

CHINA'S POORLY TIMED AGGRESSION COULD PROVE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE

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Chinese aggression might push New Delhi to rework its foreign policy aim of being a swing power and closer to Washington

The popular perception of China today is that of a newly muscular nation, toned on four decades of Deng Xiao Ping's prescription for the country's "four modernizations". In this view, China has risen from the status of a poor country to that of a rich one. It's now an Asian hegemon that seeks to challenge the sole super-power status of the United States. Its urban citizens are upwardly mobile, technology savvy and seek entertainment and luxury consumption.

Many elements of this view hold true. China has indeed emancipated over 800 million citizens from poverty over the last 40 years. It has modernized its highways and its cities. Gross domestic product per capita has risen from about \$200 to over \$8,200 (in constant 2010 dollars). Income per capita for China crossed India's at about \$450 in 1983, and is now more than four times that of India. The Chinese poverty rate, using the common United Nations definition, has dropped from 88% in 1981 to 0.7% now. Having focused its early attention on primary schooling, it has turned now to higher education, particularly in science and technology. It now leads the world in the number of annual national patents, with 1.5 million applications per year, against about 600,000 for the US. China also leads the world in trademark filings. Just last year, China's Chang'e-4 became the first ever vehicle to land in the Aitken Basin on the dark side of the moon. In military terms, budget and hardware, China is roughly 40% of the US, but is closing the gap.

Using a Confucian term, Deng described the desirable outcome as xiaokang, or a "moderately prosperous" China. In Deng's planning book, this was to be achieved by the year 2000, which was then adjusted to 2020. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has set a goal of becoming a "modern socialist" country by 2035 and a "rich" country by 2050. China has bucked the Western view that to become more prosperous, it will inevitably have to combine free markets, open global access and a plural political system. To the surprise of many observers, China has sharply exploited the open global access it received with World Trade Organization accession, combining it with a managed free market system to achieve its current status. The strength of centralized political control has reached a peak under President Xi Jinping.

Under Xi, China has eliminated political opposition (within the 90-million strong CPC), cleared the path to single-man control of the Chinese military, and embarked on an openly muscular policy towards the outside world. Xi has demanded fealty for the way he has dealt with the pandemic. There is no real hope of an independent inquiry to determine if he deserves any praise. Xi has transformed Chinese policy, famed for its long-term orientation, to make it far more transactional. Dealing specifically with authoritarians in power from Pakistan to Turkey and Argentina, China has demanded international validation in return for showering its largesse. Its belligerence in the South China Sea and its aggressive claim over several islands in the Spratly Islands archipelago (multi-country) and Natuna (Indonesia) has put it in direct confrontation with Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, Philippines Brunei and Indonesia. In pursuit of Mao Zedong's five fingers strategy, which says that Tibet is the palm and that Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Andhra Pradesh are an integral part of China, Beijing began aggressive incursions along the Line of Actual Control in India's Pangong Tso Lake area and Galwan Valley. Elsewhere, China has used the distraction of the pandemic to impose draconian anti-freedom laws in Hong Kong. The United Kingdom's response of offering citizenship to Hong Kong residents has added a new

dimension to China's global war against democracies. The US's response of banning certain CPC apparatchiks from obtaining a US visa (for human rights violations against Uighurs) has led to a reciprocal ban against US Senators. Xenophobia and nationalism now reign in Chinese cities.

China is a deeply unequal country with alarming rural poverty. Ethnic minorities like Naxis in Yunan and Uighurs in Xinxiang have been persecuted for centuries and the tradition continues. Scholars suggest that the root cause of China's rural-urban divide lies in the strategy of a centrally planned system that favoured heavy industry development and extracted an agricultural surplus largely for urban capital accumulation and urban subsidies. Intense control of information, Orwellian repression and surveillance and centralization of power in one individual are early warning signs. To this, one can now add international opprobrium.

For India, Chinese muscle-flexing comes at a bad time. India would have preferred a period when it has an opportunity to increase its international commerce, improve the balance of trade with China, and generally focus more on its economy than its military. With huge costs arising from the covid-19 pandemic, India will need to focus resources and attention on keeping its borders safe and its maritime influence in the Indian Ocean unaltered. India's foreign policy strategy would ideally be that of a swing power, but with China's aggressive action, New Delhi may have no option but to cozy up to the US. China is beginning to play a strong hand badly.

P.S: "China is a sleeping lion, warned Napoleon Bonaparte, let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world." And, "Power is the ability to influence others to get the outcome one wants," said Joseph Nye.

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