

REMAINING NON-ALIGNED IS GOOD ADVICE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

For weeks, the India-China stand-off dominated newspaper headlines, warning about the possibility of a [major conflict along the Line of Actual Control \(LAC\) in the Ladakh and Sikkim sectors](#). With both India and China agreeing to step back marginally from positions adopted at the beginning of May, and “reaching an agreement”, the newspapers and most other believe that tensions have abated. The reality is, however, very different.

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Confirmed facts about incursions during May are that Chinese forces came in sizeable numbers and crossed the undemarcated [LAC at quite a few points in the Ladakh and Sikkim sectors](#). These were in the vicinity of Pangong Tso (Lake), the Galwan Valley, the Hot Springs-Gogra area (all in Ladakh), and at Naku La in the Sikkim sector. Talks at the level of military commanders, from lieutenant generals to brigadiers and lower formations, have produced, to repeat the official jargon, a “partial disengagement”. Both sides have also agreed, according to the same set of officials, to handle the situation “in line with the agreement” that had been reached.

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The blandness of the statements conceals many a truth. This time, it would appear, the Chinese are here to stay in places such as the Galwan Valley. It is also unclear, as of now, whether the Chinese would withdraw from Pangong Tso, any time soon. Restoration of the status quo ante which existed in mid-April is thus nowhere on the horizon. Another bone of contention also seems unlikely to be resolved for quite some time, viz., China’s insistence that India stop road construction in the border area on the ground that it is taking place in Chinese territory, which India contests, insisting that it is taking place within Indian territory.

Public attention has been deflected from China’s sizeable military presence along the LAC, (comprising armoured vehicles, artillery units and infantry combat vehicles in far larger numbers than at any time in recent years), and the partial disengagement may provide many in India an opportunity to claim that China “blinked” while India showed “steely resolve”. This is not, however, the time for political grandstanding. There is a great deal at stake.

India needs to undertake a detailed analysis of recent events to find proper answers to many vexed questions. To merely affirm that India’s decision to strengthen its border infrastructure was the main trigger for the recent show of strength by China, would be simplistic. Both India and China have been strengthening their border infrastructure in recent years, and while the strengthening of the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi road may have angered the Chinese, to ascribe China’s recent show of strength to this would be misplaced.

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Admittedly, Chinese President Xi Jinping disdains Deng Xiaoping’s aphorism, “to keep your head low and bide your time”, but Mr. Xi is not known to act irresponsibly. A demonstration of military strength, merely because India was improving its border infrastructure, would fall into this category. Nor does this action fit in with western assertions that such steps demonstrate China’s newly assertive post-pandemic foreign policy.

There have to be far weightier reasons for China's actions, and India needs to do a deep dive to discern whether there is a method behind China's actions, viz., as for instance, the existence of certain geopolitical factors, an increase in bilateral tensions between India and China, economic pressures, apart from China's internal dynamics. China's action clearly belies the code of conduct drawn up at the Wuhan (China) and Mamallapuram (Tamil Nadu) summits by the leaders of India and China, and the recent incursions do convey the imprimatur of the top Chinese leadership.

If we were to examine geopolitical factors, it is no secret that while India professes to be non-aligned, it is increasingly perceived as having shifted towards the American orbit of influence. India's United States tilt is perhaps most pronounced in the domain of U.S.-China relations. Quite a few instances could be highlighted to confirm the perception that India tends to side with the U.S. and against China whenever there is a conflict of interest between the two. An evident degree of geopolitical convergence also exists between the U.S. and India in the Indo-Pacific, again directed against China. India is today a member of the Quad (the U.S., Japan, Australia and India) which has a definite anti-China connotation. U.S. President Donald Trump's latest ploy of redesigning the G-7, including in it countries such as India (India has conveyed its acceptance), but excluding China, provides China yet another instance of India and China being in opposite camps. A recent editorial in China's *Global Times* confirms how seriously China views the growing proximity between Delhi and Washington.

Also read: [Forgotten in fog of war, the last firing on the India-China border](#)

Coming next to bilateral relations, and notwithstanding the public bonhomie at the level of Mr. Xi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, relations between the two countries have been steadily deteriorating. India is almost the last holdout in Asia against China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI). India also loses no opportunity to declaim against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China further views India's assertions regarding Gilgit-Baltistan, as an implicit attack on the CPEC, China's flagship programme. More recently, India was one of the earliest countries to put curbs and restrictions on Chinese foreign direct investment. Adding to this, is the rising crescendo of anti-China propaganda within India. The *Global Times* has implied in one of its editorial pieces recently, that China's friendly policy towards India should be reciprocated, and that India "should not be fooled by Washington". On the eve of the recent high-level border talks between top military leaders, China again made an elliptical reference to the need for India to maintain equidistance between the U.S. and China.

Such sentiments do impact border matters. Almost all [India-China border agreements](#) are premised on the presumed neutrality of both countries. As the Special Representative for Border Talks with China (2005 to 2010), this sentiment was an ever present reality during all border discussions. The document, "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question" (2005), one of the very few documents relating to the China-India border, reflects this reality.

One should also not ignore the impact of internal pressures that have been generated within China — in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in part due to other factors. Mr. Xi has, no doubt, accumulated more power than any other Chinese Communist leader since Mao, but there are reports of growing opposition within party ranks to some of his policies, including the BRI.

As the full impact of the most serious health crisis that China has faced since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 becomes evident, and alongside this the Chinese economic miracle is also beginning to lose steam, the current Chinese leadership is faced with an unique crisis. The coupling of political and economic tensions have greatly aggravated pressures on Mr.

Xi, and the situation could become still more fragile, given the rising tide of anti-China sentiment the world over. How the present crop of Chinese leaders led by Mr. Xi would react to this situation, remains to be seen.

These are dangerous times, more so for countries in China's vicinity, and specially India. India is being increasingly projected as an alternative model to China, and being co-opted into a wider anti-China alliance which China clearly perceives as provocation. We cannot ignore or forget the circumstances that led to the unfortunate India-China war of 1962. Faced with the disaster of the Great Leap Forward, and increasing isolation globally (with even Soviet leaders like Nikita Khrushchev trading barbs), Mao chose to strike at India rather than confront Russia or the West.

A single misstep could lead to a wider conflagration, which both sides must avoid. This is not the time for India to be seen as the front end of a belligerent coalition of forces seeking to put China in its place — even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, now seems to be joining the anti-China bandwagon under prodding from the U.S. India has consistently followed a different policy in the past, and it is advisable that it remains truly non-aligned and not become part of any coalition that would not be in India's long-term interest.

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