a period during which India and China enjoyed mostly good relations, despite the invasion of Tibet by Mao's regime in 1950, and its subsequent annexation as a province of the PRC. During this period Indian foreign policy was centred in the non-aligned nations movement, while China was deeply immersed in a close relationship with Khrushchov's Soviet regime. China soon after became a major participant in the Korean War fought against Western forces under a UN mandate.

The relationship between China and India began to unravel following the brutally suppressed 1959 Tibetan uprising, following which India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama and his followers. A series of lethal border incidents followed.

China and India share two sections of border in the rugged foothills of the Himalayas, the Western

area being in the North of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, adjacent to Pakistan, and the Eastern area in the North of the State of Assam, adjacent to Burma. The Indian position has been that all territory South of the Himalayas has historically been part of India, while the Chinese position is that it has been administratively and culturally part of Tibet and thus belongs to China. The original Johnson and McMahon lines, negotiated by the British, became the subject of this dispute.

In October 1962 the PLA launched a major offensive, crossing both disputed borders in strength. The Indians responded, and the conflict continued until November. The result was that Indian and Chinese troops finally withdrew to a series of positions along what is now known as the 'Line of Actual Control', or LoAC, formalised in the 1990s Bilateral Peace and Tranquility Accords. Neither nation appears to regard the LoAC as an acceptable compromise.

The 1960s brought deeper shifts in foreign policy by both India and China. The relationship between China and the Soviets unravelled by the late 1950s, and became toxic during the 1960s. India invaded and annexed Portuguese Goa in 1961, and fought wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, the latter resulting in East Pakistan becoming the new state of Bangladesh. India aligned closely with the Soviets during the 1970s, sourcing most military equipment from the SovBloc and providing basing access for Soviet warships, seriously damaging relations with the United States.

Following the 1962 Sino-Indian war, China formed

a close relationship with Pakistan, which persists a half century later. China has not only been a primary weapons and aid supplier to Pakistan, but has also been a provider of technical expertise supporting Pakistan's various indigenous weapons programs. China, following intensive border conflict with the Soviets in 1969, reconciled with the United States following the 1972 Nixon presidential visit, and aligned with the West against the Soviet Bloc. The fall of the Soviet regime and end of the Cold War saw further changes in policy. China immediately reconciled with Russia, and as early as 1992 was negotiating large scale procurement of advanced Russian weapons, especially fighters, submarines, surface warships and Surface Air Missile batteries, and licencing key technologies. This for all intents and purposes was the start of the "creeping arms race" in Asia. China's relationship with the West was strained over the Tianamen Square events, and India's relationship strained over nuclear weapons. India subsequently responded to Chinese procurements with a series of tit-for-tat buys of fighter aircraft, warships and guided weapons, including the licenced production of the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile. At this time there is no evidence that the strategic relationship between China and India will change for the better in the foreseeable future.

Further Reading:

Sino-Indian Relations, Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 64, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2011, School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University.



above: China has provided aid generously to both Pakistan and Myanmar. The now obsolete Q-5 Fantan was exported in large numbers as such.



left: The deepwater port at Gwadar was constructed by China, and will be expanded into a military base. Image by Patrick Fischer.