

CHINESE AGGRESSION COULD RESET POWER PROJECTION IN ASIA

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Not just India but others too are re-assessing the China threat and altering their stance accordingly

Amid reports that a tentative disengagement is in the offing along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), as India and China reaffirm their commitment to “not allow differences to become disputes”, debate in India has already moved on to the nitty-gritty of square kilometres and inches. Though most would not know the difference between the Galwan Valley and the Hot Springs areas if shown on a map, the confidence with which the two sparring sides are making claims and counterclaims is quite remarkable. If we could rise above our partisan divide and look at the big picture, we would see not only the complexion of Sino-Indian relations having been completely altered, but also global political realities rapidly evolving in directions few would have envisioned a few months ago.

There is no doubt that ground realities along the LAC will find themselves altered after this crisis, both as a result of Chinese shenanigans and the Indian response to them. Chinese salami-slicing along the territorial boundaries had been going on for decades, and for long India was a mute spectator to those tactics. Now, as the consequences of our past inaction come back to haunt us, many are exhibiting a faux outrage.

What is of greater consequence today is that India has finally signalled that it is willing to cast aside older assumptions that have underlined its China policy. This process began much before the Galwan crisis of last month. It was reflected in India’s steadfast opposition to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, in the revival of the Quad, in taking open positions on freedom of navigation and maritime order, and in rapidly building border infrastructure. Yet, the power differential meant New Delhi had to manage China in a manner that allowed for the possibility of engagement and accommodation.

The road from Doklam to Galwan has been a tough one. It made clear to New Delhi that for Beijing mechanisms—formal or informal—are an end in themselves. The martyrdom of Indian soldiers was perhaps the price that we had to pay as a nation to come to terms with the real nature of Chinese expansionism. What India and the world are facing is not an ordinary rising power troubled by the shackles of the existing global order. We are facing an expansionist authoritarian state bent on shredding the international system to pieces to create an order in its own image. There can be tactical compromises with such a regimented state, but not strategic convergence, as many of our policymakers had long been trying.

It is this shift in mindset that the past few weeks seem to have ushered in India. Trade and cultural exchanges will not change the fundamental nature of the Communist regime in China. New Delhi’s decision to exclude Chinese companies from critical strategic sectors, government tenders and high-end technology is the beginning of a long-term process of trade and technology decoupling from China. Much like along the LAC, this too will be a long haul, but there seems to be hardly any alternative, and perhaps, just perhaps, the shock of the recent incidents will propel our political establishment to speak in one voice on the challenge posed by China.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s address to the nation and beyond during his visit to Ladakh last

week was one of the clearest articulations of this new resolve. He cast aside India's traditional sloganeering gobbledygook by squarely underscoring the point that India's quest for peace should not be viewed as a sign of weakness, and that India is committed to preserving its sovereignty. He made it clear that Chinese expansionism will have to be dealt with head on. This message for China could not have been clearer.

The larger global environment has also been evolving to India's advantage. Modi's pro-active diplomacy of the past few years has made it possible for him to demand and get support from India's global interlocutors at a difficult time. And China's own actions have made a robust push-back a real possibility. The US has deployed two of its aircraft carriers to the South China Sea's waters, and Japan has conducted naval drills with India at a time of high Sino-Indian tensions. These are signs of how major powers around the world have rallied to India's side. From Australia to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations member states, all are responding to Chinese aggression with alacrity. There is a better understanding around the world today of the challenge India faces in managing an overtly hostile China. Even Russia, which is shaping a close relationship with China, has responded much more favourably to Indian concerns than expected. This is as much a function of the changing global realities as it is of New Delhi making it clear to the rest of the world that it remains ready to fight its own battles.

Yet, this is not the end; it is just the beginning of a new era, one in which new terms of engagement are being set by powers big and small. New Delhi too will have to take the current recalibration of its ties with China to its logical conclusion. China's recent actions have clarified Indian choices. Indian policymakers can either go in for radical measures in an attempt to narrow the power differential with China, or decide to bumble along, much like their predecessors, until the next Doklam or Galwan crisis erupts. And erupt it will, because that's in the very nature of Chinese power aspirations. New Delhi will have to drop all sentimentality for a clear-eyed assessment of Beijing's logic of power, and formulate an appropriate response.

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