



DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

VOL. 9 NO. 3

ISSN 2347 - 3703

APRIL-JUNE 2020

- The Dragon Spews Fire, Once Again
Harish Masand
- Xi Jinping Moves to Reassert Control and Advance
‘Two Centenaries’ Agenda
Jayadeva Ranade
- Impact of COVID-19 on Russia-China Relations
Carl Jaison
- Understanding North Korea’s Zero COVID-19
Cases Narrative: An Analysis from the recent Media Reporting
Hina Pandey
- COVID-19 Pandemic Promotes China’s Health Silk Road!
Anu Sharma
- COVID-19 and Its Fallout in Afghanistan
Saurav Sarkar
- Confronting the Threat: Central Asia and COVID-19
Poonam Mann
- India and Bhutan Economic Relations
Sushmita Bharti
- Flying Peace over Bosnia:
The Role of Airpower in an Intervention
Chetan Rana

Book Review

DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

VOL. 9 NO. 3 • APRIL-JUNE 2020



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

VISION

To be an independent **centre of excellence on national security** contributing informed and considered research and analyses on relevant issues.

MISSION

To encourage independent and informed research and analyses on issues of relevance to national security and to create a pool of domain experts to provide considered inputs to decision-makers. Also, to foster informed public debate and opinion on relevant issues and to engage with other think-tanks and stakeholders within India and abroad to provide an Indian perspective.



DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

New Delhi

DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY is published quarterly by the Forum for National Security Studies for Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

Board of Trustees

Shri **MK Rasgotra**, former Foreign Secretary

Chairman

Dr **Sanjaya Baru**, Secretary General FICCI, Honorary Senior Fellow,
Centre for Policy Research, Former Editor in Chief, *Business Standard*, former Media Adviser to PM
Air Chief Marshal **SP Tyagi** PVSM AVSM VM (Retd), Former Chief of the Air Staff

Members

Air Marshal **Bharat Kumar** PVSM AVSM (Retd)

Air Marshal **KK Nohwar** PVSM VM (Retd), Former Vice Chief of the Air Staff

Shri **NN Vohra**, former Governor J&K, former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister,
former Defence Secretary, former Home Secretary

Air Marshal **RKS Bhadauria** PVSM AVSM VM ADC (Ex-Officio) Vice Chief of the Air Staff

Secretary Defence (Finance), Ministry of Defence (Ex-officio)

Captain **Ajay Singh**, Senior Vice President - Regulatory Compliance, **Member and Managing Trustee**
Jet Airways (I) Pvt Ltd., former Chief Flight Operations Inspector, DGCA and former Deputy Director
Air Defence, Air HQ

DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY Journal welcomes research articles on defence, military affairs and strategy (especially air power and space issues) of contemporary and historical interest. Articles in the Journal reflect the views and conclusions of the authors and not necessarily the opinions or policy of the Centre or any other institution.

Editor-in-Chief

Air Marshal **KK Nohwar**, PVSM VM, (Retd)

Editor

Dr Shalini Chawla

Distributor

KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

All correspondence may be addressed to

Editor-in-Chief

DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110 010

Telephone: (91.11) 25699131-32 Fax: (91.11) 25682533

e-mail: capsnetdroff@gmail.com

capsoffice@capsindia.org

website: www.capsindia.org

© Centre for Air Power Studies

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission from the Director, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi

DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY Journal is published four times a year and is distributed by

KW Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002

Telefax: 23263498 e-mail: knowledgeworld@kwpub.com

Printed and Published by Air Marshal KK Nohwar (Retd) on behalf of the Forum for National Security Studies (the Trust running the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi) and Printed by Nutech Photolithographers, B-240, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I, New Delhi 110020 and Published at P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110 010. Editor: Air Marshal KK Nohwar (Retd).

Subscription Rates		
India	₹ 250.00 (single issue)	₹ 900.00 (4 issues)
Overseas	US\$ 40.00 (single issue)	US\$ 140.00 (4 issues)

RNI NO. DELENG/2012/41043

ISSN 2347 - 3703

CONTENTS

Editor's Note	v
1. The Dragon Spews Fire, Once Again <i>Harish Masand</i>	1
2. Xi Jinping Moves to Reassert Control and Advance 'Two Centenaries' Agenda <i>Jayadeva Ranade</i>	13
3. Impact of COVID-19 on Russia-China Relations <i>Carl Jaison</i>	23
4. Understanding North Korea's Zero COVID-19 Cases Narrative: An Analysis from the recent Media Reporting <i>Hina Pandey</i>	33
5. COVID-19 Pandemic Promotes China's Health Silk Road! <i>Anu Sharma</i>	47
6. COVID-19 and Its Fallout in Afghanistan <i>Saurav Sarkar</i>	57
7. Confronting the Threat: Central Asia and COVID-19 <i>Poonam Mann</i>	69
8. India and Bhutan Economic Relations <i>Sushmita Bharti</i>	79

9. Flying Peace over Bosnia:
The Role of Airpower in an Intervention 91
Chetan Rana
- Book Review**
- Brexit and the Consequences for International
Competitiveness 103
Khatu Jayesh Jayprakash

➤ EDITOR'S NOTE

The quarter saw nations around the world struggling to ward off the unseen enemy from their borders. While some nations recorded zero cases of Covid-19, the US took pole position by the end of the quarter with more than 2.5 million people being detected with the disease. With educational institutions, public transportation systems and public places where large gatherings of people was possible (malls, movie halls, restaurants, etc.) remaining shut, most countries tried to get to grips to contain the spread of Covid-19 by getting into a lockdown mode.

In India, the nationwide lockdown from March 25, 2020 for three weeks was again extended on April 14 till May 3, as the number of Covid-19 positive cases rose to 10,000. Migrant labour and students not showing signs of the disease were permitted to go back to their home states in special trains run by the Indian Railways. On May 1, with the number of cases rising to more than 42,000, the lockdown was further extended till May 17. On May 7, the government launched the Vande Bharat mission to bring home the stranded diaspora from countries like the UK, UAE, US, Maldives, Bahrain and Singapore. On May 17 the lockdown was further extended till May 31, making the period of lockdown the longest by any country so far during this pandemic. On June 8, a phased reopening was commenced; it was termed 'Unlock 1.0' and was aimed at a gradual revival of the economy. A nationwide curfew between 9 pm and 5 am was imposed to ensure social distancing and prevent crowding/congregation of people.

With the number of cases crossing more than half a million, the Government of India has introduced Unlock 2.0 that is to come into effect from July 1 onwards. Schools and colleges would continue to remain closed till July 31; Metro services, cinema halls, gyms,

swimming pools and bars would also remain closed, while there would be a ban on social, religious and any other large gatherings. Work-from-home and virtual meetings/seminars (webinars) have been encouraged by leaders around the world as a means of maintaining social distancing to mitigate the spread of Covid-19. Meanwhile, efforts are on globally to find a vaccine that would protect one from the deadly virus.

Always one to take advantage of distraction of world leaders on 'other more critical events', China attacked India when the Soviets and the Americans were busy with the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Again, from 2004 onwards, China began developing runways and infrastructure on islands in the South of China Sea, and which rightfully do not belong to China, while the US was 'busy' and distracted with its Global War on Terror in Afghanistan and West Asia following the 9/11 terror attacks. It was, therefore, not surprising that the Chinese upped the ante in Eastern Ladakh and Sikkim area in early May when the world was busy with the Covid-19 pandemic. They possibly also factored in the US' distraction not only with Covid-19, but also due to its (the US') standoff with Iran following the US' killing of General Qasem Soleimani on January 3. China possibly reasoned that the US would not like to be embroiled in a 'multiple theatres of war' situation should the face-off with India erupt into war (for which the US could then feel obliged to come to the assistance of India).

Under the guise of the Shaheen VIII Exercise (between PAF and PLAAF) held in the latter half of August 2019 at Hotan—a little over 300 km North of Leh—the PLAAF retained a few J-11/J-16 aircraft at Ngari airfield (that lies barely 325 km South East of Leh) after the Exercise got over. What is of concern here is that the presence of these aircraft at Gar Gunsai airfield (Ngari) was not a coincidence but appears now to be a part of an overall strategy to assist the PLA 'in case things went wrong in the planned actions that were to unfold in the Galwan Valley/Pangong Tso/Depsang Plains regions'. It now appears that just as in 1962 wherein the Chinese had blamed the Indians for starting the aggression—and that the Chinese had only taken 'defensive action'—a similar narrative began appearing in the Chinese social media circles (in the first week of May 2020) which said "India picks up Sino-Indian border conflict again" (as pointed

out by Jayadeva Ranade, DG, Centre for China Analysis and Strategy recently). He has further indicated that the Chinese have not felt any remorse for the killing—in cold blood—of the Indian CO and 19 other Indian troops by the PLA using iron rods and clubs studded with nails and barbed wire on the intervening night of June 15-16. In fact, the Chinese are believed to have blamed the Indian troops for being on the Chinese side of the LAC! The Indian patrol team was only dismantling the structures put up by the PLA in violation of the agreed discussions at the flag meeting the previous week.

While the 'scuffle' between the Indian and Chinese troops at the Finger 4 area on the Northern shore of the Pangong Tso, a lake in Eastern Ladakh, took place on the intervening night of May 5-6, another clash in the sensitive Naku La region of North Sikkim took place on May 9.

At Pangong Tso, the jostling turned violent and left many soldiers injured on both sides, while at Naku La about 10-12 soldiers from either side were injured in the scuffle. Other areas of confrontation were Galwan Valley, Gogra and Hot Springs, all in the East Ladakh region.

The Digital Strong Innovation Team from Australia has recently stated that the PLAAF was involved in a sand model discussion on exactly the scenario that emerged on June 15; only, that the exact replica of the Area of Operation was 2,500 km to the East of Galwan. Also, the sand model discussion took place almost a decade ago.

Goes to show that the build-up of forces and infrastructure in the Galwan Valley was pre-meditated; also the brutal means used to kill and maim Indian soldiers was done by forces 'not the usual ones that the Indian troops recognised'.

The PLA is known to have also carried out exercises to capture airfields and 'passes' at high altitudes with special forces during the STRIDE series of exercises along with the PLAAF for the last one decade.

'Capture passes'? One does not need to capture 'passes' and airfields at high altitudes in a Taiwan contingency; the practices were obviously aimed at a future confrontation with India.

Of greater significance is the eighth edition of the SHAHEEN series of exercises between PAF and PLAAF that were held in 'the

region adjoining Ladakh' (at Hotan, as covered above). This was as involved an exercise as one can imagine—complete with DACT, AWACS, Special Forces, Red versus Blue large force engagements, et al. The only difference was that it was held in the 'likely area of operations for a future conflict where a two-front dilemma could have been posed to India'. That the practised scenario almost became a reality is a chilling reminder about the designs that our adversaries harbour against the Indian state—triggered into overdrive possibly by the declarations of August 5, 2019.

It was only due to the alacrity of the Indian Army and the timely forward deployment of the IAF that any serious developments were avoided. Of course, diplomacy played an important part in diffusing the situation somewhat.

The situation, however, still remains tense along the LAC.

We need to stay prepared and not let our guard down on either front—against the Chinese, or in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic.

STAY SAFE, STAY HEALTHY, STAY CHEERFUL

Happy Reading



THE DRAGON SPEWS FIRE, ONCE AGAIN

HARISH MASAND

The face-off with China at multiple points on the long Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China since May 5 has been the stuff of prime-time TV, the print media as well as social media for an entire month, as can be expected in a democracy with a largely free media and concerned public. A lot of analysis, and thought by experts, has gone into the reasons why China would open another front at this time against India in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic ravaging the entire world, its platter seemingly full with Hong Kong, WHO, the growing clamour for an inquiry into the origin of the coronavirus, Taiwan, the South China Sea as well as trade, for what was termed as “marginal territories” by Dr. Ashley Tellis in an interview on India Today TV with Rahul Kanwal recently. So far, the Government of India has not officially confirmed if there has actually been an incursion on the Indian side of the LAC or its exact extent. However, other accounts indicate that the Chinese have intruded to some extent and occupied some critical heights overlooking the new Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road, in numbers not seen hitherto in previous numerous incursions, and with artillery, armour and aircraft in support.¹

Air Marshal **Harish Masand** Vrc VM (Retd) is a former fighter pilot of the Indian Air Force.

1. Lt Gen P. R. Shankar, “Face-Offs—The Matrix Ahead”, <https://www.gunnersshot.com/2020/05/face-offs-matrix-ahead-by-lt-gen-pr.html?m=1>. Accessed on May 29, 2020; N. Reynolds and S. Kaushal, “A Military Analysis of the Sino-Indian Border Clashes”, <https://rusi.org/commentary/military-analysis-sino%E2%80%93indian->

As per some experts, Chinese troops are in occupation of about 40 sq km of territory on the Indian side of the LAC.² However, this has been disputed by other experts who claim that the initial intrusions were shallow and the Chinese forces are currently not on the Indian side of the LAC,³ except perhaps between Finger 4 and Finger 8 where the LAC claims of the two sides differ. Recent reports also indicate that both sides have moved back by a kilometre or two to defuse the situation by “consensus”, as it is called, after the meeting at Lt General-level on June 6. Regardless of the actual extent of the intrusions, which the Government of India has neither confirmed nor officially denied so far, it is obvious from the statements of the Defence Minister that there is a problem at the LAC where the Chinese have amassed in large numbers, not seen earlier. Also, if the confrontations were merely on the LAC and not inside India, it is unlikely that these would have generated so much heat and media hype as well as the kind of military and diplomatic parleys underway. Further, without any intrusions, why is it being said that India would continue to press for status quo ante as of April in the negotiations underway now?⁴

It is also obvious that this is a well-planned Chinese move, approved at the highest level, for which they have been preparing for some time. These incursions or confrontations are certainly not the regular knee-jerk reaction at the tactical level to some patrolling and infrastructure building by India on its own side of the LAC. In any event, India also has a right to build such infrastructure within its own territory, to be able to defend itself, as per the principle of equal security under the agreements with China on the border issue, particularly when the Chinese have been building all-weather heavy-

border-clashes. Accessed on June 4, 2020; Lt Gen P. Menon, “China has definitely crossed India’s Lakshman rekha but it won’t lead to 1962 again”, *The Print*, <https://theprint.in/opinion/china-has-definitely-crossed-indias-lakshman-rekha-but-it-wont-lead-to-1962-again/431490/>. Accessed on May 30, 2020.

2. Lt Gen H. S. Panag, “India’s fingers have come under the Chinese boots. Denial won’t help”, *The Print*, <https://theprint.in/opinion/indias-fingers-have-come-under-chinese-boots-denial-wont-help-us/435145/>. Accessed on June 6, 2020.
3. “Abhijit Iyer-Mitra vs Ajai Shukla: Big Border Face-Off over Ladakh Standoff”, *India Today Newstrack*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maHCZZPLBNA>. Accessed on June 8, 2020.
4. Rajat Pandit, “Ball set rolling, but Ladakh de-escalation may take time”, *The Times of India*, June 8, 2020, p. 5.

duty roads and modern infrastructure for troops and logistics all along the LAC and the border from West to East for years now. Since India has never been aggressive on the border with China, except in retaliation, the Chinese infrastructure is obviously to support a rapid offensive as, when and where required. The importance of the territory and infrastructure in dispute has also been highlighted by other experts like P. Stobdan, particularly in the Galwan valley, which makes access to Shyok valley easier in any future conflict while making our positions in Siachen and Karakoram Range difficult. At Naku La, the attempted intrusions tend to outflank our positions across the Chumbi valley.⁵ The securing of water resources of the glaciers in the Shaksgam area, illegally ceded to China by Pakistan in 1963, could also be a bonus objective.

It needs to be noted that China generally tends to pick the time for confrontation when the opponent is preoccupied, as the world today is with the pandemic, to extract maximum mileage from the confrontation. The incidents at Chumar in 2014 during the Kashmir floods are an example. Chinese Communist Party leadership is also under growing domestic pressure due to its handling of the coronavirus, the Hong Kong issue, economic growth and trade issues. That may also be one of the reasons for China to militarily flex its muscles in the South and East China Seas as also its economic might against the other powers in the region to divert attention from domestic issues. Thus, it is all the more important to be even more alert when we have a domestic problem where most of our attention is.

In view of the overall current geopolitical situation, it is also highly unlikely that territorial gains were the primary reason for the current incursions and confrontation with India. The intent seems to have been to move in and occupy unguarded territories to secure tactically advantageous positions for any future confrontation, to portray India as a weak and undependable power and, perhaps most importantly, to extract a number of strategically important concessions. These could be in terms of preventing India from participation in the international clamour for an independent inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus and reparations; and influencing India's likely actions on the chair of

5. P. R. Shankar, *op. cit.*

WHO executive board. Taiwan's presence as an observer at the WHA meeting—an issue that has been shelved for a few months already—India's growing closeness to the US and other regional powers, its presence, support and growing soft-power influence on other nations, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and, most importantly, on trade and economic issues with the recent scrutiny on foreign investments by neighbours, particularly Chinese, its refusal to join RCEP and attempts to wean away businesses from China are some of the other areas of concern for China vis-à-vis India. Of course, so far none of the Chinese demands are in public domain despite many military-to-military talks at three-star levels along with some diplomatic parleys. However, the official Chinese state media has hinted at our growing closeness to the US as one of the reasons, which tends to thwart their practice of dealing bilaterally with all weaker powers. China seems to overlook the fact that its aggressive stand is likely to push India further in its search for friends and allies to deter China.

It also needs to be realised that having moved in force, with clearance at the highest levels, China is unlikely to totally vacate the occupied areas in a hurry without suitable concessions. China is, perhaps, also bolstered in its belief that India would not escalate the situation due to repeated statements from political, diplomatic and military leadership of India that the existing bilateral mechanisms between the two nations to resolve disputes have prevented a bullet from being fired for over five decades since Nathu La in 1967.⁶ China is also bolstered by the fact that its earlier aggressions over the decades went largely unchallenged. We also seem to place an exaggerated sense of confidence in the spirit of Wuhan; the bonhomie further strengthened between the leaders of the two countries at Mamallapuram, as late as October 2019 despite the fact that, soon thereafter in January 2020, China was trying to raise the issue of Kashmir at the UN to question the abrogation of Article 370 and the changed status of Ladakh. The focus of China, on the other hand, has always been on raw power behind a façade of diplomacy.

6. Ananth Krishnan, "The last Sikkim Stand-Off: When India gave China a bloody nose in 1967," *India Today*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/asia/story/india-china-stand-off-sikkim-stand-off-tulung-la-nathu-la-pass-doklam-plateau-1021579-2017-06-30>. Accessed on May 28, 2020.

From the way the Chinese have moved in this time also indicates that the planning and preparations for this large-scale move must have started around the same time in a multi-pronged strategy for containment of India. China's likely encouragement of Nepal in its claim on Kalapani and Lipulekh areas,⁷ apart from its continuing support of Pakistan,⁸ may also be viewed in the context of its multi-pronged efforts in strategic containment of India.

In this respect, the lessons of history on the duplicity and unreliability of Chinese assurances should also not be forgotten.⁹ Even before the ink had dried on the Panchsheel agreement of 1954, Beijing had already started moving into the desolate and unmanned Aksai Chin area of the erstwhile state of J&K and started building a crucial strategic road to Xinjiang. In the humiliating war of 1962, China merely expanded and consolidated its occupation of Aksai Chin. From the beginning, it has been adept at slow and creeping occupation of territory in what even PM Nehru referred to as China's "mobile frontiers",¹⁰ which has also been called as "salami slicing", evident even in South China Sea. Even as late as 1959, Zhou Enlai had stated in a letter that the 1956 map, published by China, which depicted the eastern boundary of Ladakh with Tibet in conformity with the Indian position, that it "correctly shows the traditional boundary between the two countries in this sector",¹¹ even while the salami slicing was in progress in this area. Old Chinese/Tibetan maps of 1893 and 1909 vintage accessed by *India Today* recently reconfirm Aksai Chin as a part of Ladakh.¹² A similar attempt at salami slicing appears to have been

7. See, Indrani Bagchi, "What's Behind Chinese Intrusions", *The Times of India*, June 4, 2020, p. 8.

8. For more details on China's relations and support to Pakistan, please see Shalini Chawla, "China-Pakistan Strategic Nexus—Implications for India", in *Essays on China*, edited by Air Commodore Jasjit Singh (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2012), pp. 153-84.

9. For a detailed analysis of India's policies and its relations with China, see Kanwal Sibal, "India-China Relations: Problems and Prospects", *Air Power Journal*, vol. 7 no. 3, Monsoon 2012 (July-September), pp. 1-26; Jasjit Singh, "China's India War: Revisiting the Key Elements", in *Essays on China* edited by Jasjit Singh (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2012).

10. Jasjit Singh, op. cit., p. 2.

11. Ibid., p. 11.

12. "Old Chinese maps show Aksai Chin as a part of Ladakh", *India Today*, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/aksai-chin-ladakh-old-chinese-maps-india-china-border-dispute-1683315-2020-05-29?ref=taboola>. Accessed on May 30, 2020.

made this time, except that the Indian armed forces reacted quickly to check the incursions and force the Chinese to the negotiating table. It was, perhaps, due to this failed attempt that the Chinese Ambassador Sun Weidong made a statement, on May 27—over three weeks after the incursions and occupation—that we pose no threat to each other and that the Dragon and the Elephant must dance together. Similar statements also emanated from the Chinese foreign ministry. The point being made is that the statements of Chinese leaders exhorting peace and cooperation, after attempting a *fait accompli*, should not be taken at face value without verifiable action on the ground.

Without going into too many details here due to constraints of space in this article, it does need to be highlighted that in April 1960, it was decided between PM Nehru and Premier Zhou Enlai that both sides would prepare an official report with evidence on the boundary issue, the intent being to resolve it amicably. Later, three leading American scholars carried out a detailed study of the evidence in the above Officials' Report and came to the unequivocal conclusion that "the case the Chinese presented was a shoddy piece of work, betraying—if only to those in a position to consult the sources cited—a fundamental contempt for evidence" in support of its claims and later aggression.¹³ The map of J&K, in existence since 1822, when Maharaja Ranjit Singh handed over the state to Gulab Singh, also substantiates India's claim to the entire Aksai Chin, currently in illegal and forceful occupation of China, if not portions of Tibet when General Zorawar Singh almost conquered Kailash-Mansarovar but, unfortunately, died fighting close to it in 1841. If Zorawar had succeeded, our holy pilgrimage site would have been a part of J&K, and thus of India, after the instrument of accession was signed by Maharaja Hari Singh on October 26, 1947. Even China's claim to Tawang and, later, almost the whole of Arunachal Pradesh, is negated by the fact that while it retained the occupied territories in Ladakh and Aksai Chin after the 1962 war, it withdrew largely to the McMahon line in the eastern sector thus tacitly accepting this boundary, coupled with the fact that it has settled its boundary with the other nations in this area based on this line and the watershed principle. Certainly, our claim to Kailash-Mansarovar is stronger than China's claim to Tawang.

13. Jasjit Singh, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7.

In the current reality, the fact remains that China is an expansionist power progressively trying to occupy what it conveniently terms as “lost territories” based on its own interpretation of history. With its growing economic and, consequently, military might, it has started aggressively flexing its muscles in its insatiable drive towards world domination making no secret of its plans to replace the US as the dominant power by 2049. Concurrently, China continuously tries to strengthen its position and mask its aggressive moves with massive information warfare. Even in the current face-off with India, its media has been portraying this as an aggression by India while also citing its current dispute with Nepal and even the 50-year-old break-up of Pakistan to bolster its claims. China has also always adopted a policy of bilateral dealings in its foreign policy so as to isolate and pressurise, or bully, in other words, individual nations with its economic and military might while brazenly flouting international law. The example of China rejecting the ruling of 2016 in favour of the Philippines in the dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea by the Permanent Court of Arbitration established under the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and its subsequent actions, are clear examples of how China behaves with weaker neighbours in disputes.

It is also very clear, and unfortunate, that all the agreements and mechanisms put in place to bilaterally resolve the boundary dispute with China since 1993 have failed despite decades of patient and peaceful attempts by India to resolve this issue, once for all, so that both countries could move on and focus on more important issues of economic growth and poverty alleviation instead of tying up huge resources of the military. Even the Special Representatives (SR) mechanism, set in place after PM Vajpayee’s visit to China in 2003, has been made ineffective by China expanding its agenda beyond the border dispute to the strategic relationship between the two countries and by first demanding transfer of the Tawang tract to China, for “political” reasons.¹⁴ [For more details as well as recommendations on these issues, please see “Beijing reaches out to bridge differences:

14. Kanwal Sibal, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Co-Operation on Chinese terms?”¹⁵ in the *India-China Chronicle*, September-October 2019 issue.] Viewed from any angle, it is evident that China would not like to settle the boundary issue with India and would like to see this issue continue to bother India as a festering sore to keep India preoccupied and contained in South Asia. For China, at least in the foreseeable future, it appears that it does not make any political, military or economic sense to lower the tension on the borders with India while it continues to increase its economic and military might to currently challenge the US in the Indo-Pacific and, later, on the global stage, as the major Superpower, which incidentally concurrently neutralises India.

As part of its information warfare strategy, China also attempts to sow seeds of misinformation and dissension within the opposing country through all possible means. This can be seen in its tirades against every country in times of dispute, with the current accusations even against America on the coronavirus pandemic as the most recent example. Unfortunately, in our democratic system, there are always elements within the country, disgruntled or otherwise motivated, amenable to the Chinese propaganda, which tend to weaken the stand of the ruling dispensation. In the current face-off, by using the words “differences in perceptions on the LAC”, we also seem to be playing into the hands of the Chinese that there is a dispute on the LAC even in areas where there has been no dispute for decades now with our patrols regularly going up to the LAC, as in Galwan valley and Finger 8 of Pangong Tso. Unfortunately also, there is a view amongst national security experts that India has, so far, been following an appeasement policy towards China that just will not work.¹⁶ As stated earlier, soothing statements on cooperation and peaceful bilateral resolution of the disputes would continue to be made by China to lull us into a sense of complacency.

15. Air Marshal Harish Masand, “Beijing Reaches out to Bridge Differences: Co-operation on Chinese Terms”, *India-China Chronicle*, September-October 2019 Issue, pp. 36-41, <http://www.icec-council.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ICC-Sept-Oct-2019-book.pdf>. Accessed on June 8, 2020.

16. Brahma Chellaney, “India’s Appeasement Policy begins to Unravel”, *Japan Times*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/06/08/commentary/world-commentary/indias-appeasement-policy-toward-china-unravels/#.Xt4lhCPytbU>. Accessed on June 8, 2020.

Due to these reasons, while taking note of all the Chinese moves to nibble away at our territory, it is not only important to take a firm stand against Chinese actions but to pre-empt any weakness in the response by evolving a political consensus on the issue in advance. Certainly, while India may not match up to China militarily at this time for a full-scale conventional war, it has enough capability to give it a good fight and a bloody nose. It is felt that even China cannot afford a major skirmish, much less an all-out war with India, in the current geopolitical situation. It is also important to note that acquiescence to a bully's demands, even partially, only whets the bully's appetite for more at a time and place of his choosing. Thus, in view of all the fruitless talks and mechanisms for resolution of disputes between India and China, it would be important for us to chalk out a clear policy on how to deal with such aggression now, and in future, perhaps with a different approach since the existing mechanisms and approach have just not worked.

So, the issue comes down to what India should be doing to negate the Chinese designs in the short as well as long term. First of all, it needs to be realised that the current face-off is unlikely to be resolved in a hurry unless we cave in to the Chinese demands. Having invested a large effort in the current aggression, the Chinese can hardly be expected to walk away without extracting some concessions. Even their demands are unlikely to come forth in clear terms in a hurry. As the aggressor in possession of our territory, possession being nine points of the law, the Chinese are unlikely to be in a hurry even to put forward their demands. In Doka La or Doklam, we were very clear that we did not want the Chinese to build a road in the area that was clearly Bhutan's. Even with this clarity, it took 73 days to resolve the issue and for the Chinese to agree not to build the road. In the bargain, however, there have been some reports that, soon after the agreement, the Chinese built every other facility and infrastructure in most of Doklam plateau to strengthen their position in any future face-off in the same area while diplomatically working to get Bhutan to dissociate from the trilateral problem and make it a bilateral issue between China and Bhutan.

In view of the above, we can expect this face-off and negotiations to continue for quite some time, and we should be prepared for the long haul with a possibility of some localised skirmishes if the talks

do not go well. We can also expect that, in the parleys currently underway on both the diplomatic and military channels, in keeping with their culture and approach, the Chinese demands would be couched and shrouded in diplomatese without playing their hand, mainly to assess the Indian resolve and response to evaluate how far we would be willing to concede on their various “grievances” against us. Fortunately, both the Defence and Home Ministers have made unambiguous statements that India would not cede an inch of Indian territory across the LAC or compromise on national interest. As of now, regular military parleys at the level of Generals are underway but it is considered unlikely that these would resolve the issue to our complete satisfaction in a hurry.

In the short term, it is undeniable that we need to stand firm against such creeping encroachments and bullying. Concurrently, we should build up our forces adequately in the areas of the face-off and around to ensure that there is no outflanking move by the Chinese behind our lines keeping in view reports that Chinese troops have been practising such outflanking moves by night in a recent exercise in the area. We should also be ready to play tit for tat at an opportune moment in areas where we are more advantageously placed to show the Chinese not only our resolve but to convey the message that two can play at the same game. This could include some moves along the maritime front in the Indian Ocean. Fortunately, we have adequate forces for deterrence, if not an all-out war, and our lines of communications in the areas of the face-off, as also in the Indian Ocean, are shorter and we can logistically maintain a firm posture in these areas better for a longer time. In this effort, we need to remember that China is also under increasing pressure in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South China Sea, with the US moving against China on many fronts, and China cannot afford to remove a large force from its eastern front.

India, thus, must stand fast against regular Chinese attempts at salami slicing and be prepared for the long haul in the current standoff. In the long term, it should seriously pursue the steps on political, economic, diplomatic and military fronts outlined in the earlier article referred to above. The military front needs to be re-emphasised since China only understands power and would continue

to bully us unless we build up adequate deterrence in the window of the decade ahead. With China's emphasis on unrestricted war and the recent missives of President Xi to his military,¹⁷ and the reports of increased Chinese activity and videos of large-scale manoeuvres immediately after the so-called positive talks at Lt Gen level of June 6,¹⁸ we must also take all proactive measures including on the cyber and information war fronts since such non-contact attacks can also be expected to increase in intensity with time. The Chinese moves, by themselves, may be just posturing and attempts at intimidation, as also seen earlier—with reminders of 1962—during the Doklam standoff. However, we cannot afford to take any such moves lightly.

Lastly, we may also consider opening up a new front by taking the border dispute with China to an international forum, like the International Court of Justice, at an opportune moment in the future if China continues to remain belligerent and all attempts at bilateral settlement of the border prove futile. Surely, our claim to the entire territory of Ladakh is strong. Otherwise, we would not be trying to defend the indefensible as a non-hegemonic power. International diplomatic support is also more likely, now that the international community seems to better understand our predicament vis-à-vis an aggressive and belligerent China, as evidenced by the recent statements of Alice Wells from the US State Department. There is already a view that we should take the recent Indo-Nepal border issue to the ICJ.¹⁹ While we may not want to do that due to our historical ties with Nepal and make attempts to resolve the issue at the diplomatic and political levels, there is no assurance that Nepal would be averse to start such litigation.

Merely the start of an international litigation can be expected to put China under pressure on one more issue whatever be their attitude towards abiding by the law or ruling of international bodies. While there may be some concerns that such a move may

17. Ananth Krishnan, "Chinese President Xi Jinping meets PLA, urges battle preparedness", *The Hindu*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/chinese-president-xi-jinping-meets-pla-urges-battle-preparedness/article31680691.ece?homepage=true>. Accessed on May 30, 2020.

18. "China Flexes its Muscle", WION TV News, June 8, 2020. Also see "Ball set rolling...", and "Day after talks, MEA says India and China will resolve issue peacefully", *The Times of India*, June 8, 2020, op. cit., p. 5.

19. Bagchi, op. cit.

also internationalise the accession of the entire state of J&K, which is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, it is felt that the issue can legally be separated, particularly after the formation of Ladakh as a union territory. Even if Pakistan attempts to involve itself in this dispute, we already have an irrefutable legal basis on that issue through the instrument of accession, Pakistan's aggression and its failure to abide by the precondition in the UN resolution of 1949 to vacate occupied areas before initiating any other steps, apart from the Simla agreement stipulating a purely bilateral resolution of our disputes. With China, we do not have such a commitment.

In any event, we may have no recourse but to take the water dispute to an international body some day in view of the reports now emerging that China may have started obstructing the flow of water into the Galwan River and may do so with other rivers too thus signalling weaponisation of China's upper riparian rights.²⁰ It is also felt that an international ruling cannot leave us in any state worse than the current one on the boundary issue with China, while also considering regular incursions and disputes with an increasingly aggressive and hostile neighbour.

In conclusion, it needs to be made abundantly clear to China that the dragon and the elephant can only dance together if the dragon can learn to stop spewing fire at regular intervals, which it is inclined to do by its very nature.

20. Abhijit Iyer-Mitra, "Chinese intrusion into Galwan...", *The Print*, <https://theprint.in/opinion/chinese-intrusion-in-galwan-lasting-for-two-weeks-before-it-was-cleared-by-indian-troops/428658/>. Accessed on June 5, 2020.

XI JINPING MOVES TO REASSERT CONTROL AND ADVANCE 'TWO CENTENARIES' AGENDA

JAYADEVA RANADE

CCP General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have been badly bruised by public criticism, which was accentuated by the initial mishandling of the Coronavirus epidemic in Wuhan. After an extended hiatus, which includes Xi Jinping's unexplained disappearance from public view at the peak of the crisis between January 29 and February 10, Xi Jinping has now begun to publicly demonstrate that his political authority and influence are undiminished.

Reviving the economy is important for the CCP to retain legitimacy. It is domestically and geopolitically important for it to achieve the 'China Dream' by the hundredth year of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2021 and keep China on track to become "a major world power with pioneering global influence" by 2049—the centenary year of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). By announcing these goals at the 18th and 19th Party Congresses respectively, Xi Jinping staked his prestige and personal reputation on this. The former includes doubling of incomes

Mr. **Jayadeva Ranade** is former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.

by 2020 and the latter envisages acquiring the capability to rival the US and influence and create world organisations. Failure to achieve these 'Two Centenary' goals and bring growth back to a reasonable level would impact adversely on the CCP and Xi Jinping's personal authority and legitimacy.

Resentments have been brewing and piling up especially since the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 and the NPC Plenum that followed in March 2018. Throughout this period rising prices and growing inflation contributed to the restiveness. The closure of thousands of small coal and iron ore mining operations, businesses and factories had rendered 25 million unemployed with estimates placing their number between 70 and 80 million by March 2020. Xi Jinping's stringent drive against ostentation led to a drop in official entertainment leading to the closure of tens of thousands of restaurants and an estimated 2-3 percent drop in GDP. Ex-servicemen and PLA veterans complained of inadequate efforts for their rehabilitation or re-employment and that they were not getting the respect in society they considered their due. Sensitive that their complaints could potentially have an adverse effect on the PLA, the Central Military Commission (CMC) established the Ministry of Veterans Affairs in March 2018.

Academics, students and intellectuals were also resentful, though for different reasons. Among the important factors were the imposition of enhanced ideological and political education on colleges and schools, increased Party surveillance of Professors and lecturers, and deployment of Party members in classrooms—including of primary schools—to monitor teachers. The 'social credit management system' to be implemented across China by the end of this year has become a source of constant worry for Chinese.

Popular anger has been simmering just below the surface ever since Xi Jinping discarded the conventions stipulated by Deng Xiaoping as safeguards against a single leader becoming too powerful. Criticism has been directed at the abolition of tenures for the posts of President and Vice President and ignoring the age criteria for promoting cadres to higher echelons including the Politburo or Politburo Standing Committee. Serving as well as retired and veteran Party cadres and members, many of whom suffered during the violent Cultural

Revolution decade, publicly declared they did not want a return to the 'One Man rule of Mao'! Reputed Chinese academics like Xu Zhangrun of Beijing's Tsinghua University and others from Shanghai and other Universities criticised Xi Jinping by name from mid-2018 onwards and attracted punishment.

The economic slowdown aggravated discontent. China's 'private' businessmen and entrepreneurs have complained publicly since mid-December 2018 that private businesses are being denied opportunities and expressed a lack of confidence in the system. In mid-December 2018, Renmin University Prof. Xiang Songzuo at a public function questioned China's real rate of growth, poor state of private businesses in China and the lack of confidence. He revealed that a "research group of an important institution" had released an 'internal' report stating China's GDP growth in 2018 was about 1.67 percent! Within days, Chen Hongtian, Chairman of the Cheung Kei Group and member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), separately warned nearly 150 tycoons based mainly in Shenzhen and Hong Kong that China's private business entrepreneurs should prepare for a "winter colder and longer than expected". The group included Tencent Chairman Pony Ma, the Chairman of carmaker BYD, Wang Chuanfu, and the Chairman of courier service SF Express, Wang Wei. They asserted that contrary to assurances the State-owned Enterprises (SoEs) have expanded to enter virtually every sector of economic activity.

Supermarket tycoon and founder of Wumart Stores, Zhang Wenzhong, on November 1, 2018, told entrepreneurs at a forum that the courts had released him and returned his property after 5 years of imprisonment and cautioned this could happen to any of them. He said this is because "Our basic economic system has been written into the country's and the party's constitution. It won't change." These complaints continue to be voiced and the dissatisfaction could well hamper China's efforts to revive its economy.

With bleak prospects for an early economic recovery, Chinese economists have been debating whether China should at all mention a growth target in the report to be presented at the NPC on May 22, 2020. Ma Jun, an academic member of the People's Bank of China's monetary policy committee, recommended it be dropped "because

growth will largely depend on how the pandemic develops in Europe and the United States." Yu Yongding, a former PBoC adviser, urged the government to mention a numerical goal for expansion in gross domestic product (GDP), even if it is low. Xu Xiaonian, a Professor of Economics and Finance at the China Europe International Business School, bluntly cautioned that as long as the pandemic in Europe and America is not over, Chinese export companies will have no orders, workers will have no wages and there will be no consumption and a recession is inevitable. He said, "We are not only short of food and oil, but we are also short of markets; we are short of orders. Our per capita GDP is one-fifth of that of the United States and one-fourth that of Europe. The domestic purchasing power cannot support our enormous manufacturing capacity." He added, "We still lack raw materials, especially the technology-intensive basic raw materials, which must be imported from South Korea, Japan and Germany. We lack technology, and technology cannot be developed rapidly when we close the door."

The slow pace of economic recovery prompted prominent Chinese businessmen like Jack Ma, founder of the Alibaba Group, and Liu Chuanzhi, the founder of Lenovo, to sign and personally hand over to Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on March 26, 2020, a nine-point letter addressed to President Xi Jinping reviving demands for comprehensive reforms.

Criticism increased with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Particularly criticised were: the Party controlling everything; the progressively increasing and stringent security controls; expanding Party surveillance; undue centralisation of authority; and discarding of Deng Xiaoping's policy of "lie low, bide your time". Xi Jinping's aggressive foreign policy is blamed, certainly in private conversation, by a number of Party and government officials as well as academics for China's growing international isolation, rapidly deteriorating relations with the US and poor international image. The 'Social Credit Management System' and facial recognition were specifically mentioned. Rare in China because of the certainty of punitive action, the CCP and Chinese President Xi Jinping were targeted by name.

On February 23 and March 2, Zhao Shilin, a retired professor of Minzu University and former member of the CCP Central Committee,

posted letters to Xi Jinping which were scathing in their criticism. In his letter of February 23, Zhao Shilin said China had “missed the golden window of time” around the Chinese New Year, resulting in the “epidemic spreading with great ferocity”. He described its cost as ‘enormous’ and ‘unspeakably painful’. Zhao Shilin admonished Xi Jinping: “Regrettably, I must say, you’re scoring zero so far!” He identified five factors as responsible with stringent security, ensuring the party’s image and pre-eminence, and the centralisation of authority topping the list. These inhibited cadres and officials from doing their job and displaying initiative. Stating that “people from within and without the system are calling for systemic political reform”, he said these must include implementing the “socialist core values of freedom, democracy, equality, and rule of law” and guaranteeing political rights of citizens, like freedom of speech. In the second letter, he reiterated, “There should be more than one voice in a healthy society to demand free speech.”

Xu Zhiyong, a former lecturer at the Beijing University of Post and Telecommunications, urged Xi Jinping to step down for his “inability to handle major crises”. He called Xi Jinping’s political ideology ‘confusing’, his governance model ‘outdated’ and said he had ruined China with “exhaustive social stability maintenance measures”. He said in conclusion, “I don’t think you are a villain, just someone who is not very smart. For the public’s sake, I’m asking you again: Step down, Mr Xi Jinping.” Tsinghua University Professor, Xu Zhangrun’s essay captioned, ‘Angry People No Longer Fear’, went viral on China’s social media. It accused leaders, specifically Xi Jinping, of being out of touch with the peoples’ needs and perpetuating an elite ‘small circle of leaders’ and engaging in ‘big data terrorism’. He blamed this for the failure of the authorities in Hubei. The article called Xi Jinping a ‘political tyrant’ and declared “the sun will eventually come to this land of freedom!”

Public discontent in Wuhan city, the epicentre of the outbreak, was accentuated with the death of the ‘whistle-blower’ Dr. Li Wenliang. During Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan’s inspection of Wuhan on February 14, when the epidemic was raging people protested the communist government’s suppression of freedom of speech and its hiding of information, shouting “Don’t believe them”, “they are

telling lies”, etc. Protests continue intermittently across China. As late as March 31, Zhang Wenbin, a student of Shandong University in a post on social media asked Xi Jinping to step down.

There have been acts of apparent subtle protest by official and Party organisations. *People Magazine*, a publication under China’s People’s Publishing House and *Southern Weekly*, a newspaper owned by the Guangdong Communist Party Committee and based in Guangzhou City, published reports praising Dr. Ai Fen of Wuhan Hospital in the March 2020 edition and on March 11, respectively.

Indication of the seriousness of discontent surfaced on March 22, with reports that children of high-level veteran Party cadres, also called ‘princelings’, had posted a call on WeChat for an “Emergency Enlarged Meeting of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) Politburo” to discuss Xi Jinping’s replacement. Chen Ping, son of a former high-ranking PLA scientist and himself a ‘princeling’ and owner of the Hong Kong-headquartered Sun TV, said the meeting had a 13-point agenda including to “discuss whether Xi Jinping is suitable to continue to be the President of the country, the CCP’s General Secretary, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission.” Chen Ping said “It is not good for China if the current policies continue.”

Signs that Chinese President Xi Jinping had begun to react to the criticism became visible from February/March with China’s leadership taking note of the unceasing and widespread public criticism. In a bid to assuage immediate public anger, the National Supervisory Commission, which was investigating handling of the case of Dr. Li Wenliang, reported on March 19 that the police and Wuhan Public Security Bureau had revoked the reprimand, apologised to the dead doctor’s family and disciplined two police officers. Separately, the authorities detained those who had criticised Xi Jinping including Xu Zhangrun, Xu Zhiyong, Zhang Wenbin and several others and banned them from using social or other media.

Hong Kong, where Beijing’s inaction despite the continuous protests since May 2019 prompted speculation that the ‘China Dream’ was unattainable, witnessed action to retrieve the situation. Reports (March 18) claimed that as many as 4,000 officers from China’s People’s Armed Police (PAP) had joined Hong Kong police to monitor the protesters and their tactics as part of an effort to deepen the PAP’s

understanding of the situation. In January and February 2020, two Xi Jinping loyalists with tough reputations namely Luo Huining, former Shaanxi Party Secretary and Xia Baolong, Xi Jinping's former deputy in Zhejiang who had retired, were appointed Director of the Liaison Office of HKSAR and Head of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office (HKMAO) respectively. On April 13, the Liaison Office of HKSAR stated it was not subject to the Basic Law. In a surprise move on April 19, the Hong Kong authorities arrested 15 pro-democracy leaders including former Legco member Martin Lee and the owner of *Apple Daily*, Lai Chee-Ying (Jimmy Lai).

China continued its tough stance towards Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP to wear the people down. The *PLA Daily* claimed that sentiments favouring forceful reunification of Taiwan are rising in China and Beijing stepped up military pressure with increased sailings of PLA Navy warships and its aircraft carrier. PLAAF aircraft occasionally overflew Taiwan and on April 1, its aircraft conducted a 36-hour long-endurance early warning exercise simulating countering enemy planes during wartime with emphasis on airborne early-warning and control aircraft. Beijing blocked calls for interaction between the WHO and Taiwan over the coronavirus pandemic. On April 24, the *Nanfang Daily* disclosed that Guangzhou City's National Security Bureau had finished investigations into Lee Henley Hu Xiang, a Belizean national and Taiwan resident. *Nanfang Daily* said, "Investigations by the national security agency confirmed that the suspect provided a large amount of funds to hostile elements in the United States, colluded with foreign anti-China forces to intervene in Hong Kong affairs, and funded the implementation of criminal activities that endangered our national security." He is the first foreigner to be identified for involvement in Hong Kong.

Xi Jinping's aggressive foreign policy style has not changed. There has been no easing of propaganda or military pressure. China continues to flex its military muscle in the East Sea and make substantive advances in its claims over the South China Sea. With India, apart from articles referring to India's poor economy and criticising its health infrastructure, China raised the Kashmir issue for the fifth time at the UNSC on April 8. Underlining its comprehensive ties with Pakistan, the two held their first naval exercises (January

6-14) featuring anti-submarine and submarine rescue training in the Arabian Sea titled 'Sea Guardians 2020'. The PLA has held at least 5 military exercises in Tibet since February/March including a 'combat' exercise by several helicopters in the Lhasa area on April 21. On April 27, between 300 and 500 PLA vehicles were observed in the Tashigong area opposite Demchok.

There are other indicators suggesting that Zhongnanhai, the high-walled compound housing the offices and residences of China's top leaders, has become active in domestic politics. In addition to the appointment on April 8 of three Xi Jinping 'loyalists' as new Party Secretaries, the Beijing Western District Supervisory Commission announced the arrest of 'princeling' tycoon Ren Zhiqing, a trenchant critic of Xi Jinping. The arrest took place despite 'princelings' having addressed letters to Xi Jinping urging his release and publicising their support for Ren Zhiqing. On April 14, Politburo Standing Committee member (PBSC) and CPPCC Chairman Wang Yang chaired a meeting of the Committee on Poverty Alleviation, hitherto being steered by PBSC member Han Zheng. Poverty alleviation is a priority for Xi Jinping who promised eradication of poverty by 2020 in the 'China Dream'. Han Zheng's inaction on Hong Kong affairs had earlier prompted Xi Jinping to say in late January "those responsible should resolve it".

Important, however, are two developments which suggest that discontent within the Party and inner-Party factionalism are causing Xi Jinping considerable anxiety. In addition to the National Security Commission, National Supervisory Commission and the strengthened Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), on April 17 a Politburo meeting chaired by Xi Jinping approved the creation and membership of a new 'Safe China Construction Coordinating Small Group'. Headed by Guo Shengkun, Politburo member and Secretary of the powerful Political and Legal Affairs Commission (PLAC), each of its nine members are handpicked Xi Jinping 'loyalists'. With Xinhua (April 21) mentioning its task as to "Prevent and crackdown on activities that endanger the political security of the country", the Safe China Construction Coordinating Small Group has a wide, ambiguous ambit. Chaired by Guo Shengkun, a Politburo member, Xi Jinping will exercise direct control over its functions.

The other is the Radio Free Asia (April 27) report that Xi Jinping's followers held 'emergency' meetings at the Ministry of Public Security (April 20), the Secret Service Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security (April 21), and the CCP Political and Legal Affairs Commission (April 22). Radio Free Asia disclosed that at the Secret Service Bureau's meeting, Wang Xiaohong, Executive Deputy Minister of Public Security and Director of the Secret Service Bureau stated "(We) must increase the monitoring of the 'top leaders' decision-making power, staff appointment power, and financial approval power, to let the 'top leaders' get used to working and living under monitoring." He hinted that the Secret Service Bureau had arrested Sun Lijun.

The last two developments clearly indicate that apart from the widening public dissatisfaction, it is the inner-Party discontent accompanied by calls for him to step down that is causing Xi Jinping a lot of anxiety. Creation of the new 'small group' will certainly make Xi Jinping even more powerful as it appears to bypass the Party's PLAC and CDIC. It is a clear warning to senior Party echelons, 'princelings' and Party veterans to fall in line, but whether they do depends on the extent of opposition to Xi Jinping at the middle and higher echelons of the Party.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS

CARL JAISON

As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps across the world, there is a growing sense of unpredictability over how countries respond to the ongoing health crisis. During such unprecedented times, do bilateral ties improve, deteriorate or stagnate between two countries? Let us take the example of the Sino-Russian relationship to determine the impact of COVID-19 on their bilateral ties and explore the convergences and divergences in their respective actions and statements. This would provide a contextual understanding of the short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic on their strategic relationship.

BACKGROUND

Sino-Russian relations have been on the upswing in recent years. It was not very long ago that the two countries decided to upgrade their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Russia, with its struggling economy and continuing suspicion of the West, has taken steps to engage with China and resuscitate its great power ambitions. On the other hand, China also sees tangible benefits in the partnership for its own rising influence in world politics, not least because a multipolar world suits its interests. Moscow can meet the long-term energy needs of Beijing while in return the

Mr. **Carl Jaison** is Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

former staves off Western pressure through coordination of policies with the latter. The bilateral trade increased 5.6 percent year-on-year to US\$ 17.2 billion in the first two months of 2020.¹ The result is that Russia is now China's ninth-largest trading partner, up from the tenth position in 2019. The improved economic and trade cooperation notwithstanding, the ongoing COVID-19 situation has impacted Sino-Russia relations, in the short term. The long-term impact remains to be seen.

CONVERGENCES

In one of the clearest cases of the divide in global opinion over the COVID-19 crisis, Russia along with South Africa backed China's refusal to entertain any discussion on the pandemic in the UNSC in late March. At that time, Russia had not encountered a major spike in cases unlike its Western counterparts and it rose to shield China from coming under criticism at the UN forum. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov even dismissed a proposal by US Senator Lindsey Graham to slap China with sanctions if Beijing "will not cooperate and will not provide a full report on the events that led to the outbreak" of the coronavirus.² Lavrov believed that the key objective is to find an antidote to the virus rather than "argue over whether the virus originated in a Chinese market and impose sanctions against the country." Outside the UN and its relationship with Russia, China is increasingly facing mounting pressure from across the world, and especially from the US, over its handling of and delayed information on the novel coronavirus.

As far as China and Russia are concerned though, the two countries have jointly agreed to strengthen their cooperation on tackling the pandemic, with Chinese Premier Xi Jinping "stressing that this demonstrates the high-level of Sino-Russian relations in the

-
1. *Global Times*, "China, Russia join hands to minimize coronavirus impact: official", March 12, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182404.shtml>. Accessed on March 23, 2020.
 2. Elena Teslova, "Russia denies Beijing hid truth on coronavirus", *Anadolu Agency*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-denies-beijing-hid-truth-on-coronavirus/1842507>. Accessed on May 23, 2020.

new era”.³ Putin, for his part, appreciated the “remarkably effective measures” taken by China to contain the spread, both inside China and outside through the important contributions made by Beijing to other countries. Interestingly, he also added that China’s response represents “a resounding answer to the provocation and stigmatization by a certain country over the COVID-19 epidemic”, taking a veiled jibe at the US.

Apart from their mutual support to each other, Chinese and Russian medical and scientific experts have been working closely to develop vaccines and drugs for the COVID-19.⁴ Despite the reduction in flights to and from China, Russia had also been allowing planes from Beijing with medical equipment “to refuel on its territory without creating any additional administrative hurdles”.⁵ Russia has also followed China’s modus operandi in sending aid relief and specialists to places like Italy, Africa, etc. Taking advantage of the chaos in the public response in the US and European Union, Russia and China have combined to aid and assist COVID-19-hit regions around the world. While China manufactures the necessary products like facemasks, ventilators and other medical equipment, Russia utilises its large fleet of Volga-Dnepr-run Antonov 124 to transport these items to countries like the US, Spain and Italy.

Despite allegations that both China and Russia are milking the opportunity to discredit Western responses to COVID-19, the two countries have been careful to display a united front in their messaging. Moscow even issued a BRICS Chairman’s Statement expressing support for China’s fight against the epidemic, which the foreign ministry at Beijing obviously welcomed.⁶ In addition to this, Russia utilised its

3. Huaxia, “Xi, Putin discuss strengthening cooperation on fighting COVID-19 by phone”, *XinhuaNet*, March 20, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/20/c_138897626.htm. Accessed on March 27, 2020.

4. CGTN, “China, Russia making progress in COVID-19 vaccine development: ambassador”, February 25, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-02-25/China-Russia-making-progress-in-COVID-19-vaccine-development-OmBAirSgz6/index.html>. Accessed on March 23, 2020.

5. Henry Foy and Michael Peel, “Russia sends Italy coronavirus aid to underline historic ties”, *Financial Times*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/b1c5681e-6cf9-11ea-89df-41bea055720b>. Accessed on March 27, 2020.

6. “Russian BRICS Chairmanship Statement on the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic Outbreak in China”, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 11, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4035151. Accessed on March 27, 2020.

current position as the chair of the eight-member SCO Forum to dismiss US criticism of WHO's role and China's handling of the outbreak.⁷ Moscow stressed that baseless allegations were being made against PRC and the Russian Federation in relation to their alleged role in spreading propaganda to stoke divide in the West. In a European Union Report, both countries were blamed for the "unprecedented spread of fake news" and "targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns around Covid-19 in the EU".⁸

Both countries are cognisant of the impact caused by the virus on trade, bilateral investment and Chinese-funded projects in Russia. But Li Xingqian, Director of the Foreign Trade Department of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce believes that it would not "alter the fundamentals and long-term momentum of bilateral economic, trade ties and cooperation in the energy sector, including the China-Russia east-route natural gas pipeline."⁹ Moreover, Russia has continued to transport products such as coal, iron ore and lumber to China for processing between border regions while "around 90 percent of export-oriented facilities in the Chinese regions bordering Russia have already returned to work."¹⁰

DIVERGENCES

Despite the official-level support and statements, Russia's initial measures were indicative of a stress in its relations with China. Moscow was slow to offer assistance to Beijing when the outbreak was at its peak in China and was also one of the first countries to close its 4,300 km (2,670-mile) land border with China.¹¹ The border

7. The Wire, "SCO Meet on COVID-19: Russia, China Raise US 'Bullying', India Flags Terrorism", May 14, 2020, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/sco-meet-covid-19-india-russia-china>. Accessed on May 27, 2020.

8. Stephanie Bodoni, "China, Russia are spreading coronavirus misinformation: EU", *The Economic Times*, June 10, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-russia-spreading-misinformation/articleshow/76308682.cms>. Accessed on June 23, 2020.

9. *Global Times*, n. 1.

10. *Russia Briefing*, "Despite Covid-19, Russia-China Trade Is up 5% in 2020", March 30, 2020, <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/despite-covid-19-russia-china-trade-5-2020.html/>. Accessed on May 23, 2020.

11. Liu Zhen, "Russia and China pledge to maintain special relationship despite Moscow's slow response to coronavirus", *South China Morning Post*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3050782/russia-and-china-pledge-maintain-special-relationship-despite>. Accessed on March 23, 2020.

closure meant that Chinese nationals within Russia could not return to China. Further, Russia's initial response to the pandemic outbreak was underwhelming at best that exacerbated China's quarantine efforts once these nationals were allowed to return. At a time when the country had relatively checked the infection spread, imported cases from Russia alerted the Chinese authorities in the border regions "like in the Suifenhe checkpoint that was then temporarily shut to contain cross-border spread."¹²

Despite attempts to maintain close communications during the outbreak, China and Russia found themselves in each other's crossfire. For instance, in late February, Moscow ordered its public transport drivers to call law enforcement if they witnessed Chinese passengers travelling in them.¹³ This was met with indignation by the PRC Embassy in Russia who warned that such incidents could harm their good relations. But the Chinese embassy played down the friction citing that communication problems might have resulted from the transition in the Russian government following the formation of cabinet of new PM Mikhail Mishustin.

Perhaps the most sensitive issue to have cropped up between the two thus far is from the presence of Chinese labourers and traders who have come to work in Russia, east of the Urals. Over the years, Chinese nationals, both for work and residential reasons, have frequented Russia's Far East regions. There is a prevailing sense that even after the crisis passes, the coronavirus outbreak will likely further add to eastern Russians' fears about any Chinese presence and stall the development of the region with Chinese help.¹⁴ Reservations with Russia have also been expressed in Chinese

12. Han Huang, "Russia's Covid-19 surge means China cannot fully relax its guard", *South China Morning Post*, May 5, 2020, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/china/article/3082811/china-russia-imported-cases/index.html>. Accessed on May 23, 2020.

13. Johan van de Ven, "Fair-Weather Friends: The Impact of the Coronavirus on the Strategic Partnership Between Russia and China", The Jamestown Foundation, February 28, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/fair-weather-friends-the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-on-the-strategic-partnership-between-russia-and-china/>. Accessed on March 27, 2020.

14. Paul Goble, "Coronavirus Hitting Russia East of the Urals Hard Economically but Not Yet Medically", The Jamestown Foundation, March 17, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/coronavirus-hitting-russia-east-of-the-urals-hard-economically-but-not-yet-medically/>. Accessed on May 23, 2020.

domestic discourse as well. Even as stranded Chinese nationals in Russia increasingly look to return home, there have been reports that Beijing's decision to ensure tighter border control was because Russia had become "the top source of imported Covid-19 cases in China".¹⁵

The crisis is further fuelled by the day-to-day economic impact on bilateral trade due to the coronavirus outbreak—Russia's trade with China has seen a drop of US\$ 15.68 million a day since mid-February.¹⁶ Despite the diversification of trade basket between the two countries, the reduction in volume has caused considerable setback to previous Russian ambitions for bilateral trade to reach US\$ 200 billion by 2024.

THE SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

In the short-term, the trade disruption could cripple the slow recovery of the Russian economy. Although China is Russia's largest trade partner and bilateral trade volumes increased 10 percent in 2019 to hit the US\$ 110 billion mark, the coronavirus outbreak has dealt a serious blow to further improvement in these figures. For instance, Russian shipping is suffering from the disruption due to the halt in sending supplies, cargoes and crew members to local ports in China.¹⁷ The other affected sectors are coal exports, fruit and vegetable imports and seafood exports to China. As the US sanctions continue to affect Russia's reintegration with the global economy, the economic relationship with China has gained renewed significance.

With falling demand for oil and prices at an all-time low, Russia's post COVID-19 recovery plans have come a cropper. With

15. Tommy Yang, "Unease at the border: Russia and China seek to downplay Covid-19 outbreak in Suifenhe", *The Guardian*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/18/unease-at-the-border-russia-and-china-seek-to-downplay-covid-19-outbreak-in-suifenhe>. Accessed on May 23, 2020.

16. Darya Korsunskaya, "Russia losing 1 bln roubles a day in trade with China over coronavirus—minister", *National Post*, February 20, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/pmnh/health-pmn/russia-losing-1-bln-roubles-a-day-in-trade-with-china-over-coronavirus-minister>. Accessed on March 27, 2020.

17. Vladislav Vorotnikov, "Coronavirus creates costly disruption for Russia-China maritime trade", *Safety at Sea* (IHS Markit), March 5, 2020, <https://safeyatsea.net/news/2020/coronavirus-creates-costly-disruption-for-russia-china-maritime-trade/>. Accessed on March 27, 2020.

the increasing dependence on China for its oil and gas imports and struggling European markets, Russia's options have decreased since the outbreak of the pandemic. To make matters worse, a contractor company working for Gazprom said it would "halt operations at a Siberian gas field that supplies China after a number of workers became infected."¹⁸ But there are structural changes taking place in the Chinese economy that may not bode well for Russian carbon-dominated exports. Focus on lower-carbon investment, new emission standards, slowing economy and the US trade wars have severely reduced China's appetite for oil-driven economic growth.¹⁹ As China's economy pivots away from energy intensive industries, the oil prices are set to remain lower than pre-COVID levels as the global economy is yet to account for "the incalculable effects of lost incomes, supply chain shifts, and job dislocation."²⁰ The COVID-19 will also result in China slashing its gas demand in the remaining quarters, further adding to Russia's misery. Despite assurances that the start-up of the China-Russia East Pipeline (CREP) is imminent, the recent impact of the virus outbreak on the oil and gas market is drastic, exacerbated by the price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia.

The restrictions on flight and travel from China has also disproportionately hampered Russia's tourism sector. The industry is set to lose US\$ 38 million in two months and US\$ 403 million if the ban is not lifted before this summer. Last year, Russia hosted 1.5 million Chinese tourists, the most from any single country.²¹

Another potential cause for concern for Russia is China's increasing outreach to the former's neighbours. Case in point: Belarus. While Chinese 'mask diplomacy' has prompted criticism from some quarters, countries like Belarus have become

18. Kristin Huang and Laura Zhou, "Coronavirus poses test for Russia and China's friendship", *South China Morning Post*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3084704/coronavirus-poses-test-russia-and-chinas-friendship>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

19. Nicholas Trickett, "COVID-19: A Reckoning for Russia's Asian Energy Aims", *The Diplomat*, May 21, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/covid-19-a-reckoning-for-russias-asian-energy-aims/>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

20. Ibid.

21. Ka-Ho Wong, "How Will the Coronavirus Outbreak Affect Russia-China Relations?" *The Diplomat*, March 14, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/how-will-the-coronavirus-outbreak-affect-russia-china-relations/>. Accessed on March 23, 2020.

increasingly reliant on China for medical supplies and related cargo. On the other hand, relations with Moscow have been frosty. The Sino-Belarusian economic relations threaten to displace Russia's vision for a regional bloc among former Soviet countries vis-à-vis its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) pet project. China is eyeing Belarus as a major hub of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the Eastern European country's Great Stone Industrial Park, a 112-sq-kilometre business centre just outside Minsk, "carries the distinction of being China's largest economic project abroad."²² The pandemic has opened Belarus with an opportunity to gradually reduce its dependence on Russia, even as Moscow has refrained from publicly expressing concern about it.

In fact, as China increasingly faces pushback in the Indo-Pacific and European theatres, the resultant outcome is a renewed interest in Eurasian affairs, a region where Russia's strategic influence is waning. Central Asia and Eastern Europe are vital transit hubs for China's BRI projects and much of its success rests with Russia's acquiescence to the same. As members of the Eurasian Economic Union are faced with financial turmoil, any life-support is likely to come from Chinese investments rather than Western ones unlike in the past. On that note, there is also the ever-present challenge of Western pressures on Russia's 'former Soviet space', however, now with a possible Chinese dimension. Some scholars argue that China's BRI projects in Central Asian countries, which were once under Soviet influence, has received a 'generally positive stance' by the US as a means to check Russian unilateralism and strengthen the region's sovereignty.²³

In the long term, the fallout from the pandemic on the trade and economic front is unlikely to translate into negative implications for Sino-Russian relations. Even before the pandemic struck, Russia and China had been pushing towards partnership and cooperation

22. Dimitri Simes, "China scores points over Russia with 'mask diplomacy' in Belarus", *Nikkei Asian Review*, May 17, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/China-scores-points-over-Russia-with-mask-diplomacy-in-Belarus>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

23. S. Frederick Starr, "US Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia and the South Caucasus", *International Studies*, vol. 56 (2-3), pp. 79-91, 10.1177/0020881719851916

on next-generation technologies like mass surveillance systems, facial recognition software, roll out of Huawei's 5G network, robotics, biotechnology, digital economy, etc. In the post COVID-19 age, the "combination of strict quarantine measures and lost oil revenues will lead to increased state centralization" by Russia aided by Chinese equipment.²⁴

Second, as was evident from the UNSC case, Russia and China continue to coordinate their policies in opposition to US and Western criticism. Even when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo alleged that Russia and China were behind the COVID-19 disinformation and fake news campaigns in Western countries, the response from both countries not only rubbished these claims but also stressed on the importance of global cooperation to mitigate the crisis. As far as geopolitical goals are concerned, Moscow hopes to recalibrate its relations with the West in the post COVID-19 world while Beijing continues to chip away at multilateral institutions at the expense of the US.

Third, Moscow's dependence on China would offset any losses and mitigate itself from risks associated with Western sanctions against the country since its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Now with the pandemic pushing Russia into an even bigger crisis, Chinese investments are crucial in order to keep afloat its great power ambitions. Despite concerns over Russia ceding strategic ground to China in what has increasingly become an asymmetrical relationship, both countries are invested in ensuring that their domestic economies bounce back from the drastic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, it should not be surprising if both China and Russia remain focused on adding firepower to the scale of their relationship through close economic cooperation. In the midst of the prevailing US-China economic rivalry, Russia is wary of hurting its interests and might avoid entanglements on the economic front.

However, the coronavirus impact on certain Russian sectors and the slowdown and growth of the Chinese economy underlines that

24. Reid Standish, "Pandemic Partnership: Coronavirus Clears Path for Deeper China-Russia Ties in Hi-Tech", RFE/RL, May 18, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pandemic-partnership-coronavirus-clears-path-for-deeper-china-russia-ties-in-hi-tech/30619246.html>. Accessed on June 4, 2020.

the strategic partnership is not immune to sudden disarray. Unlike the deep economic and strategic integration and people-to-people contact amongst Western countries, the Sino-Russian relationship is still dependent on overlapping interests. This leaves the door open for unilateral policies that might prove troublesome for long-term bilateral stability, as Russia's recent border closure and China's growing closeness to Belarus highlights. The relationship remains overly reliant on their mutual animosity towards the US. Although China officially designated Russia as its highest-level partner, the vast disparity in the respective size of their militaries and economies remains unaddressed. While the COVID-19 pandemic comes as a wake-up call to both sides on the limitations of their strategic partnership, the anti-West discourse is here to stay. In such a context, there is little scope for disruption in Sino-Russia relations.

UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA'S ZERO COVID-19 CASES NARRATIVE

An Analysis from the recent Media Reporting*

HINA PANDEY

There remains a widespread speculation about how North Korea—one of the countries with the most troubled healthcare system in the world—is handling its COVID-19 crisis. While the availability of information and real-time assessments all over the world about the pandemic sometimes range from overflowing amounts to a superfluous quantity, the opposite is true for the Hermit Kingdom. One can argue that little is known about the country and even less is known so far as the status of COVID-19 is concerned.

Dr. **Hina Pandey** is Associate Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

*Data is mined from publicly available media sources. Predominantly from: *The Pyongyang Times*, *KCNA Watch*, *NK News*, *Rodong Sinmun*, *Sputnik News*, etc. A focused media monitoring of COVID-19 related news from *Pyongyang Times* (DPRK's only English newspaper) has been conducted from February 1 to July 21, 2020. More than 150 articles have been read and analysed. Close to 80 have been referred to and cited including 52 in the references. To corroborate the information Google translation of *Rodong Sinmun* has also been utilised for some parts.

Much of the information is available through the Western media, as well as through the focused media monitoring of North Korean news sources; however, a gap in analysing the same remains. A quick survey and brief assessment therefore becomes necessary. In this context, the article is an attempt to bring forth three issues: (a) A status update of North Korea's COVID-19; (b) How is the country engaged in handling COVID-19 outbreak?; (c) Connecting the dots.

ZERO COVID-19 CASES

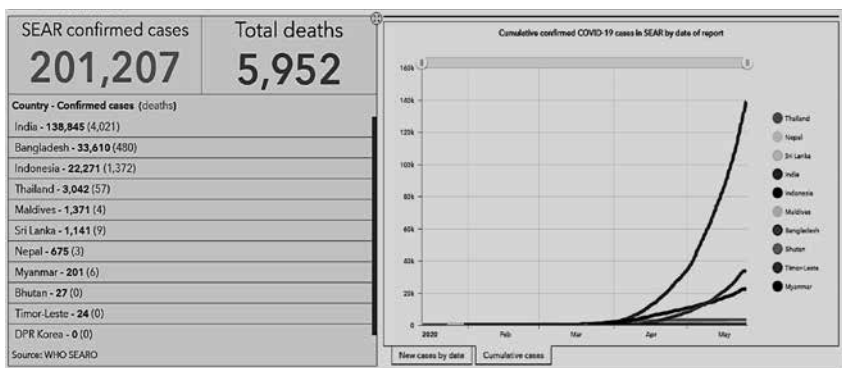
The Democratic People's Republic Korea (DPRK) that shares its borders with three former COVID-19 hot-spot countries (China, Russia and South Korea), one of them being a porous border, has claimed that it has successfully dodged the COVID-19 bullet. The State media has regularly painted a COVID-19 free picture and has claimed that its swift anti-pandemic efforts have kept a successful check on the outbreak of the pandemic in the country. In a recently (July) concluded meeting, the Supreme Leader even reaffirmed the media claims of not witnessing even a single case of COVID-19 in North Korea.¹

Interestingly, the latest WHO dataset (accessed on May 25, 2020) too indicates zero cases in North Korea, while many other countries in the same WHO South East Asian Region (SEAR) have been witnessing rising COVID-19 cases (see Figure 1).

Amidst the fact that global confirmed COVID-19 numbers stands at 5,206,614² cases as on May 25, 2020, with various countries such as the US, Russia, Brazil, the UK, Spain, Italy, Germany, Turkey and France (in that order) unfortunately leading the numbers, the North Korean claims of zero cases seem far from reality. It is noteworthy that the aforementioned countries, despite their geographical distance from China, seem to have surpassed the number of COVID-19 cases as compared to China (the pandemic's primary epicentre) which reported a total of 84,063³ confirmed

-
1. "All Is Well in North Korea: Kim Jong Un Maintains 0 Coronavirus Cases In Country", *Outlook*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/world-news-all-is-well-in-north-korea-kim-jong-un-maintains-0-coronavirus-cases-in-country/355921>. Accessed on July 20, 2020.
 2. Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Database by Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. Accessed on May 19, 2020.
 3. *Ibid.*

Figure 1: COVID-19 Situation in the WHO SEAR (region)



Source: WHO COVID-19 Dashboard for South East Asian Region (SEAR), <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/56d2642cb379485ebf78371e744b8c6a>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

cases. Additionally, within the Asian region countries such as India, Pakistan, Singapore, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Afghanistan (geographically closer to China) are currently grappling with the issue of flattening the curve. Thus, the claims of zero COVID-19 from North Korea from the same Asian region are difficult to fathom. Moreover due to the lack of credibility of the available information—most of which is propaganda dominated—the overall picture of North Korea’s COVID-19 reality seems rather confusing.

However, the North Korean narrative needs to be revisited if not accepted in toto because it is established that with adequate and strict preventive measures, the spread of the outbreak has been mitigated and even reported zero by a few countries. For instance “... there have been no deaths or local cases of human-to-human transmission in Mongolia ...”⁴ by May 2020. Additionally, Bhutan too (the

4. Anandsaikhan Nyamdavaa (2020), “Practice Makes Perfect? Mongolia’s COVID-19 Outbreak Drill”, *The Diplomat*, May 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/practice-makes-perfect-mongolias-covid-19-outbreak-drill/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020. *Cited/excerpted from source, “... So far, Mongolia has not seen any local transmission of COVID-19. The early response by the Mongolian authorities, closing borders on January 26, 2020, etc. including quarantine ... which was later increased to 21 days, has paid off. Thirty-nine Mongolian citizens and three foreign nationals out of 7,254 repatriated people so far have been diagnosed with COVID-19 during their stay in quarantine. There have been no deaths or local cases of human-to-human transmission in Mongolia to date...” and “Covid-19: Emergency Commission of Mongolia voted for extension of heightened state of readiness until

landlocked country between China and India) seemingly COVID-19 vulnerable has been able to contain the spread of the pandemic with only 27 confirmed cases⁵ reported on May 25, 2020. The country is even touted as a COVID-19 'success story'⁶ because of little evidence of community transmission. Similarly, various other countries such as "Turkmenistan, Marshal Islands, Kiribati including six others"⁷ have not reported any COVID-19 cases yet. The Indian states of Nagaland and Lakshadweep too remained COVID-19 free until May 24, 2020 while India almost reached the list of top 10 worst affected countries.⁸ Considering North Korea is an isolated country and that there have been only "few numbers of COVID-19 confirmed cases (less than 300) in the Chinese province of Liaoning and Jilin"⁹ bordering the country, the zero COVID-19 cases do not seem an impossibility. However, before furthering this claim, it remains imperative to get a clearer picture about the status of the epidemic within the country.

NORTH KOREA'S COVID-19 FIGHT

As per the recent reporting by *The Pyongyang Times*, the "global COVID-19 casualty toll neared 4 m" including zero COVID-19 cases in South Korea. No indication of any COVID-19 cases or casualty within the country was provided. In fact, until the first week of April, there were reportedly zero COVID-19 cases reported from the State Media.

June 30", *AKI Press*, May 25, 2020, https://akipress.com/news:642202:Covid-19_Emergency_Commission_of_Mongolia_voted_for_extension_of_heightened_state_of_readiness_until_June_30/. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

5. Sonam Ongmo and Tej Parikh (2020), "What Explains Bhutan's Success Battling COVID-19?" *The Diplomat*, May 8, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/what-explains-bhutans-success-battling-covid-19/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.
6. Surya Valliappan Krishna (2020), "Bhutan: A Coronavirus Success Story", *Carnegie India*, May 21, 2020, <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/05/21/bhutan-coronavirus-success-story-pub-81856>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.
7. "Which countries have not reported any coronavirus cases? Al Jazeera, May 22, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/countries-reported-coronavirus-cases-200412093314762.html>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.
8. Nikhil Aggarwal (2020), "The only Indian state which never reported any coronavirus case", *LiveMint*, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/the-only-indian-state-which-never-reported-any-coronavirus-case-11590294253053.html>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.
9. Charlie Zhu, Emma Dong, Jon Herskovitz, and Kanga Kong (2020), "Outbreak on North Korea Border Raises Doubts over Its Virus Toll", *The Bloomberg*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-10/chinese-city-near-north-korea-raises-virus-alert-xinhua-says>. Accessed on May 11, 2020.

Media reporting from February 1, 2020 to May 21, 2020 indicated that the DPRK initiated COVID-19 prevention efforts as early as February when the virus had spread to only 51 countries¹⁰ and was not even declared a pandemic by the WHO. Pyongyang has claimed that an active campaign to prevent COVID-19 in the country was already underway—even intensified—by the second week of February. A non-permanent Central Public Health Guidance Committee was established guiding all the ‘anti-epidemic’ efforts such as the broadcasting of information through the installation of electronic boards, public announcements, taking routine hygiene inspections, sterilisation drives at hospitals, schools, airports, harbours and isolation of suspected patients, etc. Medical checkpoints at various places were set up for examining suspected patients. Educational and childcare institutions too were paid special attention in terms of sterilisation in the month of February. School vacations were declared all over the country from February 20 to March. There were also reports of public amenities being shut down as of February 25. Other measures such as the inspection of quarantine of imported goods and materials were intensified at border areas as well as major ports. North Korea has claimed that “borders, airspace, waters and the areas along the Military Demarcation Line were completely blocked” and strict measures remained in place to ensure no inflow of COVID-19 carriers.¹¹

It is to be noted that by February the Red Cross Society in DPRK in close cooperation with the volunteers and doctors had begun conducting medical check-ups of suspected cases. By the second week of February the “non-permanent Central Public Health Guidance Committee of the DPRK” had planned to prolong the isolation period required for quarantine as a preventive strategy in the fight against COVID-19. The Presidium had, in fact, adopted to provisionally extend the isolation period to 30 days within the DPRK territory.¹²

10. WHO Situation Report—February 28, 2020, “Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report—39”, (Data reported as on February 28, 2020, 10 am CET), https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200228-sitrep-39-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=5bbf3e7d_. Accessed on May 24, 2020.

11. See Media Sources.

12. See Media Sources.

The anti-epidemic drive also included the participation of medical workers from various hospitals such as Pyongyang University of Medical Science, Kim Man Yu, and others. Interestingly, one report even stated that “researchers at the Pyongyang University of Medical Sciences even developed a potential COVID-19 remedy.”¹³ In terms of domestic efforts, news reporting has pointed out that emergency anti-epidemic work was further intensified in the month of March-April as well, including the extension of the quarantine of individuals. During the same time spring cleaning in the country was carried out focused on fighting the pandemic including the sterilisation of cash handling units (ATMs) of the Central Bank all over the country. Media reports suggest that they were sterilised and disinfected over three times a day. Additionally, the Sinuiju Cosmetics Factory in North Phyongan Province had begun developing sterilising products to be used as a disinfectant against the virus. The country’s COVID-19 preparedness included increasing the mass production of chlorine dioxide solution and other disinfectants. It was reported that over a hundred thousand officials of the Party and administrative organs were actively engaged in daily activities to prevent outbreak of COVID-19. Interestingly, recently the State media has even reported that the Ministry of Public Health was working on developing a vaccine against the disease.¹⁴

The Provinces of Jagang and North Hamgyong had already registered citizens who had visited foreign countries for a timely quarantine. The daily commute of passengers, cargos, border transport (railways) were reported to have been routinely and strictly supervised for anti-epidemic operations. Furthermore, it is clear from the reporting that DPRK took a regular note of the spread of the pandemic, including advisories/data released from the World Health Organisation (WHO), monitoring the increase of COVID-19 cases in China, the US, Russia, Italy, Spain, Japan, Turkey, Australia, Canada, Iran, France, etc. The country took note of negative economic consequences of the pandemic in mid-March including the anticipated global decline in the demand for oil. Some recent reports (May 7, 2020) continue to highlight that anti-epidemic efforts in the country

13. “Potential COVID remedy developed”, *The Pyongyang Times*, February 19, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33273>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.

14. See Media Sources.

have further been tightened in order to prevent the “infiltration of the epidemic” indicating that State media continues to maintain zero COVID-19 cases.¹⁵

Furthermore a recent survey of news articles (June 1-July 21, 2020) including *Pyongyang Times*, *Rodong Sinmun* and Voice of Korea, etc., has revealed a sparse COVID-19 related coverage. One of the prime reasons for this can be attributed to a possible status quo in containing the spread of COVID-19 within the country. In fact, during the 14th Meeting of Political Bureau of the 7th Central Committee of Worker’s Party of Korea (WPK), which was attended by the members of Central Emergency Anti-epidemic Headquarters of DPRK, the Supreme leader took a stock of past six months’ COVID-19 response in the country and said that, “we have thoroughly prevented the inroads of the malignant virus and maintained stable anti-epidemic situation despite the worldwide health crisis....”¹⁶ He further stressed to deepen the anti-COVID-19 responses as the pandemic still persists in the neighbouring countries. It is noteworthy that the anti-pandemic work continued in the month of July too, especially along the Military Demarcation Line and border and coastal areas. *Rodong Sinmun*, the foremost state newspaper even highlighted fighting COVID-19 as the topmost priority for the Worker’s Party. The construction of Pyongyang General Hospital as part of anti-epidemic work was even pushed ahead. Interestingly, as recent as July 21, *NK News* had reported that DPRK had tested “1,117 people for COVID-19 ... all tested negative....”¹⁷ Furthermore, DPRK also reportedly received a consignment of COVID-19 related aid from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), which was pending due to the closure

15. See Media Sources.

16. “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides 14th Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of 7th Central Committee of WPK”, Kim Il Sung University, July 3, 2020, http://www.ryongnamsan.edu.kp/univ/en/revolution_activity/7ef605fc8dba5425d6965fbd4c8fbe1f. Accessed on July 21, 2020.

17. Jeongmin Kim, “North Korea conducted more than 1,000 COVID-19 tests: All results ‘negative’”, *NK News*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/07/north-korea-has-tested-over-1000-people-for-covid-19-all-tested-negative-who/?t=1603176169211>. Accessed on July 22, 2020.

of the border since February.¹⁸ The North Korean State media has even highlighted that foreign media had praised North Korean anti-pandemic efforts. It specifically said that foreign media outlets including those of Nepal, Cambodia, Kuwait, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda devoted broad coverage to the anti-epidemic measures taken by the DPRK. Many admired the foresightedness of the leadership in successfully preventing the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

OBSERVATIONS

If one accepts the COVID-19 news reporting from DPRK at face value, the North Korean narrative does not seem impossible. However, counterclaims of the COVID-19 narrative defeats the assumption that North Korea may have dodged the COVID-19 bullet. Furthermore, scholars who observe North Korea too have expressed doubts about its claim. Jagannath Panda and Jina Kim argue that the country's efforts at hiding the COVID-19 numbers are politically motivated and might be a part of, "a wait-and-watch" strategy that includes disclosure of numbers to demand medical aid combined with a possible offer to resume talks."¹⁹ Additionally, any admission to how adversely North Korea has been affected by the pandemic would imply "acknowledging the hollowness of *Juche* philosophy (one of the founding philosophical pillars of the country)."²⁰

THE NUMBERS GAME AND COUNTERCLAIMS

It is important to take note that even with counterclaims, the real COVID-19 numbers can only be revealed with transparent nationwide testing. There is however one imaginable way in which the North Korean claim makes some sense. Notwithstanding the political

18. Jeongmin Kim, "Four months since first approval, shipment of COVID-19 aid enters North Korea", NK News, July 13, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/07/covid-19-test-kits-reach-north-korea-after-months-of-delay-ifrc/>. Accessed on July 21, 2020.

19. Jagannath Panda and Jina Kim, "What Does North Korea's Zero COVID-19 Claim Signify?" *38 North*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/04/jpandajkim042820/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

20. Jung H. Pak, "A Tale of Two Koreas In the Age of Coronavirus", April 13, 2020, *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/13/a-tale-of-two-koreas-in-the-age-of-coronavirus/>. Accessed on May 14, 2020.

motivations for not revealing the actual numbers, one can argue that North Korea might be considering only the 'local transmission' as well as 'community transmission' cases in its COVID-19 tally. In this manner confirmed cases reported outside of this, such as foreigners present and inbound travellers/citizens do not get counted as a part of the national tally. The more so because the possibility of these cases being kept as separate from the population exists. It is noteworthy that the North Korean approach to quarantine has been a mandatory state-run isolation of 15 days (later extended to 30 days). By the end of March, close to "... 5,400 people were released from quarantine ..."²¹ including 70 foreigners. Subsequently, a total number of 9,950 were reportedly in the State quarantine by April end, including 990 from the provinces of North Phyongan and 720 from the South Phyongan. Nearly half of them were reported to be released from the isolation.²² In fact, as per reports since December 31, 2019, approximately "... 25,351 people have been released from quarantine including 382 foreigners..." by the end of April.²³

Interestingly, the status and number of individuals quarantined itself raises doubts about the COVID-19 free narrative. Only a few sources are available to know the status of North Korean COVID-19 reality such as the WHO's official data, yet that is dependent on the information shared by the host country. The gap remains, for instance, the official website of WHO reports nil cases, (cited above), however, some media reports have highlighted that, "... as per the weekly country update of WHO, approximately 709 people in North Korea had been tested for COVID-19, none confirmed as positive as on 2 April 2020."²⁴ This stands in contrast with what the Russian

21. Charlie Zhu, Emma Dong, Jon Herskovitz and Kanga Kong, Bloomberg, see note 8.

22. Colin Zwirko, "Coronavirus Related Restrictions Lifted on Foreigners in Pyongyang: Embassy", NK News, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/04/coronavirus-related-restrictions-lifted-on-foreigners-in-pyongyang-embassy/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

23. Jeongmin Kim, "740 people in North Korea tested for COVID-19, still no confirmed cases: WHO New WHO figures suggest just 31 have been tested since the beginning of the month", NK News, April 22, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/04/740-people-in-north-korea-tested-for-covid-19-still-no-confirmed-cases-who/?t=1589196821877>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

24. Jeongmin Kim, "Coronavirus Related Aid Expected to Arrive in North Korea Later this Month: IFRC", NK News, April 13, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/04/coronavirus-related-aid-expected-to-arrive-in-north-korea-later-this-month-ifrc/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

media has reported that, "... cases of COVID-19 infection have been detected in the country as early as March 2020 ..."25 The *NK News'* COVID-19 tracker too suggests that "... since early February COVID-19 cases have been emerging inside the country including military doctors...."26

Additionally, much can be inferred from the kind of aid North Korea has received in its fight against COVID-19. Medical aid in the form of supplies including masks, gloves, goggles, hand hygiene products, and antibiotics had reportedly arrived by March 30.27 During the same time "UNICEF, Doctors without Borders, The Swiss Aid and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) ... have been actively engaged in North Korea."28 However, it cannot be pointed with certainty whether their operations are specifically COVID-19 focused. Furthermore, this is to be read in the light of ICRC's Director General Robert Mardini dismissing any reports of North Korea secretly approaching ICRC for help to fight the pandemic.29

Finally, it has to be reiterated that so far as the status of COVID-19 in any country is concerned, the facts on ground change on an hourly basis. Viewed in this context, any approximation of numbers especially in the case of North Korea seems questionable. However, despite this, a comprehensive assessment of North Korea's COVID-19 reality needs to include these pointers. First, the country has acquired some experience from the past in fighting epidemics such as SARS and Ebola in 2003 and 2014, respectively. Second, it is important to note that "... North Korea emerged from

25. "North Korean Lecturers Admit to COVID-19 Cases Despite Official Zero Toll—Reports", Sputnik News, April 18, 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/202004181079012414-north-korean-lecturers-admit-to-covid-19-cases-despite-official-zero-toll--reports/>. Accessed on May 14, 2020.

26. "Coronavirus in North Korea: COVID-19 Tracker", NK News, May 4, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/coronavirus-in-north-korea-tracker/facts>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

27. Jeongmin Kim, "MSF, UNICEF coronavirus-related medical supplies arrive in North Korea", March 30, 2020, NK News, March 30, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/03/msf-unicef-supplies-for-coronavirus-related-equipment-arrive-in-north-korea/>. Accessed on May 11, 2020.

28. Ibid.

29. "International Committee of Red Cross Says North Korea Not Asking for Help amid Coronavirus", *UNI India*, April 23, 2020, <http://www.uniindia.com/news/world/health-icrc-covid-19-north-korea/1966126.html>. Accessed on May 14, 2020.

SARS and Ebola unscathed ...”³⁰ Lastly, North Korea’s contact with the outside world remains negligible and it was perhaps the only country to shut its borders as early as January 2020. The possibility of swift, strict and preventive action against the spread of the pandemic translating into mitigating COVID-19 crisis at the very beginning cannot be ignored.

Finding certain answers to whether North Korea has dodged the COVID-19 bullet or not seems difficult without a transparent record of nation-wise testing; additionally any data available is bound to change given the dynamic reality of the subject itself. At present three realities makes some sense: (a) North Korea may have been able to contain the spread of outbreak with early preventive measures, (b) However, the real numbers might be revealed later if the country is following a strategy of wait and watch, (c) The numbers are bound to change in case of reopening of borders in which case cooperation on COVID-19 prevention might be sought by North Korea sooner than later.

Media Sources

1. “Nation out for combat against novel CoV infection”, *The Pyongyang Times*, February 1, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=32997>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
 2. “Measures tightened to prevent novel coronavirus infection”, *The Pyongyang Times*, February 6, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33066>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
 3. “DPRK intensifies prevention of novel CoV infection”, *The Pyongyang Times*, February 9, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33122>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
 4. “Nation out for combat against novel CoV infection”, *The Pyongyang Times*, February 1, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=32997>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
 5. “Measures tightened to prevent novel coronavirus infection”, *The Pyongyang Times*, February 6, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33066>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
 6. “DPRK intensifies prevention of novel CoV infection”, *The Pyongyang Times*, February 9, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33122>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
 7. “Emergency anti-epidemic measures ratchet up”, *The Pyongyang Times*, April 20, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1587398507-147265140/emergency-anti-epidemic-measures-ratchet-up/>. Accessed on May 19, 2020.
 8. “Spread of COVID-19 persists worldwide, death toll keeps soaring”, *The Pyongyang Times*, April 11, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33981>. Accessed on May 19, 2020.
-
30. Esther S. Im and Andray Abrahamian, “Pandemics and Preparation the North Korean Way”, 38 *North*, <https://www.38north.org/2020/02/eimaabrahamian022020/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

9. "Epidemic spreads on over the globe", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 22, 2020, kcnawatch.org/newstream/1584849647-547738290/epidemic-spreads-on-over-the-globe/. Accessed on May 17, 2020.
10. "COVID cases amount to 75,000 worldwide", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 21, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1582275680-914347551/covid-cases-amount-to-75-000-worldwide/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
- 11.
12. "COVID-19 outbreak almost put under control in China", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 31, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33846>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
13. "Italy cracks down on speculation in anti-COVID-19 products", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 1, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1583035308-171470413/italy-cracks-down-on-speculation-in-anti-covid-19-products/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
14. "COVID-19 cases still on increase in China", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 1, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33456>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
15. "Deadly virus infection grows in south Korea", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 1, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33459>. Accessed on March 20, 2020.
16. "Putin orders new anti-epidemic strategy", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 18, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1584522079-417014291/putin-orders-new-anti-epidemic-strategy/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
17. "Anti-COVID measures tightened in border and MDL areas", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 2, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33461>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
18. "Nation keeps prevention campaign up", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 3, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1583229656-753005734/nation-keeps-prevention-campaign-up/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
19. "Efforts to ensure sufficient supply of daily necessities during anti-COVID campaign", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 7, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1583575260-978399080/efforts-to-ensure-sufficient-supply-of-daily-necessities-during-anti-covid-campaign/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
20. "New pandemic sweeps through world", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 13, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1584093646-586632488/new-pandemic-sweeps-through-world/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
21. "Stricter anti-epidemic measures adopted", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 14, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1584180102-468709364/stricter-anti-epidemic-measures-adopted/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
22. "Additional anti-epidemic measures taken in different countries", *The Pyongyang Times*, May 7, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1588842060-114111284/additional-anti-epidemic-measures-taken-in-different-countries/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
23. "Cash disinfected", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 28, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1585393306-73420268/cash-disinfected/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
24. "Educational and childcare facilities take anti-COVID steps", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 27, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1582797648-531932125/educational-and-childcare-facilities-take-anti-covid-steps/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
25. "Suspected persons continue to be released from quarantine" *The Pyongyang Times*, March 27, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1585306845-661391094/suspected-persons-continue-to-be-released-from-quarantine/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
26. "COVID-19 claims about 20 000 lives worldwide", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 26, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1585213245-112259485/covid-19-claims-about-20-000-lives-worldwide/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.

27. "Spring clean focuses on fight against pandemic", *The Pyongyang Times*, April 7, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1586250098-463440875/spring-clean-focuses-on-fight-against-pandemic/>. Accessed on May 19, 2020.
28. "Pyongyang citizens turn out for spring clean", *The Pyongyang Times*, April 1, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1585731733-318585050/pyongyang-citizens-turn-out-for-spring-clean/>. Accessed on May 19, 2020.
29. "COVID-19 seriously affects global economy", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 25, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1585126901-304588713/covid-19-seriously-affects-global-economy/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
- 30.
31. "Various disinfecting goods produced", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 23, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1584957651-466299043/various-disinfecting-goods-produced/>. Accessed on May 17, 2020.
32. "Antiseptic solution, disinfectants mass-produced", *The Pyongyang Times*, March 23, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33724>. Accessed on May 17, 2020.
33. "Anti-epidemic work stepped up to check inflow of pandemic", *The Pyongyang Times*, May 7, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1588298453-171365990/anti-epidemic-work-stepped-up-to-check-inflow-of-pandemic/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
34. "Anti-epidemic work intensified in DPRK according to thought-out plan", *The Pyongyang Times*, May 9, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1589018511-946537466/anti-epidemic-work-intensified-in-dprk-according-to-thought-out-plan/>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
35. "Potential COVID remedy developed", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 19, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33273>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
36. "WHO chief fears widespread COVID-19 cases", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 28, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1582887678-695534595/who-chief-fears-widespread-covid-19-cases/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
37. "Educational and childcare facilities take anti-COVID steps", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 27, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1582797648-531932125/educational-and-childcare-facilities-take-anti-covid-steps/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
38. "Public amenities shut down to keep off COVID-19", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 27, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33400>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
39. "Multi-use sterilizing products released", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 27, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1582797647-520889450/multi-use-sterilizing-products-released/>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
40. "Inspection and quarantine of imports tightened", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 27, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33407>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
41. "All nurseries in the DPRK shut from Feb 24 as part of nationwide emergency steps to combat COVID-19", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 24, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33344>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
42. "Pyongyang intensifies anti-epidemic work against COVID-19", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 24, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33358>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
43. "Anti-COVID fight gains momentum in DPRK", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 22, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33328>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
44. "Monthly school shutdown declared due to COVID-19", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 20, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33285>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
45. "DPRK Red Cross Society joins intense combat against COVID-19", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 13, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33199>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.

46. "Quarantine period against COVID-19 to be prolonged", *The Pyongyang Times*, February 13, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=33189>. Accessed on May 18, 2020.
47. "US Military Accuses North Korea of Lying about Coronavirus Infection Rate of Zero", *Sputnik News*, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/202003171078600763-us-military-accuses-north-korea-of-lying-about-coronavirus-infection-rate-of-zero/>. Accessed May 14, 2020.
48. "North Korea Still Has Zero Confirmed Cases of COVID-19: Here's Why", *Sputnik News*, March 2, 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/202003021078454563-north-korea-still-has-zero-confirmed-cases-of-covid-19-heres-why/>. Accessed on May 15, 2020.
49. "Anti-epidemic Measures Re-examined and Toughened in DPRK", *KCNA Watch*, July 5, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1594011683-982841339/anti-epidemic-measures-reexamined-and-toughened-in-dprk/>. Accessed on July 21, 2020.
50. "DPRK Further Intensifies Anti-epidemic Campaign", *KCNA Watch*, July 5, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1593925462-942483267/dprk-further-intensifies-anti-epidemic-campaign/>. Accessed on July 20, 2020.
51. "Rodong Sinmun on Most Important Affair of WPK", *KCNA Watch*, July 10, 2020, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1594373590-378432874/rodong-sinmun-on-most-important-affair-of-wpk/>. Accessed on July 21, 2020.
52. "State Emergency Anti-Epidemic Steps Taken in DPRK", *DPRK Today*, July 11, 2020, <https://dprktoday.com/abroad/news/23222?lang=>. Accessed on July 21, 2020.
53. "Anti-epidemic work intensifies with schools, service amenities open", *Pyongyang Times*, June 2, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=34534>. Accessed on July 20, 2020.
54. "Foreign personages, media appreciate DPRK's anti-epidemic work", *Pyongyang Times*, June 5, 2020, <http://www.pyongyangtimes.com.kp/?bbs=34581>. Accessed on July 20, 2020.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC PROMOTES CHINA'S HEALTH SILK ROAD!

ANU SHARMA

The 'China model' of foreign investment and assistance through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has taken precedence in international politics since Xi Jinping announced the BRI project in 2013. BRI has become the centre point of the Chinese strategic thinking as well as the grand idea that aspires to connect the Asian, African and European continents through a myriad of connectivity and infrastructure projects. BRI has pledged infrastructure investment in roads, ports, energy, and telecommunications as part of physical connectivity worth one trillion dollars. Also, China is pushing its way into building the Digital Silk Road and Health Silk Road (HSR) in order to boost its bold vision of economic development.

China's HSR first appeared in a speech given by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2016 in Uzbekistan. But this concept of HSR can be traced back to a document prepared by China's health authorities in 2015.¹ The document laid out a three-year proposal (2015–2017) to promote the BRI through cooperation in the healthcare sector.

Ms. **Anu Sharma** is Associate Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. "Xi Jinping: Working together to create a green, healthy, intellectual and peaceful Silk Road", *Xinhua*, June 22, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-06/22/c_1119094645.htm. Accessed on June 16, 2020.

However, the sheer significance of this initiative has become more prominent and come into perspective after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic across the world. Before COVID-19, China's HSR was quietly progressing in some areas, although unevenly.

As the COVID-19 outbreak increases around the world with the countries struggling to respond and equip themselves with the necessary means and equipment to control this pandemic within their borders, it has provided China an opportunity to establish itself as a significant player in the public health sector, introducing a unique kind of power diplomacy in global politics. Even though China has been seen as the country responsible for the pandemic, China has positioned itself well by supplying the health and medical equipment to various countries across the globe despite the ongoing US-China trade war. Furthermore, on the domestic front, the activities of the Chinese propaganda machinery, working in tandem with China's Communist Party's response to the pandemic, seem like a concerted campaign in order to promote Beijing's dominance, interests and influence. In this context, this paper will analyse the main constituents and the reach of China's HSR. It will also try to examine whether there exists a relationship between the outbreak of COVID-19 and China's push for its HSR diplomacy.

THE HEALTH SILK ROAD

The HSR component of BRI was a lesser known fact to the global community and academicians working on China's BRI plans. The aim of HSR is dedicated to facilitating communication among countries in order to prevent and control infectious diseases, create a platform for proper health services and health industry, training of personnel and medical research along with developing international assistance for the countries in need. However, even after having clearly laid down the aims of the HSR, little effort was being done in this regard—both commercially and strategically—from the Chinese side to promote this.² Although BRI is primarily a strategic and economic initiative, it has health security dimensions linked to it. The purpose of the

2. Andreea Brînză, "Some Say China's Belt and Road Helped Create This Pandemic. Can It Prevent the Next One?" *The Diplomat*, April 2, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/some-say-chinas-belt-and-road-helped-create-this-pandemic-can-it-prevent-the-next-one/>. Accessed on June 16, 2020.

2016 announcement of HSR was the strategic plan of the Chinese policymakers to promote the development of health and safeguard health security on the Silk Road. In August 2017, China hosted a high-level BRI meeting that discussed areas such as health security, policy and systems, hospital management, medical research, etc.³

The COVID-19 virus, which eventually became a pandemic infecting almost every country of the world, is believed to have originated from China's Wuhan province before spreading to the rest of the world. As the pandemonium over the shortage of masks and ventilators mounted, Beijing started sending aid and donations to countries struck by COVID-19. Interestingly, any discussion related to China's HSR was negligible as most people were unaware of its existence. In fact, HSR is a health mechanism planned to work simultaneously with the Digital Silk Road as another branch of the BRI. The aim was to utilise the logistics deployed along the BRI land and sea corridors to promote HSR; and it sounded practical. However, the progress remained slow. The implementation of HSR only picked up pace and was properly implemented to its full capacity after the pandemic broke out. As mentioned earlier, HSR was formally launched in 2017 as the 'medical corridor' when the Chinese leader signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a means to improve the situation of public health in the BRI partner countries.⁴ President Xi visualised China as a leader in medical sciences and highlighted the need to promote a "community of common destiny for mankind."⁵ It has been time and again mentioned that BRI is a purely economic and strategic initiative of China. The HSR was a part of China's 'Healthy China 2030' plan which considers health as one of the national policy priorities. The extended objective of this is also

3. Kun Tang, et al., "China's Silk Road and Global Health", *The Lancet*, vol. 390, December 9, 2017, <http://www.thelancet.com>. Accessed on June 16, 2020.

4. An Baijie, "WHO, China Sign Pact Establishing 'Health Silk Road'", *China Daily*, January 19, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017wef/2017-01/19/content_27993857.htm. Accessed on June 16, 2020.

5. Christian Lindmeier, "New vision and strengthened partnership for WHO and China", *World Health Organisation*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/21-08-2017-new-vision-and-strengthened-partnership-for-who-and-china>. Accessed on June 17, 2020.

related to promoting global health security and development, especially along the corridors of BRI. Through this, China desires to build HSR as the core component of BRI, eventually leading to its extensive engagement in global health development.⁶ In the past decade, the world has witnessed the outbreak of a number of complex epidemics as well as natural disasters with a rising impact on both human health and the economy. With the growth in the commercial trade and increased people-to-people exchanges between countries after the implementation of BRI, China had anticipated the increase in the transmission of infectious diseases eventually leading to an increased burden for local medical systems of the BRI-partner countries.⁷ Also, there is an apprehension of transmission of these into Chinese peripheries also. This clearly explains China's renewed initiative and push for its HSR.

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has brought China's HSR to centre stage. Even though China is continuously being criticised for mismanaging this crisis, eventually leading it to become a pandemic, however, China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy'⁸ has made it push its HSR initiative with renewed vigour and its public health diplomacy has gone into overdrive. With soft power and people-to-people diplomacy becoming the focal point of Beijing's foreign policymaking process, the resurrection of HSR has become the central aim of this process. Through this pandemic, the BRI infrastructure network is being portrayed as the mechanism through which medical and humanitarian aid can be delivered, not just to BRI partner nations, but to all of the other affected nations also. Furthermore, Beijing has been quick to take action and delivering the protective suits, face masks and test kits to countries in Africa, Italy and Spain through the

6. Jin Chen, et al., "Combating Infectious Disease Epidemics through China's Belt and Road Initiative", *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases (US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health)*, vol. 13, no. 4, April 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6472722/>. Accessed on June 17, 2020.

7. Ibid.

8. Wolf Warrior Diplomacy—Wolf Warrior 1 and 2 are blockbuster Chinese action movies promoting pride and patriotism among Chinese viewers. Based on this, the 'wolf warrior diplomacy' refers to offensive policies developed and promoted by Chinese diplomats and leaders to defend Chinese national interests. This style of diplomacy is taking precedence in Chinese policymaking during the COVID-19 crisis and promoting Chinese values and ideals as well as securing commercial and economic gains.

already established BRI network.⁹ The next section discusses in detail China's health diplomacy around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHINA'S HSR DIPLOMACY

Through COVID-19 pandemic, China is very carefully trying to calibrate its health strategy and making its supply chains working in overdrive to supply medicines and other health-related items to various pandemic affected nations. With BRI connectivity corridors being the delivery channel, it seems that Beijing has doubled the pace on globalisation 2.0.¹⁰ There is no doubt that Beijing is vying for global health leadership during this pandemic. In certain cases, the medical supplies are also being delivered by the companies engaged in BRI projects such as Huawei or China Communications Construction Company. In some other cases, the medical supplies are being made on a bilateral basis, mostly delivered through local Chinese embassies in countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines and Greece.¹¹ Chinese propaganda ministry is already packaging China's 'medical diplomacy' activities during the pandemic under the rubric of the HSR. These are signs that eventually Beijing will slowly and carefully redirect the HSR as a mainstay of the BRI after the COVID-19 outbreak. Just like the BRI—a highly ambitious venture without a detailed blueprint—there are chances that HSR will be strong on rhetoric, whose mainstay will be related to the concrete implementation of projects.¹²

9. Andre Wheeler, "Can the Health Silk Road Intervention Save China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from COVID-19 Geopolitical Fallout?" *Silk Road Briefing*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/04/07/can-health-silk-road-intervention-save-chinas-belt-road-initiative-bri-covid-19-geopolitical-fallout/>. Accessed on June 17, 2020.
10. In economic terms, globalisation 2.0 refers to the flow of capital, goods and labour across the borders. It was launched in the 1980s. In this, the BRI has played a significant role in promoting China's globalisation 2.0 agenda. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has provided a new spin to China's globalisation initiatives sending them into overdrive as the BRI projects took a hit due to the spread of the pandemic across the globe. The main characteristics of this globalisation 2.0 are also related to the fiscal and financial crisis in Europe and the US.
11. Kirk Lancaster, Michael Rubin and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Mapping China's Silk Road", *CFR*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/mapping-chinas-health-silk-road>. Accessed on June 18, 2020.
12. Ngeow Chow Bin, "COVID-19 Speeds Up China's 'Health Silk Road'", *East Asia Forum*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/26/covid-19-speeds-up-chinas-health-silk-road/>. Accessed on June 18, 2020.

In early February 2020, the Chinese government had taken the initiative to nationalise control of the production and distribution of medical supplies within China. Concerned about shortages and its inability to contain the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government transferred authority over the production and distribution of medical supplies from the Ministry of Information Industry and Technology (MIIT) to another Chinese state agency, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), which is also the most authoritative central economic planning ministry of China. NDRC role in this has been related to the requisitioning, medical manufacturing, and logistics down to the factory level; as well as directing the production and distribution of all medical-related production, including American companies' production lines that are operative in China, for its domestic usage. In response to these government directives, foreign firms with significant production capacity in China, including 3M, Foxconn and General Motors, shifted significant essentials of their operations to manufacturing medical PPE kits. By late February 2020, China had increased the face mask production—both basic surgical masks and N95 masks—from initially being 20 million a day to over 100 million a day.¹³ Related to this also is China's 'province for country' initiative in which a province of China is responsible for providing for both material medical assistance and health expertise to the paired country. This clearly demonstrates China's low-profile manner of pushing its HSR idea amid the growing COVID-19 outbreak.

Medical supplies from China to other nations around the world began in March 2020 after the pace of pandemic slowed down a bit in China. Its medical industry went into overdrive to supply medical equipment and aid to Sri Lanka, Nepal, Turkey, Africa, Sierra Leone, Brazil, countries of South East Asia, West Asian and European Nations by late March 2020. The batch of medical aid and supplies included COVID-19 test kits, personal protective equipment (PPEs), N95 masks, protective goggles and surgical masks.¹⁴ According to

13. "COVID-19: China's Medical Supply Chains and Broader Trade Issues", April 6, 2020, *Congressional Research Service*, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46304>. Accessed on June 18, 2020.

14. "Xinhua Headlines: China returns solidarity with Europe in COVID-19 battle", *Xinhua*, March 20, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/20/c_138898996.htm; "China offers medical supplies to Sri Lanka", *Xinhua*, April 30, 2020, <http://>

Chinese state media agency, Xinhua, “statistics from the customs showed that the value of Hunan’s exports of medical equipment increased by 42.6 percent to 120 million yuan (approximately 16.9 million dollars) in March 2020.”¹⁵ According to China Global Television Network (CGTN), “From March 1, 2020, to April 4, 2020, China exported about 1.4 billion dollars’ worth of major epidemic prevention materials, which included 3.86 billion face masks, 37.52 million protective gowns, 2.41 million infrared thermometers, 16,000 ventilators, 2.84 million boxes of novel coronavirus detection reagents and 8.41 million pairs of goggles to countries across the world.”¹⁶ However, international relations experts and media houses around the world are sceptical of Chinese venture to supply medical supplies. Setting aside the publicity value of providing the medical equipment in a time of crisis to BRI partner countries through rail and road network clearly depicts Beijing’s resolution to keep the values of BRI projects intact through person-to-person connections between China and the rest of the world.¹⁷

President Xi’s revival of HSR came at a time when the Chinese government is waging a propaganda battle to deflect global criticism related to its initial suppression of information and slow response to the pandemic at the onset of a virus outbreak in Wuhan. To counter this mounting criticism, Beijing had launched a two-pronged strategy to exculpate its role in the spread of this pandemic and curtail anti-China sentiment. Beijing is trying to do this through

www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/30/c_139021686.htm; “China aids 18 African countries with medical supplies to fight COVID-19”, *Xinhua*, April 6, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/06/c_138951984.htm; “Emergency medical supplies donated by China arrive in Nepal to combat COVID-19”, *Xinhua*, March 29, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/29/c_138928533.htm; “Across China: Central China province joins global COVID-19 fight”, *Xinhua*, April 22, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/22/c_138998941.htm. Accessed on June 18, 2020.

15. “Across China: Central China province joins global COVID-19 fight”, *Xinhua*, April 22, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/22/c_138998941.htm. Accessed on June 18, 2020.
16. “China Exports Medical Supplies to Fight COVID-19”, *CGTN*, April 9, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-09/China-is-willing-to-provide-medical-supplies-to-other-countries-PycamD9Fny/index.html>. Accessed on June 19, 2020.
17. Wade Shepherd, “China’s ‘Health Silk Road’ Gets a Boost from COVID-19”, *Forbes*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2020/03/27/chinas-health-silk-road-gets-a-boost-from-covid-19/#44a9f5f56043>. Accessed on June 19, 2020.

an intense publicity initiative for its medical assistance offers, and engaging with the US in a public debate. Chinese officials and state media have levied counter-accusations against the US regarding the origin of the virus. In response to Beijing counter-accusations, the Trump administration has countered with rhetorical escalation. However, struggling with the mounting COVID-19 deaths and infectious cases, along with public outrage related to domestic political issues, the Trump administration has failed to attract international support for its narrative. Additionally, the usual supporters of the American initiative from Europe are also reeling under the drastic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an attempt to counter the Trump administration's referral of COVID-19 as 'Wuhan Virus', Beijing has been eagerly highlighting the lack of role and support of the American leadership for its allies around the world. However, it does not measure down China's role in the spread of this pandemic.

Chinese efforts to push for HSR have not been smooth. China faced the backlash for reports related to hoarding medical supplies as the crisis mounted in January 2020. Added to this the recent spate of criticism against the defective Chinese equipment and medical supplies have added to Beijing's woes. This began with Spain's claims of faulty Chinese products in the last week of March 2020 and urged China to recall about 58,000 inaccurate COVID-19 test kits, and was followed by Turkey, the Netherlands and Australia. Chinese counterparts have been quick to deny these allegations.¹⁸ In an attempt to mitigate the fallout, China's Ministry of Commerce declared that future exports of medical masks, thermometers, protective clothing, testing kits and ventilators must be certified in China as well as comply with the standards of the importing nation.¹⁹

18. Alan Weedon, "China's Coronavirus Supplies are Being Rejected—How Do We Ensure Quality in a Pandemic", ABC News, April 6, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-04/china-coronavirus-covid-19-medical-supplies-recalled-regulation/12105110?nw=0>. Accessed on June 20, 2020.

19. "Spotlight: China refutes smears on quality of medical supplies, improves export management", *Xinhua*, April 3, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/03/c_138944093.htm. Accessed on June 20, 2020.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese government may just be wiping the fine dust off the Health Silk Road concept to take advantage of it in this moment of global upheaval. The HSR narrative definitely serves a domestic role being advantageous to the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Beijing's display of its conspicuous role in providing medical aid and public health facilities to nations around the world during the COVID-19 crisis is a means of displaying the responsible behaviour of the Chinese government in reacting to this global pandemic and shrugging off any responsibility related to the outbreak of this pandemic from the Chinese province. In such a scenario, HSR activities might also serve to mitigate concern within China as the place of origin of the novel coronavirus, using redemptive displays of aid and support to compensate for harm done. Furthermore, through HSR, there are chances that China is trying to resurrect its global image that has been dampened by the pandemic outbreak. China realises the disadvantage of pushing this concept aggressively, especially in the Western world. It has emerged to Beijing's dismay—even though not intended—that the pandemic has acted as a catalyst in deteriorating relationships with most Western countries. With the US and Europe preoccupation with domestic crisis and the pandemic respectively, China is being provided with a chance to turn the tables in its favour by delivering medical aid around the world. Beijing is determined to win the post-pandemic narrative, while the Western nations continue their struggle due to the economic, political and societal fallouts related to the outbreak. Pushing HSR in the current scenario may not be an achievable aim, contrary to what Beijing thinks. With various nations aligning in order to strengthen their domestic laws to ward off China's predatory policies, it seems an uphill task for Beijing's policymakers. At the same time, it can also become the real test for China's core soft diplomacy and resurrection of the HSR. It also depends on how well Beijing is able to sell this message in an environment where there is increasing scepticism over China's capacity to integrate the local community participation in BRI projects through HSR. The outbreak of this pandemic has

demonstrated the loopholes in the public health facilities provided by both the developed and developing nations to their people as well as the dangerous face of globalisation and the major weakness of the BRI. If the BRI had actually been designed as a network of countries able to share anything from health technologies to information and expertise, it would have helped China in achieving its aspirations of being a major responsible player in world politics.

COVID-19 AND ITS FALLOUT IN AFGHANISTAN

SAURAV SARKAR

Afghanistan has so far recorded relatively moderate numbers of coronavirus cases, but certainly there is the potential for the crisis to explode due to ongoing internal conflicts and an extremely weak healthcare system. The country is already struggling with almost two-decades of insurgency and terrorism activities. At the time of writing this paper, Afghanistan recorded around 32,324 COVID-19 cases with 819 deaths¹ signifying a 2.53 percent death rate. The pandemic also endangers prospects for peace in Afghanistan, as it came soon after the US-Taliban agreement in February, and with the intra-Afghan negotiations proposed to be held in the near future, the situation is likely to become even more challenging. In this already delicate peace process, the coronavirus could offer some political opportunities for peacemakers, but additional complications are more likely to be damaging than constructive. Afghanistan faces several challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: it threatens to undermine the country's peace process, overwhelm its healthcare system, and cut down economic output by 17 percent by 2023, according to a UNDP assessment of how COVID-19 might affect Afghanistan.²

Mr. **Saurav Sarkar** is Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. Ministry of Public Health, "Afghanistan COVID-19 cases online dashboard", <http://covid.moph-dw.org/#/>. Accessed on July 3, 2020.
2. United Nations (UN) Development Programme, "Pandemic threatens Afghanistan's health system, economy, and peace process, UNDP study finds", June 18, 2020,

Afghanistan's porous borders make tracing and preventing the virus' spread from neighbouring countries virtually impossible. Associated social stigma and misinformation deter those with symptoms from seeking treatment, and Afghan households typically host large, multigenerational families, making calls for social distancing unrealistic. At even greater risk are Afghanistan's four million displaced people, who are too occupied with trying to survive poverty and upheaval to worry about COVID-19. Afghanistan is especially vulnerable because of its weak infrastructure and poor social cohesion after 40 years of war, along with a large influx of refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan—without proper quarantine and containment measures in place. The government also lacks revenue and resources to mitigate the pandemic on its own.

PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGES

Afghanistan's first case, a returnee from the city of Qom in Iran, was recorded in Herat province, bordering Iran, on February 24.³ Herat has since become the epicentre of COVID-19 cases in Afghanistan⁴ because of it being one of the important border provinces with Iran. Millions of Afghans live in Iran, often travelling by road across the border for work or personal business.

In February 2020, Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) designated the Afghan Japan Hospital in Kabul as Kabul's primary COVID-19 treatment centre. However, the hand sanitiser procured by the MoPH and used in the hospital was tested and found to have zero alcohol content. According to hospital staff, the sanitiser has since been replaced with one provided by the World Health Organization (WHO).⁵

https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/Pandemic_threatens_Afghanistan_health_system_economy_and_peace_process.html. Accessed on June 19, 2020.

3. "Afghanistan confirms first coronavirus case in province bordering Iran", Reuters, February 24, 2020, <https://in.reuters.com/article/china-health-afghanistan/afghanistan-confirms-first-coronavirus-case-in-province-bordering-iran-idINKCN20I0M3>. Accessed on May 30, 2020.
4. "Herat struggles to implement lockdown", *The Hindu*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/coronavirus-herat-struggles-to-implement-lockdown/article31439337.ece>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
5. Andrew Quilty, "With Fake Hand Sanitizer and 12 Ventilators, Afghanistan Expects Millions of Coronavirus Cases", *The Intercept*, April 3, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 10, 2020.

Afghanistan is struggling to safely take in the more than 271,000 people who have returned from Iran and Pakistan since January amidst the pandemic. A major shortcoming hindering an effective response to the pandemic is the low capacity for testing and lack of PPE kits and ventilators. The global shortage of ventilators is a problem and their high price of US\$ 30,000 to US\$ 50,000 on the international market means many poorer countries have difficulty in affording them. Nine testing centres established since January have a daily capacity of 100-150 tests each. The WHO gave Afghanistan 1,500 testing kits, but only two laboratories in the country were initially equipped with equipment that could process the test samples. There are also plans to increase the number of testing laboratories to twelve.⁶

However, there is a significant shortage of trained lab technicians and more testing kits are urgently needed. As of July, Afghanistan had conducted 74,287 tests⁷ for a population of 37 million (meaning 241 tests per 100,000 population). According to the MoPH the testing remains limited to 2,000 people per day, but they are receiving between 10,000 and 20,000 samples each day.⁸ The country's central public laboratory can now process 200 to 300 samples every 24 hours, while other laboratories can process 150 daily in Herat, 100 in Balkh, 100 to 150 in Nangarhar, and 120 to 150 in Kandahar province.⁹ Low levels of testing indicate there are "substantially" more COVID-19 cases than the official figures, according to WHO representative for Afghanistan, Dr. Rik Peeperkorn. Almost 50 percent of all tests conducted so far have been positive, one of the highest rates in the world.¹⁰ The MoPH assessed that the virus has spread to 29 of 34 Afghan provinces, first as a result of a large number of returnees from Iran and Pakistan but now organically within communities as well.¹¹

6. Ibid.

7. n. 1.

8. PTL, "COVID-19: Lack of virus tests pushes Afghanistan toward humanitarian disaster, says group", *New Indian Express*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2020/jun/05/covid-19-lack-of-virus-tests-pushes-afghanistan-toward-humanitarian-disaster-says-group-2152558.html>. Accessed on June 12, 2020.

9. n. 1.

10. "Coronavirus overwhelms hospitals in war-ravaged Afghanistan", BBC News, June 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53198785>. Accessed on July 1, 2020.

11. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 30, 2020, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr.pdf#page=13>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

Another grave concern is that Afghanistan has extremely limited infrastructure to treat severe cases. The average life expectancy is just 64 years (as per 2018 World Bank data)¹² and a high percentage of the population have pre-existing conditions with environmental pollution being a major factor in general population health challenges. Internal displacement, low vaccination among the general population required for stronger immune systems, in combination with weak health, water and sanitation infrastructure, only worsen the situation. Afghanistan's Global Health Security (GHS) Index is 32.2,¹³ which suggests that the country's healthcare system is one of the most ill-prepared infrastructures to deal with the threat of pandemics such as COVID-19.

Concerns have been raised about the supply of oxygen and other resources to government hospitals. There are reports of patients' families having to "fight for oxygen" when cylinders arrived, before bringing it to the intensive care unit themselves.¹⁴ Afghanistan's healthcare system was already under-resourced even before COVID-19—those requiring advanced medical care would often travel to neighbouring Pakistan or India for treatment if they could afford it.

Many of the doctors blame corruption for the current lack of staff and equipment in government hospitals. Officials are investigating a news story by Pajhwok Afghan News, alleging that 32 ventilators were stolen from the MoPH and smuggled to Pakistan. In another case, an official of the MoPH was arrested for allegedly demanding an US\$ 80,000 bribe in order to complete a contract with a company producing protective equipment for medical staff.¹⁵

More than a third of COVID-19 cases in Kabul, including the health minister, have been among doctors and other healthcare staff. Some doctors have closed their clinics, putting a strain on the limited health resources in Afghanistan. Around 40 staff at the Presidential Palace had also tested positive for COVID-19 including the Afghan

12. World Bank, "Life expectancy at birth, total (years)—Afghanistan", <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?end=2018&locations=AF&start=1960&view=chart>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

13. Global Health Security Index, "2019 GHS Index Country Profile for Afghanistan", <https://www.ghsindex.org/country/afghanistan/>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

14. n. 8.

15. Ibid.

health minister. Kabul has the highest COVID-19 cases in Afghanistan at 13,170 followed by Herat at 4,930 cases.¹⁶

With a population of more than 36 million, Afghanistan has roughly 172 hospitals, and just four doctors per 10,000 people, according to a 2019 government report, and with a total of 10,400 hospital beds the country has just 0.5 beds per 1,000 patients according to the World Bank. The healthcare system is dependent on foreign donor aid for support. There are parts of the country that are under the control of the Taliban where it is hard for the government to access information.¹⁷

ECONOMIC AND POLICY MEASURES TO DEAL WITH COVID-19

Keeping in mind the pandemic (and also as part of the US-Taliban agreement signed on February 29) the government has released large numbers of prisoners in the last few weeks. The Afghan government has allocated US\$ 25 million to the MoPH to fight the coronavirus. Islamic clergy have reached a consensus on preventing COVID-19 by closing mosques and refraining from conducting any gatherings. The government is also building a 100-bed hospital in Herat, along with a few clinics at district and provincial levels.

The Afghan government took several measures to help mitigate the spread of the disease. On March 14, it shuttered all schools for an initial one-month period through April 18. The government also instituted “measured lockdowns” throughout the country that closed sections of, and limited movement in, major cities. In Kabul, more stringent measures requiring all residents to stay at home went into effect on April 8. Movement exemptions were granted for humanitarian personnel and goods. Pakistan initially closed its border for a two-week period in mid-March. As of April 15, Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan was closed to all traffic except commercial vehicles. At the Torkham and Chaman-Spin Boldak crossing points, cargo trucks were permitted to cross three days per week. In the north, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all either closed

16. n. 1.

17. “Alarm over large number of coronavirus cases among Afghan medics”, Al Jazeera, May 7, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/alarm-large-number-coronavirus-cases-afghan-medics-200507165515729.html>. Accessed on May 29, 2020.

their borders to civilian movement or grounded flights to and from Afghanistan.¹⁸

In May, a political dispute between President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah had been resolved owing to the COVID-19 crisis among other factors.¹⁹ The dispute became a huge distraction for the country at a difficult time, with the COVID-19 crisis worsening every day and the Taliban increasing its attacks despite the agreement they signed with the US in February.

Earlier, Kabul had approved a contribution of \$1 million to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Emergency Fund to fight COVID-19 in South Asian countries. The government has enforced a series of precautionary measures, including the closure of commercial facilities, in a continuous effort to slow down the spread of COVID-19.

COVID-19 AND SECURITY CHALLENGES FROM NON-STATE ACTORS IN AFGHANISTAN

The Taliban have been seeking greater assistance from aid agencies to fight COVID-19. The MoPH and World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that its staff was being allowed to work in Taliban-controlled territory. The Taliban has also been running COVID-19 awareness camps and workshops in some areas to educate the public about the coronavirus with its "health commission" members wearing PPEs and wielding guns and thermometers. However, until recently the Taliban did not cease or modulate its attacks on Afghan forces despite the virus outbreak and the US-Taliban deal.

The Taliban have given medical assistance and distributed PPEs and other necessary items to the public in some areas in Helmand, Khost, Paktika and Nangarhar provinces. They have also set up quarantine and testing centres for people travelling from other provinces. Propaganda videos and messages were released aimed at highlighting the group's efforts, although the actual impact of

18. n. 8.

19. Agence France-Presse, "Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah reach 'tentative deal'", *The Hindu*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/afghan-president-ashraf-ghani-abdullah-reach-tentative-deal/article31484609.ece>. Accessed on June 5, 2020.

the work on the population remains unknown.²⁰ Their cooperative stance on coronavirus appeared at odds with their stance on polio vaccination. Afghanistan is one of only two countries in the world yet to eradicate polio, but vaccination campaigns have been suspended. In recent weeks polio cases have been discovered in provinces that were previously considered polio free. Ironically, the Taliban's military commission had banned door-to-door polio vaccination teams in their territory for the past two years, accusing them of being spies gathering target intelligence for airstrikes.²¹

The Taliban's call for increased international support is strongly linked to their demand for both greater resources and international legitimacy as a government-in-waiting. In recent years, the militant group has increased its public outreach campaigns and has organised a "shadow government" commission on public health,²² but it devotes few resources of its own to the woefully under-resourced medical services in areas it controls.²³ The Taliban sees the same risks in a COVID-19-related ceasefire as they do in any other pause in fighting; in addition to mistrust, it is likely that the group worries a lengthy halt in fighting could cripple its hard-fought cohesion and strategic momentum.

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) have stepped up attacks in recent months in Afghanistan since the outbreak of the pandemic, conducting multiple attacks in Kabul itself which has been under lockdown due to the crisis. Attacks such as that on the maternity ward in Kabul run by the *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) NGO might make external aid agencies wary of operating in

20. "Taliban leverages coronavirus crisis to burnish its image as violence in Afghanistan surges", NBC News, May 23, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-leverages-coronavirus-crisis-burnish-its-image-violence-afghanistan-surges-n1213096>. Accessed on May 29, 2020.

21. "Protection or propaganda? Taliban swaps weapons for disinfectant in coronavirus public health video", *The Telegraph*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/protection-propaganda-taliban-swaps-weapons-disinfectant-coronavirus/>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

22. Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri, "Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Makes Policy", United States Institute of Peace, November 19, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/insurgent-bureaucracy-how-taliban-makes-policy>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

23. Médecins Sans Frontières, "Afghans face impossible choices in their struggle for medical care", March 5, 2020, <https://www.msf.org/people-face-impossible-choices-their-struggle-medical-care-afghanistan>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

Afghanistan to help with relief efforts, especially when foreign aid workers can be a valuable target for terrorists. Earlier in June, MSF announced it would withdraw from the maternity ward in Kabul that was attacked allegedly by ISKP in May, killing 16 expectant mothers and eight others, including newborns.²⁴ Other attacks conducted by ISKP since the COVID-19 crisis in Afghanistan include the Kabul Gurudwara attack in March and rocket attack on President Ghani's inauguration in March among others.

The UN has also documented a dozen other violent incidents, including the repeated abduction of medical staff by the Taliban, and one instance of government security forces looting medical supplies. As per the UN there had been 15 incidents that took place from March 11—when the WHO declared coronavirus a global pandemic—to the beginning of a three-day ceasefire between the Taliban and the Afghan government on May 23. Of these, the Taliban were responsible for ten incidents, including eight in which health facilities were deliberately targeted. Three other targeted attacks were attributed to Afghan forces. During this period, the Taliban abducted 23 healthcare workers in seven separate incidents across six provinces and regions of Afghanistan. The healthcare workers were held on average for 12 days, with the longest abduction lasting 26 days.²⁵ Presently, the Afghan government controls only 133 of Afghanistan's 407 districts, according to the *Long War Journal*. The Taliban controls 75 districts, while 189 remain contested.²⁶

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

Afghanistan has been receiving international assistance to deal with COVID-19. Humanitarian organisations have advised against border closures in Afghanistan's case. Around US\$ 140 million has been appropriated collectively from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank funds at the disposal of the government. Afghanistan also featured in the list of 25 vulnerable countries that

24. n. 8.

25. UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, Special Report: Attacks on healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, June 2020, p. 9.

26. Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, "Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan", *FDD's Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>. Accessed on July 1, 2020.

will be recipients of the immediate debt service relief, provided by the IMF under the Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust (CCRT), aimed at addressing the impact of COVID-19.²⁷ According to the WHO, more than US\$ 5 million worth of medical aid has been procured so far, with US\$ 17 million worth of supplies in the pipeline.²⁸

On April 2, the World Bank approved a US\$ 100 million grant to help fight COVID-19 in Afghanistan. The Afghan government requested an additional US\$ 223 million grant from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The United States is providing Afghanistan with more than US\$ 18 million to support COVID-19 control measures.²⁹

In mid-April, NATO (Resolute Support Mission) delivered 7,000 masks, more than 8,000 pairs of gloves, cleaning supplies, and other personal protective equipment to Afghan National Police (ANP) forces in Panjshir and Parwan provinces. It also provided 13,000 masks, 1,000 sets of protective gear, disinfectants, sanitisers, and cleaning supplies to Afghan National Army forces in Helmand and Nimroz provinces.³⁰ In partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs, UNDP is operationalising five new hospital facilities to quarantine, isolate, and treat infected ANP personnel. These hospitals will receive health equipment and medical supplies and comprise some 300 beds, with quarantine facilities and intensive care units, across five provinces.

India has delivered large consignments of medicine for COVID-19 patients in Afghanistan. India had also separately delivered 5,000 metric tons of wheat consignments to Afghanistan via the Chabahar

27. International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board Approves Immediate Debt Relief for 25 Countries", April 13, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/13/pr20151-imf-executive-board-approves-immediate-debt-relief-for-25-countries>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

28. n. 8.

29. Office of the Spokesperson, "UPDATE: The United States Is Continuing to Lead the Humanitarian and Health Assistance Response to COVID-19", US Embassy in Angola, April 16, 2020, <https://ao.usembassy.gov/update-the-united-states-is-continuing-to-lead-the-humanitarian-and-health-assistance-response-to-covid-19/>. Accessed on June 10, 2020.

30. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Coronavirus response: NATO continues to support Afghan security forces and institutions tackling global pandemic", April 20, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_175266.htm. Accessed on June 12, 2020.

port in Iran and has committed 75,000 tons in total.³¹ It remains to be seen what will be the level of India's engagement in the future given the political developments in Afghanistan. Chabahar is a port in a politically volatile trade route. It has tenuous status as a rare exception to US sanctions on Iran. In the short term, regional competition has some potential to impact Afghanistan. For instance, days after Indian wheat shipments arrived at Chabahar, headed for Kabul, Pakistan, eager not to be outdone by India, announced that its Gwadar port would reopen for large humanitarian shipments as well.³²

CONCLUSION

Large numbers of migrant workers continue to seek to cross borders in and out of Iran and Pakistan, and closures at borders with limited state resources will likely lead to population build-up in makeshift camps³³; not only could these crossing points serve as hubs for infection, but there are serious human rights and health concerns—even claims of several dozen migrants being drowned by Iranian border guards.³⁴ A report published by Save the Children NGO in May found that seven million Afghan children were at risk of hunger as a result of rising food prices due to the pandemic.³⁵

For government and Taliban forces alike, COVID-19 will have implications for their capacity or intent to continue fighting. Specific Afghan military installations may become hot spots for infection, dramatically reducing readiness. Assistance declines, increases in imported food prices, and capital flight could all lead to inflation and

-
31. Elizabeth Roche, "India, Afghanistan stand together against coronavirus: Modi", *LiveMint*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-afghanistan-stand-together-against-coronavirus-modi-11587391146746.html>. Accessed on May 29, 2020.
 32. Hellenic Shipping News, "Gwadar Port resumes operation for Afghan transit trade", April 22, 2020, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/gwadar-port-resumes-operation-for-afghan-transit-trade/>. Accessed on June 5, 2020.
 33. Reporterly, "Stranded Afghans Take Shelter in Mosques, Shops near Torkham", May 4, 2020, <http://reporterly.net/latest-stories/stranded-afghans-take-shelter-in-mosques-shops-near-torkham/>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.
 34. "Afghanistan Investigating Claims Migrants Were Killed by Iranian Guards", *The New York Times*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/asia/afghanistan-iran-migrants-drown.html>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.
 35. "Coronavirus: Seven million Afghan children risk hunger—report", BBC News, May 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52488792>. Accessed on May 16, 2020.

declining purchasing power for ANSF salaries, which also would diminish readiness.

US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad warned the spread of the novel coronavirus would complicate prisoner releases between the Taliban and Afghan government.³⁶ There are concerns that intra-Afghan talks could be significantly hindered if a large number of prisoners on either side contract or die of the virus while in captivity.

Another important factor which is important in the future assistance to Afghanistan is that a significant chunk of already strained resources of the Afghan government are being diverted to deal with COVID-19. This may impact the available national resources for counterterrorism (CT) operations. This may deteriorate the security situation and make it increasingly difficult for international aid agencies and NGOs to operate in the country. In such a scenario international agencies may reduce their presence to reduce risks from non-state actors that could attack foreign aid workers by taking advantage of a slowdown in CT efforts.

36. Zalmay Khalilzad (@US4AfghanPeace), "The United States would like to see prisoner releases begin as soon as possible in line with the U.S.-Taliban agreement. No prisoners have been released to date despite the commitment to do so expressed by both sides." Twitter, March 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1240299809153695750>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

CONFRONTING THE THREAT

Central Asia and COVID-19

POONAM MANN

The current global situation has highlighted the fact that viruses can have extensive effects. The combined global population is enduring the COVID-19 pandemic irrespective of their distance from the epicentre in Wuhan, China. Since November 2019, the virus has spread across all continents causing everything to come to a standstill, and what can essentially be termed as a worldwide lockdown. It has not only placed public health systems under intense stress globally, but has also disrupted the global economy. Confronting the threat, therefore, has become a serious challenge for countries around the world. The Central Asian region is no exception and the effects of the virus have been glaring there as well. Although the five Central Asian Republics (CARs)¹ face similar challenges like the other countries around the world, the peculiarity of their geographic, demographic and economic situation offers a curious case study given the fact that over the years, all these countries have developed in such a way that they have become highly dependent upon their neighbours (particularly on Russia and China). For instance, trade, employment and their economy largely rely upon export earnings, particularly for fuel and mineral exports. Also, the Central Asian countries, particularly

Dr. **Poonam Mann** is Associate Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. The five Central Asian Republics include the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have a large migrant workforce mainly in Russia. Within the boundaries of this context, it is important to understand the response of the Central Asian countries during this pandemic.

SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS

The presence of the virus was not officially acknowledged by any of the Central Asian Republics until mid-March 2020. It seemed unrealistic, considering the proximity of the region with China² (the origin of the virus) and their intense relations with the country through busy trade and transit routes, presence of a large number of students from CARs at Chinese universities and thousands of Chinese workers in the Central Asian region. Second, Kazakhstan shares its border with Russia, the country with the second-highest number of reported cases; Turkmenistan shares its boundary with Iran, one of the epicentres of COVID-19; and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan have borders with Afghanistan. However, many analysts believed that they chose to suppress the seriousness of the crisis due to their tradition of concealment and secrecy.³ Nevertheless, the first official case of COVID-19 in the region was identified in Kazakhstan on March 13 and then later on in Uzbekistan on March 15, in Kyrgyzstan on March 18 and Tajikistan, after weeks of continuous denials, registered its first case of COVID-19 on April 30.⁴ However, it did not give any details about how and when the cases were discovered. Before this date, the country allowed mass gatherings, including the celebration of Navruz which was cancelled by other Central Asian governments and it also opened its football season by telling its citizens not to worry.⁵ Turkmenistan still does not have any officially

2. Three of the five Central Asian Republics, i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, share borders with People's Republic of China.
3. Marlene Laruelle and Madeline McCann, "Post-Soviet State Responses to COVID-19: Making or Breaking Authoritarianism?" Policy Memo 641, March 2020, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/post-soviet-state-responses-covid-19-making-or-breaking-authoritarianism?fbclid=IwAR1aHXhxxROvfH1zP-uFU0fdH_ekZkLujYTy7CMhkaHpUFqIWoqitNMyYn4. Accessed on May 9, 2020.
4. "Tajikistan finally confirms its first 15 coronavirus cases", April 30, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-finally-confirms-its-first-15-coronavirus-cases>. Accessed on May 5, 2020.
5. Catherine Putz, "Zero to 15: Tajikistan Finally Confirms First Cases of COVID-19", *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/zero-to-15-tajikistan-finally-confirms-first-cases-of-covid-19/>. Accessed on May 5, 2020.

registered cases of the virus and is quite confident of control over the pandemic. However, as a precautionary measure, it had closed most of its land border crossings, had cancelled flights to China and some other countries in early February and started diverting all its international flights from Ashgabat to Turkmenabad in the north-east, where a quarantine zone was created. Movement between cities was restricted. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov ordered the use of herbal methods to ward off the virus—despite there being no evidence. Otherwise, daily life in Turkmenistan continued to be normal. Cafes and restaurants were open, people kept on gathering for weddings and other mass events, etc., without wearing masks.⁶

There has been a considerable increase in the number of cases in the region so far and the number varies in different republics. For instance, till the time of writing this paper, the number of positive cases in Kazakhstan was 20,319, mostly in Almaty and Nursultan with 166 dead, and the source of carrying the virus, reportedly, were two Kazakh returnees from Germany on March 13, and two from Milan, via Moscow, on the same day. In Kyrgyz republic, the number was 4,513 with 46 fatalities, mostly in the southern part of the country (blamed on the returnees from the Haj pilgrimage from Saudi Arabia), Tajikistan had 5,799 cases, with 52 people dead, and Uzbekistan 7,682, with 20 fatalities.⁷ Subsequently, the governments of these countries have taken effective counter-infection measures. The affected states, particularly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz republic and Uzbekistan, have declared a state of emergency and entered a state of complete lockdown. This also brought the restriction of travel in and out of the countries and closing of their borders. They have also imposed quarantines. All the educational institutions have been shut down and public events cancelled. The military was asked to help disinfect the cities. The governments also outlined the anti-crisis

6. Abduljalil Abdurasulov, "Coronavirus: Why has Turkmenistan reported no cases?" *BBC News*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52186521>. Accessed on June 7, 2020.

7. "Dashboard: Coronavirus in Eurasia", June 27, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/dashboard-coronavirus-in-eurasia>, accessed on June 27, 2020. Also see, "Coronavirus update in the Caucasus and Central Asia", May 12, 2020, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/03/19/coronavirus-update-caucasus-central-asia/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020; Vladimir Rozanskij, "Central Asia caught in the Coronavirus whirlwind", March 26, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Central-Asia-caught-in-the-coronavirus-whirlwind-49659.html>. Accessed on April 12, 2020.

economic packages.⁸ Poor countries like Kyrgyzstan approached the international bodies, e.g., the International Monetary Fund, for financial assistance and aid packages.⁹ Thus, these countries have done well in mobilising for the first emergency stage of the crisis. However, the economic repercussions emerging out of this crisis cannot be ignored.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

All Central Asian countries are facing the economic consequences of COVID-19, like other countries around the world.

- With the air, rail, and road travel coming to a halt, supply chain links in many of the significant sectors of the economy have suddenly taken a big hit. Businesses have suffered with the closure of markets, factories, educational institutions, public institutions, etc., and the fear of collapse of commodities' prices looms large on the exporters. Besides, the loss of routine earnings and livelihoods has created an unprecedented social and economic upheaval in the region.
- Further, the pandemic could significantly affect the economies of the CARs, especially considering they are relatively small and undiversified economies and heavily dependent on foreign trade. Since the countries have closed their borders with neighbours for controlling the spread of the virus, and have restricted internal movement of goods and people, value chains have also been disrupted. Lower and expensive trade will affect consumption and cause a decline in the manufacturing competitiveness of the region. This will be specifically important due to significant costs created by connectivity and regulatory barriers.¹⁰

8. Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan outlines plan to shelter economy from COVID-19", March 18, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-outlines-plan-to-shelter-economy-from-covid-19>. Accessed on May 9, 2020; "Uzbekistan to borrow \$1 billion to fight coronavirus, aid economy", March 19, 2020, <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-uzbekistan-borrowi/uzbekistan-to-borrow-1-billion-to-fight-coronavirus-aid-economy-idINKBN2163F7>. Accessed on May 9, 2020.

9. Timur Toktonaliev, "Coronavirus Tests Central Asia's Strength", <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/coronavirus-tests-central-asia-s-strength>. Accessed March 30, 2020.

10. "Covid-19 crisis response in Central Asia", April 15, 2020, <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia-5305f172/>. Accessed on May 5, 2020.

- Falling migrant remittances will squeeze the government revenues. Two of the Central Asian Republics, i.e., Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have remittance-based economies. The economic slowdown in their main trade partners—Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—will not only affect their economies (with remittances accounting for around 30-50 percent GDP in both countries), but will also have an impact on the families of the migrant workers, since labour migration has been the lifeline of many households of these republics.¹¹
- The economic effects of coronavirus can also be seen in Central Asian countries with a drop in the global demand for primary commodities. For example, oil and gas are the Central Asian countries' biggest hard currency earners, therefore, overdependence on the hydrocarbon sector can further increase their economic vulnerability. Moreover, the sharp decline of crude oil prices (because of the Russia-Saudi Arabia conflict over oil production and price), reduced gas exports to China (as Petro-China issued a *force majeure* notice on March 5, by citing the reason that it is cutting imports due to ongoing coronavirus crisis) and general slowdown in trade because of COVID-19 has disrupted their economy.¹² This, in turn, could force these republics to revise their respective state budgets for the year 2020.
- Since there are no answers yet as to how long the coronavirus outbreak will continue to spread across the region, the economic impact is likely to be profound. Also, it is likely to put a significant strain on their healthcare systems. Since Central Asia is home to some of the poorest nations of the world, therefore, fighting the disease would be very challenging for their medical systems. Low-level of financing, inappropriate use of allocated funds, lack of availability of modern medical equipment, outdated treatment standards, unavailability of sufficient medical staff, etc., are some of the issues these countries have to address.¹³

11. Ibid.

12. Paul Bartlett, "Oil price plunge thrusts Kazakhstan into crisis mode", March 13, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Oil-price-plunge-thrusts-Kazakhstan-into-crisis-mode>. Accessed on May 5, 2020.

13. Akram Umarov, "Covid-2019: Lessons for Central Asia and Impact on Foreign Policy", April 6, 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/covid-2019-lessons-for-central-asia-and-impact-on-foreign-policy/>. Accessed on April 20, 2020.

- Moreover, the crisis has also exhibited the utility of digital tools for remote collaboration. It has underlined the need to prioritise investments in science and technology for faster digitalisation of economies, drive towards closer digital connectivity so that the governments could be better prepared to deal with a similar crisis in the future.¹⁴
- So far, the CARs have tried to fall in step with the other countries around the world to confront the pandemic. The sudden arrival of the crisis has vividly revealed the lack of strength in the resources of the healthcare industries/systems of these countries, besides their economic vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is very important for these countries to revise their domestic and foreign policies while monitoring the global trends. This could prove to be the key to overcoming the pandemic.

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

The COVID-19 pandemic is clearly both a political/geopolitical as well as a bio-political issue. It is territorial as well as people-centric.¹⁵ It promises to fundamentally reshape the dynamics of a state's thinking on both domestic as well as global fronts. It will also generate new thinking on how to deal with any such crisis in future. Therefore, the role of diplomacy and aid will be critical here and the strategic use of goodwill gestures will steer the way to what partner countries value. To combat and overcome the COVID-19 crisis, a number of international financial institutions have responded through various financial assistance programmes for Central Asian Republics. For example, Kyrgyz republic became the first country in Central Asia to receive US\$ 121 million disbursement from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under its Rapid Financing Instrument and Rapid Credit Facility assistance programme,¹⁶ and IMF has approved

14. Bakhrom Radjabov, "Post-COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities for Central Asia", *The Times of Central Asia*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.timesca.com/index.php/news/26-opinion-head/22603-post-covid-19-challenges-and-opportunities-for-central-asia>. Accessed on June 27, 2020.

15. Andrey Makarychev, "The Biopolitics of the Crisis", March 19, 2020, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/biopolitics-crisis>. Accessed on April 5, 2020.

16. "IMF Executive Board Approves a US\$121.1 Million in Emergency Assistance Under the Rapid Financing Instrument and Rapid Credit Facility for the Kyrgyz Republic

US\$ 375 million disbursement to Uzbekistan to fight the impact of the coronavirus.¹⁷ Besides, Asian Development Bank (ADB)¹⁸ and the Eurasian Development Bank—along with Russian Export Centre¹⁹—have also moved forward to provide economic assistance to these countries. ADB has increased the speed of loan disbursement under its existing programmes. The ADB Trade Finance Program (TFP), which functions in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, was increased from US\$ 1.35 billion to US\$ 2.15 billion to support projects that respond directly to the impacts of COVID-19 or address its economic impact.²⁰ To what extent this assistance will be able to sustain the economies of these countries is debatable, but, certainly, the economic assistance will prove helpful when combined with the local economic and administrative measures taken by the CARs to stimulate the domestic economy in this hour of need.

REGIONAL ASSISTANCE

Although all the five republics have chosen their own individual path to confront the crisis, the leaders of these countries are also making conscious efforts to touch base with their direct neighbours. Thus, despite the challenges, the crisis has helped in strengthening regional cooperation. All the leaders of the region have shown a political will and understanding of the benefits of cooperation. Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has taken the lead in this endeavour. As a part

to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic”, May 8, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/05/08/pr20213-kyrgyz-republic-imf-exec-board-approves-us-121-1m-emergency-asst-rfi-rcf-address-covid19>. Accessed on May 27, 2020.

17. “IMF Executive Board Approves a US\$ 375 Million Disbursement to the Republic of Uzbekistan to Address the Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis”, May 18, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/05/18/pr20220-uzbekistan-imf-executive-board-approves-us-375m-disbursement-address-impact-covid19?cid=em-COM-123-41609>. Accessed on May 27, 2020.
18. “ADB \$50 Million Package to Help Kyrgyz Republic Mitigate Health, Social, Economic Impacts of COVID-19”, May 4, 2020, <https://www.adb.org/print/node/602761>. Accessed on May 27, 2020.
19. “The EDB and the Russian Export Centre launch a programme to support businesses in the Bank’s member countries”, May 1, 2020, <https://eabr.org/en/press/news/the-edb-and-the-russian-export-centre-launch-a-programme-to-support-businesses-in-the-bank-s-member-/>. Accessed on May 27, 2020.
20. Ariel Cohen, “COVID-19 pandemic puts Central Asia’s resilience to the test”, May 4, 2020, Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/covid-19-pandemic-puts-central-asias-resilience-to-the-test/>. Accessed on July 14, 2020.

of humanitarian aid Uzbekistan has sent medical masks, protective overalls, thermal imagers for detecting the disease, pyrometers, flour, oil, rice, laundry soap, clothes for children to Afghanistan on April 1.²¹ Similarly, it has sent 1,000 tons of flour, 7,000 protective overalls, 7,000 respirators, 20,000 gloves, 500 goggles, 200 pyrometers to Kyrgyz Republic.²² Reportedly, President Mirziyoyev has also used telephonic diplomacy with his counterparts in the region as well as in Afghanistan to coordinate their efforts.²³ Such efforts can be seen to boost the level of cooperation among the Central Asian Republics, including their efforts to assist Afghanistan, something that they had started two years back, after a gap of almost twenty years.

ASSISTANCE FROM INDIA

Central Asian countries are a part of India's extended neighbourhood and strategic partners. India's engagement with the region has increased in recent years, therefore, the current crisis is another opportunity for India to give a further fillip to its diplomacy in the region. In fact, as a gesture of its support to the friendly people of Central Asia, India has provided Hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol tablets as humanitarian aid.²⁴ Besides, India's Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar had a telephonic conversation with his Tajik counterpart and they discussed the prospects of medical cooperation between the two countries in response to COVID-19 challenge and reviewed various aspects of bilateral relations. Further, virtual discussions on the preparations for the second India-Central Asia foreign ministers' meet are also underway.²⁵

-
21. "Uzbekistan sends Humanitarian aid to Afghanistan", April 2, 2020, <https://www.gov.uz/en/news/view/27089>. Accessed on April 5, 2020.
 22. Ruslan Kharizov, "Humanitarian aid from Uzbekistan delivered to Bishkek", April 2, 2020, https://24.kg/english/148950_Humanitarian_aid_from_Uzbekistan_delivered_to_Bishkek/. Accessed on April 5, 2020.
 23. Catherine Putz, "Uzbekistan Leads Central Asian Diplomacy in the Age of COVID-19", *The Diplomat*, April 2, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/uzbekistan-leads-central-asian-diplomacy-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>. Accessed on April 5, 2020.
 24. Shishir Gupta, "India draws up Rs.1 billion Covid-19 medical assistance plan, targets 90 countries", *Hindustan Times*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-amps-up-covid-19-medical-assistance-plan-targets-to-reach-90-countries/story-0X1H8z1Zqi9piw6n4FDu8J.html>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.
 25. "S. Jaishankar holds video-conference with Indian envoys in central Asia", *Deccan Herald*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/s-jaishankar-holds-video-conference-with-indian-envoys-in-central-asia-832486.html>. Accessed on May 4, 2020.

Furthermore, India participated in an extraordinary meeting (virtual) of the Foreign Ministers of members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) where they discussed sharing of information on best practices on containing COVID-19, particularly in the medicine, medical equipment, and pharmaceutical sectors and agreed on a joint declaration that focused on creating a plan of action that could be adopted at a leaders' level summit on collaboration for vaccine development and methods of disease treatment. India's Foreign Minister expressed India's readiness to share information, expertise and best practices to the SCO Member States.²⁶ Thus, mutual support and planning at bilateral and regional level is very significant for future engagements and strengthening of relationships.

CONCLUSION

After the coronavirus pandemic's global outbreak, it is evident that the world will never be the same again. Although it does provide a roadmap for future investments, use of contactless instruments, virtual digital technology, online meetings, virtual working spaces, etc., has received an enormous boost. The anti-crisis precautions that are being adopted now as temporary measures may become permanent. The impact of this crisis on the global economy and politics is unavoidable, thus every country and region—including the CARs—should prepare themselves for the potentially drastic shifts. In order to minimise the threats of long-term problems within the Central Asian neighbourhood, it is necessary that these republics build up regional political interaction, remove trade barriers and increase economic cooperation. The strengthening of regional ties will ensure that the states would not have to suffer from the economic decline individually, as the spread of the virus cannot be contained within the territorial borders of a nation. Moreover, these preparations will prove to be strategically beneficial in the post-crisis period, as alterations in the structure of the current world order and its economic systems are predicted to occur. Hence, in order

26. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation states favour action plan by leaders to fight Covid-19", *The Economic Times*, May 13, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/shanghai-cooperation-organisation-states-favour-action-plan-by-leaders-to-fight-covid-19/articleshow/75722100.cms>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

to deal with unforeseen predicaments, strong and stable regional cooperation in terms of trade and economy, strategic planning, mutual support and a largely collaborative approach towards foreign policy could ultimately aid in assuring steadiness in conquering the epidemiological and socio-economic situation in Central Asia post the pandemic. Besides, the governments should also work to strengthen their domestic socio-economic structures. Considering the uncertainty regarding the time-frame of the pandemic and its impact, the people will naturally look towards their respective governments.

INDIA AND BHUTAN ECONOMIC RELATIONS

SUSHMITA BHARTI

Relations between India and Bhutan have been defined by mutual trust and cooperation. Both countries share decades of close economic and trade linkages. Bhutan, as a landlocked country, is dependent on India for trade and transit facilities. Political friendship has enhanced economic ties and India is Bhutan's largest trade and development partner.

India, under Prime Minister Modi, has recalibrated its foreign policy, with Bhutan playing a significant role in the "Neighbourhood First Policy". The recent high-level exchange in August 2019 has further strengthened the relationship. India's Prime Minister Modi chose Bhutan for his first international visit after getting elected in 2014. Also, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar visited Bhutan on his first trip abroad after assuming office in June 2019. In this context, the paper aims to analyse the economic partnership between India and Bhutan and identify areas of mutual interest in the economic relationship.

BACKGROUND

The cordial relations between the two sovereign nations began with the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship of 1949. The treaty formed the framework for economic cooperation between India and

Ms. **Sushmita Bharti** is Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

Bhutan. Article 5 of the treaty established free trade and commerce between the two countries. This was also reiterated in the revised India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 2007.

The visit of an Indian Planning Commission team in 1961 and the development of Bhutan's Five-Year Plan set in motion the economic partnership between the two countries and India's commitment to Bhutan's development. This was followed by continuous assistance in the construction of roads, transport, schools, hospitals, industries, and power projects. Bhutan is a landlocked country in the Himalayas, positioned between India and China. Of the two neighbours, Bhutan does not have official diplomatic and trade relations with China as yet. Bhutan's industrial belt is established in the southern part of the country that makes economic linkages with India a favorable prospect.¹ Inflation between the countries is closely linked as Bhutanese Ngultrum is pegged at par with the Indian Rupee.²

INDIA-BHUTAN ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Mutual Significance

Bhutan is significant for India as a market for Indian commodities and as a destination for Indian investment. Amongst the sources of FDI to Bhutan in 2019, the majority of investment came from Asia (65 percent) and within Asia, India contributed 45 percent FDI to Bhutan.³ Energy, gas, and water sector receive the highest investment from India followed by retail, restaurants, and hotels sectors.⁴

Indian states that share borders with Bhutan are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, and Sikkim. The geographical

1. Medha Bisht, "Is there any sign of Bhutan possibly titling towards China for economic reasons? If yes, then what should be India's strategy towards Bhutan?" IDSA, <https://idsa.in/askanexpert/BhutanpossiblytitingtowardsChina>. Accessed on May 23, 2020.
2. James Chen, "BTN (Bhutanese Ngultrum)", *Investopedia*, July 21, 2018, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/forex/b/btn-bhutanese-ngultrum.asp>. Accessed on April 10, 2020.
3. Ministry of Economic Affairs, Government of Bhutan, "FDI Annual Bulletin, 2019", <https://www.moea.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/FDI-Annual-Bulletin-2019.pdf>. Accessed on May 24, 2020.
4. Nisha Taneja, Samridhi Bimal, Taher Nadeem and Riya Roy, "India-Bhutan Economic Relations", Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, August 2019.

proximity of Northeast India to Bhutan has proved to be beneficial in improving connectivity with the northeast. In 2018, Bhutan took a significant step to connect Northeast India with ASEAN countries as Bhutanese Airline, Druk Air launched a direct flight connecting Paro via Guwahati to Singapore.⁵ Also, hydel projects of Bhutan ensure power supply to parts of West Bengal and Assam.

The three key industries in Bhutan are hydroelectric power, tourism, and agriculture. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), there has been consistent growth in real GDP of Bhutan in every decade. The GDP has increased from Nu 11.8 billion in 1990 to Nu 19.2 billion in 2000 and Nu 43.04 billion in 2010.⁶ Bhutan's journey from a closed economy to a lower-middle-income economy is credited to the stable political and economic environment in the country.

Bhutan has founded a unique philosophy called Gross National Happiness (GNH). Founded by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1972, it is based on Buddhist philosophy and is an integral part of governance in Bhutan. Through GNH, Bhutan has reshaped its economy according to its priorities of sustainable development and cultural conservation. GNH has transitioned from a philosophical view to an economic tool called the GNH index which has been incorporated in the country's Five-Year Plans (FYP). There has been an association between rising GNH and increasing real GDP in Bhutan. The real GDP has increased from Nu 4.6 billion in 1980 (when the GNH was introduced) to Nu 64.8 billion in 2017.⁷

Hence, economic development in Bhutan is denoted by socio-economic progress along with the preservation of cultural and spiritual values. India's contribution to Bhutan's economy is evident in bilateral trade, tourism, development assistance, and hydropower cooperation.

5. Rupakjyoti Borah, "Northeast India Gets Closer to ASEAN, Courtesy of Bhutan", *The Diplomat*, September 28, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/northeast-india-gets-closer-to-asean-courtesy-of-bhutan/>. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

6. Sriram Balasubramanian and Paul Cashin, "Gross National Happiness and Macroeconomic Indicators in the Kingdom of Bhutan", IMF Working Paper, January 2019.

7. Ibid.

Bilateral Trade

India, as Bhutan's largest trading partner, had an 88 percent share in Bhutan's total global exports and 92 percent in imports from 2014 to 2018.⁸ In 1972, an Agreement on Trade and Commerce between Bhutan and India was signed to strengthen the free trade regime between the two countries. It allows the transit of Bhutanese goods through the Indian Territory either from one part of Bhutan to another part of Bhutan or to/from third country other than India. These goods in transit are exempted from customs duties, trade restrictions, and other charges.⁹ The Protocol to the Agreement on Trade, Commerce, and Transit provides mutually agreed 21 entry-exit points along the India-Bhutan border.¹⁰

Total trade between India and Bhutan has nearly doubled in the last five years from 2014-2015 to 2018-2019. In the year 2014-2015, total trade between India-Bhutan stood at US\$ 483.8 million and it increased to US\$ 1,026.80 million in 2018-2019 (see Figure 1). In the year 2019-2020 (till April), India's exports to Bhutan have been a total of US\$ 657.33 million and imports have been US\$ 370.96 million.¹¹ Also, the trade balance has completely been in favour of India from 2014 to 2019. Major exports from India to Bhutan are mineral products, machinery, and mechanical appliances, electrical equipment, base metals, vehicles, vegetable products, plastics, and articles. The major items of import from Bhutan to India are electricity, ferro-silicon, portland cement, dolomite, carbides of calcium, carbides of silicon, cement clinkers, timber and wood products, potatoes, cardamom and fruit products.¹² Of these items of import, two products, namely, electricity and ferro-silicon, form 71 percent of India's total imports from Bhutan.¹³

According to a report by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) on "India-Bhutan Economic Relations", additional trade potential between India and Bhutan was estimated at around US\$ 105 million. Trade potential is

8. Taneja, n. 4.

9. Agreement on Trade, Commerce and Transit between India and Bhutan, 1972.

10. Taneja, n. 4.

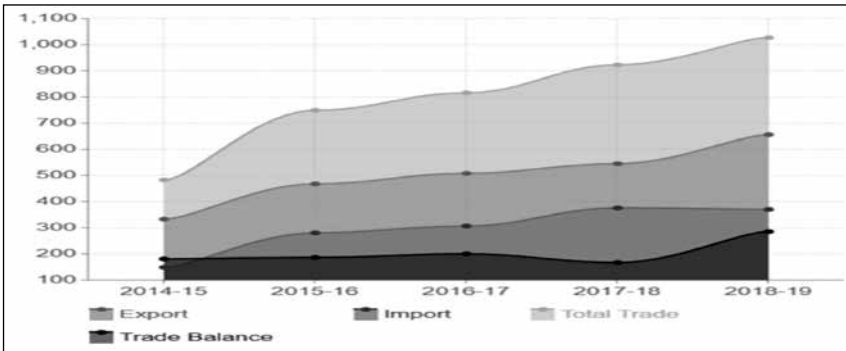
11. Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Government of India.

12. Ministry of External Affairs, "India-Bhutan Relations", *Country Briefs*, February 2020.

13. Taneja, n. 4.

defined as the level of trade exchange between the two countries that can be attained at an optimum trade frontier in a situation of open and uninterrupted trade. This study shows that both the countries are already operating at their optimum level with limited scope for expanding trade potential.¹⁴

Figure 1. India and Bhutan Bilateral Trade (2014-19) in USD Millions



Source: Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, "Export Import Data Bank", <https://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/error.htm>. Accessed on May 15, 2020.

India's Development Aid to Bhutan

India is the largest aid donor to Bhutan. Development through Five-Year Plans (FYP) in Bhutan started in 1961. The first two five-year plans of Bhutan were entirely funded by India.¹⁵ The total allocations to Bhutan have increased from INR 950 crore in the 6th FYP (1987-1992) to INR 21,300 crore in 11th FYP (2013-2018). The amount of India's contribution has also gone up from INR 400 crore in the 6th FYP to INR 4,500 crore in 11th FYP. However, there has been a decline in India's contribution as a proportion to Bhutan's total allocation from the 6th FYP to 11th FYP (see Figure 2). In 2018, India continued the policy of contributing to Bhutan's 12th Five-Year Plan (FYP 2018-2023) and announced an amount of Rs. 4,500 crore for it. This constitutes 73 percent of Bhutan's total external grant component.¹⁶ The assistance has been in solidarity

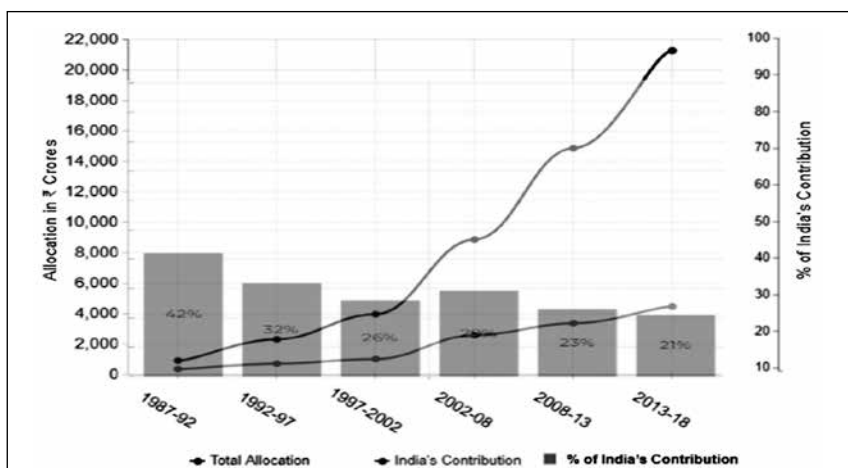
14. Ibid.

15. Embassy of India, Bhutan, <https://www.indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=4>. Accessed on April 15, 2020.

16. Ministry of External Affairs, n. 12.

with the Bhutanese Prime Minister Dr. Lotay's "Narrowing the Gap" vision for Bhutan.¹⁷

Figure 2. India's Contribution to Bhutan's Total Allocations from 6th to 11th Plans



Source: Embassy of India, Bhutan, "Economic Cooperation with Bhutan", <https://www.indembthimphu.gov.in/pages.php?id=33>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

The assistance to Bhutan mainly includes Project Tied Assistance (PTA), Small Development Projects (SDP), and Programme Grant (Development Subsidy). PTA covers all the projects related to socio-economic development like roads and bridges, schools, hospitals, industries, energy, security, agriculture, judiciary, civil aviation, roads and urban transport, sports, culture, ICT and e-governance, scholarships and training, HRD, etc. SDP is granted for small-scale projects for community development such as drinking water schemes, rural areas schools, irrigation canals, basic health units and staff quarters, market sheds, community meeting-halls, and other basic infrastructure in rural areas. The remaining amount is released as Programme Grant in instalments.¹⁸

"Project Dantak" under India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO), is operational in Bhutan since 1961. It refers to the construction

17. Geeta Mohan, "PM Modi sanctions Rs. 4,500 crore aid to Bhutan", *India Today*, December 29, 2018. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-sanctions-rs-4-500-crore-aid-to-bhutan-1419316-2018-12-29>. Accessed on April 30, 2020.

18. Embassy of India, n. 15.

of road and telecommunications networks in Bhutan. In June 2018, it completed the construction of a strategically important road linking Bhutan's border town of Phuentsholing with the capital city, Thimphu. Called the Damchu-Chukha road, it was constructed under India-assisted development projects.¹⁹

The government of India also gives subsidies to Bhutan on Kerosene/LPG. In July 2013, Bhutan faced sudden fuel price inflation after India withdrew subsidies on kerosene. It coincided with the second parliamentary elections of Bhutan in July 2013. The issue worked well for the challenger party, Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). They projected it as New Delhi's action against the party in power, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), which had tried to establish better relations with China. The matter was raised on every common forum for the campaign that led to PDP's victory in the elections.²⁰ However, Indian authorities claimed it to be an "unfortunate technical lapse" and restored the subsidies after a month.²¹

Hydropower Cooperation

Hydropower has acted as a catalyst for successful collaboration between India and Bhutan. Bhutan is among the water-rich countries in the world with 30,000 MW hydro potential.²² Out of this, only about 1,616 megawatts are currently being generated.²³ India has helped Bhutan harness hydropower energy with new technology and financial assistance. This has become the mainstay of their economy and the steady revenue generated from it has further helped finance

19. PTI, "Border Roads Organisation completes strategic road in Bhutan", *Economic Times*, July 22, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/border-roads-organisation-completes-strategic-road-in-bhutan/articleshow/65092484.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on May 24, 2020.

20. Devirupa Mitra, "As Bhutan Goes to Polls, India Is the Elephant in the Room", *The Wire*, October 17, 2018. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/as-bhutan-goes-to-polls-india-is-the-elephant-in-the-room>. Accessed on May 17, 2020.

21. Ministry of External Affairs, "Transcript of Foreign Secretary's first media interaction", August 1, 2013. <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/21988>. Accessed on April 20, 2020.

22. Utpal Bhaskar, "India to purchase surplus electricity from Bhutan's state-run Druk Green Power", *LiveMint*, August 21, 2019. <https://www.livemint.com/industry/energy/india-to-purchase-surplus-electricity-from-bhutan-s-state-run-druk-green-power-1566289243777.html>. Accessed on May 14, 2020.

23. Amit Ranjan, "India-Bhutan Hydropower Projects: Cooperation and Concerns", ISAS Working Paper, October 17, 2018.

large investments in human capital such as education and health sectors.²⁴ Hydropower exports provide more than 40 percent of Bhutan's domestic revenues and constitute 25 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).²⁵ For India, Bhutan has the potential to meet the power requirements of the country. In 2016, India became the world's third-largest power consumer after China and the USA.²⁶

Indo-Bhutan cooperation in hydropower began in 1961 with the signing of the Jaldhaka agreement. In 1987, 336 MW Chukha Hydropower Project (CHP) over the Wangchu River was commissioned. Bhutan's first mega-power project, CHP was fully funded by the Government of India with a 60 percent grant and 40 percent loan. This started a successful partnership between the two countries in hydropower and was followed by the 1,020 MW Tala Hydroelectric Project. This was also fully financed by the Government of India, with a 60 percent grant and 40 percent loan. In July 2006, the two countries signed an Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Hydroelectric Power (HEP) to develop and export 5,000 MW of electricity from Bhutan to India by 2020. This was later increased to 10,000 MW in 2008.²⁷

Ten projects have been identified for implementation of this agreement which would have a combined capacity of around 10,000 MW. Of these, three projects are 1,200 MW Punatsangchu-I, 1,020 MW Punatsangchu-II and 720 MW Mangdechhu HEPs. Another four HEPs such as 600 MW Kholongchhu, 180 MW Bunakha, 570 MW Wangchu and 770 MW Chamkarchu are in the initial stages of construction.²⁸ In August 2019, Indian PM Modi inaugurated Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Project Authority (MHPA). Also called the Bhutan-India friendship project, it is built jointly by the Indian and the Bhutanese governments.²⁹

24. World Bank, "The World Bank in Bhutan", <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bhutan/overview>. Accessed on April 20, 2020.

25. Bhaskar, n. 22.

26. Sushma U N, "India is now the world's third-largest electricity producer", *Quartz India*, March 26, 2018, <https://qz.com/india/1237203/india-is-now-the-worlds-third-largest-electricity-producer/>. Accessed on May 25, 2020.

27. Royal Bhutanese Embassy, "Bhutan-India Hydropower Relations". https://www.mfa.gov.bt/rbedelhi/?page_id=28. Accessed on April 10, 2020.

28. Taneja, n. 4.

29. "PM Modi inaugurates Mangdechhu hydroelectric power plant in Bhutan", *The Economic Times*, August 18, 2019. energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/

Tourism

The Royal Government of Bhutan has regulated the tourism sector since it first opened in 1974. The tourism policy of Bhutan is based on the idea of “high value-low impact” tourism.³⁰ This policy is in agreement with the four pillars of the Gross National Happiness (GHN) such as sustainable development, environmental protection, cultural preservation, and good governance. Following this, Bhutan has achieved the status of the only carbon-negative country in the world. To maintain this order, the number of tourists to Bhutan is regulated by a daily minimum tariff, required guided tour, certain spatial restrictions, and a general perception of inconvenience in getting a visa.³¹

Indian PM Modi, at the joint session of Bhutan’s Parliament in 2014, had highlighted the significance of tourism in uniting the people of India and Bhutan. According to the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), India was a major source market in 2019 in terms of visitor arrivals representing over 73 percent of total arrivals to Bhutan. Around 90 percent of Indians travel to Bhutan for leisure and holiday.³² However, following the concerns about the impact of tourism on their ecosystem, Bhutan has imposed a “sustainable development fee” (SDF) of Nu 1,200 per day on Indian, Bangladeshi and Maldivian tourists in February 2020.³³ Earlier, every international tourist except these three countries had to pay US\$ 250 per day including SDF of US\$ 65.

CHALLENGES

The privileged relationship between India and Bhutan is not free of challenges and complexities. Though hydropower projects spurred

news/power/pm-modi-inaugurates-mangdechhu-hydroelectric-power-plant-in-bhutan/70723091. Accessed on May 4, 2020.

30. Tourism Council of Bhutan, <https://www.bhutan.travel/page/economy>. Accessed on May 20, 2020.

31. Gyan P. Nyaupane and Dallen J. Timothy, “Power, regionalism and tourism policy in Bhutan”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 37 (4) October 2010, pp. 969-88.

32. Tourism Council of Bhutan, “Bhutan Tourism Monitor”, 2019.

33. Hemani Sheth, “Bhutan to charge Rs.1,200 entry fee for Indian tourists”, *The Hindu BusinessLine*, February 5, 2020. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/bhutan-to-charge-rs-1200-entry-fee-for-indian-tourists/article30740190.ece>. Accessed on April 20, 2020.

economic growth in Bhutan, it has been under criticism in the country. The other sectors such as trade and transit experience mainly two impediments.

Restrains in India-Bhutan Hydropower Cooperation

The export of electricity, through hydropower projects, is the major component of revenue in Bhutan. However, a section of the population has raised some concerns over these projects. First, there has been restlessness that India buys cheap electricity from the hydroelectric projects in Bhutan.³⁴ Second, there are concerns in Bhutan over delay in the completion of the hydropower projects. This has resulted in an escalation of the cost of construction. Also, the loan given by India to Bhutan increases every year which adds to the debt for the country. The completion of Tala hydropower, for instance, was delayed from 2005 to 2007 resulting in the escalation of cost from Rs./Nu 14 billion to Rs./Nu 41.26 billion. It was only by the end of 2018 that Bhutan could get rid of the loans granted for the Tala project.³⁵ Third, an increase in the engagement of the Indian private companies in the hydropower projects has restricted the scope for Bhutanese involvement in it and the complete development of Bhutan's private sector. Decision-making, planning, management, and implementation of these projects are conducted by Indian agencies.³⁶ Fourth, these projects have been unsuccessful in creating job opportunities in Bhutan as large amount of manpower is employed from India for technical jobs. This has reiterated their belief that they have not reaped any benefit from the hydropower cooperation between India-Bhutan.

Apart from these issues, there are common woes associated with power projects and their impact on society and the ecology of the country. Since Bhutan has a special focus on environment conservation, these concerns have stirred a debate in the country over the long-term impact of the power projects.

34. Ranjan, n. 23.

35. Krishna Ghalley, "Tala Hydropower Plant to Liquidate Its Debt This Year", *Business Bhutan*, June 21, 2018. <http://www.businessbhutan.bt/2018/06/21/tala-hydropower-plant-to-liquidate-its-debt-this-year/>. Accessed on April 18, 2020.

36. Ranjan, n. 23.

Issues in Trade and Transit

India's subsidised imports to Bhutan of almost all essential goods have hampered the development of domestic sectors within Bhutan. This has further strengthened India's stronghold on Bhutan's market economy.

The Land Customs Station (LCS) at Jaigaon-Phuentsholing border is India's major trading point with Bhutan. Almost 90 percent of bilateral trade takes place through this border point. Physical and technological infrastructure at the LCS in Jaigaon is not sufficient to deal with the volume of trade it handles. Lack of coordination on the part of customs officers and other border agencies makes the processing time-consuming. Also, there are underlying issues about the inspection and clearance of goods at the LCS.³⁷

EXPLORING THE WAY FORWARD

Despite the challenges, India-Bhutan ties demonstrate a time-tested relationship. It serves as an example of friendship and understanding between two neighbours. Looking into the evolution of the economic relationship, some measures could be useful in strengthening the relations between the two countries.

India's loans and grants have developed the hydropower potential of Bhutan which has greatly benefited its economy. Both the countries have gained immensely from the mutual collaboration over hydropower. The prevailing attitude in Bhutan that considers India's economic cooperation as exploitation of Bhutanese water resources is of serious concern. The impediments to power cooperation demand policy intervention. India needs to put the record straight with better clarity on resource sharing and its impact. Also, a measure for improvement in operations and connectivity infrastructure is the need of the hour, especially at the LCS in Jaigaon.

While Bhutan is a close partner of India, India should put in place a financial structure of allocation of grants and loans that takes into account the small economic size of Bhutan. Also, India needs to publicise the benefits that are given to Bhutan from the Indian projects. Besides, the already initiated infrastructure and hydropower projects with technical and administrative glitches should be completed without further delays.

37. Taneja, n. 4.

India should deepen the economic partnership with Bhutan through joint regional projects. India and Bhutan are members of regional organisations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) initiative. The GDP of all the SAARC countries combined is about 5-6 percent of the world total which calls for greater regional connectivity and economic integration of the region.³⁸ Under BBIN, Bangladesh, Nepal, and India have signed the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA). In the past, Bhutan has supported regional connectivity measures but it has certain concerns that need to be discussed in the context of MVA for its complete implementation. Such joint ventures would further cement the special friendship between India and Bhutan.

India and Bhutan have significant potential to enhance their partnership in meeting their interests. Media should be utilised to reach out to Bhutanese people and politicians. Tourism should be developed further for strong people-to-people ties. This would strengthen trust and understanding with better communication.

There is a widespread assumption that the relationship has been static over a period of time with little effort on the part of India to keep friendship with Bhutan intact. On the contrary, Indo-Bhutan ties are dynamic and have evolved by mutual cooperation and foresight of leaders of both the countries. It is important to understand Bhutan's significance in India's neighbourhood policy. Hence, the task before India is to sustain personal friendship and economic cooperation with Bhutan.

38. Suhasini Haider, "'Enlightened national interest' is at core of Modi's foreign policy mantra", *The Hindu*, June 15, 2014. <https://www.thehindu.com/sunday-anchor/Enlightened-national-interest-is-at-core-of-Modi%E2%80%99s-foreign-policy-mantra/article11632819.ece>. Accessed on May 15, 2020.

FLYING PEACE OVER BOSNIA

The Role of Airpower in an Intervention

CHETAN RANA

The use of airstrikes, especially drone strikes, in leading intervention operations has become common of late, however, this was not the case during the Bosnian war. NATO conducted its first combat operation in its history during this war. NATO's Operations Deny Flight and Deliberate Force have been considered fundamental in bringing Milošević and Bosnian Serbs to negotiate and sign the Dayton Accord. The paper identifies the rationale on preferring airpower during interventions. The study intends to evaluate the role of Operations Deny Flight and Deliberate Force during the Bosnian war.

Former President of the United States, Barack Obama, authorised more strikes in his first year as President than his predecessor had in his entire tenure. The same year, President Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize.¹ Two decades before him, President Bill Clinton led NATO in its intervention in the Bosnian war. A feature of this intervention was the use of the coalition's airpower.

Mr. **Chetan Rana** is Masters in Politics (Student) at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

1. Brahma Chellany, "More War than Peace: Nobel Peace Winner Obama's Legacy", *Hindustan Times*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/more-war-than-peace-nobel-peace-winner-obama-s-legacy/story-uaDiBjw9hqVNZ2qMYZKzQJ.html>. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

Airpower is defined as the power and impact brought on through the use of aircraft in a situation. It can take various forms. It can be used to provide food, transport injured, as well as be used to drop nuclear bombs. Airpower during the Bosnian conflict was displayed primarily through two operations: Deny Flight and Deliberate Force. This was the first combat operation of NATO. During the first two years of Deny Flight, NATO hit only nine ground targets. However, in the three weeks of Operation Deliberate Force, more than 1,000 bombs were dropped over Bosnia. This begs an important question: Can airpower, by dropping bombs from the sky, actually achieve peace? This paper shall seek to understand the development of airpower over the years and its use in interventions, with a special focus on the Bosnian war.

AIRPOWER OVER THE YEARS

It was December 17, 1903, when the Wright Brothers conducted the first successful flight by a heavier than air machine. The flight took off from Kitty Hawk and flew for 12 seconds over 37 metres. The feat achieved that day enabled humans to land on the moon in 1969. On Earth, it fundamentally changed the nature of wars. In just little over a century, airpower has gone from 12 seconds flight to launching Hellfires in the Middle East from the comfort of American soil. The evolving technology has determined the nature of airpower, its functional utility, and the theories on its use.

World War I broke out 11 years after the first flight. The war was primarily fought through ground forces; deep trenches became the symbol of the first war. The role of airpower was minimal. The development in air technology till then had been modest. The aircraft functioned on an engine block that rotated around a fixed crankshaft. These aircraft had limited flight range, could only function in suitable weather and daylight, and their navigation was based on the use of a compass. They were primarily used in reconnaissance activities.²

It was during World War II that air forces started to play a dominant role in warfare. High-powered V-configured engines were powering the new generation of aircraft. These engines gave the

2. Dennis M. Drew, *Recapitalising the Airforce Intellect* (Alabama: Air University Press, 2008).

aircraft improved speed, range, as well as payload capacity. Even navigation had improved through the use of radio beams. These aircraft were instrumental in carpet and strategic bombings.³ The German Luftwaffe infamously destroyed and levelled many great cities. Modern aircraft could provide cover for ground forces and help in breaking enemy frontlines. The importance of aircraft grew so much so that even the most valued ships in the naval fleet were the aircraft carriers.

Today, the air fleets have diversified and reached new technological heights. Aircraft evolved into Spacecraft to carry humans and sophisticated payloads into space. F-22s can fly at supersonic speeds. The C-130Js can land in Himalayan ranges and carry 19 tonnes of payload. Many of the modern aircraft can even refuel mid-air. However, the most important of these advancements have been in navigation. Today, navigation is supported by a network of satellites. The advanced navigation allows precision targeting which underlines modern-day interventions and counterterrorism operations.

THEORIES OF AIRPOWER

Before World War II, aircraft were used for mapping and reconnaissance. They would survey enemy lines and artillery positions that would help ground forces in preparing their plans. Such ideas can be found in the works of Group Captain Peter Townsend and R. P. Hearne.⁴ During World War II, airpower started to take a dominant role. The experiences of World War I shaped the ideas of a new generation theorists.

They were eager to avoid frontal trench wars. The artillery indiscriminately killed millions of young men. Therefore, the central theme of pioneering airpower theorists was to strike deep inside the enemy's territory and dissuade them from war.⁵ The new generation V-configured engine aircraft made such attacks possible due to long flight range and greater payload capacity.

3. Ibid.

4. R. P. Hearne even recommended the use of airpower in monitoring of colonies as it would terrorise the "savage races".

Phillip S. Meilinger (ed.), *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1997).

5. Phillip S. Meilinger, "The Historiography of Airpower: Theory and Doctrine", *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 64 (2), 2000, pp. 467-501.

The idea of striking deep and weakening the state from within further split into two strands. Theorists like Giulio Douhet argued for directing airstrikes against civilians. The rationale was to claim a high number of lives to change the emotions amongst the masses who would then persuade their government to cease the war. William Mitchell presented an alternate theory. He suggested that the strikes should be focused on major industries and key infrastructure. Such strikes would decapitate the enemy state from engaging in the war. The Air Corps Tactical School developed on Mitchell's idea and devised the strategy of paralysing enemy state's "industrial web".⁶ Similar ideas are found in modern-day Nuclear deterrence theory.⁷ Yet, the preferred operational strategy for either of the theories resulted in carpet bombing.

Several post-war theorists have opined that a stronger airforce engaged in strategic bombing can radically reduce the losses on the ground and end a war early. After World War II, multiple airpower theories developed based on several strategic considerations. Some theories sought the role of airpower as a delivery agent in the new nuclear age.⁸ Many theories also emerged from the non-nuclear conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, especially the latter. Modern-day theories on non-nuclear airpower largely argue for long-range airpower that is domestically based but can execute operations on the other side of the world.⁹ The emergence of drones has been a major milestone in this regard. While few proponents of airpower have suggested that it can substitute for ground and naval forces, such propositions have lost acceptance amongst strategists, scholars, and policymakers. Airforce is best utilised in congruence with ground forces.¹⁰

USE IN INTERVENTION

The strategies suggested so far make airpower an effective tool in wars, however, the operational needs in a humanitarian intervention

6. Ibid.

7. The strategies have come to be known as counterforce and countervalue strikes. The counterforce strikes focus on strategic locations like military establishments and industries while countervalue strikes target populous cities.

8. Meilinger, no. 5.

9. Meilinger, no. 5.

10. Robert A. Pape, "The True Worth of Airpower", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83 (2), 2004, pp. 116-30.

are very different. The most important factor in an intervention is to minimise the loss of human lives. Therefore, a tool that made its name through its ability to claim maximum casualties seems an unlikely option to be used in an intervention. The notion changed with the arrival of satellite-based navigation which further enabled precision targeting in modern aircraft.

In World War II only about 18 percent of United States' bombs fell within 1,000 feet of their targets.¹¹ Today, Hellfires launched from drones can accurately target with a margin of merely a metre. Precision targeting has fundamentally changed the nature of warfare in modern conflicts. It works alongside the operations of ground forces, minimising their losses. During Operation Desert Storm, the US Air Force destroyed only 20 percent of heavy weaponry of Iraqi forces but many more of them fled.¹² The airforce effectively broke through Iraqi lines and stopped the reinforcements from mobilising. A mere 147 US lives were lost during the war whereas many pre-war estimates expected the losses to be in thousands.¹³ Airpower can be utilised to take out high-value targets, heavy machinery, and break enemy lines. It further deters the reinforcements from mobilising in these broken frontlines while the ground forces conduct their operations. This strategy has come to be known as Hammer and Anvil.

Even though airpower is used for crucial purposes like logistics supplies (food and war fighting supplies), emergency health services, maintaining communication lines, and transport of diplomats, the focus of this paper is on its aggressive use. Airpower can take the form of deterrence. For deterrence to work, one needs to have (a) effective military capacity, so that (b) the potential damage should be unacceptable to the adversary, and (c) the will to carry out such an attack and its communication to the adversary.¹⁴

Its uses are dependent on factors like terrain, the chain of command of the coalition, organisation and capacity of the adversary, and aim of the action (coercive or deterrent). It can exert

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. William W. Kaufmann, "The Requirements of Deterrence" in P. Bobbitt, L. Freedman, G. F. Trevorton (eds.), *US Nuclear Strategy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 168-87.

psychological pressure by regular fly-bys and Close Air Support (CAS) operations that would ensure ceasefire. One of the primary roles of intervening forces' airpower is to establish no-fly zones and deny flight capacity to the adversary groups. The use of such strategies has transformed peacekeeping operations into peace-enforcement operations.¹⁵ This transformation was witnessed in the Bosnian war.

THE BOSNIAN WAR

The Bosnian conflict emerged from the ashes of the Cold War. The former state of Yugoslavia was a confederation of six units: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. Yugoslavia, held together under Tito, weakened as the Eastern Bloc failed and as a result, the constituent units sought greater autonomy. However, Milošević pursued more centralising policies leading to Croatia and Slovenia declaring independence.

Figure 1. Ethnic Composition of Bosnia-Herzegovina



Source: *Balkan War: A Brief Guide*, BBC, March 18, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17632399>. Accessed on May 10, 2020.

15. James O. Tubbs, *Beyond Gunboat Diplomacy* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1997), pp. 6-10.

The first Balkan Wars broke out when Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in June 1991. The Bosnian war was not the first Balkan war but it was the most gruesome one. Bosnia was a multiethnic state consisting of Bosniak Muslims, Serbs, and Croats (see Figure 1). The Bosnian Serbs, led by Karadzic, opposed secession from Serbia. The conflict started when Bosniaks and Croats voted for independence in the referendum boycotted by the Serbs. Several states and the European Economic Community granted Bosnia international recognition starting from April 1992. A three-cornered war broke out amongst the parties.

The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was created on February 21, 1992 through UNSC resolution 743. Its mandate in Bosnia-Herzegovina was extended through further UNSC resolutions 758 (Security Corridor at Sarajevo Airport), 776 (Protection to ICRC), and 819 (Safe area at Srebrenica).¹⁶ While the UN and the EU tried to negotiate peace with the warring parties, mainly through the Vance-Owen Plan, the duty of peacekeeping was left to UNPROFOR.¹⁷ However, the peacekeepers were lightly armed. They proved to be ineffective in ensuring ceasefires and were often targeted. Therefore, the states through the United Nations Security Resolution 781 (October 1992) prohibited unauthorised flights. The UNSC resolution 816 (April 1993) urged states to take measures to ensure this denial.¹⁸ These resolutions marked the start of intervening forces—the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) airpower—in the conflict. The use of airpower was the safest option for NATO to intervene without exposing its ground forces to danger.

16. UNSC Res. (1992), 743, UN Doc. S/RES/743, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (February 21). Accessed on May 10, 2020.

UNSC Res. (1992), 758, UN Doc. S/RES/758, Bosnia and Herzegovina (June 8). Accessed on May 10, 2020.

UNSC Res. (1992), 776, UN Doc. S/RES/776, Bosnia and Herzegovina (September 14). Accessed on May 10, 2020.

UNSC Res. (1993), 819, UN Doc. S/RES/819, Bosnia and Herzegovina (April 16). Accessed on May 11, 2020.

17. The Vance-Owen peace plan divided Bosnia into 10 cantons based on ethnicity. Bosnians rejected it as they wished for a single multiethnic state and did not want to cede territory to Serbia. Serbs rejected it as the natural industrial resources fell in the cantons assigned to Bosniaks and Croats.

18. UNSC Res. (1992), 781, UN Doc. S/RES/781, Bosnia and Herzegovina (October 9). Accessed on May 10, 2020.

UNSC Res. (1993), 816, UN Doc. S/RES/816, Bosnia and Herzegovina (March 31). Accessed on May 11, 2020.

Deny Flight (April 1993–December 20, 1995) was operationalised to enforce a no-fly zone (UNSCR 816). NATO Alliance under Operation Deny Flight was to (a) conduct aerial monitoring and prohibit unauthorised fixed-wing and rotary-wing flights, (b) provide CAS on request of the United Nations to their troops on the ground, and (c) conduct, after a request by and in coordination with the UN, strikes against targets threatening the security of the UN-designated Safe areas. NATO's Chief of Air Operations Command (CAOC) designed the operation in generic packages instead of target-specific packages to allow quick compliance with varying political guidance.

It was easier to deny fixed-wing aircraft than rotary wing aircraft. Of the three local parties, only the Serbs (Krajina and Bosnian) had fixed wing aircraft. These were only 32 in total with no air-to-air capability.¹⁹ However, helicopter flights continued to violate the no-fly zone. The Rules of Engagement (RoE) of Deny Flight required aircraft to first determine whether a helicopter flight was committing a hostile act before taking any action. Further, the difficult terrain of the region meant that all the parties, including the UN and Humanitarian assistance organisations, were using helicopters. Many times Croats would paint their helicopters in the colours of the UN and Serbs would paint a red cross while transporting generals.²⁰ Even though the mandate of Operation Deny flight allowed them to execute airstrikes to secure Safe areas, the dual-key mechanism of command in carrying out such operations resulted in long delays. Further, not all the UN troops on the ground were trained to call in air support. Therefore, as the warring factions continued with atrocities during 1994-95, the deterrence factor of Deny Flight started to fall apart.²¹

The threats of airstrike failed when the Serbs launched an offensive on Gorazde (April 1994). Gorazde was one of the six UN designated

19. Michael O. Beale, *Bombs over Bosnia* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1997), pp. 20-21.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Milošević had broken ties with the Serbs in 1994 after the pressure from Balkans Contact Group which severely limited Bosnian Serbs heavy-military capacity. However, only little direct action was taken further which allowed the Serbs to continue their offensive against Bosniak Safe havens.

Safe zones (see Figure 2). Even though bombs were dropped when the UN peacekeepers at Gorazde were attacked, the Serbs, instead of backing down, escalated the fight. The Gorazde incident proved that if the combatants capture UN troops, airstrikes would be ineffective.

Figure 2. UN Designated Safe Havens



Source: Joshua Nevett, "Turkey-Syria offensive: What are 'safe zones' and do they work?", BBC, November 2, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50101688>. Accessed on May 10, 2020

In the coming months, Serbs would launch an offensive on Srebrenica and Zepa. At the London Conference, July 1995, a line was drawn at Gorazde. The imperative to carry out stronger operations was strengthened after the CNN broadcast the Srebrenica massacre (July 11, 1995). NATO made changes in its Rules of Engagement (RoE); any party violating the Safe areas or weapons-free zones would be targeted. Even the UN chain of command delegated authority to Commander of troops in former Yugoslavia, General Bernard Janvier. The mission had changed from peacekeeping to peace-enforcement. Two plans were devised: Dead Eye and Deliberate Force. The objective of Dead Eye was to neutralise the air-defence capability of Bosnian Serbs. They took out crucial communication lines, Surface-

to-Air-missile systems, early warning radars, and command and control stations.²² This would ensure a safer sky for aircraft under Operation Deliberate Force.

Two days after the mortar attack in the Markale market, Sarajevo, NATO, on August 30, 1995, launched Operation Deliberate Force. During the first two days the strikes were focused around Pale. The operation lasted three weeks. Near 400 NATO aircraft participated in the operation. Ninety-seven percent of the 1,026 bombs hit their targets.²³ The Serbs were continuously attacked and were not allowed time to remobilise. The Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) and Operation Mistral 2, a military offensive of Bosnian and Croat partnership, complemented Operation Deliberate Force on the ground. The objectives of Operation Deliberate Force were simple and in line with the earlier passed UNSC resolutions. Serbs had to cease attack on Safe areas, withdraw weapons from the 20 km zone of Sarajevo weapons-free zone, and allow safe passage to the UN forces engaged in Humanitarian Aid. The fighting amongst the groups continued even after the Operation ended, however, it had secured its objectives.²⁴ A ceasefire was agreed in October 1995 and the Dayton Accord negotiations were held in November the same year which put an end to the conflict.

CONCLUSION

Operation Deny Flight and Deliberate Force provided important lessons for a coalition-led intervention. The United States, just before the Bosnian war, had shown its airpower's supremacy in the Gulf War. However, this was a different challenge. Operation Deny Flight and Deliberate Force were NATO operations, coalition efforts. They had to account for different political objectives within the coalition. For example, Greece did not want to step up offensive actions against the Serbs.²⁵ Almost all the nations wanted to reassure Russia of the humanitarian nature of the intervention. Russia was even included

22 Beale, n. 19.

23 J. A. Tirpal, "Operation Deliberate Force", *Air Force Magazine*, October 1, 1997, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/1097deliberate/>. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

24. Anthony M. Schinella, *Bombs without Boots* (Online: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), pp. 34-35.

25. Peter C. Hunt, *Coalition Warfare* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1998), pp. 37-47.

in the Balkan Contact Group to discuss political objectives during the conflict.

The coalition effort reflected even in the military design of the operations. Inferior capability aircraft were engaged in the operations as the coalition had to maintain its participative nature. Even though the United States had enough Precision-Guided Missiles (PGMs) to execute Operation Deliberate Force, a third of the bombs used in the operation were unguided.²⁶

The United Nations learned to delegate operational authority. The delays caused due to the dual-key mechanism of approval of airstrikes cost many lives. The delegation was very slow during the Bosnian war. The then UN Secretary-General, Boutros-Boutros Ghali delegated strike authority to his special envoy, Yasushi Akashi, only in 1994. The military commander of the UN troops, General Bernard Janvier, only received this authority in 1995 just weeks before Operation Deliberate Force.

Operation Deliberate Force had shown airpower's supremacy in paralysing ground forces. They stopped the mobilisation of reinforcements. Heavy military equipment was destroyed and the ones that remained had to be pulled out of the Safe zone after the ceasefire. The incessant bombing over the three weeks had restored credibility in NATO's deterrence. Further, it played a coercive role in bringing all the parties to Dayton airbase to negotiate a settlement. However, it must be emphasised that airpower is most effective when coupled with ground force action (Hammer and Anvil) and diplomatic tools. Finally, the efficacy of these interventionist tools is only as good as the political leadership that guides them.

26. Ibid.

BOOK REVIEW

Brexit and the Consequences for International Competitiveness

Editor: Arkadiusz Kowalski

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

ISBN: 9783030032449 (HB) Rs. 12,674

ISBN: 9783030404802 (PB) Rs. 10,455



KHATU JAYESH JAYPRAKASH

The 2016 Brexit referendum would be remembered as a historic event in world politics which brought out existing fissures in the process of regional integration. With the new drama unraveling in the United Kingdom (UK) over 'Brexit and proroguing the British Parliament' with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and UK's Supreme Court at loggerheads, the road to Brexit looks uncertain and bleak. Brexit, a portmanteau of 'Britain' and 'Exit' signifying "divorce" of the UK with the European Union (EU), holds unprecedented consequences for the global economy, the assessment of which is an arduous task. Arkadiusz M. Kowalski's edited book titled '*Brexit and the Consequences for International Competitiveness*' attempts to bring together contributors to "identify the implications of Brexit

Mr. **Khatu Jayesh Jayprakash** is PhD. Candidate at the Centre for European Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

for structural changes in the global economy” and contribute to this arduous task of gauging the economic consequences of Brexit to global competitiveness.

In the primary chapter dealing with theoretical aspects of regional disintegration, Kowalski provides a theoretical background to Brexit with the help of the theory of Regional Disintegration. He explains how Brexit would lead to economic disintegration, which could be a reverse process of economic integration or could even be non-abidance of certain principles. The author terms the latter as a “mild disintegration” and further explains regional disintegration with the concept of neo-functionalism as put forth by Lefkofridi and Schmitter in 2016. He looks through the prism of New Intergovernmentalism as well and explains various disintegrative elements, rather than assuming ‘the regional disintegration to be an automatic process’. He elaborates on the definition of competitiveness which relates directly to the title of the book and paves the way for the other scholars to address the issue of Brexit in the further chapters of the book.

It is interesting to look at the phenomenon of Brexit from a different perspective. Ewa Sonta-Draczkowska in *‘Brexit as a National Transformation Programme: Project Management Perspective’* tries to look at Brexit using the Project Management perspective and exclaims that “Brexit is not a single project but a group of interrelated projects”. She highlights the importance of having a vision clarity, blueprint and leadership at the same time for the process to undergo in a smooth manner. The author, using this perspective, terms Brexit as “a high-risk programme”. She takes into consideration resource capacity of British civil services and questions the effectiveness of Brexit on its programme and management which lack clarity.

Many authors in the book have used scientific research models to base their research work and address the respective problems through various chapters in the book. For instance, Anna Sznajderska in her work has approached the subject of ‘pound depreciation’ and its impact on businesses in the UK, the EU as well as in economies like China using Global Vector Autoregressive (GVAR) Model for arriving at conclusive remarks. Similarly, the issue of migration in the post-Brexit scenario has been addressed in the chapters addressing economic implications of Brexit on Poland and Russia separately.

The book contains two chapters dedicated to China and Brexit. Gunter Heiduk dwells into Brexit's influence on Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambitious 'One Belt One Road initiative' (OBOR). Heiduk looks at the OBOR as a global economic initiative but calls Britain as a "peripheral country" in the OBOR. Heiduk opines that "China will alter its BRI strategy towards the UK" as China looks at the UK as an entry point to Europe. Marta Mackiewicz and Agnieszka McCaleb in their chapter approach the subject of China-UK relations on the bilateral trade front. Mackiewicz and McCaleb assess the impact of Chinese OFDI in Europe and on trade relations between China, the EU and the UK. By emphasizing on the current trade scenario between the three entities, the authors leave it on the "divorce deal" between the EU and the UK for further future assessment of the UK-China trade relations post-Brexit.

Anna Maria Dzienis' contribution in the book touches upon Japan's perception of Brexit by analysing likely impacts of Brexit on the Japanese economy. Japan and the EU are important contributors to the world trade and global competitiveness. Thus, it becomes essential to look at the Japanese perspective. The author commences her analysis by explaining *Abenomics*, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's economic model, with the help of explanatory charts. She tries to assess- How FDIs have fallen from Japan to UK post the BREXIT announcement. But most of the author's analysis is based on 'Japan's message to the United Kingdom and the European Union' released by the Foreign Ministry of Japan in 2016 which addresses Japan's official stance concerning economic uncertainty surrounding the entire process of Brexit. It speaks the narrative put forth in the document including Japan's advice to the UK with respect to leaving the EU. The author throws light on possible repercussions of Brexit on Japanese businesses in the UK which already exist in the policy document released by the Ministry.

This book is a genuine attempt to make theoretical and empirical contributions to the theories of economic disintegration. Overall, it focuses on economic perspectives specifically, rather than delving into socio-political and strategic ones and the various chapters in this book ponder upon trade, investments, migration, regional disintegration and its consequences on the international competitiveness. The

authors agree that Brexit poses negative consequences to global economic competitiveness and thus, a judicious deal between the EU and the UK is desirable if Brexit has to take place.

Most of the contributors in the book look at Brexit in the context of Britain and the respective countries they are considering in their analysis, but neglect looking at the EU as a significant actor. For instance, in the chapter on 'Brexit and Innovation: Focus on Research and Development in the UK', impact on Britain's research and development infrastructure and financing is contemplated upon, but the question of the EU's loss or gain due to the missing 'UK element' post-Brexit remains unanswered.

In addition to this, even though the book reflects on important economic actors like Germany and China, it misses out on the contributions from certain cardinal economic actors like the United States (the EU's main partner for exports in 2018), India and trading blocs like the ASEAN. The aforementioned entities are too big to ignore while considering Brexit and its consequences on international competitiveness.

The book could be helpful for the EU and British negotiators in analysing the impact of the Brexit on varied aspects. Eventually, the effects of Brexit on global competitiveness will depend on the type of Brexit which would be initiated, i.e. deal or no deal Brexit. Thus, it becomes essential to assess the effects of Brexit on both the fronts. However, this book brings off its objective of evaluating the consequences of Brexit for international competitiveness by including new and fresh perspectives which have not been delved into before.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Articles submitted to *Defence and Diplomacy* should be original contributions and should not be under consideration for any other publication at the same time. If another version of the article is under consideration by another publication, or has been, or will be published elsewhere, authors should clearly indicate this at the time of submission.

Each typescript should be submitted in duplicate. Articles should be typewritten on A4/Letter paper, on one side only, **double-spaced (including the notes)** and with ample margins. All pages (including those containing only diagrams and tables) should be numbered consecutively.

There is no standard length for articles, but 3,000 to 3,500 words (including notes and references) is a useful target. The article should begin with an indented summary of around 100 words, which should describe the main arguments and conclusions of the article.

Details of the author's institutional affiliations, full address and other contact information should be included on a separate cover sheet. Any acknowledgements should be included on the cover sheet as should a note of the exact length of the article.

All diagrams, charts and graphs should be referred to as figure and consecutively numbered. Tables should be kept to a minimum and contain only essential data. Each figure and table must be given an Arabic numeral, followed by a heading, and be referred to in the text.

Articles should be submitted on high-density 3-inch virus free disks (IBM PC) in rich text format (RTF) together with an **exactly matching double-spaced hard copy** to facilitate typesetting; notes should be placed at the end of each page. Any diagrams or maps should be copied to a separate disk separately in uncompressed TIF or JPG formats in individual files. These should be prepared in black and white. Tints should be avoided, use open patterns instead. If maps and diagrams cannot be prepared electronically, they should be presented on good quality white paper.

Each disk should be labelled with the journal's name, article title, author's name and software used. It is the author's responsibility to ensure that where copyright materials are included within an article, the permission of the copyright holder has been obtained. Confirmation of this should be included on a separate sheet included with the disk.

Copyright in articles published in *Defence and Diplomacy* rests with the publisher.

STYLE

Authors are responsible for ensuring that their manuscripts conform to the journal style. The Editors will not undertake retyping of manuscripts before publication. A guide to style and presentation is obtainable from the publisher.

The style should be followed closely. Dates in the form January 1, 2000. Use figures for 11 and above. British spellings are to be used. Authors should provide brief biographical details to include institutional affiliation and recent publications for inclusion in About the Contributors. Sub-headings and sub-sub-headings should be unambiguously marked on the copy.

NOTES

Notes should be **double spaced** and numbered consecutively through the article. **The first line of a note must align with subsequent lines. Each note number should be standard size and have a full point.**

- a) References to books should give author's name: title of the book (*italics*); and the place, publisher and date of publication in brackets.
e.g. 1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Common Defense* (NY: Columbia UP, 1961), Ch. 2, pp. 14-18.
- b) References to articles in periodicals should give the author's initials and surname, the title of the article in quotation marks, title of the periodical (*italics*), the number of the volume/issue in Arabic numerals, the date of publication, and the page numbers:
e.g., Douglas M. Fox, "Congress and the US Military Service Budgets in the Post War Period," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, vol. 16, no. 2, May 1971, pp. 382-393.