

Narendra Modi's China failure hurts India

Sushant Singh 04 September, 2023



When the Modi government abrogated Article 370 from the Indian constitution, simultaneously downgrading and dividing the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, China's foreign ministry spokesperson said that India had undermined "China's territorial sovereignty by unilaterally changing its domestic law" and this practice was "unacceptable". Home minister Amit Shah had earlier spoken in Parliament, vowing to lay down his life to wrest back Aksai Chin and other regions that are in China's control. The Modi government tried to paper over the cracks by suggesting that this internal administrative action had no bearing on China but was soon compelled to despatch external affairs minister S. Jaishankar to Beijing to pacify the communist leadership.

In contrast, when China recently issued a new map that included the whole of Arunachal Pradesh and parts of Ladakh within its political boundaries, all that India's complaint got from Beijing was a message to "stay calm" and refrain from "overinterpreting" the issue.

Leave alone rushing its foreign minister to New Delhi, China has not even posted an ambassador to India for the past 11 months. The latest Chinese snub follows two other recent high-level meetings where Beijing has tried to publicly embarrass the Modi government.

The first of those was after the bilateral meeting between national security advisor Ajit Doval and director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China Wang Yi in July in Johannesburg, where both were attending the BRICS meeting of NSAs. In its statement about the meeting, Beijing added that PM Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping had reached a "consensus" to restore bilateral ties during their short post-dinner meeting in Bali last year. The Indian side had till then maintained that the two leaders had "exchanged courtesies at the conclusion of the dinner". The Indian statement did not mention the Bali meeting but two days later, the external affairs ministry spokesperson accepted after eight months that the two leaders "exchanged courtesies and also spoke of the need to stabilise our bilateral relations" at Bali.

The second was after the Modi-Xi meeting—or conversation or talks, depending on the version one goes by—again at Johannesburg during the BRICS summit last month, which was revealed by India after a day's gap. The Indian

foreign secretary said the two leaders had a “conversation” but a few hours later, the Chinese foreign ministry claimed in a statement that there was a “candid and in-depth exchange of views”, adding that it took place at the request of the Indian side. While there was no official denial from New Delhi, MEA sources claimed that there had been a “pending” request from China for a “bilateral meeting”. Beijing then doubled down on its stance with its foreign ministry spokesperson repeating the tired Chinese argument that “the border issue is a historical legacy and not the entirety of China-India relations”.

It seemed India was taking a conciliatory position because of hopes of some progress in border talks at the level of corps commanders in Ladakh, who met last month for two days, the first such instance in 19 meetings. This was followed by meetings between divisional commanders in Ladakh, which lasted six days.

However, there has been no substantial outcome from these talks. India seems to have blinked first, but the Chinese side is unwilling to budge from its very rigid position, whether it be about disengagement in the areas of Depsang and Demchok or about de-escalation in other areas where buffer zones have been created.

The Indian political leadership no longer insists on the return to status quo ante bellum of May 2020, raising apprehensions that it wants to somehow arrive at a resolution that can be honourably sold to the public. But the army has been reluctant to make any compromise that would permanently cripple its military posture in the area. India has no way to coerce the Chinese to restore the status quo ante but has enough defensive military strength to prevent any further loss of control over territory. This new status quo seems here to stay, wherein Indian soldiers cannot access 26 of the 65 patrolling points in Ladakh either because they are blocked by the PLA or due to the creation of buffer zones.

It is an open wound that the Modi government is forced to live with as it moves into the election year.

But an even bigger assault on Modi’s ego should be the reported absence of Xi from the G20 summit at New Delhi this week. He has politically invested a lot in hyping India’s presidency of the grouping, an elite club of top leaders that came into being after the 2008 economic crisis. The summit was meant to be the apogee of Modi’s international glory, where his dreams of becoming a “vishwaguru” were being fulfilled.

His government was already struggling with meeting the very low bar of a unanimous leaders statement, a joint communique, after the summit but Xi’s absence means that under Modi, India can’t even ensure the presence of the leader of the world’s second most powerful country. Xi has attended every G20 summit since he became China’s president and was present at the BRICS summit a few days ago. By skipping the G20 summit in New Delhi, Xi has spoiled Modi’s party.

China provides a salutary warning about the risks of pursuing personalised diplomacy, centred around big events and photo opportunities, as can be seen in the case of Modi too. Instead of interests, vision and values, Modi supporters believe that India’s foreign policy can be shaped by the sheer dint of his personality. Already enamoured of China since his days as the Gujarat CM when he was barred from most western capitals due to violence against Muslims in 2002, Modi invested a lot in China after becoming the prime minister. He hosted Xi and his wife at the Sabarmati riverfront in Ahmedabad in 2014, even as the PLA soldiers had entered Chumar in Ladakh. During a visit to China in 2015, Modi sought a mutual clarification and delineation of the Line of Actual Control but was publicly denied by Beijing. After the Doklam standoff in 2017, he took the initiative for informal summits with Xi, first at Wuhan in 2018 and then at Chennai in 2019. The result was the border crisis in Ladakh in the summer of 2020, which remains unresolved after 40 months.

Meanwhile, India remains economically dependent on China. Bilateral trade, biased in China’s favour, has hit record levels. India gets maximum loans from the two multilateral banks based in China. In sectors such as electric vehicles, solar power, batteries, electronics and pharmaceuticals, India remains dependent on Chinese raw material, intermediary goods, machinery and engineering expertise.

Indian students have already returned to China while the Modi government maintains regular diplomatic ties with Beijing. In the past nine years of Modi's rule, including the last three years of the Ladakh border crisis, India has only strengthened its economic ties with China. New Delhi may have banned Chinese apps, erected fresh barriers for Chinese investment and conducted tax raids on Chinese mobile manufacturers, but it has also paid for Russian crude oil in yuan and taken bigger loans from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank for building infrastructure in India.

In the western imagination, India is seen as the natural challenger to the Chinese hegemonic rise. This has resulted in the West's wooing of Modi, looking away from his record of democratic backsliding and targeting of religious minorities. It has little to do with the force of Modi's personality and more to do with the selfish interests of these western countries. They neither share values nor a vision with the Modi government. They can help India deal with the Chinese challenge, only as long as it is in their interest—a risky approach in the best of times but far worse in this period of geopolitical flux. It leaves India with no option but to generate capability and will to tackle China on its own.

With his belief in personalised diplomacy, Modi has wasted the past nine years not building India's strength to take on China. In his failed dealings with Beijing, Modi has hurt India.

Obiter dicta

Harvard University Professor Arunabh Ghosh's first book, [Making it Count: Statistics and Statecraft in the early People's Republic of China](#) (Princeton University Press, 2020), investigates how the early People's Republic of China built statistical capacity to know the nation through numbers, which included taking support from Nehru's India which was a global pioneer in that field. A [travel documentary](#) by Stef Hoffer covers some of China's most interesting cities and is a wonderful watch about its urbanization process.

Lead photo of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeting Chinese President Xi Jinping prior to the dinner on 4 September 2017 in Xiamen, China, during the BRICS 2017 Summit from Getty Images.