

Containing China

G. Parthasarathy
The Tribune (Chandigarh)
November 5, 2015

PAKISTAN recently announced that it had finalised a deal for acquiring eight submarines from China, with four of them being built in Karachi. It currently has five French-designed Agosta submarines. This Pakistan-China deal is meant to more than double Pakistan's submarine fleet. It follows a deal to acquire four Chinese frigates. It is no secret that as a result of Chinese assistance, Pakistan now possesses plutonium-based, miniaturised tactical nuclear weapons, enabling it to develop "full spectrum" nuclear capabilities against India. Likewise, Pakistan's missile programme, capable of targeting population centres across India, is almost entirely based on Chinese designs and technology. The JF 17 fighter, which is the main workhorse of the PAF, is a replica of the Russian MiG 29, reverse engineered by China.

Pakistan has served as the primary instrument of Chinese policies to contain and surround India. Beijing has not hesitated to use Pakistan internationally, to thwart Indian ambitions regionally and globally. It has backed Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in the UN, by opposing and delaying moves in the UN to place international sanctions on Pakistan-based terrorist groups and individuals. China has also repeatedly thwarted attempts for India to get permanent membership of the UN Security Council and membership of international non-proliferation groupings like the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It remained hostile to Indian efforts to widen its regional ties with ASEAN. It blocked moves by India for membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), insisting on Pakistan's simultaneous admission. It will use Pakistan's simultaneous admission, to undermine India, within the SCO.

China has been hyperactive in cultivating India's South Asian neighbours. The intention is to get these neighbours to embarrass and isolate India, by insisting that Beijing should be admitted to SAARC, as a full member. Liberal offers for arms supplies to SAARC countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have been periodically made. More ominously, China is making a concerted effort to develop strong lobbies in political parties in countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka, while discreetly "facilitating" individual politicians and parties. Eyebrows have been raised at the number of senior Chinese officials, including foreign minister Wang Yi, who visited Nepal, in the months preceding the adoption of the new constitution, by the Constituent Assembly. Notice has also been taken of Chinese links with some of their "fraternal" contacts, in sections of their Maoist brethren in Kathmandu.

Chinese diplomatic efforts are not always successful, despite the economic assistance and "goodies" offered. Project loans offered by China are often not as "concessional" as they made out. The Colombo Port City Project, which was enthusiastically welcomed by the Rajapakse dispensation, was soon found to be a white elephant. In Myanmar, a number of projects, including pipelines, copper mines and hydroelectric power, have been put on hold, or rejected. Moreover, the Mandarins in Beijing and Yunnan have behaved crudely, by permitting armed ethnic groups to operate across the Sino-Myanmar border in the Shan and Kachin states. Likewise, in neighbouring Bangladesh, the Chinese are finding that some of their proposals for investments in port and power facilities may well be rejected, as Japan has stepped in with far more attractive offers for port development, power plants and an energy terminal.

India and others face challenges from an increasingly assertive China, now prepared to use force, to reinforce its maritime territorial claims coercively. China is rapidly strengthening its navy and expanding its naval presence across the Indian Ocean. Its aggressive behaviour in enforcing its exaggerated maritime

territorial claims, has led to differences with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia. Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines are taking proactive measures to counter Chinese unilateralism. Manila has challenged Chinese maritime claims in the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea. It has also joined Vietnam and Japan in bolstering defence capabilities by cooperation with the US. Even Russia is strengthening Vietnamese defence capabilities. Indonesia's President Joko Widodo is embarking on an ambitious programme of naval expansion.

Beijing's naval power across the Indian Ocean is being steadily augmented, with a Chinese nuclear-powered attack submarine being spotted in the Indian Ocean last year. Using the excuse of participating in anti-piracy operations, China has moved into the Gulf of Aden. It has sought berthing facilities in Aden, Djibouti and Seychelles. It has obtained exclusive rights for mineral exploration in 10,000 sqm in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi was caught by surprise when President Rajapakse allowed a Chinese submarine to berth in Colombo where he was proposing to lease land to China, twice last year.

While Pakistan and China claim an eternal friendship "deeper than the oceans and higher than the heavens", the experience of countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar has shown that working discreetly, India can and should balance and even roll back Chinese influence, across its Indian Ocean neighbourhood. The growth of Chinese power has caused concerns not only in western capitals, but also in regional countries like Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. There is, therefore, need for India to work for a broad consensus across what is now called the "Indo-Pacific" region, extending from the western Pacific to the south-western Indian Ocean to challenge Chinese "assertiveness" on territorial and other issues.

Balancing Chinese military power is even more complex, as it involves building up our own defence and defence production capabilities. We are now regularly holding joint military exercise with the US and Japan. Our maritime ties are expanding with littoral countries, ranging from Australia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Seychelles, to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Indonesian President Joko Widodo has recently spoken of strengthening his country's naval potential in the wake of maritime boundary issues with China.

India will now have to strategically fashion a "string of pearls", extending from across the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, together with both littoral and non-littoral powers, if Chinese power is to be balanced and contained. We will have to shed earlier inhibitions, by significantly expanding defence ties with Vietnam. If China supplies missiles, frigates and submarines to Pakistan, India should not be inhibited from supplying weapons and equipment like cruise missiles to Vietnam. Cooperation with and containment of China should reciprocally go hand in hand.

Source: <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/containing-china/154642.html>