

GRADING INDIA'S COUNTER-COERCIVE STRATEGY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

In the murky and chameleon-like world of contemporary geopolitics, adopting a sceptical approach to analyses and evaluation is often the best way forward. Nine months is a reasonable period to arrive at a holistic and reasonably acceptable evaluation of crises across domains. That the world was caught napping and brought to its knees by the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) is an undisputable proposition. In the grey zone at the global level is the absence of a definitive prognosis on the decline and rise of American and Chinese power, respectively.

The two heavyweights are jabbing at one another without anyone of them being able to deliver that decisive knockout blow. The contest promises to be a long-drawn one that could last decades and result in several bouts across domains ranging from the traditional military and diplomatic spaces to new frontiers such as space, cyber and the cognitive domain. As the two powers engage in a strategy of exhaustion, middle powers such as India must see an opportunity to redefine their place in the world order.

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Alexander L. George, a pioneering American political scientist who published several path-breaking works on deterrence and coercion in a career spanning over six decades, is best known for his work on coercive diplomacy. It is instructive to benchmark the happenings in eastern Ladakh against four of his variants of coercive diplomacy — a gradual turning of the screw, a try-and-see, a tacit ultimatum, or a full-fledged ultimatum. As the People's Liberation Army (PLA) engaged in unprovoked transgressions through May 2020 that sought to alter the existing *status quo* in eastern Ladakh, it did so in a progressive manner that much resembled the graduated turning of the screw and then waiting to see India's response. This was critical for the Chinese to decide whether it could replicate similar transgressions elsewhere along the Line of Actual Control.

An immediate Indian military response in the form of a *quid-pro-quo* was among the options that was demanded by shrill voices across constituencies of strategic watchers. This was correctly not subscribed to by India's strategic establishment, which decided instead to adopt the try-and-see approach. In this phase of the crisis, India sought to engage in mild forms of coercion that involved the building up of forces to achieve parity on the ground. It was also the first time ever that the Indian Air Force could display its capabilities in Ladakh in all its roles, giving an indication that a serious demand was being made by India from the People's Liberation Army to restore *status quo* without an explicit threat or a time limit laid down by India.

Interestingly, as India's defensive posture was strengthened militarily, so did the coercive content in its diplomacy and economic posturing *vis-à-vis* China. Having failed to coerce the People's Liberation Army to withdraw by mid-July, India had two options as per the escalatory ladder laid out by Alexander George. It could issue an indirect or tacit ultimatum that would involve an implicit and tightly controlled tactical action, thereby demonstrating resolve and intent. Or, it could issue a full-fledged ultimatum followed by multi-dimensional military action that could lead to a limited conflict. If avoidance of war and winning without fighting lies at the heart of both Kautilya and Sun Tzu's approach towards statecraft, the People's Liberation Army's initial moves and the deliberate Indian response conformed to a predictable journey up the escalation ladder that stopped at a tacit ultimatum.

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Equally applicable to the eastern Ladakh crisis from Alexander George's repository of ideas are the psychological variables that impact the effectiveness of coercion, particularly the 'dangers of misperceptions and miscalculations under the stressful conditions of crises'. Ringing true is also his emphasis on the 'importance of political leaders having a good understanding of adversary leaders, their mind-sets and domestic constraints'.

In eastern Ladakh, the People's Liberation Army unrolled its tactical plans with speed and transgressed with the requisite stealth. However, at the operational and strategic level, the Chinese engaged in significant overreach and did not expect the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force to mobilise in strength and slip into their operational roles at high altitude with ease. The comfort levels of the Indian Army with absorbing attrition and offering an impactful riposte like the one it did by occupying key heights overlooking People's Liberation Army positions, makes one wonder whether the People's Liberation Army has ceded the psychological high ground it had gained in May. At the strategic level, the refusal of India's political establishment to push the panic button in May, and the synergised politico-diplomatic-military approach by the Indians during negotiations have been a welcome departure from the past.

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If one looks at the crisis through the prism of a larger global and regional context, or even through the more focused lens of coercive diplomacy, there are several positives for Indian statecraft, particularly in the diplomatic and military realms. India is a *status quo* power and this is ingrained in its strategic DNA and associated strategies of deterrence and coercion. This implies, and history is testimony to the possibility, that when faced with adversaries who are either irrational or revisionist, there is every likelihood of India initially being rocked onto the back foot during a crisis that involves either the application or the show of force. Response strategies to such situations are where there is much ground still to be covered.

India has militarily recovered well, diplomatically played hard-ball and strategically postured deftly despite the constraints of the ongoing pandemic. While it is too early to predict the trajectory of events when the snows melt, the Chinese have bitten off more than they can chew and could be looking for a face-saving solution. When such a possibility emerges with the kind of power asymmetry that exists between the two countries, it can only be fair to argue that India has done well in countering Chinese coercion in Ladakh with its own brand of counter-coercion.

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