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Making Sense of China's Dream

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Why does the India-China border flare-up with regularity? For China, it is not about determining where the boundary lies, it is about establishing primacy.

After more than two months of high decibel sabre-rattling, the standoff between India and China in the Himalayas entered a process of phased deescalation in late July. This by no means suggests that the current crisis is coming to an end - merely that it is moving into the next stage of what is likely to be a long and drawn-out period of negotiation. If so, such a development is not new for the two countries: the face-off at Sumdorong Chu in the eastern sector that started in 1986 remained active till 1987. Though it stopped dominating the headlines after a year, by some accounts, it was resolved only by 1995.

Indian figures admit that 'transgressions', or instances of Chinese patrols walking through Indian territory, have increased substantially in recent years, especially in Ladakh, or the western sector. In 2017, the year of the Doklam stand-off, these cases rose to 473 from 296 year-on-year. This year, they clocked 170 by April, in comparison with 663 in all of 2019. Ladakh accounted for 130 of these, up from 110 during the same period the previous year. That seems counter-intuitive. After all, the two sides dedicated two whole decades from 1993 onwards to devise a comprehensive regime of confidence building measures aimed at managing the border, formulating rules of engagement for the two militaries, and even setting up the Special Representatives framework to assist the process of finding political solutions to the historical issue.

Why then, have recent years seen not only increased transgressions, but also multiple cases of incursions leading to stand-offs - including at Depsang (2013), Chumar (2014), Demchok (2014), and the Doklam trijunction (2017) - before the current one in Ladakh? The answers to these lie not in looking at the history of the two in the icy reaches of the Himalayas or even in the minutes of the multiple meetings on the border that the two sides have had, but in understanding how they look at themselves within a larger, global context.

Global leadership with Chinese characteristics

Something that has set Chinese leaders apart from the time of the emperors is their fondness for euphemisms as policy pronouncements. Aided by the structure of the language that operates on the basis of characters and not alphabets, these pronouncements are then interpreted by officials for the general public. Think of Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*, which contained aphorisms from the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to guide its millions of cadres. One such expression that survived from the time of the emperors, and far before the communist party took over, is *tian xia*. Roughly translating to "all under the heaven," this was used to represent the traditional view of the world as being Sino-centric.

While *tian xia* hardly makes its appearance in official pronouncements anymore, the tradition of stilted catchphrases continues. After ascending to the position of the general secretary of the CCP in 2012, Xi Jinping unveiled such a vision called the "Chinese Dream." The dream involves national renewal, or enhancement in all aspects of Chinese life: economic prosperity, the happiness of citizens, a strong military, and finally, dominance on the international stage. These goals are to be realized in two phases, by 2021 and by 2049, and sit at the core of Xi's legacy.

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Building global economic corridors such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or militarizing claimed territories in the South China Sea are all part of this project of renewal. In some ways, this envisages a world with modern China as the most influential actor in the centre, much like how the emperors imagined a *tian xia* order to be. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) current global advance, comprising assertive actions and diplomatic altercations even as the Covid-19 pandemic sweeps across the globe, needs to be examined in this context of its long-term goals.

China seems to believe that the opportune time for this national renewal led firmly by Xi is now, especially since the United States, as the leading global power, seems to be waning. The time for another euphemistic directive "*tao guang yang hui*," or "hide your capabilities and bide your time," from Deng Xiaoping, is now past; this is the time for China to establish itself as the leader of the global order. Yan Xuetong, one of the foremost scholars of international relations in the PRC, explains this in his latest book. He says that the quality of leadership determines the rise of a state, positing, "when the rising state's leadership is more capable and efficient than that of the dominant state and that of other contemporary major states, international influence is redistributed in a way that allows the rising state to eclipse the dominant state" (2019, 2). As the People's Republic under the leadership of Xi Jinping aims for the top position in the international order, a world distracted by a pandemic provides an excellent opportunity.

This is, of course, combined with a host of other factors that have lined up over the years. While it still lags behind the US in military capability, China has been catching up on economic might. Moreover, as the US sits out of multiple international organizations and protocols, the PRC has seized the opportunity. What the PRC is offering the world instead of the US-led order, is again, couched in amorphous terms. Debuted domestically in 2012, the idea of a "community with a shared future for mankind" was presented to the international community in 2015 in Xi's first address to the United Nations General Assembly. Peppered with promises of inclusivity, dialogue and mutual respect, the proposal avoids making concrete suggestions about how to achieve such a reality.

The "vagueness" in the proposal, as a former Indian foreign secretary calls it, is intentional. It allows Beijing to replace the rules-based-order and mould an international system that revolves around it. China has made forays into the architectures that bind the international system together. It leads four of the United Nation's 15 specialized agencies and wields influence in others. As the World Health Organization smarts from criticism over lack of leadership during the current crisis, China has virtually taken over the job through its Health Silk Road, supplying medical equipment, expert advice, and allied services to over 120 countries. There is one crucial difference: the Chinese initiative operates in a hub-and-spoke model that prioritizes Beijing's interests. It follows the same structure, model of financing, and method of implementation as the rest of the BRI, with China as the hub and the rest as spokes.

Trouble in the Himalayas: Not only about the land

John Garver, in his seminal 2001 book about the Sino-Indian relationship, finds two sources of contention. He describes the first as "conflicting nationalist narratives that lead […] the two sides to look to the same arenas in attempting to realize their nation's modern greatness," and the second as "a conflict of fundamental national security concepts resembling a classic security dilemma" (2001, 11). In operational terms, they explain much of the proximate and distant causes related to trouble at the border.

The Chinese vision for rising to the top of the global order begins with establishing China's primacy in Asia. In the last decade, Beijing has asserted its primacy in its eastern periphery, which it calls the "main strategic direction." It has built artificial islands in the South China Sea waters claimed by multiple South East Asian countries, aggressively patrolled the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands that Japan claims, and carried out live-fire military exercises in the waters around Taiwan. On its western border or the "secondary strategic direction," it aims to maintain status quo even if that means teaching a lesson to anyone that attempts to be too ambitious. China's current approach seems to follow the logic of its desire to keep India in its place.

The element of 'teaching India a lesson' has appeared in messages about India from the top Chinese leadership at multiple inflection points in the relationship. It was one of the overarching motivations for Mao Zedong ahead of the 1962 war. Deng Xiaoping too articulated such a warning shortly before the Sumdorong Chu stand-off (Pardesi 2019). During the Doklam crisis in 2017, the message resurfaced, with suggestions that it was time to teach India a second lesson, possibly referring to the results of the 1962 war. At the core, this points to a distrust that has festered between the two neighbours, with Beijing questioning India's incentives and India, in turn, adapting its behaviour to convince China. Understanding this requires turning our attention to the pages of history.

As long back as 1950, mistrust manifested in India's concerns about how the PRC might interpret its relations with Tibet. Months before the invasion of Tibet, the Dalai Lama reached out to Delhi asking for modern arms and ammunition. The ensuing discussion between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his advisors centred on whether the move would be construed by Chinese leaders as an attempt to interfere in the Sino-Tibet relationship. Eventually, India declined Tibet's request. However, this did not ameliorate China's suspicions. Even now, it regularly accuses India of using the Dalai Lama's presence in India as a tactic to meddle in Tibet and manipulate the boundary issue.

It is possible to see this dissonance emanating from a fundamental difference in the way the founders of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China experienced the moments leading to the birth of their respective nations. Nehru and his colleagues believed

that a shared, common set of values and experiences connected India to China. By extension, they believed that the intertwined histories directed them towards a common path for the future. However, for China, recent experiences trumped civilizational ties in dictating how the two countries approached the world. While independent India was the product of a peaceful and non-violent struggle, the PRC's path to the new political system was quite the opposite. As a result, while Nehru believed that power consisted of being a moral force in the comity of nations, the Chinese approach favoured an active role for force (Kennedy 2008).

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These aspects of disagreement and the underlying distrust continue to weigh heavily on Beijing as it decides its policy towards India. Today, the PRC interprets India's disagreements on China's stated objectives as New Delhi's unhappiness with China's global ambitions. This includes India's steadfast resistance to the PRC's flagship foreign policy initiative, the BRI, as well as attempts at slowing Chinese inroads into India's immediate neighbourhood. The BRI is China's attempt to overturn the way the world has operated for the last few centuries - with the West at the centre of the industrializing world. Through an ambitious roll-out of railways, roadways, and economic projects, the BRI is designed to reshape the global economy and place China at the centre. While all of India's neighbours except Bhutan have signed up for this, India's refusal has been troublesome. Beijing has already had to remove from the overall plan the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor, one of the seven economic corridors supposed to hold the BRI in place.

China is also uncomfortable with India's growing relations with the US. The relationship that started developing since the late 1990s crossed the threshold of a strategic relationship with the civil nuclear deal in 2005. It now involves collaborations across sectors, from trade and economics, energy and climate change, to people to people ties. The US has thrown its weight behind India's aspirations for membership of international organizations like the United Nations Security Council and the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It has provided exceptions to expand cooperation on civil nuclear issues. To China, the multifaceted partnership looks like a part of a larger plan to encircle and contain it. Formulations like the Indo-Pacific and groupings like the Quad, involving Australia, India, Japan, and the US add to this discomfort.

In these circumstances, Beijing has over the past few decades successfully used Pakistan to keep India tied down in South Asia. In fact, while the PRC for many years carefully avoided commenting on bilateral issues between India and Pakistan, this policy has now been discarded. China has helped build up Pakistan's conventional as well as nuclear military capabilities, forcing India to keep up. Beijing has also proved reliable in shielding Pakistan from terrorism charges in international forums, increasing deterrence costs for India. As India diversifies its options by entering into partnerships with other countries, it is likely that the PRC will continue to apply pressure in order to prevent India from fulfilling its aspirations of becoming an emerging power.

Beyond these, of course, are reasons that are rooted in China's domestic developments. These are often the least visible, but not impossible to deduce. After all, under the veneer of inscrutability, Chinese leaders have the same anxieties about themselves and their legitimacy as any other state. There have been persistent rumbles against Xi's attempts at consolidating power, and he has responded by rooting out detractors through various anti-graft campaigns. Since last year, the opposition has grown louder since term limits were removed to allow Xi to rule indefinitely.

The fallout from Covid-19 has also not helped. As global condemnation mounted in view of China's obfuscation and misdirection, an activist evaded official censors and published an open letter calling Xi a clueless leader, asking him to step down. Beyond its borders, China's leaders have tackled the backlash by alternating between apparent benevolence through mask diplomacy and outright bullying through wolf warrior diplomacy. However, this has not addressed concerns about the BRI, a project that will need to be curtailed in a post-pandemic environment with limited capital. With a slowing economy and an impatient young population, the BRI was supposed to inject the domestic economy with its returns from investments. This looks unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future.

> …China has a pattern of seeking victories abroad at times of domestic crises.

It has, therefore, become important for Chinese leaders to rally their citizens by pointing out challenges not from within, but from beyond China's shores. As former national security advisor Shiv Shankar Menon points out, China has a pattern of seeking victories abroad at times of domestic crises. The 1962 war coincided with the PRC's troubles with both the US and the Soviet Union, while the 1979 war with Vietnam came during repercussions due to Deng Xiaoping's reforms in 1978. It is obvious that Chinese leaders still worry about looking weak. It is likely they find the tried and tested strategy useful.

As some research has demonstrated, the PRC prefers using coercion in conditions where the economic cost is low, and the need to establish resolve high (Zhang 2019). India accounts for a mere 3% of China's total exports, a figure that Beijing possibly believes allows it to raise the stakes. However, so far, news of the stand-off has not been used to whip up nationalistic fervour in China. The mostly state-controlled media has been headlining news about China's relations with the US, Japan, and Taiwan, along with developments in Hong Kong and the South China Sea.

What tipped Beijing's hand?

In discussing the current standoff, official statements from Beijing have pointed only at the issue of infrastructure development by India near the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, the PRC has consistently developed infrastructure on their side for many years. This includes better road connectivity not only near the LAC but also improved road and rail connectivity between Tibet and other parts of the mainland for the rapid movement of people and material for civilian as well as military purposes.

> Is it possible that the developments were catalyzed by the abrogation of Article 370 and subsequent reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir?

It was only in 2005 that India reversed a long-standing policy and announced a project of 61 roads covering 3,350 km near the LAC. Once completed, these will significantly erode China's advantage. The agency in charge, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), expects to complete them in 2023. One of the most important of these, the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie road, which runs parallel to the LAC and was completed in 2019, is close to the Galwan Valley, the location of the incident on 15 June. A troop build-up in the area by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) directly threatens the road. Through unofficial accounts, the PLA has claimed that it has been warning India and now wants to push it to the territory occupied after the 1962 war.

Is it possible that the developments were catalyzed by the abrogation of Article 370 and subsequent reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir? The answer may lie in separating the issue of Article 370 from Ladakh being turned into a union territory. It is possible that Chinese administrators believe that direct control from the centre will accelerate the economic integration of Ladakh as well as the infrastructure projects. China took note of the address by the India's home minister in August 2019 on the floor of Parliament in which he hyphenated Aksai Chin and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. He categorically stated that in reorganizing Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh will be turned into a union territory "in which Aksai Chin will also be included." The Chinese foreign ministry took note, urging India to "avoid taking actions that further complicate the border issue." It raised the issue in an informal session of the UNSC the same month, claiming that India had challenged "Chinese sovereign interests and violated bilateral agreements on maintaining peace and stability in the border area."

Voices from India have rejected these concerns, claiming that the issue is internal to India. Besides, during their meeting in August 2019, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had assured China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, that the development had "no implication for either the external boundaries of India or the LAC with China." While that may be accurate, it does not seem to have assuaged Beijing's concerns adequately. At least one semi-official commentary affiliated to China's external security agency, the Ministry of State Security, hints at this.

In October, as the union territory of Ladakh was formally established, the Chinese foreign ministry again accused India of "challenging China's sovereign rights and interests," declaring that such a step would "neither change the fact that the relevant region is under China's actual control nor produce any effect." While none of this conclusively establishes that China's behaviour at the LAC can be directly attributed to the decision on Article 370, it suggests that the move featured in China's calculus.

Where to now?

In the absence of authentic accounts from Beijing, it is difficult to discern what combination of the factors mentioned above convinced China's decision-makers to initiate a conflagration with India. All that is visible for us to see is that India is not alone. In the last few months, Beijing has taken advantage of the world's preoccupation with the Covid-19 pandemic to activate multiple fronts and advance its claims. Apart from India, these include, contestations with Taiwan and Vietnam over the Paracel Islands; with Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam over the Spratly Islands; with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands; and a completely new claim with Bhutan in Trashigang district in the eastern part of the country. Simultaneously, it is fighting diplomatic battles with countries from Canada and Australia and battling global opposition to Hong Kong's new national security law. Its diplomats have launched verbal attacks in Brazil, the United Kingdom, and other parts of Europe. Most importantly, its relations with the US, according to the Chinese foreign minister

himself, face the "most severe challenge since the establishment of diplomatic ties."

Irrespective of how close Beijing believes it is to becoming the leading global power, it is obvious that managing so many fronts all at the same time takes a great deal of effort and governance capacity. The opacity of the Chinese administrative system prevents insights into the specific objectives that might have led Chinese leaders to synchronize active confrontations across the globe. However, it is fair to imagine, that at the very least, they wanted to make quick gains on some outstanding problems. If the aim was to settle some of these issues emphatically in their favour, the campaign so far has been far from successful. None of the parties in dispute with China have shown signs of backing off.

> For India … the current crisis has altered the relationship with China irrevocably.

On the contrary, states are formulating alternatives to untangle from and reduce China's exposure in their domestic economy and security. Some of them have taken to collective diplomatic messaging to signal this. The US has expressed its disapproval of Beijing's "incredibly aggressive action" with India along the LAC, while India has reaffirmed its support for freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea following a statement from the US. The UK has excluded China's Huawei from 5G networks in the country, turning instead to Japan. Australia, in the meantime, has suspended its extradition agreement with Hong Kong, offering visa extensions to those from the city already in Australia.

To the discerning, a subtle shift in the PRC's attitude has been visible in recent weeks. It is possible that China wants to dial down the belligerence and call a truce, at least for now. As Foreign Minister Wang acknowledged when speaking on the crisis in the US-China relations, he also called for a dialogue with all issues on the table. For India, the reconciliatory tone came in an 18-minute-long video message from the Chinese ambassador to India in which he urged that the two countries "cherish what we have achieved today rather than repudiate it," and "enhance mutual understanding and cooperation, manage differences through dialogue."

For India, however, the current crisis has altered the relationship with China irrevocably. Earlier stand-offs were set-off by Indian and Chinese patrols coming across each other in contested territory. From the accounts available, this time, in clear premeditation, PLA units were diverted from training exercises. Additionally, even while disengagement processes are being discussed in Ladakh, there are reports of heightened PLA activity in the eastern sector, off Arunachal Pradesh. The movement of thousands of troops with their equipment, artillery, and air defences points to considerable planning.

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Talking about the India-China relations in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had claimed that despite differences, "over the last four decades not a single bullet has been fired across the India-China border." The developments in Galwan mean that while the comment about bullets factually holds, it is inconsequential, as the four-decade long peace, no longer does. Even less valid is the sentiment of intent on both sides that the comment underscores. The death of 20 Indian soldiers at the hands of the PLA has cast doubt on the viability of the agreements and rules of engagement worked out between 1993 and 2013 to guide behaviour along the border. The scepticism is already visible. Indian army officers are reportedly apprehensive about whether the PLA troops would disengage despite agreements reached. Some recent reports from the LAC suggest that there may be reason for this concern.

In a way, all future conversations will now have to start from the beginning, reconfirming the validity of all prior agreements in light of the changed realities of Chinese ambition. It stands to reason that this will reflect in the meeting of the Special Representatives as well. China is unlikely to walk back its claims or acknowledge its revanchism, as was evident in the Chinese readout of a recent conversation between the Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and the Chinese foreign minister: "the right and wrong of what recently happened at the Galwan Valley […] is very clear." The extent of the problem becomes apparent when you consider that the comment is about only one of the many points on the boundary that the two sides disagree on.

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In its other territorial disputes, such as in the South China Sea, Beijing has taken an approach to maximize gains, intent on claiming the entire region, having clearly moved from its earlier assent to joint development. Elsewhere, such as in Central Asia, its strategy has

involved extracting acquiescence on other issues in exchange for concessions on contested land. It is likely that in exchange for a compromise in Ladakh, China will expect accommodation from India for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in the vicinity. Depending on how far it can push, it may even ask for less opposition from India as it builds relationships across South Asia. Additionally, there is no indication that any of this will lead it to make any compromises in the eastern sector and on the PRC's claim on Arunachal Pradesh.

Complicating matters is the fact that the rapprochement initiated with Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988 has run its course, and for now, there is nothing else to replace it. Establishing a new modus vivendi is also more difficult in current circumstances. In 1988, both sides were keen on establishing trust and opening up, as Deng famously told Gandhi, the border issue could be left to wiser future generations. Opening up bilateral trade or even resurrecting a conversation on the border were considered wins. Now, three decades down, the low hanging fruits no longer exist. Resolving issues of the trade deficit and market access or making headway on the border question require political will and economic acumen from both. Today's China is much more powerful and seeks deference from other actors commensurate to its stature. This, in turn, has shrunk the space for India to negotiate.

It would be erroneous to read this as India reacting merely to Chinese machinations without any agency of its own. Finding ways to live with the growing asymmetry in capability has kept the Indian strategic community busy for the last few years. Building domestic capacity, both military and economic, while being effective, takes time. This leaves the option of external balancing, which involves building relationships with other states. The current partnership with the US spans aspects that were unimaginable earlier. The Act East policy has actively cultivated friends like Japan and Vietnam. Most recently, the decision to invite Australia to participate in naval exercises alongside Japan and the US, while also signing a defence agreement that allows India and Australia to use each other's military bases, shows that New Delhi is carefully considering its options and constantly expanding them.

> In the absence of abiding trust, it is likely therefore that clashes on the border will continue and even increase, both in frequency and in intensity.

However, there is an element of subtlety to this policy, based on China's far greater hard power, and India's desire to buy as much time as possible. India's history of nonalignment, coupled with civilizational pride and the ambition of being a regional power, dictates that it not take sides openly. To the PRC, which seems convinced that India has thrown in its lot with the US-led order, this is duplicitous behaviour. After India's independence, Chinese leaders accused Indian leaders of being imperialist agents for continuing with British arrangements in the Himalayan states. Now, they point to its closeness to the US and claim that it is an ally of imperialism. During the current crisis, the Chinese ambassador has warned India that economic decoupling with China will only harm India. The Party's propaganda newspaper *Global Times* has been more direct: "the US would just extend a lever to India, which Washington can exploit to worsen India's ties with China."

In the absence of abiding trust, it is likely therefore that clashes on the border will continue and even increase, both in frequency and in intensity. The strategic community in China seems divided on the approach to India. Some advise keeping India in line by continuing to apply pressure at every opportunity. Others suggest caution, lest too much pressure pushes India to more actively engage with anti-China alliances. Irrespective of which side manages to get its voice heard, it is unlikely that the un-delineated and un-demarcated border will stay calm. As Srinath Raghavan (2019) has pointed out, India and China have a historical conflict of interest, and an environment of muscular nationalism makes it difficult to move towards a resolution.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is instructive to look at China's much-vaunted goals of national renewal once again. The first milestone in 2021 is planned to coincide with the centenary of the CCP. According to the path set out by Xi in 2017, China is supposed to be a moderately prosperous society by this time. It is also supposed to be on its way to realizing the final goal of an "era that will see China move closer to the centre of the world" by 2049, the centenary year of the PRC. However, this will not be easy.

The rapid economic growth of the last three decades has already slowed, while the post-pandemic economic slowdown will affect the BRI. Together with the decisions by a number of countries to block Chinese access for economic and security reasons, this is likely to derail the gains that Beijing needs to fulfil its goals. In such situations, we have seen Beijing fall back on the strategy of pointing fingers at the world and assembling its citizens around the flag and the leader.

For India and other countries, this can mean only one thing: greater contestations and fewer resolutions in issues involving China.

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