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Taming the Dragon: India's Way Forward



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Introduction

The recent disengagement of Indian and Chinese troops from the pressure points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), consequent to 16 rounds of military commander's level talks, still cannot be seen as a surety that the status quo ante, as of April 2020, will be restored especially when the terms and conditions of the disengagement is yet to be made public. Given the scant regard for the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreements (BPTA) signed between the two sides in 1993, 1996, 2005, 2012 and 2013, China may be looking for a more opportune time to militarily assert its territorial claims.

On its domestic front, between February 2021 and January 2022, China has adopted the 'Coast Guard Law', 'New Maritime Traffic Safety Law' and the 'Land Border Law', each of which demonstrates an aggressive manifestation of China's territorial belligerence in maritime and continental domains. The accelerated infrastructure development, incursions into Northern Bhutan to bypass Jampheri Ridge which India considers vital due to its

Key Points

- China and India signed BPTA in 1993, 1996, 2005, 2012 and 2013, to maintain the sanctity of the LAC.
- China have passed fresh maritime, coast guard and land boundary laws to legitimise unauthorised intrusions and have also accelerated infrastructure developments to facilitate military operations.
- China's encroachment into Northern Bhutan and Nepal as well as the multiple visits to forward areas by communist party and religious leaders of China, are all evidence of China's belligerent desire (attitude).
- India needs to re-strategise its response mechanism while dealing with China in the future.



closeness to the Siliguri corridor, multiple air intrusions beyond the 10 Km buffer from the LAC and plans to construct the G-695 highway from Lhunze in Tibet to Mazha in Kashgar by 2035, to further enhance connectivity and mobilisation upto the LAC, indicates that China's long-term intentions are far from benign.¹ The visit of Chinese selected Panchen Lama (Gyaltsen Norbu) to multiple villages including Longju in Upper Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh, close to the LAC, is part of China's deviously orchestrated design for defence of border areas—"governing border areas is the key for governing a country".² The recent willingness of China to disengage at Gogra Hot Springs could be a strategic move, to currently focus on a more expedient Taiwan front and avoid a multi-front challenge, at least in the near term.

As a part of a well-recognised grey zone strategy of 'two steps forward and one step backward', China seldom gives up areas under control without significant strategic concessions—the same is true in militarisation of reclaimed islands in the South China Sea as also the deceitful encroachment in areas of Northern Bhutan. The recent military exercises around Taiwan following the US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit involving over 60 frontline aircrafts and 14 combat ships, which included multiple infringement of the median line and exclusive economic zone of not only Taiwan but even Japan and a blockade of sorts preventing merchant ships and commercial aviation traffic, is likely to be the new normal in China-Taiwan escalatory matrix.³ Besides, in view of subdued US response to Chinese military muscle flexing and a divided EU response, the Western World or in fact much of the rest, are unlikely to rally around Taiwan for two simple reasons— *one*, most of the developed world recognises the 'One China Policy' and *two*, antagonising China will accrue significant economic blowback.

In this backdrop, it would be pragmatic for India to recalibrate its China policy and to shift from 'strategic restraint' and 'persuasive / dissuasive deterrence posture' to one of 'credible deterrence' in its supreme national interests. Historically, our China policy has been one of 'appeasement' both in the military and diplomatic domains, understandably to avoid a multi-front criticality and manage the LOC more aggressively. On one hand, China continues to develop model Xiaokang (well off) villages in the garb of border area development and on the other, they viciously protest against similar developments on Indian side with purely religious connotations.



The robust response to Chinese expansionism in Doklam in 2017 and occupation of Kailash Ranges on the South bank of Pangong Tso in response to adventurism in Eastern Ladakh, are emerging examples of unshackling from hitherto appeasement strategy to a more 'assertive and decisive response' mechanisms. Evidently, India would have to formulate its independent and autonomous diplomatic, economic and military posture against future contingencies to counter the relentless Chinese bellicosity.

Military Preparedness

It is neither desirable nor tactically prudent to hold the entire 3,488 Km of frontage against possible Chinese intrusion. Indeed, the PLA/Border Defense Regiments hold much lesser frontages and are bereft of defensive layout to withstand a surprise offensive, in the belief that India would seldom attempt a trans LAC option, even in the face of grave provocations. This false perception must be remedied. Hence, we need to identify our vulnerabilities along the LAC in consonance with infrastructure development, own strategic mobility across valleys to build up troops and equipment in a competitive time matrix vis-à-vis the PLA and defend only selected areas with adequate reserves. These will have to be reviewed periodically, based on own capability development as also further development of infrastructure and force posturing by PLA from time to time often in the garb of exercises.

The balance of force must be constituted into mission centric task force-oriented reserves with intrinsic firepower resources to take the battle into the enemy territory at multiple locations along the entire front while retaining positive control over escalation. With additional forces being assigned to the Northern front, it is possible to generate multiple options along the entire frontage. While force modernisation and technological asymmetry with China will continue to exist in the foreseeable future, sectoral advantages offered by terrain, expertise in high altitude warfare and leadership at cutting edge level, can be exploited for *quid pro quo* gains. Critical voids and intrinsic hollowness at the tactical level comprising equipment and ammunition deficiencies especially those dependent on imports, will have to be made up expeditiously.

Infusion of Technology

Focus on defence manufacturing through Atmanirbharta, including reserving all items upto INR 200Cr to be produced by indigenous manufacturers, 68 percent capital procurement by services earmarked for domestic players, publication of negative lists, enhanced FDI up to 76 percent through automated route and private sector participation, will contribute to self-reliance in military hardware in due course.⁴ Meanwhile, it is evident that PLA will exploit its superior capability in the fields of cyber, EW, space and psychological operations, during critical periods, to compromise and degrade its adversary's (in this case India) information systems. Thus, India needs to invest in capability development including quantum computing, 5G connectivity and AI enabled surveillance systems, processes and procedures to safeguard own systems against a debilitating attack. We need to concurrently develop offensive capabilities in the non-traditional fields, especially cyber, by invigorating a hugely capable private sector, even if incrementally, to display capability for matching retribution. The enunciation of a Defence Capability Development Plan, in consultation with academic and technical institutions, with an aim to infuse much needed technology into military capability building, is the need of the hour.⁵ While the West is not expected to join us in the tactical battle along the LAC, nonetheless, it can greatly assist us in sharing technology especially in the field of intelligence, surveillance, navigation and communication, to facilitate precision targeting besides providing high end equipments.

Exploitation of Other Elements of National Power

Synergistic employment of other elements of national power in the fields of economy, diplomacy and strategic communications, must continue to be exploited not only in response to a crisis but also as a national strategy. In spite of taking measures like banning over 200 Chinese apps, enforcing over 300 percent import duty on Chinese toys, restricting bidding in 5G technology, withdrawal of Li-Ning as the official apparel sponsor for Tokyo Olympics and the recent move to block Chinese mobile phones priced below US\$ 150, the balance of trade has only grown in favour of China. In the first half of 2022, Chinese export to India has gone up by US\$ 67.5 bn (up by 34.5%), while Indian export fell to US\$ 9.57 bn, a decline by 35.3% resulting in a trade deficit of whopping US\$ 47.94 bn.⁶ The economic embrace and enabling policies of several decades cannot be undone overnight, without any significant

adverse economic fallouts. However, progressive diversification of supply chain, ban on import of non-essentials and crackdown on illegal trade practices, as is being executed, needs to be more intense and vigorous.

If Taiwan is part of 'One China Policy' without China ever being in occupation of the island, notwithstanding wider international recognition, so can be Jammu and Kashmir, having formally acceded to the Indian Union and Arunachal Pradesh which has always been part of India. Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, Former Foreign Minister of India alluded to 'One India Policy' in her conversation with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2014.⁷ Both the union territory/state have had multiple democratic elections over decades. Geopolitical concessions to China, in the past, including recognition of PRC in 1949, championing its entry into UN, generosity with respect to Tibet (though 17-point agreement was signed under duress in 1951), soft engagement in QUAD despite locational advantage of the Indian Navy, silence over the well documented human rights violation in Xinjiang by China and militarisation of islands in South China Sea, have not extracted reciprocal recognition of India's core sensitivities. While not wanting to escalate tension to our disadvantage, India's assertive foreign policy articulation, of late, needs to be taken to the next level.

Neighbourhood Policy

The 'Neighbourhood First' Policy, as a core component of India's Foreign Policy has been recognised and appreciated worldwide especially the free distribution of Covid-19 vaccines, over US\$ 3.8 bn financial assistance to Sri Lanka during its worst economic crisis and first responder assistance to Nepal during the 2015 earthquake.

- **Sri Lanka and Maldives.** The Sri Lankan Government awarding contract for construction of three wind farms off the Jaffna Port, western container terminal with Japan (notwithstanding the recent reluctant permission to China to dock its surveillance ship at Hambantota Port) and the visit of Maldivian President against a domestic 'India Out' movement, are all reflections of growing influence of India.⁸
- **Nepal.** Undoing parliamentary resolution on cartographic aggression on Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani will take time. However, Kathmandu must soon realise that getting access to four Chinese sea ports and three land ports, about

3000 km away, under the Protocol on Implementing Agreement on Transit and Transport, signed during the visit of President Bidya Devi Bhandari to China in 2022, will not materialise so easily. Territorial incursions by China in the Humla district of Nepal, could not be blindly swept under the carpet for too long.⁹

- **Myanmar.** International isolation of Myanmar and more specifically by ASEAN in the recently concluded ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting held at Phnom Penh, is unlikely to affect Myanmar till it has the support of China. India must therefore regulate its engagement with the Military Junta while condemning execution of political prisoners on the lines of what it has progressively done with the Taliban.
- **Bangladesh and Bhutan.** Bangladesh is gradually slipping into an economic crisis and Bhutan needs to realise the danger of an expansionist dragon especially in the evolving regional security dynamics.

Hence, India's Foreign Policy articulation must focus on co-development, inclusiveness, collaborative growth and collective security.

Nuclear Strategy

India's self-imposed moratorium on nuclear weapons testing, since 1998, needs review especially now when three vast missile silos, (nearly 300) near Yumen, Hami and Ordos in North Central China, in conjunction with upgradation and augmentation of nuclear assets, has been discovered.¹⁰ Pakistan, on the other hand, continues to add to its arsenal (now nearly 200), exceeding that of India, including counter force tactical nuclear weapons, despite its economic hardship. It is no rocket science to appreciate that tests carried out in 1998 and its extrapolation will not consummate a changed nuclear asymmetry. As, against achieving complete nuclear disarmament as per provisions of NPT, Russia, US, UK and France are actively pursuing upgradations and augmentation of their existing arsenals.¹¹ The evolving regional security dynamics necessitates review of India's nuclear posture to maintain minimum credible deterrence and assurance.

Conclusion

It should be realised that, China can never be trusted completely, either with existing confidence building mechanisms or with additional protocols as is being contemplated in the form of a 'code of conduct'—a similar arrangement was made with the ASEAN and languishing since the turn of the century.¹² Hence, we must be prepared for the Chinese contingency more so as some analysts think that, China's Taiwan frustration might manifest along the LAC as well.¹³ Having said that, there are multiple areas of convergence which can be leveraged upon for mutual growth and collective prosperity. India's foreign policy is not inextricably embracing the US to confront China. The Ukraine crisis has unequivocally proven that India is certainly not in the Western camp and follows an independent foreign policy based on its core national interests—an aspect that has drawn appreciation even from its adversaries viz. China and Pakistan. It is time for China to realise that India is not against China's rise as long as China does not impinge on India's legitimate security concerns, territorial integrity and sovereignty.

End Notes

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