

Beijing's violent rise must be checked

Our northern neighbour is a menacing power that wants to be acknowledged as the greatest, is inherently expansionist and dissatisfied with the status quo



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Since President Xi took office in 2013, China has flexed its military muscle in disputes with India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Taiwan. (Express Illustrations | Amit Bandre)

By Sreeram Chaulia

Following the unprecedented physical brawl at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that cost the lives of 20 Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese troops, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) blamed India and claimed that "the sovereignty of the Galwan River Valley has always been ours". It was a classic instance of Chinese Communist deceit, backstabbing and propaganda to conceal territorial aggrandisement.

China had previously agreed in military commander-level talks with Indian counterparts that it would disengage from Galwan. For decades before the PLA's ingress into Galwan in May, China had not asserted claims on Galwan. But the gap between what China says one day and what it does on the ground the next day is vast, and is part of its time-tested ploy of keeping adversaries off balance through surprise.

As Mao Zedong, the founder of Communist China and legendary war planner, held during the period of Chinese resistance to Japanese colonialism in the 1930s, "make the enemy uncertain and then attack him by surprise at one point". While the PLA's military doctrines today are drastically different from those of Mao's guerrillas, the strategic culture of Communist China remains the same because the underlying philosophy of 'historical materialism' (belief that the world goes by material power, i.e. economic and military force, rather than ideals or morals) still guides President Xi Jinping's foreign policy.

China's playbook is to use brute force in limited form where necessary, establish a fait accompli on the ground or waters with quick military thrusts, and then use historical revisionism to claim more and more territory. As cover for this skullduggery, Chinese officials incessantly promote diplomatic concepts like 'harmonious world', 'win-win cooperation', 'universal love and non-aggression', and 'a new type of international relations' based on 'jointly upholding the authority and sanctity of international law'. Lurking beneath the verbose shibboleths is a menacing great power that wants to be acknowledged as the greatest, which is inherently expansionist and dissatisfied with the status quo.

What the PLA did in its savage assault with nail-studded rods and stones against an Indian Army party in Galwan was to show China's true colours—an uncompromising hegemon that seeks to extract as much land and leverage to pressurise states like India that stand in the way of Chinese domination.

States that are substantially weaker than China or do not resist Chinese supremacy are rewarded with a final resolution of territorial disputes. Communist China has settled border disagreements with 17 countries since its inception in 1949, and in 15 out of these 17, it actually conceded territory. But when it comes to India, Bhutan (viewed by Chinese elites as an Indian proxy), Japan and Southeast Asian countries, China is unwilling to compromise on land or sea borders and is pressing forward fresh claims to apply geopolitical pressure.

Since President Xi took office in 2013, China has flexed its military muscle in disputes with India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Taiwan. When the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte disavowed allegiance to the United States, which Xi's China sees as its main opponent, Beijing softened its approach to Manila and offered economic incentives to it. In a reprisal of the ancient notion of Tianxia, China believes it is nominally the ruler of the world, and all the others must accept its superiority and pay tribute to it. Those who dare to deny China its rightful place as the number one power have to face a different China that is fierce and bullying.

The same tradition of 'cartographic aggression', wherein the PLA ingresses into a contested domain and then presents distorted maps claiming that specific area had belonged to China or fell under China's sphere of influence since millennia, is

continuing from Mao until Xi. What is new is that China's toolbox has expanded. Today, it has accumulated huge financial reserves and deploys them to fulfil Xi's 'Chinese dream' of expanded global influence under the umbrella of the \$4–8 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By means of a cut-throat 'debt trap' strategy, China has found a commercial pathway to gain control over vital waterways, ports and mineral-rich lands.

Yet, the bare-knuckled violence of the PLA in Galwan Valley is a stark reminder that treating China as a purely economic juggernaut that expands in a less threatening way via trade, aid and debt is missing the full picture. There is more than BRI and chequebook diplomacy to China's rise. The less civilised side of China, which people outside Asia and the Indo-Pacific often ignore or dismiss as something too remote to bother them, is growing under Xi's hardline authoritarian rule.

The policy need of the hour is for the whole world to take off blinkers, recognise China as it really is and push it back on multiple fronts. Liberal formulae of accommodating China, making it a 'responsible stakeholder' or meeting China halfway by conceding it the strategic space it deserves, have for long confused nations. But the time for such dilemmas is past. Xi's China is dropping all pretensions and acting in a far cruder and belligerent manner. Chinese force has to be met with proportionate counterforce on a variety of dimensions. The alternative is subjugation.

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