

WHY CHINA IS BEING AGGRESSIVE ALONG THE LAC

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The ongoing tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) pose the biggest national security challenge to New Delhi in at least 20 years. The clashes in Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh have [claimed 20 Indian lives](#), the first incident of fatalities on the India-China border in 45 years. [China has revived its claim on the entire Galwan Valley](#) and has [asked India to pull back](#) from the areas. [Satellite images](#) in the public domain suggest that China has set up defence positions in the valley as well as the disputed “Fingers” of Pangong Tso. Both sides are engaged in a face-off at Hot Springs. Despite multiple rounds of military-level talks, tensions are unlikely to ease given the complexity of the ground situation.

What led to the current situation? In 2017, India and China agreed to amicably resolve the [Doklam standoff](#) that lasted for more than two months. No blood was spilt then, and no shots fired. The National Democratic Alliance government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been very careful not to upset China’s domestic and geopolitical sensitivities. Barring occasional joint statements issued with leaders from the U.S. and Asia-Pacific countries, reasserting India’s commitment to “freedom of navigation” (a veiled criticism of China’s claims over the South China Sea), India has stayed away from criticising China on controversial topics, whether its “de-radicalisation” camps in Xinjiang, crackdown on protests in Hong Kong, or disputes with Taiwan. Yet China chose to increase tensions along the LAC. Why?

One popular argument is that China’s move, driven by local factors such as India’s infrastructure upgrade and its [decision to change the status of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh](#), was reckless. For some square kilometres of land, this argument goes, [China has lost India strategically](#), to the West. Several experts have claimed that the tensions on the border are driving India deeper into a strategic embrace with the U.S. But it’s not as easy as it seems. There is a [clear shift in Chinese foreign policy](#) post the COVID-19 outbreak. This is seen in [China’s rising tensions with the U.S.](#), its threats against Taiwan, repeated naval incidents in the South China Sea, and a [new security law for Hong Kong](#). The tensions along the LAC are part of this shift. To understand this shift, one has to get a sense of the sources of China’s conduct.

Today’s China is an ambitious rising power which wants to reorient the global order. Unlike the Soviet Union of the 1940s (in the early stages of the Cold War), China is not an ideological state that intends to export communism to other countries. But like the Soviet Union of the post-war world, China is the new superpower on the block. When it was rising, China had adopted different tactical positions — “hide your capacity and bide your time”, “peaceful rise” or “peaceful development”. That era is over. Under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese think they have arrived. With the global economy in the doldrums, globalisation in an irrecoverable crisis accentuated by the COVID-19 outbreak, and the U.S. under an isolationist President taking the most aggressive position towards China since Richard Nixon, Beijing believes the global order is at a breaking point. It is fighting back through what game theorists call “salami tactics” — where a dominant power attempts to establish its hegemony piece by piece. India is one slice in this salami slice strategy.

China doesn’t see India as a ‘swing state’ any more. It sees India as an ally-in-progress of the U.S. Its actions were not reckless, taken at the risk of losing India strategically. Its actions are a result of the strategic loss that has already happened. If India is what many in the West call the “counterweight” to China’s rise, Beijing’s definite message is that it is not deterred by the counterweight. This is a message not just to India, but to a host of China’s rivals that are teaming up and eager to recruit India to the club.

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Within this broader framework there could be a host of factors — local, regional and global — that influenced China's moves. When most of the world's big powers are grappling with the pandemic, revisionist powers such as China have more room for geopolitical manoeuvring. Europe has been devastated by the virus. The U.S. is battling in an election year the COVID-19 outbreak as well as the deepest economic meltdown since the Great Depression. Its global leadership is unravelling fast. The Indian economy was in trouble even before COVID-19 struck the country, slowing down its rise. Social upheaval over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, and the National Register of Citizens had weakened the Indian polity. India's traditional clout in its neighbourhood was slipping: tensions with Pakistan have been high keeping the troops occupied in the border areas; Nepal raised boundary issues with India; Sri Lanka is diversifying its foreign policy and China is making deep inroads into that region; and Bangladesh was deeply miffed with the CAA. Even in Afghanistan, where Pakistan, China, Russia and the U.S. are involved in the transition process, India is out. More important, last year's Balakot airstrike was strategically disastrous. It may have helped Prime Minister Modi win a re-election, but there was no evidence that proved that Indian strikes hit the militants. India lost a jet to the neighbour and its pilot was captured and later released by Pakistan. The whole operation exposed the chinks in our armour, eroding India's deterrence. A confluence of all these factors, which point to a decline in the country's smart power, allowed China to make aggressive moves on the LAC.

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This is a strategic trap. India has reached here partly because of the lack of depth in its strategic thinking. A deep embrace of a declining U.S. is not a solution as many argue; rather, it's part of the problem. Pakistan embraced a far steadier U.S. during the Cold War to check India. What happened to Pakistan thereafter should be a lesson for India. What India needs is a national security strategy that's decoupled from the compulsions of domestic politics and anchored in neighbourhood realism. It should stand up to China's bullying on the border now, with a long-term focus on enhancing capacities and winning back its friendly neighbours. There are no quick fixes this time.

stanly.johny@thehindu.co.in

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