

BEIJING SHOULD NOTE

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In pushing India to a tipping point, [China](#) is close to losing the hard-won trust of the world's second most populous nation and a large neighbour. If the 1962 war saw the freezing of bilateral relations for the next quarter of a century, the current crisis could lead to a chill that lasts longer. Keeping India's trust, however, might look like a trivial matter to the current Chinese Communist Party leadership. India might be the world's fifth largest economy, but it is one-fifth the size of China's. Beijing is acutely sensitive to power differentials, and sees an India that is struggling to find an effective response to the Chinese manoeuvre in Ladakh. Of course, Communist China's disdain is not exclusively for India. Beijing, which once benchmarked itself against Washington, is now contemptuous of the US and more broadly of the West that has found it hard to cope with the COVID crisis and seems at odds with itself. The CCP is telling itself that "Xi Jinping Thought" is the essence of "twenty-first century Marxism" and that "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has triumphed over Western capitalism.

By all accounts, Beijing feels confident that it can confront all the major powers simultaneously. It bets that economic interdependence and political influence operations can easily break up any potential hostile coalition that might emerge within and among them. Coming to the Asian neighbours, the CCP believes that it owes no explanation for taking territories and waters that it claims as its own. It is convinced that China's "historic rights" take precedence over international law and good neighbourliness — whether it is in the South China Sea or in the Himalayas. The sensitivities of its neighbours — from Japan to Indonesia and Philippines to India — hardly make an impression on the Chinese sense of entitlement today.

Appealing to China's better angels at this juncture, then, might be futile. Yet, the CCP should know that China is not the first power to be overwhelmed by narcissism and hubris. Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany believed they were unstoppable in Asia and Europe in the run-up to the Second World War. Soviet Russia, too, believed in the late 1970s that America was in irreversible decline after its humiliating defeat in Vietnam and a string of socialist revolutions, from Cambodia to Namibia and from Afghanistan to Mozambique. But the tide eventually turned against all the three great powers that ended up in history's dustbin. Just as India struggles to understand the power impulses that drive China, the CCP could never fathom India's political culture. It has been easy for Beijing to underestimate India's strategic resilience that produces unity amidst crises. The CCP might also be under-estimating India's tradition of "non-cooperation". If Beijing does not step back and restore the status quo ante that existed prior to the crisis that began in May, it will compel Delhi to embark on a radical reorientation of its China policy. The CCP ought to have no doubt that the Indian people can and will step up to such a recalibration.

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