



CLAWS

Breathing Fire: China's Aggressive Tactical Posturing

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Strategic Stability

As part of its grand strategy, China is moving rapidly to close economic and military gaps with the United States with a view to consolidate its 'comprehensive national power', so that it gains recognition as a competing superpower. Its military modernisation is proceeding at a swift pace. It plans to make up for its poor hardware capabilities by enhancing its ability to wage asymmetric warfare in the space, cyberspace and information warfare domains. For unhindered economic growth and unfettered military modernisation, China needs a secure periphery and seeks to ensure that it is not slowed down by a war, especially a prolonged war, till it has completed its "four modernisations".

Another spoke in China's grand strategy is its policy to prevent or delay, for as long as possible, India's rise as a competing regional power in Asia. Through strategic linkages with Bangladesh, the Central Asian Republics, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and a carefully crafted "string of pearls" strategy in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, China seeks to confine India to the backwaters of the Indian Ocean as a subaltern state. Till it achieves its diabolical ambitions, China is following a twin-track policy in its dealings with India: stability at the strategic level and aggressive engagement at the tactical level.

Stability at the strategic level flows from several factors. The unsettled India-China border has been quiet since the

last armed clashes in 1962 and, as the Chinese are so fond of saying, "peace, harmony and tranquility" prevail. China and India are cooperating closely on the international stage in various fora: for e.g. at the Doha round of talks in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the climate change negotiations. Both countries have cooperated on the counter-terrorism front and for mutual energy security, though the extent has been rather limited. Adding to these convergences is the phenomenal growth in bilateral trade, which crossed US\$ 50 billion in 2008-09. If India's trade with Hong Kong is also taken into account, China is now India's largest trading partner. However, there are some divergences as well at the strategic level. China still does not recognise India's status as a nuclear weapons state and insists that India must abide by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1172, give up its nuclear weapons and sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapons state. Hence, China refuses to discuss nuclear confidence building and risk reduction measures with India.

At the tactical level, China has relentlessly pursued a policy of aggressive diplomacy and military engagement, with a view to ratcheting up the tensions whenever it chooses, and to tie down the Indian forces on the 4,056 km long border. China's aggressive intentions are reflected in a spate of recent incidents, both in the field of diplomacy and military engagement.

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Breathing Fire: China's...

These incidents clearly highlight the underlying hardening Chinese posture. This Issue Brief takes stock of China's tactical aggressiveness, with a view to understand it better and suggest Indian counter-measures.

Hard-line Diplomacy

The interminable territorial and boundary dispute between India and China has played the role of a major spoiler in bilateral ties. China's persistent reluctance to resolve the dispute has prevented the emergence of a genuine thaw in the relationship. Further, China has signalled no redefining of its South Asian policy formulations, as it continues to strengthen its strategic nexus with Pakistan. This was clearly demonstrated by the nuclear technology, weapons-grade uranium and missile collaboration between the two, aimed at neutralising India's conventional superiority in the subcontinent. The dissonance continues as China goes on to exert tactical pressure against India's peripheries.

China's offensive diplomatic posture was demonstrated in September 2008 when Beijing attempted to foil the Indo-US civil nuclear deal at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) meet, contrary to several earlier assurances from the Chinese leadership that Beijing would not block the emergence of a consensus at the NSG. Reacting to the deal, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Qin Gang stressed that current international safeguards on nuclear weapons should not be weakened by exceptions. This point was later emphasised in a 07 March 2009 *China Daily* opinion piece: 'The US-India Nuclear Deal Would Destroy Non-Proliferation Efforts'. Both the official Chinese reaction and critical media commentaries were bitterly stern in their

tenor. However, this was not new, as on 26 October 2005, *Renmin Ribao* had accused Washington of being soft on India and warned that if the US made a "nuclear exception" for India, other powers [i.e., China] would do the same for their "friends" — a move that would potentially weaken the global non-proliferation regime. This could well be viewed as being in continuation of China's move in 2007 when it effectively sabotaged India's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

In July 2009, a leading Chinese think tank, whose views count significantly with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), put forth the shockingly offensive proposition that China should break India into 20-30 independent states with the help of "friendly countries" such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. The article was originally hosted on the website of the China International Institute for Strategic Studies (CIISS). Written by Zhan Lue, the article was titled, 'If China Takes a Little Action, the So-Called Great Indian Federation Can Be Broken Up', and urged the CCP to exploit regional sentiments in India by joining forces with "different nationalities" like Assamese, Tamils and Kashmiris, to support them in establishing independent nation-states of their own. Yet another suggestion was that China should give political support to Bangladesh to encourage ethnic Bengalis in India to get rid of "Indian control" and join Bangladesh as one Bengali nation.

Significantly, this article appeared just before the 13th round of India-China border talks held at New Delhi on 07 and 08 August 2009. Coinciding with the talks, the *Global Times* — affiliated to the Party organ, *People's Daily* — carried a report titled 'Expert: China Will Not Compromise on Sino-Indian Border Issue'. Expectedly, the talks failed to yield any tangible results. Beijing seeks to use high-profile occasions for the purpose of raking up its border claims, which could well influence the bilateral negotiations on the territorial dispute, manifested in the form of border talks. In another incident of tactical aggressiveness, the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Qiu Guohang said in Kathmandu on 05 September 2009 that the government of China

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will “readily provide arms support, financial support and diplomatic support if Nepal faced any threat to its territorial integrity.”

It was reported on 01 October 2009 that the Chinese embassy in New Delhi had begun issuing visas to Indian passport holders from Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) on a separate sheet of paper, rather than stamping the visas in their passports as is the norm with other Indian citizens. This is a crass new move to question the status of J&K vis-à-vis the Indian Union.

Unfounded Claims over Arunachal Pradesh

China has repeatedly asserted its claim over India’s northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. China accuses New Delhi of “occupying” 90,000 sq km of the Chinese territory. China claims the state in its entirety, despite the fact that it has always been an integral part of India. Repeated claims over Arunachal Pradesh appear to be a maximalist position. Beijing actually appears to be aiming at gaining the monastery town of Tawang as part of the final settlement of the dispute. China has constantly reiterated that the sixth Dalai Lama hailed from Monyul area and that the three parts of Tawang i.e., Monyul, Loyul and lower Tsayul were under Tibetan administrative and jurisdictional control. The Tibetans, including their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, have, however, never asked for the monastery town to be returned to them.

China carefully chooses the timing and the occasions on which it raises the Arunachal bogey. Following former Indian Prime Minister AB Vajpayee’s visit to China in June 2003, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) foreign ministry spokesperson had asserted that China did not recognise Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese strategy on the Arunachal issue was demonstrated once again when Beijing’s envoy to New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, created a flutter by making inflammatory statements ahead of President Hu Jintao’s visit to India on 20 November 2006 and effectively derailed his own president’s visit. In an exclusive interview to an Indian news channel, Sun restated his country’s claim

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and said, “In our position the whole of what you call the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory and Tawang (district) is only one place in it and we are claiming all of that... That’s our position.” In fact, Ambassador Sun only followed a long-existing practice — it has been customary for China to reiterate territorial claims at diplomatic levels just before or just after high-level exchanges with India. The first of a series of hard-line Chinese statements on Arunachal Pradesh was articulated as early as 1986 when Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Shuqing declared, “Some 90,000 sq km of Chinese territory” was under Indian occupation and that unless India “resolves this key to the overall situation” it would be impossible to reach a settlement.

The Chinese raked up their territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh yet again when a group of 107 Indian Administrative Services (IAS) officers were scheduled to head for a management programme to China in May 2007. The visit had to be cancelled owing to Beijing’s refusal to grant a visa to an IAS officer, Ganesh Kayu, hailing from Arunachal Pradesh. In fact, Beijing was understood to have pointed out that the man in question was a “Chinese citizen” and, therefore, did not need a visa. Kiren Rijiju, a member of parliament (MoP) from Arunachal Pradesh, has stated that China has moved 20 km into Indian territory and occupied an area amounting to 9,000 sq km.

In January 2008, Beijing protested the visits by India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and later by President Pratibha Patil to Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese

foreign ministry expressed its “unhappiness” regarding the visits. The Dalai Lama has sought permission from the Indian government to visit Tawang in November 2009 to inaugurate a hospital. While expressing annoyance over the proposed visit, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu said, “We firmly oppose Dalai Lama visiting the so-called Arunachal Pradesh.” Significantly, Indian External Affairs Minister SM Krishna came out in support of Dalai Lama’s visit and said, “Arunachal Pradesh is a part of India and the Dalai Lama is free to go anywhere in India.”

In March 2009, China reiterated its border claims in a roundabout manner by attempting to block a US\$ 2.9 billion development loan for India at the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on the grounds that part of the loan was meant for development projects in Arunachal Pradesh. In an article titled ‘Fanning the Flames’ published in China’s National English Weekly, *Beijing Review*, in July 2009, Ma Jiali, a Chinese analyst on India at the government-supported research group, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), wrote, “The ADB’s irrational move... undermined China’s interests and complicated the China-India border issue. China’s strong reaction was fully justified... The entire border is disputed.” China is obviously likely to keep up its efforts to delay the projects during the implementation phase. Recently, it arm-twisted Australia and Japan to vote against India on a technicality related to the issue.

The Chinese media has also been extremely aggressive in its diatribes against India as has been noted on numerous occasions in the recent past. A spate of recent editorials has

blamed India for ratcheting up tensions by moving troops to Arunachal Pradesh. On 11 June 2009, the *Global Times* wrote: “India is frustrated that China’s rise has captured much of the world’s attention.” A week later, editor and columnist of the official *People’s Daily* online Li Hongmei affirmed that “many Indians actually have very subtle impression upon China, which has been translated into a very complicated mindset—awe, vexation, envy and jealousy—in the face of its giant neighbor.” The *Global Times* published yet another confrontational commentary on 12 June 2009, titled ‘India Is a Paper Tiger, Its Use of Force Will Be Trounced, Say Experts’.

A 15 September 2009 *People’s Daily* analysis has called the upward swing in Indo-US relations as an effort by means of which, “the US is tipping the balance between China and India, wooing India away from Russia and China and feeding India’s ambition to match China force for force...” In addition, an article by Chinese analyst Li Qiulin, in the ‘International Observer’ column of the CCP’s theoretical wing, *Qiu Shi* titled, “The Strengthening of US-India Military Cooperation will Change the Strategic Situation in South Asia,” on September 14, 2009 expresses concern regarding the impact of long-term strategic cooperation between the US and India.

Aggressive Military Posture

Two Chinese MI helicopters reportedly violated Indian airspace on 30 August 2009 during which they air-dropped some canned food in barren land at Chumar, northeast of Leh, along the border. The incursions were reported to the nearby defence post by residents of this high altitude area living along the Pangong lake prompting the Army Aviation Corps (AAC) to rush its Cheetah and Chetak helicopters for a confirmation sortie.

Besides helicopter incursions into Indian airspace, the Chinese border guards violated the International Border (IB) in the Leh region, as reported on 06 September 2009. The Chinese troops entered nearly 1.5 km into the Indian territory near Mount Gya, recognised as the IB by India and China, and painted “China” in Cantonese with red spray

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paint all over the boulders and rocks, official sources stated. The 22,420 ft Mount Gya, also known as “fair princess of snow” by the Army, is located at the tri-junction of Ladakh in J&K, Spiti in Himachal Pradesh, and Tibet.

The border guards of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) have been crossing over into the Indian side in this region quite frequently with the maximum number of incursions being reported in August 2009. The area of Trig Heights, also known as “Trade Junction”, which connected Ladakh with Tibet in earlier days, is an area that the Chinese patrols have frequented in 2009 during June, July and August. According to media reports, the Chinese patrols have transgressed the LAC 26 times in June, including two incursions by helicopters, and 21 times in July. In August 2009, the Chinese patrols entered the Indian territory more than two dozen times. However, Indian officials have said the number of border incursions has shown no dramatic increase to warrant any undue worry.

In early June 2008, China launched an incursion across the boundary on northern tip of Sikkim, despite the fact that the boundary in this area was settled between Sikkim and Tibet and is marked by stone cairns. The area is referred to as the “Finger”. In June 2007, media reports surfaced that the Chinese vehicle-mounted patrols and ‘woodcutters’ had intruded at least one km across the boundary into the “Finger” area. They were thrown back by the Indian Army.

The Chinese have also been very critical about India’s role in the Indian Ocean region. In 1993, the then head of the PLA’s General Logistic Department, Zhou Nanqi, stated, “Indian Ocean is not India’s Ocean.” China’s strategy to acquire port facilities for its navy in Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, is well known and has been called China’s “string of pearls” policy by western analysts. Beijing’s game plan appears to be to isolate India and dominate the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Notwithstanding that Beijing is actively pursuing initiatives to tie down India in its neighbourhood, it lodged protests in May 2006 over a new ‘quadrilateral’ initiative held in Manila between the US, Japan, India and Australia.

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On its part, India has always gone out of its way to be accommodating and reasonable in the face of Chinese intransigence. This was demonstrated in April 2009 when the Indian Navy warships participated in China’s International Fleet Review. Three warships, including guided missile destroyers INS Mumbai, INS Ranveer, and guided missile corvette INS Khanjar, along with the tanker INS Jyoti, from the Eastern Fleet participated in the review held off Tsingtao port in Shandong province to mark the 60th anniversary of the Chinese Navy, despite China’s decision not to take part in the International Fleet Review organised by the Indian Navy in February 2001.

The Pareechu lake controversy in 2004 brought out that the issue of river water sharing is another area of potential discord between the two countries. It is well known that China and India share the waters of the Indus, the Brahmaputra and the Sutlej rivers and are upper and lower riparian states, respectively. This, in turn, makes India vulnerable to manipulation of the river water supply by China. In 2004, China had informed India that approximately 35 km from the Himachal Pradesh border, an artificial lake measuring about 230 hectares had been formed on the Pareechu river — a tributary of the Sutlej River. This incident triggered a debate in India whether the formation of the lake was a natural phenomenon or a man-made one. If the possibility of the latter being true, it provided China with the capability to devastate lower reaches of the river in India at will. India requested China to allow Indian experts to examine the topographical details of the lake and study the causes for its origin. China, however, denied visas to a fact-finding

...Aggressive Tactical Posturing

team from India to visit the spot of the lake formation, further fuelling speculation. The Pareechu lake incident highlights China's awareness regarding the environmental vulnerability of India.

Conclusion

Indian officials and analysts are bound to wonder why China has adopted an aggressive posture at the tactical level. Deng Xiaoping had famously advised the CCP, as part of his 24-character strategy, "Hide your capabilities and bide your time." In keeping with this advice, the Chinese have concentrated on building their capabilities. When military capabilities exist, the intentions could potentially change overnight. Given the existential disputes between the two countries, China could ratchet up tensions at any given point of time. Increasing Chinese military incursions across the border into India, combined with Beijing's disinclination to demarcate the LAC on the ground and the map, clearly underlines its disinclination to resolve the territorial dispute in an early time frame. China's growing assertiveness coincides with ongoing geopolitical competition that is sweeping Asia as it revolves around equations that demonstrate emerging power equilibriums.

India's policy makers must not be lulled into a sense of complacency by China's talk of "peace, harmony and tranquility" and its quest for strategic stability. China's aggressive tactical posturing could be a sign of incipient intentions to use military force to settle the

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territorial dispute. The Indian armed forces must not lose any more time in upgrading their defensive capabilities and developing offensive capabilities to take the next border war into Tibet, as only offensive capabilities provide genuine deterrence. India's military posture on the border with China must be robust and pro-active. The patrolling policy must be more vigorous and determined so as to deny the Chinese the ability to transgress the LAC at will, even while ensuring that no cause is given to provoke an unnecessary confrontation. If that calls for placing border guarding forces like the ITBP under the operational command of the Army, that must be done immediately. All available national technical means should be used to supplement patrolling with electro-optical surveillance from the ground, the air and by using military satellites. The border infrastructure must be strengthened in a time bound manner. As the Chinese understand strength, their tactical aggressiveness must be met with resolute strength, both diplomatically and militarily.



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