

India-China Relations and Emerging Geopolitical Dimension

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The positive atmospherics built by both India and China in the form of informal summit in 2018 at Wuhan after Doklam stand-off was perceived to be a new beginning in building mutual understanding on each other's perspective on contentious issues. India reciprocated and welcomed President Xi Jinping at the second round of informal summit organised at Mamallapuram in India in 2019. Both the leaders Prime Minister Modi and President Jinping were showing a degree of seriousness and there was an expectation that India and China will be working together for a better Asia and the world. But, unfortunately, China's aggressive behaviour got reflected when wanted to change the status quo in Eastern Ladakh.

India's attempt in building conducive environment in its neighbourhood has always been defeated mainly by Pakistan and China. Pakistan has been working with a single minded aim to destabilise India. China has been attempting to create disturbances across Line of Actual Control (LAC) for years because of a lack of consensus on the definition of LAC. China failed in abiding and implementing the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC in the India-China border areas signed in 1993 and the Agreement on confidence building measures in the military field along the LAC in the India-China border areas signed in 1996. The declaration on principles for relations and comprehensive cooperation between India and China signed in 2003 was again never followed by China.

The border crisis

Both India and China had agreed to give due consideration to each other's strategic and reasonable interests and follow the principle of mutual and equal security as enshrined in the article IV of the agreement on political parameters and guiding principles for the settlement of the India –China boundary question signed in 2005 could not help in building consensus in the last fifteen years. The two sides had agreed to strictly respect and observe the LAC and work together to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas.

The recent standoff is a testimony to the fact that China believes in non-adherence to the agreements which they sign formally. The ongoing India – China standoff has defeated the purpose of Wuhan Spirit which was set forth after Doklam Standoff. China perhaps is the only country in the world which does not have regard for any agreements both at the bilateral as well as multilateral levels

The ongoing crisis has completely vitiated the atmosphere across Sino-Indian border. Almost a week after the Chinese foreign ministry informed that the situation along the border in Ladakh was “stable and controllable”, the two sides have initiated military level talks and prepared a roadmap for de-escalation of the situation. Going by the statement of the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying and the reports emanating from the defence ministry sources, it would be safe to assume that the two armies are preparing to commence a “limited disengagement” in eastern Ladakh to end the month-long border standoff. Four rounds of talks at the Commander’s level could not yield any dividends as yet. The crisis seems to be deepening.

Needless to say, both armies reflect the views and strategies of their respective political establishments in New Delhi and Beijing. New Delhi’s stand has been that the onus of de-escalation lies with China as the prime mover in the standoff and related offensive moves. The army high command in Beijing replaced the Army commander for its Western Theatre Command ground forces responsible for handling the border. Lieutenant General Xu Qiling was appointed as the new Commander of the PLA to take part in the talks.

China’s objectives

The immediate provocation for the present face-off is to register China’s stiff opposition to India constructing an important all-weather road near the Pangong Tso Lake besides constructing another road connecting the nearly 255 km long Darbuk-Shayok-Daulat Beg Oldie in Galwan Valley. This road will facilitate the Indian army to easily access its post in the Karakoram Pass which oversees Chip Chap River, Trig Heights and Depsang Plains.

China’s overall aim is to wrest this area from the Indian army and then build its proposed road connecting Tibet with Gilgit-Baltistan, weakening India’s position in Siachin Glacier. This will join the Karakoram Highway (KKH) running from Kashghar to Islamabad via Khunjerab Pass and Gilgit. China needs to protect its assets in POK to ensure unhindered passage to Gwadar in Indian Ocean. It is evident that given the woeful military strength of Pakistan, an Indian action in POK will jeopardise Beijing’s strategy.

The 73 days Doklam standoff appeared to spin off into a serious conflict between India and China but both countries showed maturity and decided to de-escalate. It was in this background that the Wuhan informal summit between the two top leaders happened. India downplayed invitation to the Tibetan leaders and Taiwanese representatives to Modi’s swearing in ceremony. China on its part lifted its earlier objection of inclusion of Pakistan in the “grey list” of Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Both leaders agreed to give “strategic guidance” to their respective armies, improve border level communication, work seriously on confidence building measures and strengthen mechanisms to manage border tensions.

But it was not easy for New Delhi to secure China’s nod for the UNSC resolution to designate the Pakistan-based chief of Jaish-e-Mohammed, Masood Azhar, as a terrorist. Though Beijing relented at the last moment, it was clear that the level of bonhomie was slowly but surely receding.

Modi government’s bold decision to abrogate Article 370 giving special status to J&K and creation of two Union Territories came in for sharp criticism from Pakistan and China. But both countries could do very little harm to India in the international arena. Much to the chagrin

of Beijing, the government reiterated that Aksai Chin was part of Ladakh and therefore an integral part of India (a position stated by the first Prime Minister Pt. Nehru in Parliament). New Delhi also took a pro-active stand in the QUAD meeting held in US though China views the platform as an anti-access security net against it.

What now?

It is now certain that the Wuhan spirit has been completely evaporating and none of the confidence building measures are working. China continued to block India's participation in the Afghanistan reconstruction projects where Pakistan has a greater say. China also blocked India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

India would need to understand China's intentions, their behavioural patterns and fundamental goals for a better policy formulation. It would help India in enhancing its preparedness for managing such eventuality emanating from China frequently. India also would need to cement its strong ties with the West and more particularly European Union by identifying convergences. The new geopolitical dimension and equation would be needed to be worked out and the recent India-EU summit seemed to be an indication to build a constructive strategic engagement. The evolving perception that China is emerging as a threat to the world system and world order needs to be examined in a comprehensive manner.