

India's new-found confidence

As it heads for the 75th anniversary of its independence, has India learnt to behave like a superpower? The sequence of events over the last few months would seem to suggest this. You must have got it by now—I mean the standoff with China and its resolution.

The Indian government deployed a judicious mix of strength and wisdom during the Doklam episode. Two videos may be fresh in your memory. The first was in Doklam, in which Indian soldiers could be seen pushing back the intruders in red from China. In the second, at Ladakh's Pangong Tso Lake, the physicality of the conflict was palpable. Pelting stones, raining fists and blows on each other, the Indian and Chinese soldiers appeared to be engaged in an intense wrestling match. Episodes such as these have taken place on the border with China in the past too, but it was the first time that the videos were being watched by people in their drawing rooms, in a matter of hours.

The places where these skirmishes took place are inaccessible for tourists. There isn't even a village in the vicinity. So who shot these videos and why did they go viral? The answer to this may still be a mystery, but by destiny or design, it served a larger purpose. The videos kindled a confidence in the common citizen that our defence forces are second to none. When the occasion demands, they can put up stiff resistance and push back the Chinese. This is a clear sign of a shift in India's military strategy.

What is significant is that even as India was changing its spots, China was steeped in the old mould—trespassing followed by hollow threats. When its defence ministry said India should remember what happened in 1962, its foreign ministry joined the chorus and added—The way the Indian army went to Doklam, imagine what could happen if the Chinese went and ensconced themselves in Nepal? They unleashed a series of challenges and warnings. For Indians who love sensationalism, this was a different kind of thrill. The two video clips had become a good antidote for their anxieties.

All through this turmoil, the ruling establishment in India displayed extraordinary restraint. Defence minister Arun Jaitley's brief but consequential response to the Chinese was that the India of today isn't the India of 1962. A few days later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said India was ready to resolve every issue through dialogue. That is why the global opinion kept turning against them and ultimately China had to drop its road-building plans. This was the second jolt to our powerful neighbour. First, India boycotted Chinese President Xi Jinping's pet One Belt One Road Project (OBOR) and now the shelving of road-building. Once bitten, why would India compromise on its sovereignty or on the security of its borders?

Some people believe that after the setback to its ambitious OBOR project, China could not have accepted India's absence from the BRICS summit. This had the potential of inflicting a serious blow to China's economic interests. So, it made amends. There is a possibility that India's policy architects had anticipated this and accordingly taken the blow-hot blow-cold decisions. Before sending out troops on the border, successful governments explore all possibilities on the diplomatic front. That's what New Delhi did. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in Beijing at present. In the evolving scenario, he will certainly meet his Chinese counterpart with renewed confidence. One hopes both the countries will prioritise peace and prosperity over other issues. Chanakya wasn't wrong when he said we can change everything but our neighbours. Alertness, understanding and cooperation are the best policies to deal with a neighbour. China should understand this. Their companies conduct their business in India. If our people turn against China, who will buy their products?

It will be wrong to assume that previous governments have not done enough to defend our borders.

In 1967, during a skirmish near Nathu-La, Indian troops neutralized more than 300 Chinese soldiers but the general public didn't get a whiff of it. In 1999, it took a long time for the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government to declare the Kargil conflict as a war. Those were the days of hesitant diplomacy.

In a way, the present government led by Narendra Modi has bid goodbye to that policy. Whether it is action against insurgents in Myanmar, surgical strikes against Pakistan or skirmishes with Chinese soldiers, New Delhi hasn't been reluctant to talk about them. Till now, the US and its allies have been pursuing this policy. We should welcome the tact and maturity that New Delhi has displayed over the last few months. It is a sign of India's new-found confidence.

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