The Chinese challenge uncovers India's fragilities

The border crisis has laid bare political, economic and diplomatic problems — the result of choices made after 2014

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Like Banquo's ghost, the 1962 Sino-India war hangs like a shadow over the current state of bilateral ties between India and China. A military defeat close to six decades ago has no real bearing on the current border tensions, but is a constant reminder to Delhi, like Banquo's ghost is to Macbeth, of its own fears and insecurities. An outcome of India's choices since 2014, these weaknesses have been shown up by the prospect of a conflict with China, which may no longer be immediate but it does not feel as far fetched and remote as it did just two years ago.

China's diplomatic moves

Nearly 20 months after the border crisis began in Ladakh, China has pressed on with aggressive diplomatic and military gestures against India. Beijing recently renamed 15 places in Arunachal Pradesh, following the six it had done in 2017, weeks after the Dalai Lama visited Tawang. China justifies the renaming as being done on the basis of its historical, cultural and administrative jurisdiction over the area — these old names existed since ancient times which had been changed by India with its "illegal occupation". The External Affairs Ministry said that the move by Beijing "does not alter" the fact that Arunachal Pradesh is itself a San-skritted rechristening of the North-East Frontier Agency in 1971 by being made a Union Territory was an integral part of India.

Possession is indeed tenthens of the law but China's re-taking drive is one prong of its plan to assert its territorial claims in disputed border areas. On January 1, 2022, Beijing's new land border law came into force, which provides the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with full responsibility to take steps against "invasion, encroachment, infiltration, provocation" and safeguard Chinese territory. This law supports — and mutually reinforces — the construction of 628 Xiaokang border villages by China along its disputed border with India. As per available satellite imagery, at least two of these villages have been constructed on the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Arunachal Pradesh. These villages will come in handy for Beijing when the principle of 'settled areas' is invoked to resolve the border dispute in the future.

It is not just Beijing but even the diplomats posted at the Chinese Embassy in Delhi who have been emboldened by India's cautious response. Last month, Political Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy, Zhou Yongsheng wrote an angry letter to Indian Members of Parliament — including two Union Ministers, Rajeev Chandrasekhar and Ramdas Athawale — for attending a meet organised by the Tibetan government-in-exile. The letter asked them to not engage with "out-and-out separatist political group and an illegal organization". This angry misfire from an Embassy official to two Ministers has earned no reproach from the Government for the Chinese Ambassador. It did not even get an official condemnation from the External Affairs Ministry.

Submissive response

The reasons for such subservience by the Narendra Modi government towards the Chinese are not difficult to understand. Delhi has run out of proactive positions against Beijing that will force the Chinese leadership to change course on its India policy. Tibet and the Dalai Lama were often projected as a trump card but evidently are not. Beijing does not care for its declining popularity among the Indian populace. The two countries have an increasingly lopsided trade relationship driven by Indian dependency on Chinese manufacturing, a situation further worsened by the Government's mishandling of the novel coronavirus pandemic. Delhi has little geopolitical or economic leverage over Beijing to boast of. There are no arrows left in Mr. Modi's quiver. The best Delhi can do is to prevent any further loss of territory to China with extensive military deployment on the LAC, while hoping that Beijing, either with Moscow's urging or otherwise, will give Mr. Modi an honourable diplomatic exit out of this crisis. If India was to give it back to the Chinese as good as it gets, Beijing may take it as an affront, further smothering Indian desire for a smooth end to the crisis.

To restore the status quo ante on the LAC as of April 2020, India undertook internal balancing of its military from the Pakistan border to the China border and external rebalancing through a closer partnership with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the U.S.) has, however, remained a non-military grouping. The signing of the AUKUS (a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S.) and the humiliating American exit from Afghanistan made it crystal clear that for all the intelligence sharing and logistics support from the U.S., India will have to deal with the Chinese challenge on the border on its own. In decline since 2017, India's economy is incapable of supporting such an endeavour. The Modi government has now placed its hopes on Moscow, which seems keen to play a media- tor between India and China. Russian officials say that their offers of a Foreign Ministers meeting, if not a leaders' summit, of the Russia-India-China grouping is on the table but Delhi first wants to see some steps from China towards resolving the border crisis.

Now revealed

The Chinese challenge has laid bare globally India's political, economic and diplomatic fragilities under Mr. Modi, and this has grim portents of how challenges in future will be managed. Worried about its northern borders and the threat of a two-front collaborative threat, the Modi government and the ruling party are no longer as vociferous on Pakistan. Even if viciously attacking Pakistan has been an electorally rewarding domestic agenda for Mr. Modi, he has been forced to stay away from even mentioning India's western neighbour in any of his recent electoral speeches. With 'development' and 'employment' no longer Mr. Modi's calling card, that vacuum is being filled by the most horrific attacks by Hindutva bigots on Christians and Muslims under the benign gaze of the Hindu majoritarian government.

Because of the Chinese factor, the U.S. is currently looking away even as India mistreats its minorities and its democracy stands diminished. That is unlikely to continue for long if India is to be the democratic counter in Asia to the rise of a one-party authoritarian state like China, one that is now keen to off er its own governance and growth model to the world. India's difficult diplomatic and military engagement with China is going to leave it more dependent on U.S. support, rendering the Modi government more vulnerable to American pressure on 'shared values'.

A decade ago, many observers had warned that the emergence of an increasingly assertive and confident China under Xi is going to be to India's detriment. The signs were there when PLA soldiers walked into Chumar even as Mr. Modi hosted Mr. Xi in Ahmedabad in 2014. The Doklam crisis of 2017 only lulled the Government into thinking that the worst was over. It, instead, triggered the border crisis of 2020. With the loss in the 1962 war, India lost its pre-eminence in Asia; with this display of weakness six decades later, India is in danger of losing its dominant influence even in South Asia.

India's internal situation, from Nagaland to Kashmir, with the miseries under attack, is not going to help either. India made its choices after 2014, and the China border crisis has only shown them up.

Onus on the leader

With a rising China as its neighbour and a more self-centred U.S., which is uncomfortable with India's reliable partner, Russia — as its friend, Delhi continues to face difficult choices. Not made from a position of strength, in future too, these choices will be as much domestic as they will be in the domain of foreign policy. A collegial and deliberative model of decision-making would work best but is unlikely to be followed if the track record of the current dispensation is any indicator. Pushing a domestic narrative through a compromised media is one thing but dealing with the geopolitical realities at a difficult time is a different ball game.

Put under the harsh glare, a domestically divided, economically weak and diplomatically boastful India has been found wanting in its ability to deal with future challenges. The immediate challenge, however, remains China. It cannot be wished away and must be tackled.

As the Chief Minister of Gujarat, when Mr. Modi was barred from most western capitals after the 2002 riots, he frequently travelled alone to China. He showed a make of learning from China's remarkable and unique growth story, and applying it to the Gujarat Model, which he promised to India in 2014. After he became the Prime Minister, Mr. Modi has met Mr. Xi at least 18 times, but has not had even one telephone call since the border crisis began.

As a proponent and exemplar of personality-centric diplomacy, which included two informal summits with Mr. Xi, there has been a surprising lack of any personalised move from Mr. Modi so far. Now that his generals, advisers and Ministers have failed to deliver, it is time for Mr. Modi to step up and personally resolve the crisis. He has no excuse left. Allowing things to fester will only ensure that India pays a price far higher than it can afford.

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