

Future Contours of the India-China Relationship

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The brutal assault by Chinese troops on Indian soldiers on the night of 15-16 June 2020 is an inflection point in the relationship between the two countries with long term implications. Military actions carried out by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) may be tactical and localised, but they are orchestrated at the political level and are designed to deliver a message which has strategic ramifications. It is not by accident but by design that a series of border violations took place in Eastern Ladakh and in Sikkim in the month of May.¹ That Nepal also put up claims at this time for a stretch of Indian territory that was clearly not in dispute also points at a possible Chinese hand, though the Nepalese context has been driven by local political considerations.

What could be the cause of Chinese belligerence? There is an opinion currently being expressed within the strategic community of India that Chinese actions are a result of internal dissidence, so an external threat environment is being created to keep the country united, or perhaps to enable the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to continue its vice-like grip on the country and to perpetuate one-party rule. This may not be wholly untrue. China has not just opened up a front with India, but also with Japan and Taiwan, and with some of the ASEAN countries over claims in the South China Sea. With Japan, China has a dispute over the Senkaku Islands. China also claims sovereignty over Taiwan, a position which the

Taiwanese government does not agree with. As of now, it has a trade dispute with the US, which has been ongoing for the last two years. So, are Chinese actions in opening up multiple fronts at the same time, a bid to establish China as the sole competitor to the United States? Is China throwing a gauntlet to the US and to the world? This possibility cannot be ignored.

In February, the Chinese Air Force (PLAAF) flew fighter jets and bombers around Taiwan as part of what it claimed to be an exercise to test “air-ground assault and fire support drills to further refine and test their multi-service joint combat capabilities.” The PLA’s air intrusions continued in March and April as well.² Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defence has stated that in the month of June, Chinese military planes had crossed over the outer reaches of Taiwan’s air defence identification zone (ADIZ), eight times.³ In April, a naval flotilla of five warships, led by China’s aircraft carrier Liaoning, sailed through the Miyako Strait between Japan and Taiwan,⁴ apparently signaling Chinese naval might in the region. And in the South China Sea, where China has laid claim, through its 9 dash line, to all of the waters therein, a Chinese vessel hit a Vietnamese boat near the Paracel Islands in April and captured its eight crew members along with two boats which came to its rescue.⁵ The Chinese lay claim to the Spratly Islands that are also claimed by Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei and have established military and industrial outposts on the artificial islands that

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they have constructed in these disputed waters. Increasing unilateral actions by China indicates a disturbing trend which needs detailed analysis.

Post the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world, an ever-increasing clamour is gaining ground to make China accountable for the spread of the virus, as the Chinese government suppressed data about the origin and spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan, the capital city of the Hubei province of China. The pandemic has impacted on the Chinese economy too, adversely affecting the livelihood of millions of workers. This has been further compounded by deteriorating relations between the United States and China, which has both economic and strategic implications. Chinese claims to its unilateral nine-dash line in the South China Sea and its claims over territories like the Senkaku Island are being resisted as this impinges on free and open navigation on the seas. Towards this end, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also called QUAD), an informal strategic forum between the US, Japan, Australia and India, is viewed with concern by China as it increases Chinese vulnerability along the sea lanes of communication where a major part of China's energy needs passes through the narrow Malacca Strait. Chinese aggressive behaviour is thus not merely to create an external threat to suppress internal dissension but has other dimensions too.

In China's strategic calculation, it posits that India is exploiting Chinese vulnerability and leveraging China's weakness to make territorial gains in the disputed region. China claims the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the basis of the positions held on 7 November 1959, whereas India

claims the LAC based on the positions held on 8 September 1962.⁶ China has since then built robust infrastructure with a network of roads coming up to the forward areas. The Indian response was muted, with hardly a road being built in the difficult mountainous region. This asymmetry has been consistently exploited by China. India's attempts to bridge this gap since 2014 has made China uncomfortable, especially the construction of an all-weather road from Darbuk to Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO), the 255-km long Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road. Lying at altitudes ranging between 13,000 to 16,000 feet the road took almost two decades to construct, but its completion has great strategic significance as the Karakoram Pass is barely 15 kilometres to the Northwest of DBO and is connected by a road. China has constructed the G219 Highway, running East to West, and connecting Xinjiang via Tibet. The G219 Highway passes through India's Aksai Chin, which was illegally occupied by China in the 1950s. From the Karakoram Pass, the G219 Highway is just over 100 km to the North, and so, the completion of the DSDBO by India is viewed by China as a potential threat to the G219 and thereby to Chinese control over its restive Xinjiang region.

Aggressive moves by China in Eastern Ladakh could perhaps be tactical manoeuvres to gain positions of advantage to dominate the DSDBO road. This, of course, begs the question as to why China should seek to make some tactical gains which would antagonise India and are thus a strategically unwise decision, especially at a time when China is facing multiple challenges across the world. But China believes it has to stand up to

India, whatever the cost.⁷ China does not seek clarity on the LAC, as the view from Beijing is that the two sides do not share the same historical records or perspectives and thus attempts to clarify the LAC will only result in more discord. The Chinese believe that a settlement of the issue can only be a political one,⁸ but they are in no hurry to do that either as ambiguity on the LAC has given China the leverage to continue advancing their claims, based on the ‘salami-slicing’ tactics they have refined over the years.

India’s complete integration of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), through the abrogation of the operative provisions of Article 370 and the splitting of the state into two union territories—the Union Territory of Ladakh (without a legislature) and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (with a legislature) in August 2019 also came as a rude shock to both Pakistan and China. Pakistan created terrorist groups such as the Jaish-E-Mohamed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hizbul Mujahidin (HuM) on its soil and continues to nurture them as strategic assets and as instruments of its foreign policy to create terror and havoc within Kashmir and in other parts of India. However, with Article 370 becoming inoperative, many linkages through which Pakistan’s ISI operated within India stand broken, thus considerably degrading the potential of these terror groups to create unrest within Kashmir. This has left Pakistan extremely worried and flustered. In addition, statements emanating from the Indian political leadership that India will wrest back Gilgit-Baltistan and Mirpur Muzaffarabad from Pakistan’s illegal control has come as a further shock to Pakistan as far from regaining the Kashmir Valley,

they now fear losing their illegally occupied territories. China too is concerned as it has the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—an over 60 billion dollar project running through Gilgit-Baltistan which would be in jeopardy if India wrests back that area. China is also concerned about claims made by Indian leaders to wrest back all territories of the erstwhile state of J&K which includes the Aksai Chin. That, of course, would cut China’s Xinjiang province as the G219 Highway passes through Aksai Chin. This too has perhaps emboldened China to seek positions in Eastern Ladakh which could dominate the Indian road axis leading on to the Karakoram pass.

China also feels it is in its interest to keep India bogged down in South Asia and thus undermine its global potential. What China seeks from India is neutrality in the US-China strategic competition. India demands a permanent settlement of the border, which perhaps could have as a first step, the demarcation of the LAC. However, in China’s conception, a permanent settlement of the border would be irreversible, but would not bind India to a neutral stance when Chinese interests are ranged against the US. China would hence not relinquish the leverage it has, for a strategic gain which is fungible.⁹ We can thus expect tensions to simmer between India and China in the years to come.

In such a scenario, what are India’s options? As India seeks to find its rightful place in the world, to include a seat at the high table, it cannot subordinate its interests to Chinese concerns. China, on the other hand, would do all that it can to keep India tied down to the backwaters of South Asia. In its quest for global dominance, it would not like to see a fellow competitor within Asia and

so would continue to use its proxies such as Pakistan to keep India embroiled in low level-conflict on its western borders, while China keeps India engaged on the LAC. The default condition in the India-China relationship will thus remain a mix of wariness and suspicion at one end to subdued hostility at the other. This is what has to be managed, without getting into a full-scale conflict which will benefit neither country at this time.

For India, it is important to get its act together and use all the instruments of state power to keep China in check, whilst also addressing the constant needling and pinpricks emanating from Pakistan. The present crisis, which is still ongoing in Eastern Ladakh may spill over to other sectors in Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. India will have to handle each challenge with firmness of resolve as was displayed in Doklam. The nation's armed forces must thus be mentally prepared to ward off any threats that may come from land, sea or air and must be deployed accordingly.

On the diplomatic and political front, it is perhaps time to revisit some of the legacy policies in relation to China. There is a need to speak out against China's human rights violations against the people of Hong Kong and the Uyghur of East Turkestan (Xinjiang). India also needs to revisit its stance on Taiwan and build a more robust relationship with that country. India's policy on Tibet also needs to be tweaked. China should not get away with the idea that it can promote dissent within India and not face the consequences of such action. China's use of psychological operations as part of its 'Three Warfares Strategy,' encompassing psychological warfare, public opinion warfare and legal warfare also needs to be countered with

a well-structured perception management campaign, which should also target the Chinese population. In addition, India needs to further bolster its partnerships with like-minded countries for a regional security architecture and organisations like the QUAD need to be strengthened to ensure free navigation on the high seas.

Chinese attempts to capture vital segments of the Indian market also need to be countered with appropriate legislation as well as with sensitising the masses on the pitfalls of using Chinese goods. The key sectors of concern are telecommunications and power, where no Chinese entry should be permitted on national security concerns. Such policies need to be announced upfront, leaving no ambiguity of interpretation, either within India or abroad. Alongside, India must make a determined push in future technologies through well-funded research projects, especially in Artificial Intelligence and chip manufacturing capability. The private sector also has to be co-opted in a big way to exploit the talent India has in multiple fields. This would give the necessary impetus for technological advancement, but a suitable environment would have to be created for the same, through the framing of legislation which is compatible with the needs of the corporate sector.

In terms of security, the nation needs to gear up its defence manufacturing capability. The public sector needs a total overhaul, especially the defence ordnance factories (OF) and the Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSU). The OF is being corporatised but the management has to be freed of control by non-specialists and rules have to be framed which gives management adequate leeway to perform in line with the private sector.

It is not talent that is in short supply but archaic rules and working procedures which inhibit both thought and growth. If India can produce a world-class space and missile programme, there is no reason why it cannot produce a state of the art fighter jets, warships, submarines, guns and tanks. India needs to be unshackled for its talent to flow and the private sector needs to come in, in a big way to support the defence effort.

Finally, on issues of national importance, the nation must stand up as one. Bipartisan support to vital national issues must be the norm, rather than the exception. But that perhaps is a big ask. There is equal danger from the spoilers within the system as there are from enemies outside. How this challenge is addressed will also determine the pace of India's rise as a leading power in the comity of nations.

References:

- 1 *A scuffle took place between Indian and Chinese troops at Naku La in Sikkim on 9 May 2020, an area with a settled border. Earlier, Chinese helicopter's violated Indian air-space on April 11 and April 20 at Sumdo on the border of Himachal Pradesh. In Eastern Ladakh, face-offs have taken place in May and June in the Depsang Plains, Pangong Tso and area of Hot Springs, in addition to what happened in the Galwan Valley.*
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- 3 <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/china-sends-8-military-planes-taiwan-airspace-analysts-see-move>
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- 5 <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3078286/chinese-ship-hits-and-sinks-vietnamese-fishing-boat-south>
- 6 *Yun Sun, China's Strategic Assessment of the Ladakh Clash, War on the Rocks, 19 June 2020, available at* <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-the-ladakh-clash/>
- 7 Note 6.
- 8 Note 6.
- 9 Note 6.

