

Opinion | The harsh truth of why we tolerate Chinese incursions

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The economies of India and China were roughly at par back in 1962 but we have been left far behind

China's recent intrusions at multiple points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh are unquestionably the most serious incidents at the India-China border since 1962. The main events are well known. From around 19 April, Chinese forces began to push the LAC further inside territory claimed by India and towards the Chinese claim line at multiple points: the Bottleneck in Depsang near Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), Patrol Point (PP) 14 on the Galwan river, PP 15-17 at Hot Springs near Gogra, and further south at the so-called Fingers 4 to 8 on the north-east bank of the Pangong Tso lake. When Indian forces realized that these were not routine post-winter manoeuvres and attempted to push the Chinese back, it led to aggressive confrontations, including the 15 June clash at PP 14 that resulted in the unfortunate death of 20 soldiers and many more injuries for the Indian forces, and also casualties on the other side.

In the disengagement negotiations that have followed, China has successfully implemented its usual tactic of two steps forward, one step back. Both sides are pulling back a kilometre or two on either side of each confrontation point to create a buffer zone. But since the Chinese army had first moved forward before partially moving back after negotiations, the effective LAC has been shifted further west of the Indian claim line and closer to the Chinese claim line. This is not the first time that China has made such intrusions. But it is the first time since 1962 that China has simultaneously intruded at multiple points all along the LAC in Ladakh, in the process reportedly occupying a vast expanse of land claimed by India. Two questions arise. Why has China made such a move at this time? And why does India tolerate these repeated incremental moves through which China is gradually shifting the effective LAC towards its claim line?

One explanation for the Chinese move is the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road, which is nearing completion. This 255-km all-weather road reduces travel time from Leh to DBO from two days to six hours and aims to secure India's supply lines to the military base at DBO as well as the Karakoram Pass just above it. This pass, India's gateway to the Xinjiang province of China, is of enormous strategic importance. On the east, it gives India direct access to China's strategic highway G219, which links the restive provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet. On the west, this pass gives India access to Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that passes through it. The CPEC highway is China's main supply line for transporting oil and other strategic goods from the Pakistani port of Gwader port on the Arabian Sea to Kashgar in Xinjiang. Occupying vantage points close to the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road and gaining the ability to cut this critical supply line to DBO and the Karakoram Pass, should the need arise, are thus of vital strategic importance to China.

Another explanation is that China now wants to enforce its 1960 claim line, which it had actually secured in 1962 before a partial withdrawal. Seen along with China's aggressive moves in the East and South China seas to impose its will on littoral neighbours like Japan, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, it reflects Beijing's switch from Deng Xiaoping's doctrine of China's "peaceful rise" to the more hegemonic doctrine of Chinese President Xi Jinping. In my view, these explanations are not mutually exclusive. One folds into the other.

The other question is why India accepts repeated intrusions that incrementally shift the effective LAC further into territory claimed by it. The short answer is that India may not have much choice. The narrative of India-China relations has been dominated by India's defeat in the 1962 border war between the two neighbours, but China's real victory was its dramatic and unprecedented economic growth over four decades, which has left India trailing far behind.

Back in 1962, both economies were of comparable size. In fact, they were broadly comparable even as recently as in 1980. But today, China's economy is nearly five

times the size of India's. This difference in economic power is directly reflected in the defence capabilities of the two countries, with China's capability far exceeding that of India. This is a sobering reality that has to be factored into any Indian response.

"Rich country, strong army" was Japan's driving slogan that led its great modernization following the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and its emergence as Asia's pre-eminent economic and military power in the early 20th century. It was the same principle that led China's emergence as Asia's leading economic and military power in the late 20th century. It is also the goal that India must pursue diligently if it is to protect its interests in a period of emerging Chinese hegemony. This is a long-term goal, requiring a radical transformation from a sclerotic, dirigiste and unequal economy to one that is nimble and dynamic but also inclusive, like most of the successful countries of East Asia.

Meanwhile, China's premature assertiveness under Xi Jinping might actually have helped India by setting alarm bells ringing across capitals in Asia and beyond. The collective resistance of these countries to Chinese power may hopefully persuade its current leader to walk back to Deng's shrewd path of China's "peaceful rise" without posing a threat to others.

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