

Beware of Dragon's smile: China's hidden agenda to exploit Indian market

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India would be foolish to fall into the recent charm offensives and not read into the dubious nature of the narrative regarding the thawing India-China bilateral



Representational image. Reuters

Recently, there have been some murmurings of a thaw in India-China relations, particularly after the release of India's Economic Survey, which talks about the need to relax some of the restrictions in place against Chinese investment, and after the meeting between India's National Security Advisor (NSA), Ajit Doval, and China's Wang Yi on the sidelines of a BRICS meeting in St Petersburg, Russia, in September.

The chatter increased after India's External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, stated in September that 75 per cent of the disengagement problems with China have been sorted out. However, what is missed out is that in September itself, he stated that the patrolling arrangements between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have been disturbed since the beginning of the military standoff in eastern Ladakh in 2020, and the issue has not yet been resolved. He added that the main issue now was that of patrolling.

Be it in the context of the economic relationship or in the realm of politico-military ties, the relations are far from normal. A closer analysis of events from just the last month (mid-September to mid-October) reveals the exact opposite of the narrative that there is a thaw in India-China relations. On October 14, the Indian government imposed curbs on parts of pocket lighters with immediate effect in order to encourage domestic manufacturing and

to cut dependence on their inbound shipments from China. On October 2, it was reported that the Indian government was planning to extend its 'trusted source' mandate to tech devices like smart meters, parking sensors, drone parts, and laptops to tackle concerns from China.

Earlier this year, India's access to solar equipment from China was restricted in response to India's anti-dumping probe against Chinese companies. India is one of the countries that files the most number of anti-dumping cases against China, owing to Chinese companies' dumping practices in India. Goods imports from China slowed down during January to April 2024. The Economic Survey also highlighted that China has been quietly restricting India's access to solar equipment in response to anti-dumping probes.

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On October 7, the Indian Air Force (IAF) downed a Chinese spy balloon, and the IAF alerted the government about the presence of the Chinese spy balloon in Indian skies. The spy balloon was hovering at an altitude of nearly 55,000 feet on the eastern front, near China and had a payload. On October 4, IAF Chief A P Singh stated that China is rapidly building infrastructure along the LAC and that India is upgrading too. On September 28, China did unreasonable patrolling at two LAC spots along Arunachal Pradesh, in the Yangtse area and the Subansari Valley, which have historically been India's. Immediately after this, it was announced that India is to maintain LAC troop deployment as trust deficit with China remains and that the Indian Army is maintaining a high level of operational preparedness.

On October 6, it was noticed that CCTV cameras in Taiwan and South Korea were digitally talking to crucial parts of the Indian power grid, and on closer investigation it was found that the sytange conversations were the deliberate indirect route by which Chinese spies were interacting with malware that they had previously buried deep inside the Indian power grid. Clearly, the 'trusted source' mandate that the Indian government is planning for tech devices needs to be implemented at the earliest.

On October 12, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh dedicated 75 Border Roads Organisation (BRO) projects, worth Rs 2,236 crore, along the border. On the same day, it was reported that the IAF was in talks with Uttarakhand to take over three airstrips and develop an additional one in Spiti. On October 10, outflanked by 12 Chinese nuclear submarines, India approved a 'game changer' nuclear-powered attack submarine for the Navy. The Government of India nodded for constructing two Ship Submersible Nuclear (SSN) boats, the apex predators in underwater warfare.

If events in the last month alone were to be tracked, it becomes clear that India is only gearing up for more aggression from China, and not without reason. While China continues its infrastructure buildups along the LAC, abuses technology, and uses it for espionage in addition to sending spy balloons into Indian airspace, India does not have a choice but to be prepared.

However, currently, a concerted narrative in line with China's charm offensive to leverage India's economy has emerged, which speaks about a thaw in the bilateral relationship. As the West, led by the US, slaps more tariffs on China and makes it next to impossible for China to leverage Western markets, Beijing needs markets to keep furthering its otherwise faltering economy. India fits the bill, which is why China has unleashed charm offensives diplomatically, speaking more about camaraderie, toning down its verbal aggression, and highlighting commonalities between India and China. All of this is to leverage the Indian market while denying India equal market access in China through tariff and non-tariff barriers and while further aiming at salami-slicing Indian territory. India would be foolish to fall into the recent charm offensives and not read into the dubious nature of the narrative regarding the thawing India-China bilateral.

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