

# THE MAIN PLANKS IN A COUNTER-CHINA POLICY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The [situation along the China-India border in Ladakh](#) region is still tense. The disengagement process is proving difficult, and the latest meeting of the Corps Commanders on July 14 has not resulted in any demonstrable progress regarding troop disengagement/de-escalation. India is standing firm on both sides ensuring complete disengagement of troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), while China is laying emphasis on strengthening Confidence Building Measures in the border areas, and proper handling of border issues in a timely manner to “avoid differences becoming disputes”.

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Details regarding the actual ground situation, meanwhile, remain sketchy, lending itself to differing interpretations. However, it would appear that this time around, China is intent on managing the ground situation to its advantage, and bring about a realignment of the LAC. With the idea of ‘buffer zones’ having been accepted — which apparently are to be located on Indian territory — it would appear that China is well on its way to achieving its objective. If China does succeed, it could be for the first time that China has a foothold on the west side of the Kongka Pass.

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The events of May and June were hardly a ‘one-off manoeuvre’. A great deal of planning would have preceded the incursions across the LAC at multiple points, several hundred kilometres apart. However, what prompted China’s aggressive behaviour is unclear, but it had the effect of shredding the painstakingly devised Border Agreements of 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2013. Whether China is behaving like an ‘irredentist power’ seeking to expand its frontiers to the limits that existed in the Qing Dynasty, or as an ‘expansionist power’ (as the Prime Minister obliquely hinted which produced an instant reaction from Beijing, warning India against making “a strategic miscalculation with regard to China”), is less critical than what China’s current objectives are. Undoubtedly, humbling India in the eyes of Asia and the world was all important. India needs to ponder deeply on this, to avoid making a strategic miscalculation during a difficult period.

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The 21st Century was once heralded as the Asian Century, with China and India in the vanguard. Rumour has it that as far back as 1988, Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, had mentioned to then Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, that he doubted this. If so, Deng has been prescient, for in the 21st Century the two Asian giants have been more at loggerheads than anything else.

Much of the blame should be cast on China. The latter, having shaken off its image as a ‘status quo power’, is intent on dominating the geostrategic space in its neighbourhood and across Asia, before embarking on its ambition to displace the United States as the Global Numero Uno. Instead of reinforcing economic relationships in the region, China has been intent on transforming the Asian region in its own image, and, simultaneously, seeking to become a continental and a maritime power.

Trying to make sense of China’s actions is critical for India’s response. To begin with, and

despite the fact that China has been inclined for long to nibble at territories in the western, middle and eastern segments of the border, it would be a mistake to think that China is preparing for a conflict over territory. India should not be taken in by Western propaganda about China's territorial ambitions, for China is well aware that it cannot be certain whether it will emerge a victor from an all-out conflict with India. With two key dates in mind (2025 and 2035 — Made in China 2025 and China Standards 2035), China cannot afford to jeopardise its future for the present. India's strategic thinkers and planners must keep this in mind, while drawing up plans to checkmate China's predatory actions in the mountainous border regions. Instead, they should urgently implement the plans to set up the Mountain Strike Corps divisions, which had been inexplicably shelved. This is bound to deter China here far more than the stockpiling of state-of-the-art weapons.

Undoubtedly, a strong military is an important component of a nation's power. It is important to maintain a strong military but it is even more important to know when or how to use it. With a country such as Pakistan, the military option is more often than not the most suitable one; with countries such as China, one has to consider a variety of options. Undue sensitivity to domestic politics in a situation such as the one we currently face in Ladakh, should not dictate our course of action.

India must go back to the drawing board and consider what are the 'subtler tools' of power available to it, rather than only considering the military option. India may well find non-military tools not only more cost effective but also less risky. One option, readily available, is diplomacy which is an equally indispensable instrument of a nation's power. Exploiting the current widespread opposition to China, India must embark on a diplomatic offensive to create international opinion in its support regarding border violations. A diplomatic offensive, involving different Ministries of the Central government, business leaders, persons of international standing, etc., can achieve a great deal in convincing international opinion that India is right and China is wrong, as also in conveying a message about India's peaceful intentions *vis-à-vis* China's expansionist ambitions.

As a corollary to this, India should also revitalise another instrument of power that it had employed in the past, *viz.*, cultivation of foreign leaders with a view to draw their specific attention to China's aggressive policies and designs. Countering China's moves to 'buy' influence will not be easy, but India's involvement with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) should prove invaluable in this respect. India's relationship with NAM needs to be revitalised. India previously also had a programme of helping countries across Asia and Africa through a well-designed technical aid programme which possibly still exists, but may need to be upgraded. Such programmes not only provide an enduring link between India and these countries but also help contrast India's 'untied aid' with that of countries such as China whose aims are political and economic subjugation.

To compete effectively in today's world (and to counter China's offensive across the world), India must also overhaul its 'messaging' capacity. It should make greater use of technology to send across its message and ideas to people and countries, in its vicinity and across the globe, highlighting its peaceful intentions in stark contrast to China's aggressive policies and tactics. This was not one of India's strong points in the past, but in today's world where social media plays a dominant role, sustained messaging has become critical.

At this time, India must pay particular attention to relations with countries in its neighbourhood, such as Nepal and Bangladesh, and allies such as Iran and Vietnam, which seem to have frayed at the edges, with India being more intent on strengthening relations with the West, especially the U.S., and bodies such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), or the informal strategic dialogue between the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia. Smaller countries of Asia,

which constantly face China's aggressive interference in their internal affairs, have not received much support from India, and this needs India's attention.

India's true strength, over and above all this, however, is its unity in diversity. A truly united and resilient India is the best antidote to China's attempts to humble India. The impact of a united India will be far greater than establishing closer links with the U.S. or the West. China has never been able to properly fathom, or understand, the strength India seems to derive from its spiritual, religious and cultural attributes, which are a part of its civilisational heritage. China has also never been able to comprehend the innate value India attaches to reaching out to leaders of different religions, in particular the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, with no strings attached. In recent years, possibly with a view to appeasing China, India has somewhat distanced itself from the Dalai Lama, which has, without doubt, been a mistake that needs to be rectified. The Dalai Lama is an enduring symbol of hope for many millions of people across the globe, apart from Tibetans. Restoring the Dalai Lama to the same level of eminence in India's official thinking, should be an important plank in India's anti-China policy.

Simultaneously, India would do well to take pole position in propagating 'Himalayan Buddhism' which China has been seeking to subvert to achieve its ends. India's credentials here far outweigh that of China's and should produce excellent dividends. It needs to become a key plank in India's 'forward policy'.

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