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# Engagement with China: Need for a Proactive Strategy

Sheru Thapliyal

**T**he Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) rapid military build-up, both in terms of technology and military infrastructure, should be a cause of great worry for the Indian leadership. China is a country which has a history of "ditching friends first". Nehru's trusting polemics of "*Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*" and an uneasy peace with China, had a devastating denouement in 1962 when the PLA, in a sophisticated and swift offensive, humiliated India.

Of late, there has been a disquieting increase in both Chinese claims on Indian territories as also in the number of incursions in areas where hitherto there was no dispute. The incursions have gone up to the 1962 level average of 15 to 20 per month. The latest instance is of the Chinese disputing the Sikkim-Tibet boundary in North Sikkim. The Sikkim-Tibet boundary is well established by the Anglo-China Treaty of 1890 and there was neither any ambiguity nor any arm twisting of the Chinese by the British, as they claim in most cases. This is in addition to the Chinese claiming Tawang Tract which is part of their claim on the whole of Arunachal Pradesh.

## **Chinese Strategy**

Why are the Chinese doing this? In this context, their grand strategic design needs to be understood. While the US wants a unipolar world and a unipolar Asia, and India wants a multipolar world and a multipolar Asia, China wants a multipolar world but a unipolar Asia. So, obviously, China does not want India to emerge as a contender for dominance in Asia. Indian policy-makers perhaps have not been able to grasp this reality. They feel that by engaging China economically and

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closing our eyes to its territorial claims and transgressions, India will be able to live happily ever after. Nothing could be more myopic and naïve than this.

The Chinese have nothing but contempt for any appeasement. India does not learn from history. Throughout the 1950s, India tried to appease China. India was one of the earliest to recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC) soon after the revolution. Further, India kept on espousing China's case for entry into the UN which turned out to be the classic Arab and the camel story. China not only became a UN member but also of the Security Council and now makes all efforts to derail India's claim of becoming a member of the extended Security Council, a pipe dream if ever there was one. On the other hand, India meekly accepted Chinese annexation of Tibet. This only emboldened the Chinese.

India even ignored Chinese claims on its territory and to cap it all, did not even know that the Chinese had constructed a road through Aksai Chin in northerneastern Ladakh, linking Xinjiang with Tibet. Nehru, who was in charge of the Foreign Office, did not even inform the Parliament of the Chinese occupation of Indian territories in Aksai Chin. In fact, he went one step further, claiming that loss of this territory was of no consequence since not a blade of grass grew in that area. By that logic, all Indian territories where no grass grows should be handed over to China. The result of this appeasement was the humiliating defeat of 1962. Indian policy-makers apparently are yet to get over that trauma, and the appeasement of China continues unabated.

In order to implement their grand strategy of not allowing India to emerge as a strong contender for Asian dominance, the Chinese have resorted to strategic encirclement of India. This is being achieved by creating a ring of hostile or inimical states all around India's immediate neighbourhood. India already has a hostile Pakistan in the West whose rise as a nuclear power is mostly due to Chinese largesse. Nepal in the centre is more or less in the Chinese camp, with Prachanda ready to do their bidding. Bhutan is being pressurised to start diplomatic relations with China. This is being done by

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large scale intrusions in western Bhutan and claiming territory near the India-Tibet-Bhutan tri junction. This will have serious military implications for India, with a direct threat to the strategic Siliguri Corridor. The Chinese already have Bangladesh in their embrace and it has become a safe haven for anti-India insurgents. Myanmar also appears inclined to become more or less a Chinese province, with Chinese naval presence in Coco Islands and the opening up of the Stillwel Road. The Chinese are also trying to get a foothold in Sri Lanka and Maldives. Now there are reports that the Chinese have started to supply arms to insurgents in the northeast and their current flavour is the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isaak Muivah (NSCN-IM) group. In a yet another manifestation of pressure tactics, intrusions in Indian territory have increased alarmingly. The Indian Army has claimed that there have been over 70 intrusions in Sikkim; China has the temerity to say that in this context, the reports of the Indian Army forward troops are wrong. The Sikkim-Tibet boundary has been defined by the Anglo-Chinese Convention of March 17, 1890. Here, the Chinese cannot claim that their representative did not sign the convention, like in the case of the McMahon Line. But the Chinese have no compunctions in disregarding all international norms, conventions and treaties which do not suit their interest.

### **India's Response**

How does one deal with a nation which is so highly focussed to achieve its strategic objectives? Firstly, at the political level, there must be a complete reversal of today's policy of appeasement and weak-kneed responses. India must not appear petrified by China. A multi-pronged approach needs to be evolved. Some of the steps that need to be taken could be:

- At the political level, China needs to be treated on an equal footing. India must not be cowed down or browbeaten by China's bullying tactics.
- All negotiations with China must be in the public domain. These need to be transparent and there should be no attempt to sweep controversies under the carpet. It would be an insult to the intelligence of our countrymen.
- All problems with China, including the territorial dispute, need to be discussed openly with them. If the border is quiet, it must not be presumed that all is peaceful. By doing so, India shall lull itself into a false security cocoon, as happened in the Fifties. At that time, the Chinese were willing to discuss the border question. However, Nehru disdainfully rejected it, with disastrous consequences.
- Confabulations of the India-China Working Group must be made public. So

far, either these have been futile or inimical to India's national interests.

- India must begin to assert itself and use its leverages. These include the Dalai Lama, the Indo-US nuclear deal and economic cooperation with Japan and other Asian countries.
- Militarily, India must improve the infrastructure in the border areas, which should be given top priority. It should have been done immediately in the aftermath of 1962 War. Since this has not been done, it puts the Indian Army at a great disadvantage today.
- India's dominance of the Indian Ocean, especially in the Bay of Bengal, is going to be a crucial factor in China's energy survival. India can choke off all Chinese shipping in the Nine and Ten degree Channels in the Andaman Islands even before Chinese ships reach the Malacca Straits. For that, the quantum modernisation of the Indian Navy is a primary requirement.
- Development of strategic weapons and space control must receive top priority.
- India must also evolve a consensus approach among political parties in which the nation is informed of all negotiations with China. Besides, India must create a public diplomacy strategy by using the media.
- If the Chinese can claim Tawang Tract only because one of the Dalai Lamas was born there, nothing stops us from claiming Kailash-Mansarovar because 800 million Hindus believe that it is the abode of Lord Shiva.

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### **Let China Show Some Good Faith and Accommodation**

Let China show good faith and accommodation on the following longstanding issues:

- Agree to Demchok being the transit point for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra.
- Increase the number of pilgrims from the paltry figure of 300 at present.
- Start border trade at Demchok.
- Start discussing nuclear issues instead of treating India as a pariah.
- Show some gratitude by supporting India's case for being a permanent

member of the UN Security Council with voting rights.

- Stop nibbling Indian territory way beyond its claim line in Ladakh.
- Welcome a delegation of members of the legislative Assembly from Arunachal Pradesh to visit China.
- Stop arming insurgent groups in the northeast.

It is not known if our foreign policy mandarins have ever put across these issues to the Chinese. In all probability, they have not. By not resorting to a proactive strategy, we are not putting the Chinese under pressure.

Finally, India needs to stand up to its larger neighbour and not bend its knees before its might. India is an emerging power without doubt, but at the end of the day, all power needs to be shown and applied in the national interest. It is time to stand up and be counted.