



POLITICS BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA: CHINESE RESISTANCE TO INDIAN NUCLEAR IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT:

India has been the focus of analysis whenever nuclear identities are studied. Not only has it seen different stages from an outlier to a responsible state but has also managed to carve a different position for itself in the holier than thou nuclear club. This was despite the imposing nuclear norms. While it detonated the first device in 1974, it was the 1998 tests that brought India into the lime light. China being the only nuclear power in Asia till then, felt the dynamics change suddenly. Although the world have to accept India's nuclear identity China took its time and proved that nuclear possession made the transition for any state from a third world country to a major player in the world power play. This study looks at the Chinese hesitation in accepting that identity of India in spite of its close ties with Pakistan and strong rhetorical support for nuclear norms. In order to examine the complex relationship and balance between identity creation and acceptance in foreign policy decision making and the role conception seen as an extension of this dynamics, this article will examine the example of the relations between India and China post 1998. In the process I look at two aspects of identity acceptance- one by India accepting China as the 'enemy' that disturbed the 'rapprochement', and the other acceptance of India by China as the 'potential ally'. The two instances changed the entire dynamics of the relationship between the two states.

KEYWORDS : focus of analysis , nuclear identities , lime light.

INTRODUCTION

The domain of foreign policy and the decision making process involved in it is often regarded as being driven by a heavy state centric dynamics moulded by systemic variables. It is however insufficient to confine the decisions taken to mere power centric and interest driven rationalities and overlook the presence of other factors like the cultural baggage, the economic parameters and identity constructions and acceptance. While the power is a major factor and capabilities do matter, there is an important notion of 'identity' that exists in the relations between two states.

The great power status can be seen as embodying three criteria: the material one of relative capability and two perpetual ones declaratory in nature- self declared status and status as recognised by the others. While the self constructed identity is important and needs the support of the material capability to a large extent, it is the recognition or the acceptance of the 'other' that is much more important in the improvement or deterioration in the relationship between two states.

IDENTITY AND ITS COMPLEXITIES

Identities are a complex phenomenon in itself. It is one of those aspects that have two sides which are governed and framed by different agents. Identity of any person, state or even belief has two aspects- one is the construction and the other is the acceptance. While at the personal level, one tends to struggle everyday for mere recognition if not acceptance, the state of affairs at the state level is no different. The

states which are the power holders, the 'unitary', 'rational' actors too struggle in their foreign policy decisions to ensure the acceptance of the identities that they create with their capabilities.

Samuel Huntington (1999) says that any identity of 'self' can only be defined in relation to an 'other'. It is quite true. Infact, the notion of identity would become hegemonic if the one projected by the 'self' completely converged with the one projected by the 'other'. It is the difference between the idea of identity perceived by the two that leads to conflicts and even alliances. The inter-state relations are not just dependent on mere distribution of capabilities or the possession of power.

Whenever any individual or state adopts a new identity, there is a long process that covers a wide spectrum from the negative to positive, from a huge gap between identity created and accepted to an absolute convergence of the two. Cronin (1999) divides these phases into hostility (Other as anti self) that gives way to rivalry (Other as competitor), indifference, cohesion (some sense of common good and group identity) and altruism (willingness to sacrifice Self for Others) to symbiosis (shared core identity dissolves Self- Other distinction) . In order to understand this social process, a pre-requisite is to overcome the temptation to regard states as similar functioning entities.

Kaabro brings out how the identity issues are often "foreign policy-ized" (Kaabro 2003) when identity is conveniently linked to other factors and understood as a result of every other aspect *sans* the social construction. It is essential to understand, that not just interests but even the environments and actors penetrate, influence and shape each other that results into a foreign policy decision. For the neo-realists, the rationale and motivations behind the social structure too is confined to security and survival due to the high preference given to political-military gains and that too the relative gains. The neo-liberals see the importance of absolute gains and the motivations are a mixture of several aspects but the assumption is that self interest leads to cooperation. It is however essential to understand neither the security, nor the cooperation nor any feature is permanent in the realm of international politics. New identities are created and recreated and the interstate societies get evolved.

It is however too simplistic to assume that the relationship between identity, defined role conceptions and interests is a linear one. The role conceptions can be defined as "the image of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment" (Holsti 1987). There were several attempts made by the international community as well as the actors to categorise role conceptions and their sources. The identity of those actors plays an important role in all stages.

India denoted its first nuclear device on 18th May 1974 (Perkovish 1999: 178). The Indian identity changed with that itself. Suddenly it was seen as possessing suspicious intentions. Its decision to refraining from signing the NPT was an additional factor in demeaning its position. But with the 1998 tests, it proved there was no looking back. That changed the whole relationship between the Indian self perceived identity with the one accepted by the international community. It also changed India's role conception as well as interests of the others actors of the world. It was the newly found nuclear identity of India that changed all these factors suddenly. The next section will look at how that change in identity affected the relationship between India and China.

INDIAN NUCLEAR TESTS OF 1998 – THE CHANGE IN IDENTITY

In order to understand the complexities of the relationship between the two civilization states, we need to understand the historical ties to some extent. Under the era of colonialism, India was the colony and China the semi colony. The major common grievances that brought the two states together were the struggle against imperialism and the anti-colonial sentiments (Deshingkar 2005: 50). China needed India as an "important pillar of an anti-imperialist united front" (Deshingkar 2005: 49). However, soon things changed as the colonial era ended and the two neighbours entered the new world with freedom and huge potentials and yet different status. While China very soon got the recognition as a power, India remained in the line for a much longer time to be taken as a serious candidate for some position in the international politics.

In order to limit the discussion with respect to the historical aspect, a brief touching of major issues would bring out the variations in the relations between the two states. The 1962 war proved to be a blunder of Nehru's optimism and China was seen as the aggressor by the Indians (Verma 2012). The 1962 debacle became a sour wound and a lesson too for the Indian leadership. The anti-Chinese literature and threat of the expansionist China doing the rounds in the public opinion on the one hand and the tearing apart of the Nehruvian "pan-Asianism" in the foreign policy on the other were the highlights of the relationship. The relationships remained tensed for quite some time owing to the historical experiences, the 1965 war in which China sided with Pakistan, the increasing intensity of the Sino-Pak ties, the rise in Indian suspicions towards the alliance of the two neighbours and to top it all the assistance that China provided to Pakistan in terms of arms and technology that came in the form of transfer of 200 T-59 tanks, 120 Mig 19's and free arms for 2 Infantry divisions. China suddenly became the "protector" for Pakistan and provided it with nuclear weapons technology, economic aid and conventional arms (Tellis 2017). Swaran Singh describes the India-China relationship by means of ten T's. They are:

traditional legacies; territorial sovereignty; Tibet's past, present and future; temporary knee-jerk initiatives; technology transfers to Pakistan; three border skirmishes; three treaties for tranquility in border regions; Taiwan syndrome about unification; trade as emerging new link and finally India and China's trust-with-destiny approach towards competing for an Asian and larger leadership role. (Singh 2008:86)

All these played important roles at different points in time and have led to the current status. While the 1960s were full of tensed situation, and the Indian nuclear test in 1974 received a conspicuous silence from China which could be because the nuclear capability was not overtly declared (Ganguly 1999), the late 1970s were the times of increasing ties between the two neighbours. From 1978, the two states witnessed the phase of Rapprochement. This period was characterised by efforts to improve the sour relationships and it continued till the Pokhran-II tests conducted by India in 1998. The phase saw delinkage of issues and "freeze and move" policy which basically aimed at avoiding stagnations and long lasting frictions in the relationship. The Chinese spoke of non-intervention in intra-South Asian disputes and it seemed to be the end of the blind support to Pakistan. But still China followed its policy which was also known as the "strategic encirclement" which was carried out by the Zhou Enlai's visits to the South Asian countries (Garver 2001). The phase witnessed the 1986 Sumdorong Chu incident that got suppressed, Operation Chequeboard, and there were concerns about another Sino-Indian war (Liu 1994: 146). Although the tension seemed volatile, Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China led to de-escalation of the issue and discussions on the border were upgraded with the mechanism of the Joint Working Groups (JWG) comprising officials, cartographers, legal experts and scholars and historians (Liu 1994). The progress was gradual and incremental with an increase in high-level meetings at regular intervals from both sides and a thrust was sought to be given to trade and commerce. Two major agreements in 1993 and 1996 (when the Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited the subcontinent) on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control and on confidence building Measures in the Border Regions helped to impart a substantial measure of stability and positive impetus to the process of normalisation (Acharya 1999).

Though there were certain areas of friction in the form of Sino-Pakistan's entente cordial, the Vietnam war, the rise of BJP in power in India, the major blow to the Rapprochement were the nuclear blasts carried out by India in Pokhran on 11th and 13th May 1998. The blasts announced the beginning of the nuclear era for India and came as a rude shock to China. The post 1998 era was a time of major downswing for the relations for about a year (Acharya 1999). While the nuclear status of India itself was an issue for China, the problem increased when Vajpayee's letter to Clinton "leaked". In the letter Vajpayee justified the tests by blaming China for the insecurity in the region. The letter called China the sole reason behind the nuclear decision of India and enemy number one (Burns 1998). What followed was China's complete ignorance of India's nuclear weapon status in order to maintain the difference in status (Kondapalli 1998).

The relationship between China and India has been complex with Pakistan always lurking in the background. But with the 1998 blasts, that relationship saw a different twist altogether. China demanded a

justification for being projected as the justification for Indian decision of testing the nuclear weapons (Ganguly 1999). In addition to this, there was one more aspect. China was also disturbed by the fact that India had accepted the world as a uni-polar one with United States as the super power. China in an official statement on 14th May 1998, blamed India using China as a “gratuitous accusation” to develop nuclear weapons (Ganguly 1999):

China demanded an explanation and made all the efforts to “roll back” the Indian nuclear capability through the United Nations Security Council Resolution no 1172, which addressed the necessity of de-escalating the tension, built up by the nuclear tests and to analyse the nuclear threats in South Asia (Sinha 2007). China imposed immense pressure on India to sign the NPT. For about a year after the India nuclear tests, no substantial diplomatic exchanges took place. This was the phase when China had refrained from acknowledging the nuclear status of India (Kondapalli 1998). Everything was attempted to malign the Indian nuclear identity.

The re-engagement began with India President K R Narayanan’s visit to China in 2000 (Ram 2000). The opening of Nathula pass, Jelepala pass were major breakthroughs. The efforts continued with the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao pushing for increased Sino-Indian cooperation in 2005. While all these continued China still refuses to support India on issues like the membership in the Security Council and Nuclear Suppliers Group. The identity that India portrayed was not accepted or supported by China completely. That led to some major hurdles in the Indian strive to emerge as a global power. While politically the stance was absolutely cordial, the economic relationship between the two states was kept away from any turmoil. If we look at the figures, trade was officially resumed between the two states in 1978 and both countries signed a trade agreement – the Most Favored Nation Agreement in 1984 (Ministry of External Affairs 2005). From a mere US\$ 339 million in 1992, trade levels rose to US\$ 8 billion by 2003. In 2004, India became China’s 11th largest trade partner and the largest in South Asia when trade levels climbed up to US\$ 13.6 billion, representing an increase of 79.1% over the previous year (Tellis 2001). Along with the economic factors, the change in the Indian perception within the international community was a factor in loosening China up. 2002 saw the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visiting India. In 2003 the Indian Prime Minister A B Vajpayee visited China and the visit resulted in appointment of Special Representatives from both the countries to explore options to resolve the territorial dispute from a political perspective (Acharya 1999).

In all these attempts, there were two identities being questioned. One was the nuclear identity of India that China had been adamant in defaming. The other identity at stake was the Chinese one which India slandered in justifying its 1998 tests. The momentum in the relation hardly had anything to do with the nuclear capability of India. Chinese nuclear capabilities have always eclipsed the Indian capabilities. But the attack on the Chinese identity was a big blow to its international image. Yet the relations between the two states remained delinked with the economic aspect. The economic potential of India was never undermined.

Very briefly, it was only during the period of strong political polemics of the initial period of India’s nuclear tests that saw some economic interaction being cancelled or postponed and Indian exports suffering a visible setback during the first three or four months (Singh 2005). In 1998—the year of India’s nuclear tests—India’s share of China’s international trade actually increased to 0.59% from 0.56% for 1997 (Singh 2005). India’s nuclear tests and other political rhetoric have had only a limited impact on China-India bilateral trade. The return of Hong Kong to China strengthened the China link of India’s business community, many of whom have lived and thrived in Hong Kong for over one hundred years. It is especially this economic engagement between their non-state sectors that has now begun to provide steam to the China-India political rapprochement, promising to gradually emerge as an important force in moulding the nature and magnitude of China-India trade relations (Acharya 1999).

They are several intrinsic aspects to it. If we look at other states, the norm has been that economic sanctions are imposed on the states that go nuclear in order to suppress the nuclear proliferation. Iran is a classic example of that. However, China chose a different path towards India. The reason is that China chose to acknowledge the economic identity of an emerging market though it might have taken its time to accept

the nuclear one. Both states with their combined efforts and in spite of their withstanding issues have upheld their economic intentions. There are various circumstances in which it is difficult to clinically distinguish and delineate interests from ideational beliefs. This scenario is one of them.

China has cracked open the concept of identity and differentiated between the political from economic. While the economic aspect has been smooth politically, it still opposes India's membership in the Security Council or the Nuclear Suppliers Group. China does not want to strengthen India's nuclear identity. That has always been the case.

CONCLUSION

Identities are difficult to understand since they are not just a single strand but a number of factors intertwined with each other. Identity is often seen as a creation of elites. While that may be true at the individual level, at the international level, identities are the ways to attain goals, utilize role conceptions, satisfy interests and then redefine the identities. Identities for Barry Buzan play into international relations in two basic ways: by coexistence and by hierarchy (Buzan 2004). The way we look at India and China, while the first step was to establish hierarchy, eventually China had to accept India's newly found identity and then accepted co-existence as the way out.

Self conception and conception of others are both very important for a state to survive and flourish. While it was easier in the bilateral relationship, it is much more difficult to identify 'who matter' as the others or rather who confer recognition and acceptance. When we talk about the links between the capabilities and the identity there have been examples like Sweden and Spain who got the status of a 'great power' just 'out of courtesy' (Buzan 2004: 63).

India and China have worked hard to maintain the status quo, peace and tranquility. The two states have been through Cronin's division of phases into hostility (Other as anti self) that gives way to rivalry (Other as competitor), indifference, cohesion (some sense of common good and group identity) and altruism (willingness to sacrifice Self for Others) to symbiosis (shared core identity dissolves Self- Other distinction) and has emerged in a unique way (Cronin 1999).

In a world where the dominant discourse is state centric and interest driven, it is difficult to bring out the psychological identity of a state and how that works within the policy making. Yet, every state has a psychology, whether of dictatorship or democracy. It stands out and brings a belief system of its own and acknowledges others according to its perception. As a result the identities are created and destroyed and that is what leads to the instability in the world scenario. Whether the identity is of polarity or of the third world trade union leader, it is not the ranking but the acceptance that matters. It is impossible to simplify the working of foreign policy decision makers.

The relations between India and China have been through several ups and downs. Both the states have had to face their set of domestic turmoil. Both have a common connection – Pakistan. Pakistan has often determined the fate of China's policy towards India whether it was the nuclear tests or the refusal to declare the Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar as a UN designated terrorist. In fact China has often raised issues about the exceptionalism India enjoys and has often tried to undermine that. The crux of the issue is to contain the power of the Indian identity as a regional hegemon, as a nuclear giant and as a nuclear capable neighbour.

To conclude, identities are extremely important in international relations whether they are economic or political. They are all socially created but unless the created identity is accepted by the 'other', they stay incomplete.

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