

# THE RED DRAGON'S STRATEGIC OVERREACH

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The year 2020 will be remembered not only for the covid-19 shock and the end of [Donald Trump](#)'s presidency in the US, but also as a moment of reckoning for China. With its international reputation battered by the pandemic, and with pushback against its territorial overreach intensifying, China's ability to pursue its geopolitical ambitions is diminishing rapidly. Nowhere is this more apparent than in its relations with India.

The shift began in May. As the brutal Himalayan winter receded, a shocked India reportedly found that Chinese forces had occupied hundreds of square kilometres of borderlands in its northernmost Ladakh region.

The encroaching forces, backed by thousands of troops in the rear, had seized mountaintops and other strategic vantage points, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had established forward bases, blocking India's access to areas along the disputed frontier that had been under its exclusive jurisdiction.

It was a cynical attempt to exploit not only the chaos and hardship caused by China's most infamous global export, covid-19, but also the longstanding appeasement policy of the government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party.

In the previous six years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had met with Chinese President Xi Jinping 18 times, in the hope of fostering friendlier relations (and weakening the China-Pakistan axis). This hope appeared to have blinded India to China's preparations for aggression, including combat exercises and the frenzied construction of military infrastructure along the frontier.

In this sense, Modi repeated the mistake of India's first post-independence prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, whose dogged courtship of Mao Zedong enabled China to annex Tibet, thereby eliminating the territorial buffer between itself and India. Chinese encroachments culminated in the 1962 Himalayan border war, which began with a surprise PLA attack and ended with territorial losses for India.

That war shattered India's illusions of China as a trustworthy partner, and triggered a shift away from pacifism. With China's recent Himalayan aggression, India seems to be re-learning the same lesson. Already, India has matched Chinese troop deployments along the frontier and occupied strategic positions in the area. The heightened tensions have triggered a series of clashes, the worst of which left 20 Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of PLA troops dead in mid-June.

By turning what was once a lightly patrolled frontier into a "hot" border and raising the spectre of further military surprises—all while deepening its strategic ties with Pakistan—China has left India little choice but to strengthen its strategic posture significantly.

In fact, a major Indian military buildup is on the cards. This will include vastly increased frontier patrols and additional mountain-warfare forces. But, because Indian forces cannot guard every nook and cranny of one of the world's most inhospitable and treacherous borders, deterrence will also be essential.

That is why India has been testing a series of leading-edge missile systems, including a

hypersonic cruise missile, a hybrid missile-torpedo (which can be deployed against submarines and aircraft carriers), and an anti-radiation missile (designed to seek and destroy enemy radar-equipped air defence systems). This portends substantial Indian investment in military modernization.

India's military buildup will also include significant expansion of its naval capacity. This will enable India to adopt a much stronger maritime posture, which includes opening a front in the Indian Ocean, through which much of China's trade (including most of its energy supplies) passes.

But India is not confronting China alone. In November, Australia, Japan, and the US joined India for the Malabar naval war games—the first-ever military exercise involving all four members of the so-called Quad, a loose strategic coalition of the Indo-Pacific region's four leading democracies. Deepening cooperation among the Quad is central to America's Indo-Pacific policy, which includes a focus on the maritime realm. Given bipartisan consensus in the US on the need to counter China's expansionism, this policy is unlikely to change significantly under President-elect Joe Biden's administration.

A US-India strategic alliance has long been China's security nightmare. Yet, by repaying Modi's peace overtures with stealthy land grabs, Xi has made such an alliance more likely. It was in response to China's aggression that in October, India finally concluded the last of four "foundational" agreements that the US reaches with its allies. The terms of the agreement had been under negotiation for more than a decade.

Beyond working with like-minded states, diplomatically and militarily, India is attempting to counter China by exposing its neocolonial activities, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. And it will likely seek to foil Xi's plan to capture the 442-year-old institution of the Dalai Lama and cement China's hold over Tibet. With the current Dalai Lama having made clear that his "reincarnation will appear in a free country", India should tacitly help Tibetan exiles find his successor in its Tibetan-Buddhist Himalayan regions, which produced a Dalai Lama in the late seventeenth century.

Yet another likely dimension of India's new China strategy will be to pursue a managed and selective economic decoupling. China's trade balance with India represents its third-largest bilateral surplus (after the US and the European Union). Now that India recognizes the folly of relying on China for critical supplies, this is bound to change.

Since the People's Republic was founded in 1949, it has more than doubled its territory by annexing ethnic-minority homelands and seizing other countries' lands. Against this background, its recent encroachments on India's territory in the Himalayas could pose a significant threat to Indo-Pacific stability.

Fortunately, regional powers—beginning with India—are pushing back. With this regional resistance increasingly supported by the US and other Western powers, Xi will most likely live to regret the decisions he made in 2020.

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