

# A RED LINE THAT BEIJING SHOULDN'T TRY TO CROSS

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China's aggression along the LAC reveals strategic myopia on its part, a failure to appreciate where its own long-term interests lie and what attributes justify claims to geopolitical power

In a world unsettled by the covid pandemic, it is clearly in the interests of both New Delhi and Beijing to avoid any confrontation along the 3,500-km-long Line of Actual Control (LAC) that India and China share as a de facto border. However, two hotspots along the LAC (in Ladakh and Sikkim) threaten to turn into military flashpoints, reviving memories of the 2017 Doklam stand-off. Indian armed forces are said to be on alert and diplomacy is expected to dial down tensions. Even US President Donald Trump has offered to "mediate or arbitrate" the dispute. But China's troop build-up and incursive attempts—in Ladakh's Galwan area, particularly—seem ominous in the context of Chinese President Xi Jinping's asking his country's army to raise its battle-readiness shortly after Beijing upped its defence budget by 6.6% this year to nearly \$180 billion, as estimated. Posturing, this may well be. Yet, it reveals strategic myopia on the part of a regime that sees itself as a long-term participant in geopolitics and fancies itself as the creator of an Asian century.

Beijing's self-image already seems bent toward hegemony. China has been flexing muscle not just along the LAC, but elsewhere too. On all available signs, its defence policy envisions a high-tech ground military force to go with an enhanced capacity to project maritime force across the high seas of the Indo-Pacific. Some analysts trace its aggressive shift in tone of recent weeks to domestic politics, where it may serve as a diversionary tactic to relieve Xi of pressure within over the regime's handling of the global response to its role in the covid outbreak. Directing some fury at India, which recently joined international calls for a probe into the origins of the virus, could be a convenient way for the regime to rally nationalistic support back home. It may also have found a pretext to accuse New Delhi of ulterior motives in our recent moves to close the asymmetry in terms of border-area road access. Last year, for example, India opened the country's highest altitude all-weather bridge in eastern Ladakh, some 45km from Chinese territory. If China is being discussed around the world, though, it is for the current pandemic. Specifically, for its thinly-veiled efforts to leverage its relatively quick corona recovery to exercise greater sway over world affairs. While the US was already ranged against it, Beijing's clumsy designs on Europe in the guise of an aid provider appear to have weakened Sino-European ties. Indeed, many of the diplomatic gains that China made now appear at risk of being frittered away by its actions. Till recently, its telecom prowess was winning admiration globally. Today, it attracts suspicion for strings attached to its foreign dealings. This trust deficit could be attributed to its misguided notions of global authority.

For one, any country's so-called hard power, defined as an ability to bend another nation to its will by force, needs to be matched by its soft power, which is a function of the appeal of its professed values. For another, leadership is largely about being looked up to by the rest of the world for truly worthy innovations. This is especially so at this point in the arc of history, with everyone desperate for a covid cure. Economic and military heft matters, but only up to a point. Rich and muscular China might have become, but it should not delude itself about its strength in a post-covid world.

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