

China: Beijing's Bhutan gambit: Here's how to contain China

By Abhijit Iyer-Mitra

The recent skirmishes with [China](#) near the [Bhutan](#) border bring home one thing loud and clear: the danger is clear and present. The question is: how do we defuse this, and what options does India have on the table?

The recent spate of deliberate incursions — and let us be clear about it that these are planned in [Beijing](#) — seems to have had multiple triggers and multiple desirables. All Chinese actions invariably are multi-causal.

In conjunction with ongoing provocations by China in the [South China Sea](#), the first message is clearly aimed at the United States to show that China can activate multiple fronts to make Washington's life miserable and bog it down in many theatres of action. More importantly, this also demonstrates that the US's regional allies are security lightweights, and that the benefits they bring are outweighed by the security baggage they lug along.

The second is aimed at India — the message that any closer proximity with the US comes with consequences, and should those consequences escalate militarily, there is very little that the US can realistically do to help India. The third message is also to India — and it has to do with India's furious rejection of the 'One Belt One Road' ([Obor](#)) initiative — something President Xi has associated his personal prestige with and the rejection of which he seems to have taken quite personally as well. The final message is to Bhutan. To Bhutanese policymakers, it is to demonstrate the limits of Indian help.

After all, will India risk Gangtok, Itanagar or, for that matter, Delhi, for Thimpu, if push comes to shove? Clearly then, one of the desired tangibles of the latest Chinese action is to co-opt Bhutan into joining Obor and pave the way for formal bilateral relations between the two, reducing, if not jettisoning, India's vice-regency. So what can India do? The response has to be divided in two: the tactical talking down of China, and the strategic containment of China. The tactical involves appeasing China to some degree and assuaging Xi by pursuing the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Forum for Regional Cooperation vigorously.

This enables Xi to portray this initiative as a subset of Obor for the purposes of the 19th Congress of Communist Party of China later this year, and in so doing 'save face'. India, too, saves face by not joining Obor, while ignoring the domestic messaging in China of BCIM being 'Obor-minus'. The strategic containment borrows from a US Cold War template. The closest point between the US and the Soviet Union was in the Bering Straits, where the two were separated by a mere 90 km. Yet, the US kept the Soviet Union bogged down in Europe, seldom — if at all — paying attention to the straits.

In the Indian iteration, India needs to turn the South China Sea into the Fulda Gap and the Himalayas into the Bering Straits. India's fear has always been 'What if China does the same in the Indian Ocean'? This is where our policymakers have a clear decision to make and cannot afford to dither.

Do we continue to invest in an obsolete Army facing what is literally an uphill battle, and indulge the Navy's power projection fantasies? Or do we focus on the problem at hand, cut the Army, focus on the Air Force, and force our Navy into a sea denial posture in a domain where we enjoy an overwhelming advantage? The path ahead seems quite clear. The question is will Delhi choose it.

(The writer is Senior fellow at the Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies)

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