

Crafting a brave new foreign policy that can take on Chinese hegemony in Asia: The onus is on Modi

July 28, 2020, 3:00 AM IST [Sreeram Sundar Chaulia](#) in [TOI Edit Page](#) | [Edit Page](#). [India](#). [World](#) | TOI

The deadly physical clash between China's PLA and the Indian army in the Galwan valley last month was a watershed moment for bilateral relations and geopolitics in Asia. China's discarding of decades-long restraint and its violent push to attain tactical territorial advantages at the LAC, mirrored by similar bouts of aggression against other Asian neighbours with which China has outstanding maritime disputes, have thrown the old playbook of 'competition-cum-cooperation' out of the window.

The new reality is that conflict rather than coexistence with China is going to define the horizon for countries that are unwilling to accept its hegemony. Recognising this changed reality and the imperative to shift gear, foreign minister S Jaishankar has remarked that India must "exploit" the altered international situation, "step out more", "take risks" and make critical "choices".

Post-Galwan India has to brace itself for permanent strategic resistance to Chinese incremental encroachment using a variety of tools, including military, economic and diplomatic ones. India's defence spending has fallen below 1.5% of GDP in recent years. This trend must be reversed immediately to close the capability gap with China, which is acting forcefully because it believes it has the upper hand. India's digital strike at China's first global social media sensation, TikTok, deprived it of no less than 300 million users and inflicted \$6 billion worth of losses on it. The ban put China on notice that it cannot enjoy unfettered access to India's vast market and profit from it if the Chinese military continues its expansionist spree.

More trade barriers should be brought to the table if China doesn't mend its ways. China is an export driven economic machine, already struggling with the coronavirus-caused collapse in global demand for its manufactured items. By leveraging its market size and consumer base, India can compound China's woes and compel it to moderate its behaviour.

Following the Galwan fighting, many commentators in the United States and in India have called for abandoning New Delhi's 'hedging' between Beijing and Washington, and unambiguously allying with the latter in the ongoing 'new Cold War'. Indeed, equidistance is illogical when China is provoking and threatening India's sovereignty. While the Ladakh standoff was at its peak, China's state-owned media issued warnings that India should not fall into a "trap" and become a "pawn for US containment strategy". To rub it in for China, and to raise the costs of its military adventurism, India should do the opposite and look for closer alignment with the US, especially in military interoperability.

But given the contradictory and transactional impulses which have driven US President Donald Trump's China policy, relying solely on the US strategic partnership as a guarantee against Chinese bullying will be a mistake. India's vision ought to be more far-reaching than simply inching closer to the US, we need to consolidate a 'US plus' model going forward. India has an array of middle power partners in Asia who detest Chinese expansionism and whose survival as sovereign states is in peril due to President Xi Jinping's totalitarian hunger for power and grandeur.

From Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan to Australia and Japan, all eyes have been on India and the way it mobilises to repel Chinese intruders in Ladakh. For these regional players, irrespective of whether or not the US under Trump or any future administration shows its will or resolve to deter China, an endogenous 'soft balancing' coalition is sorely needed.

India, which has been hesitant in the past to attempt formation of any overtly anti-China bloc, must shed inhibitions and take the initiative to skilfully convince partners and bring about a loose 'minilateral' grouping to fruition. The tragedy in Asia is that almost all countries (barring Pakistan and North Korea) are worried about

China's influence and wish to check its hegemony, but none wants to make the first move and looks to others to bell the cat.

It is a classic collective action problem that can only be overcome by fearless leadership which is ready to absorb the costs of Chinese retaliation for the sake of the collective security and stability of the region. With his soaring ambition for regional leadership and wide acceptance as a nationalistic foil to Xi, the onus is on Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

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