

WHAT IS DRIVING CHINA'S AGGRESSION? - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

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There has been growing debate in recent times in India and other countries about China's aggression. What's driving Beijing to engage in contests on multiple fronts, be it Hong Kong, the near seas, or India, particularly amid a pandemic and economic weakness? Is it opportunism? Is it hubris? Is internal turmoil and insecurity leading to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) lashing out? Or are there structural factors that one must consider?

Last week, the Chinese foreign ministry formally established a new research centre, the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy. State media reported that the centre would be useful in distilling the paramount leader's thoughts to "serve the construction of theory, system and mechanism, and capacity of the major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in a new era". This development demonstrates three structural features of China's approach to the world under President Xi Jinping. Each of these impinge on what, by all measures, appear to be strategically damaging choices that the Chinese leadership has made over the past seven months.

First, the trend of top-level design dominating foreign policy has been firmly cemented. Much has already been written about Xi's ascent as the core leader, his consolidation of power within the CCP, and control over the armed forces. His thoughts on diplomacy were adopted at the 2018 foreign affairs work conference. It called for prioritising "the centralised, unified leadership of the Party" when it came to foreign affairs. Unlike his predecessors, foreign policy decisions under Xi carry the distinct imprimatur of the core leader, at least that's what the propaganda apparatus has told the world. For instance, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is seen as Xi's legacy initiative. In 2017, the Central Party School's publication *Study Times* reported that Xi "personally made decisions on building islands and consolidating the reefs" in the South China Sea (SCS). Not since Mao Zedong's era has personality, instead of institutions, mattered so much in China's approach to the world. This, in itself, limits policy discourse and innovation, heightening the risk of cloistered thinking. Of course, given that the leader enjoys overwhelming, if not absolute, control, there can also be 180-degree turns. After all, it was Mao who pivoted towards to the United States (US) in 1972. But such an outcome seems unlikely in the present scenario.

Second, Xi's ascent has also been accompanied by a return of ideology as a key driving force in Chinese politics. Over the years, Chinese leaders haven't necessarily ignored ideology. It's always been present in public rhetoric. But in practice, it was relegated to secondary place to economic performance and political pragmatism. In contrast, under Xi, the need for loyalty has come to dominate political discourse. A demonstration of this was evident earlier this month as the CCP and State institutions reported their efforts to uphold the "two safeguards," which essentially refer to upholding Xi's authority as core leader of the party. Days later, *Qiushi*, the party's journal, published an article of excerpts from Xi's speeches over the years, underscoring the centrality of the CPP.

In it, Xi exhorts cadres to "maintain a high degree of ideological consciousness, political consciousness, and action consciousness". This intensification of ideological consciousness bleeds into perceptions of and narratives about competition between systems and models. Long before we stood at the cusp of what now appears to be a Cold War-like contest between China and the US, Beijing was talking about the challenges of a Cold War mentality. The now infamous Document No 9, which was reportedly put out one month after Xi took over as president in 2013, had warned against the threat of infiltration by foreign ideas and universal values, calling for greater commitment to work in the ideological sphere. This, under Xi, has further been blended with a nationalistic narrative of historic humiliation at the hands of external powers and the meteoric rise under the Party's command. Irrespective of China's economic achievements, as ideological convictions deepen, they breed a sense of siege, constraining the scope for pragmatic compromise.

Finally, Beijing views itself as a major power. It must, therefore, also act in accordance with that self-perception. This has meant the need for greater engagement with the world at large, as evident by repeated affirmations of sticking to the path of reform and opening up. Xi has publicly expressed the desire to actively engage in new forms of multilateralism and participate in global governance reform. This has meant setting up new institutions and structures while also expanding China's stake in the existing system. Beijing clearly sees value in sustaining the global institutional architecture.

Yet it understands that in geopolitics, power is the currency that matters. In multilateralism, this has resulted in Beijing's efforts to assume leadership of United Nations agencies or establishing forums like the 17+1 model with Central and Eastern European countries and The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation with African states, or even China's normative contestation to legitimise a particularistic conception of human rights. In bilateral relations, there's greater transactionalism and coercion. After all, what worth is power that cannot be exercised? And is one truly powerful if one cannot shape favourable political outcomes?

The answer to the first of these two questions is obvious. How Beijing responds to the logic of strategy following its recent assertion will help answer the second.

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