

READING CHINA RIGHT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The motive behind [China](#)'s incursion in Ladakh is to push India to settle the boundary issue and cede Aksai Chin to China. Experts phrase China's border policies differently, but the overriding assessment is that they are essentially an outward projection of internal security concerns. The key, in essence, is to ward off the threat at the periphery to achieve internal stability.

A pattern is being noticed after China's last experiment of settling borders with Russia and three Central Asian states in the 1990s. Fearing its sensitive Xinjiang region becoming an object of external power play after the Soviet collapse, Beijing had displayed urgency in settling the border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Chinese border negotiation tactics with these countries blended "incentives with coercion". Beijing settled for a third of territories it claimed from Kazakhstan. Yet, the Kazakhs had to admit they had gained. In addition to what it had lost, Kazakhstan had to denounce Uyghur separatism and curb anti-China activities. In a similar pattern, Kyrgyzstan had to cede 1,20,000 hectares in a dubious exchange for Chinese assistance. Tajikistan was made to surrender 1,100 square miles in 2010. Here, China claimed some 28,000 sq km, but settled for 3.5 percent of it. The Tajiks had to cede land and yet were made to feel the victor.

In essence, China ultimately gained a bit of land, nixed the Uyghur issue, and pushed its economic agenda by making Xinjiang a pivotal link to the Eurasian markets. The success gave birth to a self-serving SCO, lauded as an exemplary multilateral cooperation mechanism, essentially meant to blunt any US-led Asian alliance in Eurasia. But China's appetite for territorial expansion did not stop here. In Russia's Far East, weaker states are induced to let out agriculture and forestland to Chinese farmers. Borders and rivers are being altered to meet China's new interests.

India desperately wanted to join the Chinese-led SCO, without perhaps understanding its game. The Belt and Road Initiative has since been added by Xi Jinping in 2013. A view popular now is that the early surrender to China was a mistake. Its tactics are fuelling tensions and resentments across Asia.

China's past border tactics should offer some example, if not a complete cue to Chinese strategy. Ever since India and China agreed in 2005 on a new set of guiding principles to settle the vexed boundary dispute through the Special Representative (SR) level talks, China has been seeking a substantive adjustment concession especially on Tawang. India probably prefers having a marginal modification in the current alignment of the boundary to settle the issue. For India, ceding Tawang confronts a political difficulty. This was reflected in the drafting of the guiding principles. But both countries hoped to clinch a solution through this mechanism.

In March 2013, China once again pushed for a settlement. Remember, the motive behind the PLA's 19-km intrusion in Depsang in April 2013 was to press India to show "urgency" and "redouble" efforts to settle the boundary issue. Post-Depsang events showed the officials of two sides had drawn certain lessons. The officials described the Depsang standoff as an "isolated" incident, but the important thing was to underscore how it was resolved without making the issue big enough to affect relations. Importantly, the boundary resolution was deemed important from the Chinese point of view.

So far 22 rounds of special representative-level talks have been held since the drafting of the guiding principles. But a framework agreement still eludes these talks. Meanwhile, China has

created more suspicion through its economic expansion in and around India. India too has responded while building up its infrastructure along the [Line of Actual Control](#) (LAC).

China's recent swoop in Ladakh can't be unrelated to its growing domestic uncertainties and on India's front, about future plans in Xinjiang and Tibet that border Ladakh. Beijing doubts India would raise the Tibet issue. But, it does suspect the US-Japan-India coalescing to encircle China. Therefore, a stronger assertion may be a euphemism for deterring India plus others harming China's core interests. Of course, China retains the option to offset the three by fronting Iran, North Korea and Pakistan.

Through the Ladakh incursion, the Chinese are possibly trying to convey three essential points. One, settle the boundary dispute on its terms. Two, that it intends to solve the Tibet problem internally and does not want any Indian interference in the post-Dalai Lama developments. Three, it wants to point out that a US-led QUAD strategic forum should not be encouraged.

China seems to be pushing for a formal settlement along the LAC in Ladakh, where they have nothing to lose. Probably, they also assume that India has accepted *fait accompli*. And, to our disappointment, it may not involve swapping India's claims over Aksai Chin for China's claims over Arunachal Pradesh, which many in India thought to be a pragmatic thing to accept. This time, Chinese may be making a tricky move to let India, in the first step, forego its claim over 38,000 sq km (Aksai Chin), thereby de-link Ladakh from the overall boundary dispute. But, should that happen, India, by implication, will have to give up not only Aksai Chin, but also cede its notional claim over the 5,047 sq km (Skyasgam valley) and the Menser Enclave (five villages) near the Mansarovar Lake. China's "minimal demand" that Tawang is non-negotiable had been aired through Chinese academics. This tactic was also applied with Central Asian states.

If India falls for some kind of Chinese position over Aksai Chin, Beijing will then shift the focus to Arunachal to emphatically claim 90,000 sq km from India. Ceding Aksai Chin would fundamentally alter the status of J&K and Ladakh. By implication, India would have to forget about PoK and Gilgit-Baltistan as well. India should tread carefully unless both sides are willing to make a move for grand bargaining.

The writer, a former ambassador is an expert on strategic affairs

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