



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

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Taming the Revanchist Dragon

Author

Lalit Kapur

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing Indian Troops at Nimu, Ladakh, July 03, 2020. Source: NDTV

Defence Ministers Rajnath Singh and Gen. Wei Fenghe meeting in Moscow on September 4, 2020.

Source: India Today

Chinese soldiers armed with stick machetes deployed along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh, September 7, 2020. Source: WION

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by
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Introduction

Nearly three months after the PLA brutally assaulted and murdered Col. Santosh Babu and his men but received a sharp lesson at the hands of the Indian Army, and four months after China's border transgressions began, the India-China confrontation in Eastern Ladakh persists, highlighting an external challenge that continues to generate discussion and debate on India's options in response to the situation. And as India's reaction unfolds at the political, diplomatic, economic and military levels, statements following the meeting of the Indian¹ and Chinese² Defence Ministers on September 04, 2020 highlight the gulf between the perceptions and the narrative on both sides.

The US National Security Adviser recently acknowledged³ that "probably the biggest failure of American foreign policy over the last 40 years is how we've dealt with China". This paper argues, admittedly with the benefit of hindsight, that it is time to accept that India too has dealt with China, virtually since independence, with a deeply flawed approach destined to fail in its desired objective of ensuring stable and secure borders. It seeks to evaluate the evolution of India's China policy paradigm, why it is time for a change, discuss options for the future and identify some ghosts that must be laid to rest even as the necessary policy corrections are instituted.

A nation's response to external challenges depends on the effective functioning of three organically linked mechanisms. To use a human analogy, the first are the sensory faculties that provide warning of impending danger. Their national equivalent is the strategic intelligence apparatus. Next is the brain, which evaluates warning signals from the senses, formulates the underlying policy paradigm and the accompanying strategy for a response, directs the physical sinews in accordance with this strategy and subsequently uses the experience gained to prepare for future challenges. In nations, this task

¹ For a readout of India's statement, see <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1651529>

² For a readout of China's statement, see http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-09/05/content_4870747.htm

³ Press Briefing by Ambassador Robert O'Brien and others, September 4, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-ambassador-obrien-ambassador-grenell-senior-advisor-kushner-press-secretary-kayleigh-mcenany-september-4-2020/>



devolves on the political leadership. Third are the sinews, whose national equivalent is the government establishment which executes the diplomatic, economic and military elements of the chosen strategy.

Three facts are clear. First, India's senses have failed yet again in their basic task of providing early warning. Second, India's brain is still operating with only marginal changes to a paradigm that has long outlived its utility, has not adequately come to terms with the changed global and regional environment, and is yet to direct and deploy a new strategy that can address the challenge posed by the revanchist dragon. Third, the response by the sinews continues under constraints while salvaging some honour by the display of military valour. It may yet yield the desired short-term result (an unlikely but possible return to the status quo ante), but cannot deliver on the long-term solution (stable and secure borders). Nor has the brain given enough attention to managing the narrative through effective public communication or strategic signalling to the adversary. Hope appears to be pinned on the illusion that the crisis will somehow fade away and we will again live happily in an inherently unequal, unreciprocated and unstable relationship with China.

The Paradigm for India-China Relations



Defence Ministers Rajnath Singh and Gen. Wei Fenghe meeting in Moscow on September 4, 2020. Source: India Today

Historical experience indicates that India's relationship with China, the ideologically and civilisationally distant Asian giant on its northern borders,



will be a fraught and difficult one. This is all the more reason that the paradigm that the nation's political and foreign policy leadership applies to managing inevitable challenges with China must be well-considered and capable of delivering the desired results. India's leaders have, however, consistently displayed a peculiarly recurring blind spot about handling this powerful neighbour.

Speaking at the 4th Ram Nath Goenka Lecture in November last year, India's External Affairs Minister had identified six phases of India's foreign policy⁴. The paradigm shaping India's China policy has, however, witnessed four distinct phases.

In the first iteration marked more by appeasement driven by the search for an illusory Asian solidarity than by robust realism, India became the first non-communist country in the world to recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC) on January 01, 1950. A day later, the PRC announced that the "liberation" of Tibet would be one of its basic goals. It commenced annexation of that historically distinct nation on October 07, 1950, the same day that it announced military support for North Korea. Chinese forces under Peng Dehuai were to cross the Yalu River into Korea with 260,000 troops less than a fortnight later, going head to head with General MacArthur and US forces in Korea⁵. Their force level on the Korean Peninsula would increase to over half a million troops in the next six months. China was, therefore, vulnerable in Tibet, more so as its lines of communication were overextended. A stand by India at that time may have obtained support from other powers and preserved Tibet as a strategically important buffer. But China calculated that India would not object and India's inexperienced leadership obliged, giving India a direct (and disputed) border with the unpredictable dragon for the first time in its history.

⁴ External Affairs Minister's Speech at the 4th Ramnath Goenka Lecture, 2019, https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32038/External_Affairs_Ministers_speech_at_the_4th_Ramnath_Goenk_a_Lecture_2019

⁵ Bruce Reidel, "Catastrophe on the Yalu: America's Intelligence Failure in Korea", <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/13/catastrophe-on-the-yalu-americas-intelligence-failure-in-korea/#:~:text=A%20year%20after%20the%20creation,North%20Korea%20invaded%20the%20South.https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/13/catastrophe-on-the-yalu-americas-intelligence-failure-in-korea/#:~:text=A%20year%20after%20the%20creation,North%20Korea%20invaded%20the%20South.>



Chinese Soldiers marching in front of the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Source: OpIndia

That there were reservations at the political level is clear from a letter by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. To quote Patel's words, "The Chinese Government has tried to delude us by professions of peaceful intentions. ... The final action, in my judgement, is little short of perfidy"⁶. But Sardar Patel passed away in December 1950, making it easier for India's collective leadership to set aside his reservations. Through the 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse with the Tibet Region⁷, India agreed to hand over the postal, telegraph and public telephone services and other assets it held in Tibet. These actions speak of a paradigm guided more by delusions of Asian solidarity and accommodation of the neighbouring communist giant, than by any realist or strategic assessment of India's long term interests.

⁶"China Doesn't See us as Friends: Patel's Letter to Nehru in 1950", <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/patels-letter-to-nehru-on-tibet-chinese-do-not-regard-us-as-friends>

⁷Ministry of External Affairs, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/7807/Agreement+on+Trade+and+Intercourse+with+Tibet+Region>



Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with Chairman Mao Zedong of the People's Republic of China in Beijing, October 23, 1954. Source: MEA India

The appeasement bought a peaceful border for the next few years, while China moved rapidly to link its newly acquired territories of Tibet and Xinjiang. This involved the construction of Highway G 219 through Aksai China, which India thought of as its own territory. It was the discovery of this road, coupled with muddled thinking on how to deal with China's transgression, that forced a transition to the second paradigm of posturing and led to the war of 1962.

Posturing and bluff may work with a trusting and easily misled domestic public. When dealing with a hard-nosed external adversary, however, the bluff will be called, as it was. The 1962 war ended with a break in relations, China in occupation of large parts of Aksai Chin and the start of the third phase, the paradigm of isolation from China. Perhaps the only gain from this period was that the shock caused by the dragon's action led India's leadership to recognise the merits of military preparedness, leading eventually to the successful creation of Bangladesh in 1971.



An Image of Highway G 219. Source: Xinhua / Twiter

The paradigm of frozen relations lasted 14 years. Nixon's outreach to China and its gradual assimilation into the global order led to pressures to change the approach again. China could no longer be shut out and India joined the world in wooing the dragon. India-China relations were re-established with the exchange of Ambassadors in 1976 and began warming up following the Atal Bihari Vajpayee visit to Beijing in 1979. The Rajiv Gandhi visit to Beijing in 1988 led to India agreeing to shelve the border issue and build the relationship in other domains. The Narasimha Rao visit to China of September 1993 and the signing of the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement⁸ (BPTA) formalised the onset of this changed approach. Relations grew thereafter, despite a temporary hitch following Pokhran II, culminating in the strategic partnership agreement signed during the Wen Jiabao visit in April 2005 and the ten-pronged strategy to intensify relations signed during the November 2006 Hu Jintao visit. An anticipated dilution of the threat from the north led to the guns vs. butter debate coming to the fore, resulting in the erosion of resources allocated for meeting the dragon's challenge and a return to appeasement and accommodation, while India focused its military resources on the cross border terror threat from the west. This is broadly the paradigm that has prevailed till recently and has guided action by India's intelligence apparatus, the executive establishment and the military.

⁸https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_930907_Agreement%20on%20India-China%20Border%20Areas.pdf

Intelligence

India's intelligence collection and assessment apparatus has an unenviable record of having failed the country in nearly every major external crisis. Despite warning signs, its failure to assess China's intentions led to the debacle of 1962. It failed to warn of Pakistan's Operations Desert Hawk, Grand Slam and Gibraltar in 1965; to assess the LTTE's reaction to the India-Sri Lanka Agreement of 1987; to warn of operations by mercenaries that led to Operation CACTUS in 1988; to assess indicators of the Kargil intrusions in 1999; and to anticipate the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping at the 1st India-China Informal Summit in Wuhan, April 27, 2018. Source: Flickr/MEA photo gallery

It should have long been apparent to those responsible for intelligence collection and analysis that a China that had militarised disputed and reclaimed islands in the South China Sea despite a public commitment by Xi Jinping not to do so; manufactured history to justify territorial rights to the South and East China Seas; brought economic and grey zone coercion and a salami-slicing strategy to bear on maritime neighbours and trading partners alike in pursuit of illegitimate claims; arbitrarily dismissed the legally binding ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration; and indulged in extensive influence operations to choke international opposition, could not be trusted to honour its treaty commitments. These actions should have resulted in a focused effort to detect and analyse indicators of attempted salami-slicing incursions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to pre-empt a fait accompli situation, the more so after the unhappy experience of Kargil. That Chinese troops were able to move into positions at various points on the LAC in Ladakh, along with the



equipment, stores and logistic material required to sustain prolonged operations, with either warning signs not being picked up or wrong conclusions being drawn, speaks of systemic complacency, mistaken presumptions and muddled analysis.

As observed by strategist Bruce Reidel, political leaders understand that control of intelligence leads to control over decisions⁹. India's leaders have forged an intelligence community that gives them inputs enabling reinforcement of their long held views rather than projecting reality, downplaying the fact that just as the senses are critical to human reaction, the strategic intelligence apparatus is critical for effective decision-making. Intelligence failure forces the political leadership into a reactive mode, eliminating the possibility of pre-emption. It is evident that either the recommendations of the G.C. Saxena Task Force on Intelligence that was part of the Kargil Review Commission were inadequate, or that they were not effectively implemented. Being forced to pay the consequential costs time and again constitutes a heavy drain on the nation's limited resources. The leadership owes the people who elect it corrective action, including fixing accountability for the lapse, irrespective of associated political costs. Ignoring this need can only handicap India going into the future, the more so as the external security environment becomes more complex and the luxury of a relatively peaceful era passes.

Diplomacy

The first article of the BPTA¹⁰ of 1993, the foundational agreement that began the process of growth of India-China relations, stated: "the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the line of actual control" and "When necessary, the two sides shall jointly check the segments of the line of actual control where they have different views as to its alignment". The use of the imperative "shall" makes it clear that this requirement was not optional. The agreement also bound both sides to resolve the boundary question through "peaceful and friendly consultations" and abjure the threat or use of force¹¹. Nearly 27 years later, the joint check to clarify segments where there are differing views on LAC alignment has still not been completed. The LAC remains defined by physical occupation rather than a mutually accepted alignment. More frequent confrontations among border patrols have led to physical jostling in the past and escalated to the brutal murder of 20 Indian soldiers on June 15, but India has continued to give China the opportunity to shift goalposts and change its

⁹Bruce Reidel, "Catastrophe on the Yalu: America's Intelligence Failure in Korea", Op Cit.

¹⁰https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_930907_Agreement%20on%20India-China%20Border%20Areas.pdf

¹¹Ibid



definition of the LAC at will. What exactly Indian border patrols must defend or hold has become a grey zone.

The Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh governments did not, therefore, lay the Sino-India conflict to rest, as was claimed by a veteran commentator¹² recently. They merely decided to sweep foundational requirements under the carpet and opt for accommodating China. Beijing's current Ambassador to New Delhi is on record as having stated that clarifying the LAC could result in new "disputes"¹³. This raises the question of whether implementation of the foundational stipulation of the BPTA regarding jointly verifying the alignment of the LAC was ever considered important enough, or the failure to do so an impediment to the future of the relationship.

That India's diplomacy, no doubt under political direction, accepted moving ahead with a raft of agreements that supposedly strengthened the bilateral relationship and even led to China being labelled a "strategic partner" without insisting on the execution of what both had rightly agreed was a foundational requirement, is baffling. It indicates to China that for India, the fact of signing an agreement mattered more than its actual implementation, and that India remained bereft of long-term strategic thinking. So when an erstwhile Ambassador of India to China, Foreign Secretary and National Security Adviser writes about the 'give and take' of diplomacy¹⁴, one wonders (admittedly with the benefit of hindsight) whether he understood that in an equal relationship, the 'take' must be commensurate with the 'give' and that the foundations of verified trust are a constant pre-requisite. The deferential approach that India's foreign policy establishment has adopted towards China (without gaining due recompense) could never have provided the desired "peace dividend". The similarity with China's imposition of the so-called nine-dash line in the South China Sea, where the deference shown to the dragon by the concerned ASEAN nations has only led to their loss of control over sovereign rights under UNCLOS, is striking.

¹² Prem Shankar Jha, "India is Headed for a War With China No One Wants, Here's What it Should do to Prevent it", <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/china-india-ladakh-pangong-tso-tensions-war>

¹³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/clarifying-lac-could-create-new-disputes-chinese-envoy/article32232724.ece>

¹⁴ Shiv Shankar Menon, "League of Nationalists: How Trump and Modi Refashioned the US – India Relationship", Foreign affairs, September / October 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-11/modi-india-league-nationalists>



The Economic Element

That India's economic rise in comparison with China has regressed is evident from the GDP and military spending of both, limiting policy options available to India's political leadership.

Starting from a position of near parity in the 1970s, China's GDP today is roughly five times that of India (the disparity is only likely to grow due to the impact of the pandemic) and its stated military budget for 2020 is projected at 1.268 trillion Yuan (\$ 178.2 billion) as compared to India's \$ 45.8 billion for the same period. Moreover, unlike India, which still depends on imports for a large part of its defence needs, China's domestic industry fulfils most of its military requirements.

India has operationalised an economic response, notably the revision of the rules governing investment in India by neighbouring countries, cancellation of contracts awarded to Chinese firms, banning of Chinese digital applications and a renewed thrust on self reliance, but these initiatives will take time to bear fruit. Whether they will moderate China's behaviour, given that Beijing has repeatedly made it clear that economic considerations will never influence its determination to pursue so-called "core" strategic and geopolitical interests, remains to be seen.

Military and Other Measures

Military action to defend India's borders continues, with recent tactical moves to control heights in the Pangong Tso south and adjoining Spanggur Tso region designed to offset China's violation of the status quo in other areas. But India's military effectiveness remains hostage to a dysfunctional higher defence structure, the domination of process over outcome and an Army that disproportionately accounts for roughly 56% of the defence budget¹⁵ and 85% of the nation's military personnel¹⁶. It is not the intention of this paper to delve into the higher defence structure or civil-military relations. The question is whether action by the Indian Army that has, by all accounts, performed with heroic distinction that was evident even in 1962, will suffice to deal with a changed China. The lessons of the 1962 conflict¹⁷ bring out that no amount of

¹⁵Based on India's Defence Budget 2020 – 21, <https://idsa.in/issuebrief/india-def-budget-2020-21-lkbehera-040220>

¹⁶ Statistics from "The Army in Indian Military Strategy: Rethink Doctrine or Risk Irrelevance", Arzan Tarapore, Carnegie India Working Paper, August 2020

¹⁷ The Henderson – Brooks Report, which analysed the conflict, has not yet been declassified. Copies of sections are, however, available on the internet, as at



valour can make up for the lack of preparedness and clarity in political direction. If 1962 was partly due to the delusion that bluff could replace actual muscle, 2020 proclaims that trust without verification and adequate dissuasive deterrence cannot deliver the desired results. As in 1962, the Air Force and Navy, though prepared and ready, may not be operationalised. The underlying reason could be lack of understanding of what these forces can do in the situation, driven by the Army's predominance and the competition for budgetary share, or a desire to avoid escalation, or both.



Chinese soldiers armed with stick machetes deployed along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh, September 7, 2020. Source: WION

Other actions by the executive are ongoing. A spate of emergency procurements have been initiated to fill up gaps in military capability, even though the urgency will necessarily entail higher economic costs. Diplomatic and political action appears limited to reiteration of positions based on respecting post-1993 frameworks in interactions with China's political and military hierarchy¹⁸, alongside a continued reluctance to build international support against China's border transgressions. However, given that Beijing has already rebuffed international pressure in the Western Pacific, such pressure is in any case unlikely to be effective in restoring the status quo ante in Ladakh.

Taken together, India's military, economic and diplomatic measures have been markedly subdued and accompanied by weak strategic signalling and lagging perception management. Whether they can deliver results is highly debatable.

<http://www.indiandefencereview.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/TopSecretdocuments2.pdf>

¹⁸India's envoy in China is reported to have reached out to the Central Military Commission, see <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/china-meeting-lac-crisis-india-envoy-embassy-6555203/>



Need for a Changed Paradigm

India's strategic community is gradually coming to accept that the current paradigm governing India-China bilateral relations needs to be reconsidered; there can be no return to "business as usual". One analysis¹⁹ acknowledges that "The framework for managing India's engagement with China has run its course". A former Ambassador of India to China is of the view²⁰ that "In one fell swoop, China, with Xi Jinping in the core leadership position of the CPC and with ultimate responsibility as the Chairman of China's Central Military Commission, has effectively destroyed the edifice of bilateral relations so painstakingly built post the Chinese aggression of 1962", though clearly an edifice built on shaky foundations was bound to collapse sooner or later. Another strategic analyst has observed²¹ that Xi Jinping's China "has simply ceased to care about global public opinion or parameters of reasonable conduct. It has little interest in healthy relations with India and considers the diminishing of India's role, growth, weight and presence as a key foreign policy objective".

Xi Jinping has emerged as China's undisputed leader and there are indications that he will remain in power well beyond the completion of his second term. China's actions under his direction make it clear that he longer considers it necessary for China to hide its strength and bide its time, and that more is to be gained from using this strength and associated power, particularly in Asia. China's underlying assessment is that the US may bluster and make noises for public consumption, but in the final analysis, it lacks the political will to intervene in Asian conflicts and thereby maintain regional balance and order. In India's context, Xi's assessment appears to be that India's strategic outlook will remain weak and indecisive, despite public anger and nationalistic media hype. It suits him to keep up the pressure on the boundary, continue using salami slicing tactics to put India on the defensive and deflect India's focus from the bigger picture of an emerging Pax Sinica.

Persisting with the past policy paradigm and hoping for reciprocation by China is unlikely to yield results; it is in fact likely to confirm Xi's view of India as a

¹⁹ HK Singh and Arun Sahgal, "A moment of reckoning", https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/a-moment-of-reckoning-1835.pdf

²⁰ Nalin Surie, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-border-didpute-diplomacy-india-foreign-policy-nalin-surie-6473046/>

²¹ Samir Saran, "Letter from Peking: What Galwan Valley Taught us this Summer", July 21, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/letters-from-pekings-what-galwan-valley-taught-us-this-summer/>



weak nation whose limitations must be shown up to cement China's hegemony in Asia. India's strategic objective cannot, therefore, be limited to "managing" relations with China and expecting restoration of the status quo ante, as agreed to telephonically between the two special representatives on the boundary issue on July 05, 2020, demanded by the MEA's official spokesperson²² on July 30, 2020, and reiterated by India's Defence Minister during his meeting with his Chinese counterpart on September 04, 2020. It must go beyond, to include options that will disabuse China of the notion that it can coerce India successfully and without cost. India must aim at long term measures that will tame the dragon's hegemonic instincts and bring it in line with accepting an open, rules based and multi-polar regional order. But that is easier said than done.

Paradigm Options

Conflict on India's borders with China will necessarily remain limited because of the nuclear overhang. In such a conflict, material and technological superiority counts, but less so than political resolve, determined leadership and a highly motivated military, as the examples of Vietnam (with both the US and China) and Afghanistan indicate.

India has a choice of three broad approaches it can adopt to deal with China's assertions. First, it can submit, accept the reality of China's hegemony and find creative ways to sell this as inevitable to the domestic public. Second, India can continue with the policy of appeasing China through political rewards in the hope that China will somehow be reasonable, while defending against coercion as and when that occurs. Third, India can moderate the dragon's behaviour by calculated measures that counter its transgressions with painful consequences.

China has become accustomed to much of Asia and indeed the world offering it inducements while capitulating to its demands, whether reasonable or otherwise, due to a combination of its attractions as a market and its growing coercive power. The Philippines opting to abandon its hard won victory in the Permanent Court of Arbitration is a standout example. The notion that sovereign states are equal is alien to China's thought, as amply brought out by Yang Jiechi's candid assertion to ASEAN that "China is a big country and you

²²https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/32864/Readout_on_IndiaChina_LAC_Disengagement_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_during_the_virtual_Weekly_Media_Briefing_on_30_July_2020

are small countries and that is a fact"²³. Much of South East Asia has given in, although a few holdouts remain.

Capitulation, however, means abandoning India's dreams of being a consequential power in Asia and the world. It would relegate India to a permanent subsidiary status. This is not something that either an aspirational India or a political leadership that prides itself on commitment to national interest will find acceptable. Hence this option can be set aside.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping at Mamallapuram, October 11, 2019. Source: MEA / Flickr

The second option, based on the hope that China's leaders can be appeased or accommodated, is a continuation of India's current paradigm of placating the dragon while resisting only when red lines are crossed. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar is reported to have highlighted the aspect of standing up to China in an interview²⁴ at the beginning of this month, indicating that this may be the preferred approach. India has stood up in the past, as at Doklam or in maintaining its principled position on the BRI, and is clearly doing so now in

²³Tom Mitchell, "China Struggles to Win Friends over South China Sea", Financial Times, July 13, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/a9a60f5e-48c6-11e6-8d68-72e9211e86ab>

²⁴"China Shouldn't View us Through U Lens. That would be Great Disservice, Says Jaishankar", Indrani Bagchi, Times of India, August 01, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/we-must-stand-up-to-china-foreign-minister-s-jaishankar/articleshow/77309734.cms>



Eastern Ladakh. The standing up is, however, visible only when India's interests have been directly impacted or it has been pushed into a corner. It does not extend to speaking up or displaying solidarity when the dragon's transgressions trigger broader concerns which India shares with its strategic partners. The pattern is predictably defensive and reactive, leaving the initiative completely to China as it leverages its superior power to break down India's occasional resistance without fighting.

The third option lies in adopting a significantly more proactive approach, seeking to modify China's assertive behaviour by imposing unacceptable pain. Xi Jinping will not perceive India as a military, economic, technological or diplomatic equal or countenance a multi-polar Asia, irrespective of the spirit of Wuhan and Mamallapuram. The only logical way of securing greater accommodation of India's interests, concerns and aspirations is by linking China's transgressions with major consequences for bilateral relations, and building sufficient hard power to tame the dragon through dissuasive deterrence. This will require a substantial revision of the paradigm that has governed India-China relations for the last three decades, with accompanying strategies being shaped once this is accepted as a policy construct.

In the ultimate analysis, the new paradigm India adopts and the effective execution of resultant strategies will determine whether or not India can moderate China's egregious behaviour and unilateral assertions. It is not the intention of this paper to spell out these strategies; but as an initial step, we will need to exorcise some past ghosts.

Exorcising Past Ghosts

The number and variety of ghosts of the past that must be exorcised is considerable. This paper covers six of the most significant ones.

The first must be putting to rest the perennial guns vs. butter debate that has muddled India's strategic thinking and constricted its military capability. The debate loses sight of the fact that Adam Smith's factors of production can come into play only when the nation's security, both internal and external, is assured; an aspiring major power that has to depend on others to provide security in its primary region of influence will not be perceived as a power of any consequence. China could afford the luxury of focusing on the agricultural, industrial and technological revolutions ahead of its military revolution because it faced no revanchist neighbours who coveted its territory. India must depend on itself to ensure a liberal environment of sovereign equality, mutual respect, peaceful settlement of disputes and respect for international law. The



current era of geopolitical competition no longer permits middle powers to neglect their military sinews and our regional partners, from Japan to Australia, are already strengthening theirs.

Linked with this is the fact that ideologies do matter. The liberal approach of bestowing trust without creating the necessary foundations of security is what has brought all major democracies, including India, to the present impasse. China's actions necessitate adoption of a more pronounced "distrust and verify" approach that was articulated by the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in his address at the Nixon Presidential Library last month²⁵. India would be well-advised to adopt its own version.

Third is India's continuing discomfort (despite limited post Uri and Pulwama actions) with the use of military force, which is coupled with the reflexive belief that the Army must remain the primary determinant of India's military response and that the use of the other services could result in avoidable escalation. The Army has no doubt done a stellar job in defending the nation's borders and in tackling cross-border terrorism, considering that the debacle of 1962 was occasioned by the failure of the political and military leadership. It cannot, however, effectively and on its own inflict significant pain on a dragon that is protected by a buffer the size of occupied Tibet. Investing substantially in a Mountain Strike Corps is driven more by considerations of budget share than strategic effect; it loses sight of the fact that the depth of strike required to inflict appreciable pain on China far exceeds the capability of any force India can muster. Depth actions to disrupt vital military assets and their logistical links are better undertaken by mobile Special Forces, the Indian Air Force, or by cruise and ballistic missile forces. Diplomatic pain can also be delivered through measures such as questioning China's dubious claim to Tibet, holding back on endorsing its "one-China policy", building stronger partnerships in South East Asia and strengthening the Quad and Quad Plus mechanisms.

Fourth is discarding the virtual monopoly that one particular agency exercises over India's external intelligence operations, encouraging competitive inputs for strategic decision-making, and ensuring greater inter-agency coordination to disseminate real time inputs to both civilian and military stakeholders. Inter-agency turf battles and related battles for budget share must be more effectively managed.

²⁵ For a transcript of the speech, see <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>



Meeting of Quad Foreign Ministers in New York, September 26, 2019

Source: Twitter

Fifth is discarding the shibboleth that interest and issue based alliances against a common threat somehow constrain India's strategic autonomy, which is fast becoming an euphemism for strategic ambiguity and all-round hedging.

It is noteworthy that even the NATO Treaty²⁶, whose stated objective is to "settle any international dispute in which the parties may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered"²⁷, states that "The parties agree that in the event of an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or America, they will assist the parties so attacked by taking such action as they deem necessary, including the use of armed force"²⁸. The key lies in the words "as they deem necessary", leaving determination of this action to the nation concerned. Similarly, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the US calls for the parties to act to meet common dangers in accordance with their constitutional processes²⁹. Both permit a level of autonomy not much different from India's Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of August 1971 with the USSR, which, in the event of either party being subjected to an attack or a threat thereof, called for the two parties to "enter into mutual consultations to remove

²⁶https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm

²⁷Article 1 of the Treaty, *ibid.*

²⁸Article 5 of the Treaty, *Ibid.*

²⁹<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1951/08/30/mutual-defense-treaty-between-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the-united-states-of-america-august-30-1951/>, Article IV



such threat and to take appropriate effective measures to ensure peace and the security of their countries”³⁰.

It is the existence of a potential, commonly perceived coercive threat on which such arrangements for mutual reinforcement are founded; the Quad is a good example and must be taken forward, with India taking the lead.

The sixth ghost pertains to the domination of process over outcomes and the apparent irrelevance of the time factor in decisions impacting national security, which is due mainly to bureaucratic preponderance in national security decision-making. India is unique in that its military has been subordinated to the bureaucracy instead of being answerable to the political leadership. It defies comprehension that the Defence Secretary in the Ministry of Defence officially bears the sole responsibility for all business connected with the “Defence of India and every part thereof including preparation for defence and all such acts as may be conducive in times of war to its prosecution and after its termination to effective demobilisation”³¹. A beginning has been made with the creation of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff and the Department of Military Affairs, but there is still a long way to go in restructuring political, civilian and military responsibilities for securing the nation’s defence.

Conclusion

In the past, India’s political leadership has time and again displayed strategic naiveté or unqualified trust in the adversary, as for instance in 1948 (taking the Kashmir issue to the UN), 1962 (pursuing a forward policy relying on bluff), 1972 (giving away the gains of the 1971 victory without closure of the J&K issue) and 1987 (intervening disastrously in Sri Lanka against the LTTE). Reposing confidence in a “strategic” relationship with China without building the secure foundations of deterrence is, therefore, hardly an aberration. In any case, India is not the only nation to have been surprised by a risen China’s unilateral assertions; others too are today struggling to come to terms with the dragon’s true neo-colonial intentions.

There are, however, indications of a growing understanding that the China policy India has followed for the last seven decades has been misplaced and cannot deliver the desired stability and security to our nation, except on China’s terms. China’s changed avatar demands evolution of a different paradigm to

³⁰<https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5139/Treaty+of+ , Article IX>

³¹Extracted from the Government of India, Allocation of Business Rules, 1961.



deal with it, the more so because it countenances no equals in Asia and regards India as an obstacle to its hegemonic ambitions.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing Indian Troops at Nimu, Ladakh, July 03, 2020.

Source: NDTV

Meanwhile, great power competition has come to India's Eurasian and Indo-Pacific doorstep and is no longer focused on the distant Atlantic. The world order is undergoing unprecedented stress. India is today rightly perceived as the only nation on the Asian mainland with the size, resources, population and potential to help create multipolar stability. A revised China policy paradigm will necessarily involve using India's inherent strengths; revamping its intelligence, military and strategic capabilities; and working together unhesitatingly with like-minded external partners to redress power asymmetry and uphold regional balance and order.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown the resolve and willingness to shed ideological hesitations of the past and bring about a decisive change towards a more pragmatic and realist foreign policy. India's robust strategic posture in Ladakh is an indication that he will not roll over and acquiesce to Chinese intimidation. As Asia's most capable bulwark against a future under China's domination, the choices India makes today will be hugely consequential for shaping Asia's destiny and contributing to global order.



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