

THE STANDOFF AND CHINA'S INDIA POLICY DILEMMA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

For China, which has long been preoccupied with its relentless pursuit to approach the centre of the world and in managing a turbulent relationship with the United States, the June 15 incident of a violent face-off between Chinese and Indian troops at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), causing casualties on both sides, came as a big jolt. It brought the national focus back on an otherwise not-so-popular topic of China-India relations. The development took China's strategic community by storm, while the intense debate and discussions that followed, rather than generating a consensus, brought out China's many dilemmas *vis-à-vis* India.

On one side of the debate are China's top India watchers such as Lin Minwang and Zhang Jiadong, from Fudan University, and Li Hongmei from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) among others, who believe that the present conflict is not an "accident" but an "inevitable result" of what they perceive as "India's long-standing speculative strategy on the China-India border". From Doklam to Kashmir to India's "unending infrastructure arms race" at the LAC, they say, Beijing was "fed up" and "had to teach India a lesson".

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Their key argument is that China-India relations hold no great prospect in the current international situation. There is no possibility of a negotiated settlement of the border dispute any time soon. India is already a "quasi-ally" of the U.S. with no scope for reversal. With opportunities for cooperation at the global level diminishing, regional competition intensifying and the earlier system of effective management of bilateral differences crumbling beyond control, periodic violent conflicts, they predict, are the "new normal" in China-India ties.

China, they argue, should reconsider its prevalent strategic thinking that India is not its main strategic challenge and, therefore, peace needs to be maintained in its direction as much as possible. Only by daring to fight, by showing strong determination, the will and the ability on the western frontier can China effectively deter its adversaries on the eastern coast. This is also, what they called, the right way to resolve China's primary contradiction, that is the China-U.S. problem, by first breaking "its arms and legs".

To deal with a resurgent India, Chinese hardliners suggest a policy of "three nos": "no weakness, no concession and no defensive defence". In other words, China should take all opportunities to crack down on India, take the initiative to hit it hard whenever possible. This, it is argued, will not damage China-India relations; on the contrary, it will make it more stable. Didn't the 1962 China-India war help China to maintain peace and stability on the western front for a long time and directly eliminate American and Soviet ambitions to use India to contain China? In this backdrop there is renewed interest among certain sections of the Chinese strategic community to: keep India under control by destabilising the entire border region, creating tension across the board, from the McMahon Line in the east to the Aksai Chin area in the west; take the initiative to attack and seize territories under India's control from Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, and weaken India internally, by supporting the cause of Maoists, Naga separatists and Kashmiris.

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However, on the other side of the debate are Chinese political thinkers and professors such as Zheng Yongnian and Yu Longyu among others, who in their analysis of the Galwan Valley

incident, have been somewhat critical about China's policies towards India, which they say remain mostly tactical, of a "reactive nature" and are characterised by a "tit-for-tat" approach without any clear strategic intent. This, according to them, stokes extreme nationalism in India and unites the otherwise divided nation against China, which not only harms China's interests but might eventually draw China into an untimely military conflict.

They criticise those vying to "teaching India a lesson" as being "short-sighted" and not "psychologically prepared for the rise of India". China, they argue, lacks understanding of the fact that India, as a rising power, is very important to China and will be increasingly crucial in the future, with China-India relations evolving as the most important pair of relations after China-U.S. links.

If China-India ties are damaged beyond repair, they warn, India alone or in association with other countries will cause "endless trouble for China". For instance, an openly hostile India will use every possible means to prevent China from reaching the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the decoupling of China-India relations will further strengthen the "anti-China alliance" between the U.S., Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia and other countries, who will actively take the initiative to reshape global industrial chains, use the Indo-Pacific Strategy to check and balance China's military and economic power, and expand international organisations such as the G-7 to weaken China's influence in international affairs.

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On a similar note, various commentaries in the Chinese press highlight that downgrading China-India relations to the level of India-Pakistan relations or a 'Kashmirisation' of the China-India border is easier said than done as this will require a complete reversal of China's present LAC policy of being "reasonable, profitable and economical".

Strategically too, they say, it is "unwise" for China to take the initiative to get into a comprehensive military conflict with India — "a big country with comparable military strength"— at this point in time. The general view among these military analysts is that if China has an advantage in terms of psychology, equipment, and logistics mobilisation, India too has advantage on various fronts such as deployment, supply line, practical war experience, topography, and climate among others. If India's disadvantage remains in the fact that its capital lies well within the bombing range of China, China's key disadvantage is its particularly long supply lines. Therefore, if the conflict ends in a short period of time, it will benefit China. But if it is prolonged, China will be disadvantaged.

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If a war starts, they argue, India will make all efforts to prolong it as long as possible, and the U.S. is likely to help India to attain this objective. Even if the two sides ended in a tie, in India it will be counted a victory and the national morale will rise sharply; on the contrary, in China, the morale will decline if it cannot beat India decisively. Therefore, in its effort to "teach India a lesson", they fear, China might lose more than it would gain.

The overall consensus within this group is that it is still not the time to 'resolve' the India problem. Instead, China, for now, should strive to make India retreat without a military conflict, maintain basic peace and stability at the borders, and, at the minimum, not deliberately push it towards the U.S. Meanwhile, China simultaneously carries out its strategy of weakening India internally by leveraging its social and political differences, completing its strategic encirclement, improving troop deployment in the Tibet region to secure the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and stationing Chinese troops in the Gwadar Port (Arabian Sea), so as to secure China's Indian

Ocean sea routes, among other interests. In the words of another Chinese strategist, Yin Guoming, rather than winning a war, China should aim at attaining a comprehensive and overwhelming advantage in geopolitics *vis-à-vis* India, which cannot be altered by war.

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To sum up, despite all the jingoism and rhetoric propagated through its official media, China is actually in a serious dilemma over its India policy. As we, in India, seek to reset ties with Beijing in the post-Galwan era, we should take note of the ongoing Chinese debate on India, factor in its many internal contradictions and perceived vulnerabilities *vis-à-vis* India, and leverage the same to our benefit.

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