Clash in eastern Ladakh: A historical perspective

Among other things, a crystallisation of our political and security arrangements with countries which share our concerns over China’s aggressive posture is required.

There is a history to Chinese behaviour patterns. Until November 1985, China’s formal position for resolving the India-China border issue was the “package proposal”, which would have legitimised the status quo at the border, making the LAC the international boundary. In 1982, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping publicly reiterated this proposal: “…for instance in the Eastern Sector, can we recognise the existing status quo, I mean the so-called McMahon Line?” This was left over from history but in the western sector, the Indian government should also recognise the existing status quo.

At the 6th round of official-level talks held in November 1985, the Chinese reinterpreted the package proposal, stating that since the area of the largest dispute was the eastern sector, where India was in “occupation” of 50,000 sq km of Chinese territory, a package settlement must include India making “meaningful” concessions in the east, for which China would make “appropriate” concessions in the west. The gapposts had changed. China believed this would be economic and military capabilities vis-a-vis India had grown; that the international situation was in its favour, thanks to its virtual alliance with the US, and India had a relatively untenable political leader in Rajiv Gandhi. This was followed by the Wangdung incident in 1986, when Chinese troops occupied a feature south of the LAC and came down to the Sun dornung River Valley, claiming that it was Chinese territory. This was followed by the explicit demand that in any border settlement, India would have to give up Tawang. This latter may have been related to India making Arunachal Pradesh a state of the Indian Union in February 1987. This has a certain resonance with the change in the status of Jammu and Kashmir in August last year as a backdrop to current developments in eastern Ladakh, both political changes were rejected by China. Chinese moves on the border are closely linked to their perceptions of the power balance between the two countries, the overall regional and international geopolitical environment, and internal political dynamics in India and China.

Let us see by contrast China’s posture when it believes that the power asymmetry with India may be reducing and that India’s international stock and diplomatic space may have expanded in relative terms. During 2003-07, India was growing at 8.9 per cent a year. It was seen as the next big commercial opportunity, after China. India had displayed its naval power in extending relief and assistance to countries in both South and Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the Tsunami in December 2004. The close coordination of the Indian Navy with the navies of the US, Japan, and Australia led to the birth of the Quad (Quadilateral Security Dialogue). A historic nuclear deal with the US seemed imminent and India’s relations with the US, Europe, Japan, and Southeast Asia were perhaps the best since the country’s independence. Against this backdrop, important gains were made in India-China relations in April 2005, including the conclusion of the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Border Question. Sikkim was formally recognised as a state within the Indian Union. It was agreed that India-China relations had now assumed a global and strategic dimension and that they should resolve the border issue expeditiously so that there could be cooperation on larger strategic issues. This phase was short-lived. In the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis of 2007-08, China has reduced the gap in economic and military capabilities with the US. It is now the second-largest economy in the world and, as we are reminded repeatedly, China’s GDP is five times India’s and growing. India’s growth has slowed. It is retreating from the East instead of “Acting East”. This is how China interprets India walking out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. During the current pandemic, China’s economic recovery has been faster than that of any other major power. Just as it changed the goal posts in the 1985-87 period, it is seeking to do the same now, believing that the geopolitical environment is in its favour. The same behaviour pattern is visible in the East and South China Sea. China will continue to press its claim line in different sectors of the India-China boundary. Our response requires re-ordering priorities and strengthening defence over other objectives. This will not be easy but there are no alternatives as just in the post-1962 period. We need to prepare the nation for the long haul and have confidence in our ability to frustrate Chinese ambitions on our borders. We ought to avoid the perception among friends and adversaries alike that we have chosen to acquiesce in the loss of Indian territory. This will undermine our international credibility.

This historical perspective should guide our China policy. One should pursue de-escalation, remain engaged, but focus on acquiring deterrent capabilities that would convince China that advancing its territorial claims will be both risky and costly. We are vulnerable to expanding Chinese influence in our sub-continental neighbourhood. A measured foreign policy, a re-development of sparse material and human resources to the neighbourhood, and a further crystallisation of our political and security arrangements with countries which share our concerns over China’s aggressive posture are the need of the hour.

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