

INDIA MUST EXERCISE HARD POWER IN RESPONSE TO CHINESE HOSTILITY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Our ambivalence towards such power persists but it's time to play hardball with China on trade

India's ambivalent attitude towards the pursuit of hard power—military, economic and political—has made it difficult for us to tackle the current 3Cs challenge we face: on Covid, China and the (Great Economic) Contraction.

On covid, we have at least stumbled on to the right balance between saving lives and livelihoods. Even though total cases are headed for the 10 million mark over the next two or three months, our fatality rates are dropping steadily. So, we are coping.

On the economy, despite the jaw-dropping 23.9% gross domestic product (GDP) contraction in the first quarter of 2020-21, we should see a steady reversal of fortunes over this quarter and the next as covid lockdowns ease and the government starts priming the growth pump. A big fiscal stimulus is due any time now as the festive season nears.

It is on China that we are sorely in a fix. Our army has said that on the night of 29-30 August, the Chinese tried to change the status quo on the southern bank of Pangong Tso, a lake in Ladakh, but pre-emptive action by Indian soldiers prevented this incursion.

This incident, along with the more violent clashes that took place in Galwan Valley on 15 June, underline a new reality: China has decided to unilaterally change the status quo, and is willing to risk a war to achieve its strategic goals. This could be for two reasons. It may be an opportunistic move based on the Chinese leadership's assessment that a world fighting covid and economic contraction will not have any appetite to resist ever-expanding Chinese ambitions on every front, from Hong Kong to Taiwan, the South China Sea and Indian territory. Or it could be that its Communist party faces internal dissent over its own economic and covid failures, and needs an external distraction to stoke nationalist fervour.

But whatever the reasons behind China's new belligerence on multiple fronts, India has demonstrated a weak hand by stressing diplomacy and talks as the way out of this border crisis. New Delhi has also sought to buy more arms and ammunition at the eleventh hour before a military confrontation. Both these signal a simple reality: we think of hard power only after a crisis forces us to. At other times, we are happy diverting resources to other areas that are deemed politically more rewarding.

Democracies always find it hard to balance the classic guns-versus-butter challenge at the best of times, but India, with its huge backlog on social sector investments, has been particularly unwilling to invest in hard power, both militarily and economically. We opened up the economy in 1991, but till date we have not unambiguously committed ourselves to basic factor market reforms, especially at the state and municipal levels.

We have an additional handicap in terms of our civilizational attitudes towards the acquisition of power. The yogi seeks the power to change from within; the commissar seeks change by wielding power over the masses. Remember Mao's dictum, that power flows from the barrel of a gun? Add maudlin Gandhian values like ahimsa, or non-violence, and you have a perfect mix of ingrained attitudes that hamper our drive to acquire hard military power. We tend to start

planning for defence only after it's too late.

We also suffer from the additional handicap of assuming that our enemies and rivals are "people like us". They are not. We have not invested enough resources to understand what drives a China or even a Nepal towards confrontation, and then appear hurt and angry when our assumptions about them turn out to be wrong.

Last, we want to believe that hard power acquisition needs no sacrifices. It does. You cannot build hard power without major diversions of resources to defence and border infrastructure. This is also true of economic hard power. You cannot reform the economy without taking political risks and addressing social anxieties. China succeeded in both tasks—military and economic—precisely because it repressed its own people, both financially and otherwise, to generate resources for investment in the economy and military capabilities. As an authoritarian state, it could squash any revolt against the regime that these sacrifices may have engendered.

Indians also like to talk about soft power—yoga, meditation, Indian cuisine, etc—when the reality is that soft power cannot deter hard power. Soft power is useful only when you have the hard power needed to push it. Coca-Cola and McDonald's don't constitute American soft power independent of its hard power status as the world's No 1 economic and military superpower.

In our current eyeball-to-eyeball with China, the immediate sacrifice we have to make is on trade benefits. As we can't afford a prolonged military confrontation, it's the only way we can hit China. While trade theorists will try to confuse us on the issue, the truth is we cannot afford to gift China an annual \$50-odd billion in US dollars through trade deficits while it is trying to capture Indian territory. We have to start placing harder restrictions on trade with China, even at some cost to our own economy.

Banning or curtailing Chinese imports is a hard power move. We must use this weapon effectively.

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