

COVID-19 and India-China Equations: Examining their Interface in the Indian Ocean Region

SWARAN SINGH

School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University
drswaransingh@gmail.com

Abstract

The last two decades have seen the spread of diseases that frequently trigger transnational crises. None of these, however, have inflicted a global ruination and fear like COVID-19. Its onset threatened to reset human life, including interstate relations. This health crisis triggered deep economic recession, led to widespread unemployment, accentuated social tensions and political polarization, and helped reshape geopolitical alignments worldwide. In this crisis, the world's largest nations, China and India—together home to more than a third of humanity—had a special responsibility. Their effectiveness in combatting COVID-19 at home and in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) was contingent upon their bilateral equations, which had seen irritants and even multiple violent face-offs in the midst of pandemic. The pandemic has not just carried implications for their success or failure at home and abroad but has also become a test case of their mutual, decades-long trust-building efforts and resultant subtle synergies. In face of their different development levels and trajectories and their varying efficacy of their strategies in redressing COVID-19, this pandemic both germinated and showcased strengths of their expanded mutual stakes. This article uses complex interdependence theory to assess how, in midst of the pandemic and border tensions, India and China have managed to come to a modus vivendi. It first outlines a few novel trends that showcase

their coordination in providing COVID-19 assistance among IOR nations. It briefly discusses each country's response to the health crisis, its impact on India-China equations, and examines their interface in the IOR to identify sinews of cooperation in midst of confrontations and crisis. It elucidates how prompt and 'parallel' India-China assistance in IOR's fight against Covid-19 revealed signs of expanded interdependence and an improved coordination that can enable them to mitigate and manage their future conflicts.

Keywords

COVID-19, China-India, Indian Ocean, mutual mistrust, border

In the first two decades of this century, the repeated transnational spread of disease—HIV/AIDS, Zika, Ebola, Avian flu, H1N1, MERS, bird flu, SARS and now COVID-19—has forced a rethink on almost everything, including international relations. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further demolished the sanctity of national boundaries or of higher levels of development; it has even cast doubt on connotations of 'power' or 'security' that define the very axis of international relations discourse. None of history's challenges were as global as the coronavirus pandemic, be it the Spanish flu, Great Depression, or the two World Wars. The health crisis has affected 216 countries and epidemiologists continue to uncover its mutations, their virulence, and the speed of viral transmission. Questions also abound about the potency of various vaccines. Together, these have strained human life and livelihoods and has accelerated the reshaping of international relations.

Among these changes, the contrast in the pandemic experience of China and India can become a game changer. Both are the largest and second-largest nations, respectively, accounting for more than a third of global population. As the planet's second and sixth-largest economies, they also account for a fifth of the world's economy. Going beyond blame-fixing, this article elucidates how COVID-19 has impacted India-China equations and how their success or failure carries implications for their peripheral regions or even for the larger global geopolitics. Examining

their ever-expanding maritime interface of the Indo-Pacific, specifically in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), highlights their parallel, coordinated contributions to the regional fight against the pandemic. In the end, it seeks to understand this development using complex interdependence theory, and to highlight how a few pandemic-driven positive signs in their problematic bilateral ties can be emblematic of their future trajectories.

This article begins by taking the pandemic as the inflection point in China-India relations, exploring if history has any lessons to furnish our understanding of these linkages. The second section examines the impact of the ongoing health crisis on regional geopolitics that is shaping and is being shaped by India-China interactions. The third section surveys the pre-pandemic relations of both states; they held two informal summits in 2018 and 2019 that showcase a newfound bonhomie before slipping into serious border tensions in 2020. The fourth section elucidates how divergent views of India and China on Indo-Pacific did not preclude both states from providing COVID-19-related relief to nations in the IOR. For a change, this did not see them undercutting each other's initiatives. Did this entail increased coordination in this new theatre of their cooperation and competition? Was it a serious rethink on both sides on how intensely 'interdependent' they have come to be, with China staying as the largest trading partner of India and, in 2020, with India chairing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and leading Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) where China wields decisive influence? Finally, it examines if Complex Interdependence theory aptly explains Beijing-New Delhi coordination amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a partnership that can help them sustain and even enhance bilateral ties.

Changing Geopolitical Context

While it may be too early to assess the long-term geopolitical impact of COVID-19, today's unprecedented connectivity and flow of information presents a novel framework to do so. The pandemic has already triggered debates on 'reset' among large nations like China and India, two major stakeholders in post-pandemic initiatives. The impact of the virus on

global healthcare, economy and politics has been evident through economic deceleration, rising unemployment, and increase in acute poverty, all of which have accentuated social tensions and political polarization. The pandemic has also pushed back the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). What has been especially stunning is how even developed nations proved unable to manage this health crisis. The Western industrial and political model, premised on the pursuit of “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness,” has been undermined. The skepticism rose when President Trump disowned global leadership, serving notice of the US’s withdrawal from World Health Organization (WHO). It was the sixth global institution or arrangements that the US left under his administration.

In contrast, China was seen to have advanced itself into global leadership. Beijing has claimed to have eliminated extreme poverty by the end of 2020—a full ten years before SDG target of 2030. China was the first to be hit by COVID-19, but it was also the least affected and the first to recover from it. This brought the country enormous advantages in restarting production lines, but it also helped provide a hundred nations with critical medical supplies and assistance at a relatively short notice.

The *World Economic Outlook 2020* of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast that the global economy would shrink by as much as 3 percent in 2020, while emerging Asia was projected to grow only by 1 percent. In 2020, India’s economy dipped by 23 percent and that of the US economy by 3.5 percent, but China attained a positive growth of 2.3 percent. Even American experts predicted that, “China is likely to emerge from the recession caused by pandemic faster than other nations” (Wong & Swanson, 2020). This was bound to redefine India-China relations.

However, if a China-led Asia is to rekindle global growth, then Beijing and New Delhi must avoid working on cross-purposes. The fall-out from precisely such as situation took place in early 2020, when both states saw the increasing frequency and intensity of their border face-offs. China’s rise—coinciding with the collapse of Soviet Union with the relative decline of the US—also saw President Trump unleashing anti-China tirades and urging other countries to join him. India has sought to

balance Beijing and Washington, but faces increasing pressure to choose between these two sides. Even as the past decade has seen New Delhi inching closer to the US, much to the annoyance of Beijing. In addition to their defense partnership, India's trade with the US is equal to its trade with China. The former remains in India's favor, but the latter suffers a formidable trade deficit that benefits Beijing. Also, unlike India's strategic partnership with the US, New Delhi's ties with Beijing remain uniquely problematic, saddled with historical baggage and the world's largest disputed borders. But the COVID-19 presented a historic opportunity for both states to recast their bilateral ties.

COVID-19 and the Indo-Pacific

Prima facie, the COVID-19 has further intensified the prognosis of the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the center of global geopolitics woven around US-China strategic competition. This has increased the chances of regional powers like China and India to minimize and 'manage' bilateral difficulties. Even in the face of their continued trust-deficit, their potential to mold Indo-Pacific geopolitics cannot be underestimated. China's unprecedented rise has been a trigger for the US drift to conjoin the two large oceans as one seamless Indo-Pacific. What is intriguing is that in the US-led Indo-Pacific discourse, Beijing remains an outlier, even the target of its new strategies (Singh, 2018, p. 132). Meanwhile, China has become the largest exporting nation, the biggest consumer of goods, an influential investor in strategic infrastructure-building (Heydarian, 2020, p. 2), and the biggest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). Also, the COVID-19 pandemic has further reduced US dominance over China's economy that stood at \$15.5 trillion for 2020 (Global Times, 2021).

The US and its allies' strategy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) remains suspect in Beijing, which sees the FOIP as an attempt to contain China's expanding regional footprint. The FOIP can be traced to President Obama's 'rebalancing' and 'pivot' to Asia, which was driven by the US's desire to replicate, in the Indo-Pacific, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) security architecture—one that sustained

American leadership after World War II. In 2007, Washington, along with its allies Japan and Australia, and later India—on the grounds of being four democracies—started the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Though the Quad became dysfunctional soon after its first meeting, it was revived a decade later in 2017. It has since picked up momentum involving frequent meetings, including its first foreign ministers' meeting in New York in September 2019. Australia joined the US, India, and Japan for naval exercises in Malabar in November 2020. The first Quad Leaders summit was held in March 2021.

For its part, India's interest in the Quad or the Indo-Pacific has been guided primarily by its preoccupations in the IOR, where China's increasing naval presence has caused serious concerns in New Delhi (Gupta, 2021), as has the onset of COVID-19 and violent China-India face-offs since early 2020. Other than the US, Japan, and Australia, New Delhi has recently strengthened its strategic partnership with France, which has various island territories in the Indian Ocean that houses 1.5 million citizens; it has also granted Paris access to over nine million square kilometers of India's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Laskar, 2019). In May 2019, New Delhi held its first Indian Ocean naval exercise with Paris, which controls the Reunion and Mayotte Islands and the uninhabited islands of Kerguelen, the Crozet Archipelago and St. Paul and Amsterdam where France keeps scientific crews and even military personnel on a rotation basis.

India's extended neighborhood has been another impetus for its engagement with the Indo-Pacific. In a speech at the June 2018 Shangri La Dialogue, Prime Minister Modi articulated his country's approach to the Indo-Pacific; it is premised on its "inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality" that remains critical, as "India does not see the Indo-Pacific as a strategy or as a club of limited members" that "seeks to dominate" or emerges as "directed against any country" (Laskar, 2019). India has since repeatedly advocated for China to become an integral part of the Indo-Pacific and even incorporated this agenda in its Annual Maritime Dialogue with Beijing. This dialogue was expected to redress India's concerns on China's presence in the IOR and to elevate their navies'

coordination and cooperation on joint anti-piracy operations, which have been in place since 2007 (Fuzuo, 2020, p. 81). This explains why, in spite of recent tensions, both states continue to agree that no single power should monopolize the security and development architecture of the region.

China-India Equations in Indian Ocean

Most of China and India's foreign trade, especially energy imports, sail through the Indian Ocean. This has prompted both states to expand partnerships with IOR nations and showcase their niche strengths and complementarities. Beijing has focused on mega turn-key projects and physical infrastructure whereas New Delhi has underlined historical, ethnic, cultural linguistic connections and education and training links while also investing in infrastructure development. Though China, a relatively new player in the IOR, has triggered some anxieties among Indian policy makers, this did not hinder their engagement in refurbishing and building ports that were eventually called the 'string of pearls' and 'string of flowers,' respectively (Unnithan, 2015). China has built new ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and Kyaukphyu (Myanmar) and established a naval base in Djibouti in North Africa in 2017.

India likewise has obtained access and refurbished contracts at ports in Sabang (Indonesia), Agalega and Assumption Islands (in Mauritius and Seychelles), Duqm (Oman), and Chabahar in Iran (Kumaraswamy & Quamar, 2020, p. 147). India's 'string of flowers' and China's 'string of pearls' are, however, different from the naval bases of the US and its European allies; New Delhi distinguishes its engagement with the IOR. Engagement between China and India presents a new model of mutual accommodation although, given their mutual skepticism, this often falls prey to their memories of Cold War divides. Both, for example, have become increasingly conscious of each other's anxieties. When Prime Minister Modi launched his Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision in March 2015, the visit to Beijing in April 2015 signaled

China's readiness to link its Maritime Silk Route with India's 'Mausam' project that seeks to revive India's cultural and maritime connect with the IOR littoral using monsoon patterns (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2021). This was China's way of addressing New Delhi's concerns by highlighting potential 'common benefits' (Tremblay & Ashok, 2017, p. 132). India has also been adjusting to its expanding asymmetry with China, and projecting its unique strategic location at the very center of the IOR.

Other than China and India, most of the IOR nations fighting COVID-19 also contributed to the fine-tuning of Beijing's and New Delhi's 'parallel' contributions to the region's fight against the pandemic. India's neighbors like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles, with notable numbers of infections, had their unique responses. While Mauritius and Sri Lanka began by declaring a complete lockdown, Seychelles asked people to stay at home after working hours, and in February 2020, selectively cancelled the arrival of over 2,300 tourists with little alternative sources for its revenues (Senaratne, 2020). These varying responses to COVID-19 created the IOR nations' own opportunities for parallel engagement with China and India. These new contours of IOR geopolitics were *prima facie* noticeable in how, in spite of their violent face-off on their disputed border in 2020, both New Delhi and Beijing did not view each other's relief efforts across the IOR as a zero-sum game, thereby introducing a positive effect of providing parallel support without igniting mutual suspicions.

India's Expanding Outreach in the IOR

China has enormously expanded its engagement with the IOR. But comparisons between Chinese and Indian influence in the region based on simple 'bean-counting' often miss the nuanced nature of New Delhi's organic connectivity. Other than emphasizing India's unique geological and social links with IOR nations, the Indian Navy has learnt lessons from the tsunami of December 2004 and developed operational capacities for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR). These

have become focus areas for India's naval exercises, naval operations, and infrastructure-building. Early in his first term in office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi prioritized the IOR, visiting Mauritius and the Seychelles to launch his vision of SAGAR. This March 2015 initiative has since guided India's interactions with her neighbors. Often, New Delhi has been the first one to reach them in times of crisis.

In addition to its listening post on Madagascar, India has built other strategic facilities, including those on Agalega islands in Mauritius and Assumption Island in Seychelles (Unnithan, 2015). Prime Minister Modi's visits to these littoral states emphasize India's historical, cultural and diaspora links. In 2018, India and the Seychelles signed an agreement for the joint development of a coast guard facility, as well as the construction of an air strip on Assumption Island. Likewise, in spite of American pressures, New Delhi has continued the development of Chabahar port in Iran; it also received access to the Sabang port in Indonesia and obtained resupply access at Australia's Keeling Islands (Lintner, 2019, p. 78).

Trends in India's maritime engagement in the IOR since the 2004 tsunami refute the rhetoric about China-India confrontation by showcasing sinews of subtle synergies built over a period of time. Both New Delhi and Beijing remain engaged in pursuing and expanding their influence, and this has seen them adopting far more nuanced strategies comprising simultaneously elements of coordination, cooperation, and contestation, which all form part of their mosaic relationship that is managed on regular basis. In this respect, India's assistance in the IOR reflects its piecemeal drift from pursuing 'power' to seeking 'influence' by strengthening its search-and-rescue skills and HADR strategies and by using naval exercises and naval diplomacy to strengthen partnerships.

What Explains India's Policy Drift

In the wake of COVID-19, the first proactive step by New Delhi was not just to evacuate Indian citizens from Wuhan—where the coronavirus originated—but also to repatriate from the city the citizens of Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, South Africa, and Madagascar. All evacuees

were quarantined inside India before sending them to their respective countries.

The second step was to treat COVID-19 as a shared crisis and to connect with regional leaders. India took the initiative, convening a virtual summit with the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), followed by that with G20 leaders. India proposed the SAARC Emergency Fund and initially pledged \$10 million, with other nations also making contributions. Prime Minister Modi had virtual summits with the Australian Prime Minister, and New Delhi evacuated over 6,000 Australians stranded in India's nation-wide lockdown (Bhattacharjee, 2020).

Third, India took the lead in supplying necessary materials to IOR nations, such as Mauritius and the Seychelles, which requested and received the equipment through special Air India charters (Dixit, 2020). These shipments carried life-saving treatment drugs, including millions of paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) tablets that were endorsed by the World Health Organization (Marjani, 2020). As part of India's SAGAR vision, similar dispatches were made to 25 African nations (Choudhury, 2020a). In this respect, New Delhi lived up to its reputation as the 'pharmacy of the world;' it produces majority of the world's HCQ tablets, which are an anti-malarial drug but are also used to treat autoimmune disorders like arthritis and lupus.

Fourth, COVID-19 helped India ease irritants in its ties with Islamic nations like Iran, Malaysia, and Turkey. New Delhi and Tehran cooperated in the former's efforts to evacuate Indian citizens from the latter. President Hassan Rouhani thanked India for medical supplies and for the support of Tehran's initiatives to cope with US sanctions that had crippled its fight against the virus. India, having bumper crops and enormous food stocks, supplied food-grains, and sent wheat to Afghanistan via the Chabahar port in Iran. It also supplied HCQ drugs to Malaysia, and the Indian ship INS Shardul was the first to reach Madagascar with 600 tons of rice on March 10, 2020. This was a follow-up to an earlier delivery by the INS Airavat that brought relief materials on 30 January in the aftermath of Cyclone Diane earlier that month (Choudhury, 2020b).

No doubt, New Delhi's increasing engagement with the Indo-Pacific has been partly influenced by Beijing's expanding footprint, but New Delhi did not present its efforts as a contest with those of Beijing. India has become increasingly aware of its economic asymmetry with China's rapidly growing economy and military leverages. To redress this asymmetry, New Delhi has sought not to confront Beijing but to strengthen its historic, cultural, ethnic and linguistic, and inter-societal ties with the IOR. India has echoed Western nations' discourse of "debt-traps" that result from the commercial unviability of China's BRI projects in the IOR. For its part, Beijing interprets India's IOR initiatives as efforts to balance Chinese forays into the region.

China's Expanding Presence in the IOR

China's economic rise since the 1990s coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. It was followed by growing exports and expanding energy imports via the Indian Ocean, which transformed Beijing's maritime priorities. That strategy has since shifted, from Admiral Liu Huaqing's 1988 thesis of surpassing the three 'island chains' and expanding naval outreach into the Pacific Ocean to holding scientific surveys and anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean (Yang, 2013, p. 134; Khalid, 2015, p. 79). China's maritime outlook is driven primarily by its economic interest; that in turn necessitates the security of sea lanes that has gradually guided Beijing's naval modernization. For one long-time observer of India-China relations, the "Chinese made their first calls into Indian Ocean ports in the mid-1980s" but "China's naval capacities now surpass India's both quantitatively and qualitatively" (Grare, 2017, p. 34). Indeed, Chinese engagement with the IOR is evident from expanded trade and investments to infrastructure-building including strategic ports in various IOR nations.

The first to be hit by, but also the first to control, COVID-19, Beijing had the great advantage of restarting its production lines that helped generate necessary supplies and assist several nations in the region. For instance, on March 21, 2020, Rwandan President Paul Kagame

tweeted his profuse gratitude to Jack Ma for his “generous donation” of diagnostic test kits (Sharma, 2020). Beijing was also the first to host a videoconference with nearly 300 officials and health specialists from the Africa’s Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Twenty-four African nations connected with Chinese experts who shared their best practices in controlling the spread of COVID-19 (Sharma, 2020). These examples showed how the pandemic boosted Chinese advantages, which were assiduously built over a period of time.

As with India, the December 2004 tsunami had also seen China’s maritime focus shifting to HADR. This also coincided with the rise of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Malacca Straits. Since 2008, Beijing has constantly expanded and justified its anti-piracy operations in the name of security and freedom of navigation for its energy imports. Recent years have seen China raise its capacities, some of which were outlined in the US consulting firm Booz & Allen’s 2005 report on *Energy Futures of Asia*, which also popularized the term “string of pearls.” Ten years later, in its 2015 *White Paper on National Defense*, Beijing formally changed its maritime approach from defense of the ‘near seas’ to the protection of the ‘far sea’ (Desai, 2020). This explains China’s leverages in fighting COVID-19 in the IOR and how has pandemic further reinforced India’s perceptions about a persistent (and indeed increasing) asymmetry in Chinese and Indian engagement with the IOR.

India’s Perceptions of China’s Presence in the IOR

According to the Indian Navy’s Information Management and Analysis Centre in Gurgaon near New Delhi, over 600 Chinese fishing boats have been annually spotted in the IOR since 2015. The boats are counted based on the signals emitted by the vessels’ Automatic Identification Systems (Gurung, 2020). Chinese fishing boats find a more ‘lucrative’ catch in Africa’s east coast and the central Indian Ocean than in the South China Sea. The number of Chinese scientific vessels has also increased, inciting suspicions that they are surveying areas for deep sea mining or studying the characteristics of the water, useful for the movement of Chinese

submarines. The last two decades have also witnessed Chinese ships moving gradually from simple port calls, to training cruises, anti-piracy operations, search-and-rescue missions, and underwater operations. Since 2013 and 2014, at least two *Shang*-class nuclear submarines have been deployed in the IOR (Azam, 2020, p. 14). But this activity can be seen as part of Beijing's overall (not necessarily India-centric) expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

In the wake of COVID-19, this expanding PLAN footprint facilitated China's lead in supporting the IOR. Also, in early 2020, India, Maldives, Comoros, Seychelles, and several others received China's medical supplies at a relatively short notice. Of course, India had also sent 15 tons of healthcare materials to Wuhan mid-January 2020 when COVID-19 was at its peak in China. But the persistent asymmetry in their mutual equations, and Beijing's COVID-19-related assistance undeniably sowed some mistrust in New Delhi. Such sentiments have been nursed by a one-sided trade and investment deficit, by the greater number of visits by Prime Minister Modi to China than President Xi's trips to India, by New Delhi's silence on Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Nuclear Suppliers Group, and by President Trump's blame-fixing on China. Yet India's leaders have reckoned with the asymmetry with China and have been exploring new complementarities which underline that New Delhi is no longer competing with Beijing but is seeking to protect its interests by focusing on its own niche advantages and highlighting its exceptionalism compared to China.

Building on Chinese anti-piracy naval operations in 2008, New Delhi has also brought in bigger assets like destroyers and conventional and nuclear submarines into IOR waters. Since 2017, China's naval facility in Djibouti has also transformed the dynamic of its infrastructure-building at Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Kyaukphyu (Myanmar), signaling Beijing's new vision and wherewithal. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed global shipping to its lowest levels in history, and the International Maritime Bureau reported zero hijacking in the Gulf of Aden from March to April 2020. Even so, in early May

2020, China dispatched the 690 personnel-strong 35th Task Force of PLAN to carry out anti-piracy patrols in the IOR region (Sputnik, 2020).

In mid-April 2020, the Indian Navy spotted a dozen Chinese Underwater Unmanned Vehicle, *Haiyi* (Sea Wing), in the eastern Indian Ocean, purportedly for scientific research for deep-sea mining. In a public statement, the Indian Navy said that, in spite of the nationwide lockdown to address the COVID-19 pandemic, its Eastern Naval Command's Dornier squadron continued with maritime surveillance missions. They added that their other naval assets remain "mission-ready and prepared for immediate deployment should the need arise" (Lintner, 2020). Before spotting *Haiyi* underwater drones, Indian naval warships also encountered another Chinese research vessel, the *Shivan-1*, operating inside India's EEZ in the Andaman Islands. But the *Shivan-1* retreated and explained its breach.

Even in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic and rising border tensions, China and India have coordinated and managed the simmering undercurrents in their bilateral ties. At any given time, four to five Chinese research vessels are usually seen mapping different parts of the Indian Ocean. China's nuclear-powered submarines, Type-93, have been spotted sailing through the Malacca Strait into the Indian Ocean (Lintner, 2020). Likewise, its *Haiyi* UUVs can run for months without refueling and, in times of conflict, facilitate submarine movement by intercepting and destroying underwater mines and by sending real-time data to their mother ship, *Xiangyanghong-06*. This is not to say that India has not expanded its own naval capabilities. But what is significant is that New Delhi has not allowed these tensions to derail their interactions. Also, given that China so far does not pose any existential challenge for India, New Delhi has continued to focus on soft-balancing strategies (Zhen & Paul, 2020, p. 24). This has seen both states' increasingly emphasis on shared and expanded responsibilities, and on exploring avenues for better cooperation and coordination to minimize mutual anxieties—a trend that was partly strengthened as they provided parallel support to scores of affected IOR nations.

India-China Fighting COVID-19 in the IOR

In the wake of COVID-19, both China and India were to be two major sources of supplies and best practices in the IOR's fight against the pandemic. More significantly, what became noticeable was that unlike in the past, neither India nor China undercut each other's regional efforts and engagement in COVID-19 pandemic initiatives. India as the world's third largest producer of pharmaceuticals saw the WHO endorsing its paracetamol and HCQ tablets as suggested treatment for the virus; and India supplied these to over fifty-five countries, including those in the IOR. For example, India was first to reach out to Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman, providing medical teams and HCQ, while China did the heavy lifting in Iran, which was the region's worst affected country in the pandemic (Aneja, 2020). By mid-March 2020, Beijing had supplied Tehran with 350,000 diagnostic test kits, 24,000 masks, 130,000 isolation gowns, and 120 medical ventilators and aspirators.

This shared responsibility revealed interesting new developments in China-India synergy, at least during the pandemic. These include the umbilical link between India's pharmaceutical sector and China's role as a supplier of the former's active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) or raw materials. China's APIs accounted for up to 90 percent in some cases of India's antibiotics production, and about two-thirds of overall pharmaceuticals production (Pandey, 2020). Even for the country's most in-demand HCQ tablets, Indian laboratories—Zydus, Microlabs, Cipla and Wallece—depended on APIs from China (Balachauhan, 2020). These large supplies of Chinese APIs make India especially attractive to developing and least-developed nations of the IOR. According to a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, in terms of its volumes, India's pharmaceutical industry stood as the third largest in the world and thirteenth in terms of its value (Madan, 2019). In education, the eve on the eve of the pandemic, over 23,000 Indians were studying in China, 21,000 of whom were studying medicine (PTI, 2021). This has expanded mutual consciousness of shared medical traditions

and triggering explorations of new branding and integration (Islam, 2017, p. 167).

Future of India and China's 'Complex Interdependence'

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977, 1987) did pioneering work with their Theory of Complex Interdependence, which explains how expanded mutual stakes amongst states create conditions that mitigate and manage their conflicts. Three main factors define this complex interdependence: multiple channels of interactions, absence of clearly defined hierarchies of issues, and the relatively minor role of armed forces (Keohane & Nye 1977, pp. 27–28). India-China relations meet all three conditions. In the wake of COVID-19 and border tensions, their interactions and ministerial and military meetings that resulted in limited military disengagement helped ease border tensions. There has also been a gradual shift from narrow bilateral channels to regional and global multilateral forums that also benefit bilateral interactions (Singh, 2011, p. 156). Finally, both China and India in 2020 are led by powerful and ambitious elected leaders who opt for the relatively minor role of armed forces in determining mutual perceptions and policies.

Indeed, expanding India-China bilateral trade has been the most reliable and agreeable pillar of their rapprochement since the 1990s (Singh, 2005, p. 23). Their bilateral trade for first five months of 2021 (compared to same period for 2020) grew by an unprecedented 70 percent (Patranobis, 2021). India in 2020 did ban over a hundred Chinese apps and barred Chinese companies from bidding in state-run projects. However, major business associations voiced concerns, which led India's Department for Promotion of Industry and Trade to announce relaxations and allow Indian companies with robust technology transfer agreements with Chinese companies to bid for government projects (Rathee, 2021). What made this complex interdependence also effective was that in early 2020, China successfully controlled the spread of the virus. India managed to keep its infection-rate low for much of that year, but faced a quick sharp spike in its second wave in early 2021. Most

glaring was the failure of the US and many of its European allies to goad India into joining their broad anti-China rhetoric. The delayed impact of the pandemic and the existence of complex interdependence enabled New Delhi to withstand pressures against China-India synergy, especially in their regional fight against COVID-19.

Certainly, India did drift towards the US in 2020, yet New Delhi did not burn bridges with Beijing. In terms of complex interdependence, this showcased the strength of their trust-building initiatives that had been built so assiduously since the 1990s. Expressing this confidence on March 25, 2020, China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his Indian counterpart, S. Jaishankar, that Beijing was ready to enhance cooperation with New Delhi to "safeguard the global and regional public health security" and help manage the emerging post-COVID-19 new normal (Aneja, 2020). Wang Yi reiterated the same sentiment during the BRICS Foreign Ministers Meeting on June 1, 2021 and in their SCO a month later. Therefore, what the COVID-19 experience established is that complex interdependence between India and China enabled them to not just manage and mitigate their mutual conflict but also calibrate a simultaneous parallel participation in the IOR's fight against the virus.

Keohane and Nye (1977, pp. 10–11) also underline how an "asymmetry in dependence" can influence the parties' "bargaining over an issue" and how it remains subject to domestic politics. In this respect, India clearly appreciated its increasing asymmetry with China, thereby securing their synergies. Of course, varying trajectories of the health crisis also enabled them to emerge as the leading first responders providing assistance across the IOR, building on their earlier response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake. Increasingly, both have displayed a certain equanimity with regards to their regional interface. In Nepal's fight against COVID-19, while China provided protection gear and reagents for testing, India supplied HCQ and other medicines (Aneja, 2020). The same was true for Sri Lanka, where India was the first to send a plane load of medical supplies while China provided \$500 million worth of concessional loan to help Colombo tide over its financial difficulties. The unfolding of future challenges will of course continue to test this

hypothesis about their subtle synergies and whether these early positive signs hold true for better management of their future conflicts.

Conclusion

India-China's parallel efforts to fight COVID-19 in the IOR reflected the strength of their synergy, which was undergirded by their expanded economic interdependence and political pragmatism. Those in turn, resulted in shared strategies for redressing various bilateral, regional, and global challenges. And their complex interdependence has enabled them to soft-balance their mutual mistrust. Indeed, both sides have carefully calibrated and coordinated to maximize their contestations, including in the IOR, which has emerged as the new theatre of China's increasing naval presence. Undoubtedly, Beijing's increased naval presence in the region has made New Delhi anxious yet both states showed their appreciation of critical shared stakes that have helped them manage tensions. Their 2017 joint anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden remains perhaps the most apt example of this shade of expanded coordination between their navies.

Their parallel contributions in the IOR's fight the COVID-19 pandemic foregrounded their novel critical connect in the pharmaceutical sector—where China's APIs continue to underwrite India as the pharmacy of the world. In view of much-anticipated global health challenges, the China-India linkage can emerge as, and exemplify, a strong pillar of complex interdependence. As civilizational states, both countries view such interdependence beyond economic or material indices; their foreign policy discourses remain grounded in the frame of shared humanity. COVID-19 has reinforced their mutual need to focus on their inordinate regional responsibilities, not on historic bilateral irritants. In the face of expanding connectivity and interdependence of humanity, this shared sense of challenges bodes well for synergies at other levels which, in turn, can help manage their conflicts better in the future.

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