



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

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China-India border standoff and China's 'India' dilemma

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing Indian troops in Ladakh, July 3, 2020. Source: NDTV

A verbal standoff in progress between Indian and Chinese soldiers on the LAC.

Source: The Tribune

Chinese President Xi Jinping inspecting military units on parade at the Zhurihe training base in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, July 30, 2017. Source: China Daily

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by
Antara Ghosal Singh

As news of the brutal and “pre-meditated”¹ attack by the PLA on Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley and the resulting bloodshed on the night of June 15, 2020 broke, China faced a strange dilemma: to disclose or not to disclose the number of PLA casualties. Official disclosure of the casualty data would not just have put at risk the PLA's reputation as an invincible fighting force but could have also sparked an uncertain reaction in a public already agitated by Indian media reports of more than 40 Chinese casualties. Even as China chose to “follow tradition” and not disclose the casualty data, some Chinese strategists complained that the decision was only helping India to portray itself as a “[victim](#) of Chinese aggression”² and gain global sympathy, while [depriving](#)³ China of its moral high-ground and its claim of being a peaceful nation⁴. Chinese netizens too were unhappy about the decision and slammed the government in various [public fora](#) for “not letting them have an opportunity to grieve, when the whole of India was mourning its martyrs”⁵.



*A verbal standoff in progress between Indian and Chinese soldiers on the LAC.
Source: The Tribune*

This episode is just one of the many dilemmas that China seems to be facing vis-à-vis India. An analysis of internal debates and discussions in China on the

ongoing China-India border row reveals two strong but mutually contradictory currents prevailing in Beijing regarding its relations with New Delhi.

Apart from the blame game at the official level holding Indian provocations responsible, many Chinese strategists appeared to believe that the present conflict is not an “[accident](#)”⁶ but an “inevitable result” of what they perceive as “India's long-standing speculative strategy on the China-India border”. In fact, since the Doklam confrontation of 2017 (in which, as per the Chinese assessment, India succeeded in dissuading China to carry out further construction activities in the area), there has been a growing chorus in China about “teaching India a lesson” on the ground that India is taking advantage of China's unfavourable internal and external situation, misinterpreting China's restraint as weakness, and daring to “[speak out loud](#) on China's major interests and concerns”⁷. The reorganisation of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir on August 5, 2019 and China's subsequent failure in getting international support to raise this issue at the UN further strengthened these voices. India's announcement of a series of infrastructure projects in the border region in the following months was seen as a further setback to China. “(China is) fed-up with Indian misadventures” was the resulting view, “China had to take a stand and teach India a lesson. In dealing with India, a tough diplomatic voice or strong criticism is not enough, India requires firm lessons and a fierce response.”



Chinese President Xi Jinping inspecting military units on parade at the Zhurihe training base in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, July 30, 2017.

Source: China Daily

There is a view among China's strategic community that China-India relations hold no great prospect in the current international situation. This perspective rules out any possibility of a negotiated settlement of the border dispute any time soon. India, it is felt, is already a quasi-ally of the United States and there is no way China can prevent the further deepening of US-India relations. With opportunities for cooperation at the global level diminishing, regional competition intensifying and the earlier system of effective management of bilateral differences crumbling beyond control, violent conflicts are predicted the "new normal"⁸ in China-India ties.

Given this assessment, China needs to reconsider its prevalent strategic thinking that India is not its main strategic challenge and, therefore, peace needs to be maintained in its direction as much as possible. "If China wants to work in the main strategic direction (the US), it needs to solve the problem in the secondary direction first" – this is one of the [key arguments](#) of this group⁹. Referring to the 1962 border war, they point out that even during those years, India was not China's priority direction. However, the war, as expected by China's founding leaders, did help China to maintain peace in its south-western frontier for the next 50 years and directly [eliminated](#) US and Soviet ambitions to use India to contain China¹⁰. They, therefore, advocate that China should prepare for simultaneous war-like situations on both fronts - with the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps focusing on the eastern front, and the Army taking on the western front with India. Interestingly, they take inspiration from India on this matter, arguing that "Isn't India preparing on two fronts all the time? Why can't we fight on two fronts?". "Cowardice", they say, is not going to solve China's problem vis-a-vis India.

In this backdrop, there seems to be a renewed interest in the Chinese strategic community to reclaim territories in China-India border region from where China withdrew after the 1962 war by declaring a unilateral ceasefire on November 21, 1962. They refer to a long-standing [regret](#) in China's strategic circles about "China winning the war (1962) but losing territory and India losing the war but gaining a state."¹¹ Not seizing control of "southern Tibet" (Arunachal Pradesh) during the war and announcing a unilateral ceasefire without obtaining actual control of Tawang, they say, was "a costly mistake", which requires being undone in the present time¹². Some [Chinese scholars](#)¹³ argue that recent Chinese activities on the China-India border are a part of this larger game-plan. The message that they want to convey to India is that "China is not the China of 1962", it can do away with the entire [grey zone](#) concept¹⁴, thereby putting an end to the "infrastructure arms race" and paving the way for conducting future conflicts in [territories](#) directly under Indian control¹⁵. Indeed, a handful among these Chinese strategists hold the most problematic

understanding of India as a nation state and are unrelenting on their designs to humiliate India, make it apologise, or dismember it so that it ceases to pose any challenge whatsoever to China in the future¹⁶.

However, on the other side of the debate, some Chinese strategists of repute, in their analysis of the Galwan Valley incident, are somewhat critical about China's policies towards India which they say remain mostly tactical, of a "reactive nature" and are characterised by a "tit-for-tat" approach, without a substantial strategic intent. This, they say, stokes extreme nationalism in India and unites the otherwise divided nation against China, which not only harms China's interests but might eventually draw China into an untimely military conflict.

Strategists holding this perspective criticise those vying for "teaching India a lesson" as being "short-sighted" and not "psychologically prepared for the rise of India". They argue that China lacks understanding of the fact that India as a rising power is very [important](#)¹⁷ to China and will be increasingly important in the future, with China-India relations evolving as the most important pair of relations after China-US relations.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing Indian troops in Ladakh, July 3, 2020.

Source: NDTV

They warn that if China-India ties are impaired beyond repair, India alone or in association with other countries will cause "endless trouble for China". For instance, they point out that China has no direct outlet to the west and its



access to the Indian Ocean must pass through neighbouring Pakistan or Myanmar, but to do so it faces almost insurmountable difficulties. An openly hostile India, they warn, will use every possible means to prevent China from reaching the Indian Ocean. If China wants to enter the Indian Ocean through Pakistan, it will complicate the relationship between India and Pakistan; if China want to pass through Myanmar to access the Indian Ocean, it will encounter challenges there as well. Furthermore, any [decoupling](#) of China-India relations, they say, will only strengthen the "anti-China alliance" between the United States, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia and other countries, whose key objective will be to reshape global industrial chains, use the Indo-Pacific strategy to check and balance China's military and economic power, and expand international organisations such as the G-7 to weaken China's influence in international affairs¹⁸.

On the other hand, many Chinese strategists are far from [convinced](#) about the merit of China-India relations being downgraded to the level of India-Pakistan relations and a subsequent 'Kashmirisation' of the China-India border¹⁹. This, they argue, will require a complete overhaul of China's existing policy at the LAC of being "reasonable, profitable and economical (有理、有利、有节)", while leaving the main task of pinning India down militarily to its proxies like Pakistan²⁰ (now Nepal and Bangladesh seem to be increasingly figuring in this list). Militarisation of China-India relations, they caution, is not an easy option. Even in 1962, the Chinese victory came at an "unbearably high price"²¹.

Moreover, the Chinese policy community remains deeply skeptical about [how the United States might be leveraging the conflict situation](#) between China and India²². Alluding to the Chinese proverb "鹬蚌相争，渔翁得利" (meaning when the snipe bird and the mussel fight, only the fisherman makes profit)²³, various commentaries/opinion pieces²⁴ in the Chinese media stress that any conflict between the two Asian neighbours - from a local war to a full scale war- will be a "dream come true moment" for the US²⁵.

Firstly, they [posit](#)²⁶ that despite China's military superiority over India, it might not be possible to overwhelm India as easily and as quickly as many in China would expect it to. If a protracted war or a war of scale is enforced, then this will become China's primary strategic direction, demanding full commitment and main resources. This, in turn, will prevent China from forming a joint front with Russia in its main strategic direction (the US), leaving it completely vulnerable to a possible US onslaught. If the situation worsens, Japan may up the ante too, followed by several other nations with whom China has territorial disputes. This will also be an opportune moment for the internal secessionist

movements to gain traction, further weakening China from the inside. Therefore, "even if China wins a local war with India, it will lose the overall situation".

This group of Chinese strategists argues that it is still not the time to 'resolve' the India problem. Instead, China, for now, should strive to make India retreat without a military conflict, explore new outlets for diplomatic relations, new potential for cooperation, and strive to maintain peace and stability in the border as much as possible. Meanwhile, it should simultaneously carry out its strategy of weakening India internally by leveraging its social and political differences, completing its strategic encirclement, improving troop deployment in the Tibet region to secure the CPEC, and stationing Chinese troops in the Gwadar Port as soon as possible, so as to secure China's Indian Ocean sea routes, among other interests. In other words, rather than winning a war, China, they say, should aim at attaining a comprehensive and overwhelming advantage in geopolitics vis-à-vis India, which cannot be altered by war.

To sum up, one can argue that just as much as 'China' unites India today, 'India' divides China. Are India-China relations doomed to failure or will they emerge as the most important pair of relations after China-US ties? Should China resolve its secondary contradiction, that is the 'India problem' first, or should it continue to maintain its high degree of strategic focus on the US, which it considers as its primary strategic direction? Should China continue with its existing policy at the LAC of being "reasonable, profitable and economical" or should it brace up for a Kashmir-like militarisation of the China-India border? There is clearly no consensus within Chinese strategic circles on these fundamental aspects of China-India relations.

While India can take cognisance of these internal debates in China and the two predominant strands of Chinese thinking about India outlined above, we can hardly derive any strategic comfort as neither offers prospects for mutual respect, security and accommodation. If there is to be a breakthrough in the current impasse, it will depend largely on China's willingness to progress meaningful military de-escalation and disengagement and return the situation along the LAC in Ladakh to the status quo ante prevailing in April, 2020. The ball is in China's court, and as India's official statements have indicated, major consequences could follow if Beijing persists along the path of border intimidation and salami-slicing aggression.

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