

Majoritarian nationalism is complicating India's China challenge

In the 2004 Hindi film *Swades*, Shah Rukh Khan plays NASA scientist Mohan Bhargava who returns home to a village in India. Tired of Mohan's sharp questions about the way things are in society, a village elder quizzes him: "*Kya tum nahi maante humara desh duniya ka sabse mahaan desh hai?*" [Do you not believe that ours is the greatest country in the world?]

The same question was put to 7,000 Indian adults in April-May this year as part of a new survey for the Stimson Center, a non-profit, nonpartisan think tank based in Washington DC. The response was overwhelmingly nationalistic: 90% strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that "India is a better country than most other countries". The other responses were equally troubling. While 69.3% said India "definitely" or "probably" would defeat both China and Pakistan in a war, the figure climbed to 89.1% when it came to defeating only Pakistan. In what should both worry and please Washington DC, 56% said the United States would "definitely" or "probably" help India in the event of a war with China, while 59% said the same would happen in case of a war with Pakistan.

The reasons for such widespread views are not hard to guess. The Indian state has made a concerted effort in inculcating majoritarian nationalism among the populace in the last few years, resorting to fabrication of history and manipulation of current affairs. Indians have always demonstrated great faith in the military, but placing the soldier on a very high pedestal — as part of an electoral project of the ruling party—has deified the armed forces. This narrative, echoed in the survey, has been consolidated by a biased, partisan and ultra-nationalist yarn spun by the majority of India's mainstream media.

This belief is, however, completely at odds with reality. Take the ongoing border crisis in Ladakh with China, which first came to light in May 2020 and has been in the news over the Chinese People's Liberation Army's denial of grazing rights to Indians in Demchok last month. Over the past 28 months, India has been unable to regain control of more than 1,000 sq. km of territory in the sensitive border area. It means that border patrols of the Indian Army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police are either blocked by Chinese soldiers (as in Depsang, Hot Springs and Demchok) or denied access to patrol points due to disengagement agreements with China last year (as in Galwan, Gogra, the north bank of the Pangong lake and the Kailash range).

At Galwan, the Indian Army lost 20 soldiers in a clash in June 2020 while scores of others were injured. Another few dozen were taken captive by the PLA, before being released over 72 hours. Last year, Chinese social media handles, believed to be proxies of the PLA, put images and videos of captured Indian soldiers out on Twitter. This was ignored by the Indian media. A senior military commander closely involved in the Ladakh operations confirmed to me that no Chinese soldier was taken captive by India. Four days after the clash, Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed at an all-party meeting in Delhi that "*Na koi wahan hamari seema mein ghus aaya hai, na hi koi ghusa hua hai*" [No one has intruded inside our borders, nor is anyone intruding]. The official PMO video on YouTube was later edited to remove that quote, but the damage had been done.

India did attempt a *quid pro quo* military operation in August 2020 by capturing some peaks on the Kailash range (south of the Pangong lake), but the PLA moved to occupy the remaining heights in the area. As both sides fired at each other and their tanks were barely 50 yards apart, the crisis threatened to escalate. The two sides started talking and India agreed to disengage from the Kailash range in exchange for a no-patrol zone on the north bank of the Pangong lake. This was announced by defence minister Rajnath Singh with great fanfare in Parliament in early 2021, where he also claimed that conversation on Depsang and Gogra would start within 48 hours of the disengagement.

So far, 16 rounds of talks at the level of the corps commander have taken place, but no disengagement has taken place after July 2021. Nearly 50,000 additional troops from either side remain deployed in Ladakh. The Chinese refuse to even discuss the areas of Depsang and Demchok in the meetings. They are unwilling to bring de-escalation (moving forces out of the operation area) and de-induction of forces from the region on the agenda. Meanwhile, the Chinese have constructed massive military infrastructure on their side, augmenting the capacity of their air force while reducing the mobilization time for their soldiers to initiate operations against India. The *status quo* on the ground has been altered and a new normal established in the military and diplomatic talks. The situation in Ladakh is now a *fait accompli* for India that threatens to repeat itself in Arunachal Pradesh.

All through the Ladakh crisis, the government has done little to build India's depleting military strength. Already short of 1.2 lakh soldiers, plans are afoot to permanently slash the strength of the 12.5 lakh-strong army by at least 2 lakh. The Indian Air Force has only 30 squadrons of fighter jets against its authorization of 42, and its urgent demands for force multipliers like midair refuellers and an airborne warning and control system remain unfulfilled. A few years back, there was talk of a 200-ship Indian Navy, but its fleet is now down to barely 130 vessels. Its submarine fleet is dwindling, with new projects delayed indefinitely; the INS Vikramaditya, its sole aircraft carrier, has been in maintenance since early 2021 even as China has put its third carrier out for sea testing. India's much delayed second carrier, the INS Vikrant, though inaugurated with great fanfare by the prime minister last week, will only be functional by the end of next year. The Indian Army's ammunition stocks for some of its specialized weapons are not sufficient for even 10 days of combat. The new Agnipath scheme for short-term contractual recruitment of soldiers has added to the upheaval, with serious questions about the continuation of Gorkhas from Nepal in the Indian Army. Even though the government is shy of acknowledging the harsh truth, everyone concerned is aware that the Indian economy, since the demonetization debacle of 2016, has been unable to provide the resources to support the military that the country needs.

Things are no better at the political level. Despite being promised one in 2018, India still doesn't have a national security strategy. The defence minister's operational directive ([as we discussed in the last edition](#)) has not been updated since 2009. The government has failed to appoint a chief of defence staff for the past eight months to replace the late Gen. Bipin Rawat. A crisis is building up. The warning lies in a dialogue from Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*: "How did you go bankrupt?" Bill asked. "Two ways," Mike said. "Gradually, then suddenly."

To be fair, an overstretched military has done its best to hold the line against the PLA in Ladakh and prevent any further ingress across the Line of Actual Control. This has meant internal rebalancing of forces from the Pakistan border to the China border. Simultaneously, attempts have been made at external rebalancing, which refers to creating pressure on China by partnering with other countries in the Indo-Pacific theatre. The political leadership has, however, been shy of doing anything that would actually provoke the Chinese—its timidity has only emboldened Beijing. "This too shall pass" may be a great line for a philosophy sophomore, but it is a suicidal strategy for a strong adversary like China.

External affairs minister S. Jaishankar claimed four times last month that ties with China cannot be normal as the border situation is not normal. Unless his claim is meant to delude the Indian public, Jaishankar's definition of normalcy is more tangential than normal. All through the border crisis, China has been India's near-biggest trading partner and bilateral trade is on course to cross \$100 billion for the second consecutive year in 2022, having reached \$79.77 billion in the first seven months of 2022, up 18% year-on-year. Nearly a quarter of the development loans from the Beijing-headquartered Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have been advanced to India—more than \$2 billion in 2021 and another \$1.641 billion so far this year. India may be one of the biggest pharmaceutical exporters to the developing world, but is dependent on China for sourcing 70% of its active pharmaceutical ingredients.

The government had been requesting Beijing to allow nearly 23,000 Indian medical students to return to China, but the obstacles remain. India has also asked for resumption of regular flights to allow Indian businesspeople to travel to China. The country is engaging diplomatically with China, welcoming its foreign minister, Wang Yi, to Delhi in March. In June, Modi attended the BRICS summit, virtually, which was chaired by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Modi is likely to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit this month at Samarkand in Uzbekistan, where Xi will also be present. Indian soldiers are attending the ongoing Vostok military exercise in Russia with China, while Chinese (and Pakistani) soldiers will be attending an SCO counter-terrorism exercise [next month at Manesar](#).

The dissonance between a deluded public and the grim reality carries a heavy risk. Hyper-nationalism in the public is likely to push the government into refusing to make any compromise, which will close the doors on any exit path from a major crisis. An inflated public view of the military prowess will make it challenging for the political leadership to step back from conflict, since the public will view such conflicts as winnable even when the military odds are stacked against India. The answer lies in honesty, especially from the media and the military, in order to educate and inform the public. Unfortunately, "India's military has also become part of political spectacles," [writes](#) Lt Gen. HS Panag (retd). "...there seems to be politico-military collusion to cover up failures and exaggerate success to present a false picture of our military prowess."

Ultimately, whether it is by lack of capacity or will, or both, the buck stops with the political leadership. In this government, with Modi, who must begin by telling the truth to the public. A good starting point is the answer from Shah Rukh Khan's character in *Swades*: "*Main nahi manta hamara desh duniya ka sabse mahaan desh hai...Jekin yeh zaroor manta hoon...*"

hum mein kabliyat hai, taqat hai, apne desh ko mahaan banane ki. [I do not believe that India is the greatest country in the world, but I do believe that we Indians have the ability and the capacity to make our nation great].”

Obiter dictum

In a month’s time, it will be the 60th anniversary of the Sino-India border war. It was a limited border clash but the mythology around the military debacle has obscured the truth. The loss is blamed on Nehru’s Forward Policy and undue reliance on the inputs and recommendations of the Intelligence Bureau. Historian Srinath Raghavan’s book [War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of The Nehru Years](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) provides the most accurate understanding of the war, along with a factual analysis, to set the history right.

[Sushant Singh](#)

Sushant Singh is a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. He has taught at Yale University (Fall 2019 and Fall 2021) and was deputy editor of The Indian Express. A winner of the prestigious Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Awards in 2017 and 2018, he had earlier served in the Indian Army for two decades. He is also the author of Mission Overseas and co-author of Note by Note: The India Story.

