

CHINA POLICY LACKS PERSPICACITY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

There is an uncanny resemblance between what is going on now on the India-China border with the events in the run-up to the 1962 war. The debacle in that war was rightly blamed on the Nehru government for its military unpreparedness and for its inability to fathom China's larger strategic objectives. In fact, the former failure was but a corollary of the latter. With India much better prepared now to face China's challenge on the ground, the situation in terms of the military equation is not the same as in 1962 but that is a secondary issue.

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In both cases New Delhi failed to fully understand China's fundamental strategic objectives regarding India. Nehru could be impugned for his idealistic notion of Afro-Asian solidarity and his suspicion of America's strategic designs that influenced his thinking on China. However, the present government, which by its own admission is firmly committed to national security above everything else and whose foreign policy actions are driven by transactional rather than idealistic considerations, seems to be equally naïve about Beijing's long-term strategic objectives.

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New Delhi has compounded its failure by indulging in reckless rhetoric regarding Aksai Chin and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) that have painted the image of India as a revanchist power in utter disregard of the country's capabilities that preclude any attempt at changing the status quo on either front. Senior Cabinet Ministers' declamations about liberating Aksai Chin and recovering PoK, while justifiable in terms of India's legal rights to these territories, were ill-timed. They were made when Beijing was feeling alarmed at the Indian government's decision to separate Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir that augmented its perception that it was a prelude to India's attempt to change the status quo in Aksai Chin. Beijing was also worried about India's renewed assertion of its claims on PoK that in China's perception threatened the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project.

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But these missteps were merely the icing on the cake. While the military is more cognisant of China's tactical goals in terms of creating facts on the ground and making them the base line for future negotiations, the political leadership, it appears, has failed to fully comprehend China's strategic objectives. These strategic goals include (a) ensuring that India understands that it is not in the same league as China and driving home the lesson by periodic localised assaults across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) if it tries to assume a position of equality; (b) warning India not to actively oppose Chinese designs to dominate the Indo-Pacific region by aligning with the U.S. and its allies — Japan and Australia, in particular — in an attempt to contain China; (c) keeping India preoccupied with problems in its immediate neighbourhood so that it cannot act as an alternative pole of power to China in the broader Asian region; and (d) as part of the last objective, supporting Pakistan economically and militarily, including the sharing of nuclear weapons designs, to neutralise India's conventional power superiority vis-à-vis that country. An understanding of these objectives is essential to fashioning a realistic Indian response to China's aggressive policies in Ladakh and elsewhere along the LAC. Pakistan is at best an irritant for India that can be managed with the use of diplomatic tools, international opprobrium, and superior military force. In fact, the Pakistani challenge to India has become magnified because of its nexus with China.

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China is undoubtedly India's principal long-term adversary. Wining and dining with its leaders creates confusion and hinders a clear perception of this reality. India's main strategic goal should be the adoption of carefully calculated policies that neutralise China's diplomatic and military clout in the Asia-Pacific region without making India appear as a surrogate for other powers and without sacrificing India's autonomy of decision-making in foreign policy.

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