

Domestic Imperatives Behind Chinese Aggression at the India-China Border in 2020

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Abstract

The military clash between India at Galwan has signaled a new low in India-China relations. While it has been on for three months, and several attempts are made to predict the future of India-China relations, what becomes pertinent is to understand the rationale behind China's sudden aggression at the India-China border. For this purpose, a cursory look at China's contemporary history, Xi Jinping's intended dreams for China as well as an assessment of the prevailing realities in China domestically become important. This paper argues that the rationale behind China's aggression to Galwan are similar to the ones driving China to the 1962 skirmish with India, and that some of the conditions that Xi Jinping finds himself in are very similar to what Mao Zedong had found himself in post the Great Leap Forward.

Keywords

Aggression, China, India, Xi Jinping, Economy

The current COVID-19 order presents a peculiar challenge for China- on the one hand it is seen as being responsible for COVID-19

which has caused public health systems and economies come crashing across the globe; on the other hand it is seen in some quarters as having the potential to rise to the challenge and

emerge as the saviour of the world through its medical and aid diplomacy. U.S. leadership is clearly in decline as it clamours to protect itself from the myriad impacts of the COVID-19 and increasingly pulls out of multilateralism to focus better on the home front. The withdrawal is seen in its moves to pull out of the World Health Organization in 2020. Even prior to this, the Donald Trump administration has pulled out of the Paris Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The vacuum that will be left over when the U.S. completely withdraws from the international system as a leader, will create new challenges for an already anarchic international order. In the current COVID-19 world order, we see heightened aggression from China, including military aggression as seen as its borders with India. A few other examples include that of Chinese fighter planes entering Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zones (ADIZs) at least thrice this year, the most recent one being on June 16, when Taiwan's Air Force Jets chased a Chinese J-10 fighter; a Chinese Y-8 entering and being asked to leave Taiwanese airspace on June 12, Su-30 fighters from China crossing over in to Taiwan and being asked to leave on June 9, while a Vietnamese fishing boats near the Paracel Islands was sunk by China in April. (Mohan 2020) With this heightened aggression, the signal is clear: that China is ready to assume charge as the leader of the international arena.

In fact, even prior to the world order COVID-19 has ushered in, China, since Xi Jinping's assuming charge in 2012, has been sending strong signals that its time has come and it is willing to play the leadership role in international affairs. This is also seen in three more recent and interlinked events:

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- 1) In his speech at the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping stated that by 2020 China would emerge as a modern and prosperous nation, and he went on to suggest that other developing countries could adopt the same growth model to transform the lives of their people. At the 19th Party Congress, xi also unveiled his two-stage plan to make China a great modern socialist country and said that the world's second largest economy had entered a "new era" where it should "take centre stage in the world". This was a clear departure from Deng Xiaoping's hiding one's capabilities and biding one's time. The indication in Xi's statement is clear- China is willing to assume the role of leadership. (Press Trust of India 2017) The point to note is that China was more successful in combating the global financial crisis of 2008, and as stated by

Ren Xiao, it is against this backdrop that the China Model debate has been unfolding both within China and overseas. Ren states, “The implications of the China Model for the world are that China’s success has demonstrated it is not true there is only one mode of development in the world.” This has been the thought behind Xi’s highlighting of the Chinese model as an ideal for developing countries to follow.

- 2) In 2012, Xi Jinping delivered his idea of the ‘Chinese Dream’ for the first time not as a policy pronouncement at some state or national-level political meeting, rather during his visit to the National Museum’s ‘Road to Revival’ (*fuxing zhilu* 复兴之路) exhibition on November 29, 2012. This was merely two weeks after he was elected the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The coincidence between the pronouncement at the ‘Road to Revival’ and the emphasis on ‘revival of the Chinese nation’ in the Chinese Dream are more than a coincidence. All Chinese leaders in the past, including Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, have used catchphrases or grand strategy slogans as guiding policies for the country. However, none of the guiding ideologies during their respective tenures were announced as early, as has been the case with Xi Jinping and his Chinese Dream. The indication was that Xi was willing to

take on the task of a revival of the nation from early on.

- 3) In 2019, at the BRICS Summit in Brasilia, Xi Jinping stressed on multilateralism, and indicated how China was willing to take on more responsibilities to ensure the efficacy of multilateralism. This was at a time that the U.S.-China trade war was impacting all segments of international trade, and the U.S. under President Donald Trump was even threatening to pull out of international institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Xinhua 2019)

In these three instances, China even before COVID-19 emerged officially in December 2019, was showing signs of capabilities to assume charge at the helm of international relations. The audience for these three instances were foreign as well as the domestic Chinese. In the COVID-19 world order that currently characterises international relations, what was earlier characterised as being beyond the realm of hard power- indices such as public health and economics have now become centre stage. And China, in the current international order uses an active mix of hard power as well as what has been traditionally seen as soft power to signal that its time has arrived. It does so through the mix of military, civilian and diplomatic tools. Newer forms of military aggression as well as diplomacy in the form of facemask diplomacy, medical diplomacy as well as wolf warrior diplomacy are all being utilised by China. In

terms of military aggression seen in its escalated standoffs with Vietnam and Malaysia in the South China Sea, night time drills in the Taiwan Straits as well as the killing of 20 Indian soldiers at the border, there is a much more heightened hostility which has hitherto not been witnessed. But before analysing the military aggression with India in 2020, it becomes pertinent to understand the impact of the COVID-19 on Chinese public health system as well as on its economy, which in turn explain China's heightened aggression outside its domestic borders.

COVID-19 in China and Increasing Public Ire

On November 17, 2019 Dr. Li Wenliang- an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, had warned about the possible outbreak of an illness that resembled the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which is now known as COVID-19. (Press Trust of India 2020) After he shared his warnings publicly, the Wuhan police summoned him and rebuked him for spreading falsehood on the internet. The Chinese government instead of promptly informing the WHO and the rest of the world about the onset of the deadly coronavirus, for reasons best known to it, kept the matter under wraps and placed it in the public domain only on 31 December 2019, that is after a delay of six weeks of occurrence.

Li eventually got infected with the coronavirus and died of it. However, even before his death

he had turned into a hero for many Chinese people. (Sina Finance 2020) The suppression of Li's warnings has not been the only instance of China's suppression of information on the outbreak of the COVID 19 epidemic. In an interview with the Chinese magazine *Renwu*, which is being rapidly censored and reposted on the Chinese web, Ai Fen, director of emergency at Wuhan Central Hospital, said that superiors had reprimanded her for reporting a SARS-like virus. (BMJ 2020) Ai said authorities told hospital staff not to wear protective gear so as not to cause panic and reprimanded her for "harming stability" when she tried to warn others of the virus (Kuo 2020).

In June this year, Hu Weifeng, who was a urologist at the Wuhan Central hospital, the same hospital where Li Wenliang worked, died of the virus after a four-month battle. Hu was the sixth doctor from the hospital killed by the virus (Kuo 2020).

Li Wenliang's death in February caused furore among the Chinese public, and only in response to it, the central government dispatched investigators to investigate the circumstances surrounding his reprimand and death. Beijing's investigators concluded that Wuhan authorities acted "inadequately" when they reprimanded the late doctor and failed to follow "proper law enforcement procedure" (Xinhua 2020). The point to note is that the investigators did not mention what the response to Li's warnings should have been.

In June, after Hu's death, there was a hashtag on his death on Chinese social media with more than 400 million views and more than 46,000 comments. Questions have been raised as to why the heads of the hospital have not been punished- including Cai Li, the head of the Communist Party at the hospital. (Allen 2020) Despite internet surveillance and censorship in China, there has been a flood of photos, videos and witness accounts from hospitals in Wuhan, which are undermining the state's narrative of having the situation under control.

In addition to social media criticisms and witness accounts, the second round of the COVID-19 in Beijing, which emerged in June this year, has dealt the state narrative of controlling the COVID-19, a severe blow. Xi Jinping might have removed the term limits for top posts including his own, but many senior Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres, officials, academics, students, intellectuals and others have gone to the extent of risking punishment to criticise Xi Jinping on social media. Intellectuals and Professors such as Xu Zhongrun, Xu Zhiyong, Zhang Xuezhong and Yu Linqi have demanded on WeChat that Xi Jinping step down. (Ranade 2020) On March 22, on Weibo, "princelings" or the children of high-level veteran CCP cadres called for an "emergency enlarged meeting of the CCP'S Politburo to discuss Xi Jinping's replacement. (*Ibid.*) On March 23, Ren Zhiqiang, a Chinese realty tycoon wrote an opinion piece, in which he called Xi a "clown" who insisted on

wearing the Emperor's new clothes (Chen 2020). Ren, a former chief of Beijing Huayuan Group, a state-owned developer is known to be an outspoken maverick. Clearly, not all is well for Xi.

COVID 19: Whither Chinese Economy?

China's economic growth model is an export reliant one, capitalising on its status as the manufacturing platform of the world. However, as stated by the World Bank, the global economy is currently in the deepest global recession in decades, despite all extraordinary efforts of governments across the globe to counter the downturn, using fiscal and monetary policy support. A 5.2 global contraction in gross domestic product (GDP) is expected, and even in the future scars of the pandemic will be visible in the forms of lower investment, an erosion of human capital, lost schooling and work, fragmentation of global trade and supply linkages (World Bank 2020). While China might have started attempting to return to normal much before other countries of the globe did, as it ordered reopening of factories and schools, fact remains that China relies on exports of its goods. If the world does not recover, it will simply not be able to absorb Chinese exports. In August last year, amidst the U.S.-China trade spat, the State Council, in an official policy document listed 20 measures to help improve domestic consumption, ranging from improving pedestrian streets to encouraging night markets. (Leng 2019) Nevertheless, the fact that the State Council had to come up with such a policy is indicative

of the fact as to how domestic consumption is not a match for exports.

Speaking at a webinar organised by the Institute of Chinese Studies on June 17, Prof. Yao Yang stated that the Chinese economic growth rate dropped by 6.8 per cent year on year in the first quarter of 2020, the growth rate is at a negative of -3 per cent; investment shows a -10 per cent growth year on year, and 600 million Chinese people are not “well off”. He added that urban unemployment was at 6 per cent in April this year. (Yao 2020) Industrial production declined by 8.4 per cent year-on-year in the first quarter. Services was also deeply impacted. (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020) As per CNN’s estimates, 80 million Chinese are already be out of work, and 9 million more will soon be competing for jobs. (He and Gan, 2020) A big indication of everything not being well in China was the postponement of the National Congress. There have been increasing questions and pressures on Xi Jinping even in this backdrop. What becomes pertinent to point out is that the conditions currently prevailing are in complete juxtaposition to what had been envisaged by Xi Jinping in his Chinese Dream in 2012. According to Xi Jinping, the Chinese Dream consists of the following components (Koptseva, 2016):

(1) A powerful and rich state (*guojia fuqiang* 国家富强)

(2) Renewal of the nation (*minzu fuxing* 民族复兴)

(3) Happiness of the people (*renmin xingfu* 人民幸福)

None of these three components is quantifiable, and more than anything else, they create an emotional appeal and the perception that the leadership is attempting to regain the Middle Kingdom’s lost glory- by empowering its citizens, by giving them a decent living standard and by creating a powerful country. But in the current COVID-19 world order how does China arrive at any of these three tenets- a powerful and rich state, a renewal of the nation and the happiness of the people?

The currently prevailing situation is like the one faced by Mao Zedong in 1961.

Gap Between Visions and Realities: Similarities Between Xi’s and Mao’s China

A year before the second five-year plan ended in 1962, it was clear to Mao Zedong that his policies of the Great Leap Forward were a catastrophic failure. Between 35-45 million Chinese people had died because of the Great Leap Forward, which caused a famine instead of the imagined rapid industrialisation. The expectation was a great leap in agricultural productivity from collectivization, as the Chinese government accelerated its aggressive industrialisation timetable. According to Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, the sharp decline in grain output and widespread famine is found attributable to a systemic failure in central

planning. (Wei and Yang). In the current time period as well, While Xi Jinping, as envisaged in the China Dream or in his speech at the 19th Party Congress had imagined a much more powerful state with strong indices of domestic consumption, now finds himself in a situation wherein his and the Party's credibility has suffered a severe setback, and confidence in the ability of the Party to steer China away from international political turmoil as well as domestic crises is low. In this context it becomes pertinent to analyse some of the steps undertaken by Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping to unite the country again under the command of a formidable leadership.

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The Creation of an External Foe in India

The Lushan conference of 1959 remains an important juncture in China's political history. A meeting of the top leaders of the CCP, the Lushan Conference was held between July and August 1959, and it was followed by the 8th Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee of the CCP. The major topic of discussion was the Great Leap Forward. On July 14, Peng Dehuai, the then Defence Minister wrote a private letter to Mao, criticising certain aspects of the Great Leap. Peng had worded his letter cautiously and wrote of the great achievements of Mao,

while showing his disapproval for aspects like over-reporting of grain production, commune dining and the establishment of the commune militia, which according to him would undermine the strength of the People's Liberation Army. (Pantsov and Levine, 2012) Peng also criticised Mao's 'politics in command', substituting economic principles for political objectives. Mao, in response, decided to have Peng's letter widely circulated.

Mao saw the letter as a personal attack and started defending himself on July 23, and he also attacked Peng and all those who disagreed with his policies. On August 16, the Lushan Conference passed a resolution that condemned Peng as the leader of an "anti-Party clique" and called for Peng's removal from the positions of Defense Minister and Vice Chairman of the Military Commission. As stated by the reason as to why Mao felt assaulted by Peng Dehuai famous "Letter of opinion" was that there were many top-level officials and others in the CCP and society at large who agreed with much of Peng's critique. (Bernstein, 2006)

For Mao at that time, the best way to regain power and legitimacy was by unifying the nation especially the armed forces against an outside enemy. That outside enemy was found in India, which was accused of a forward movement at the border. This would also serve the purpose well of deflecting the attention of the citizens from pressing issues of food, shelter and livelihood.

In 2020, as stated in the preceding sections, Xi Jinping is under increasing strain as the public perception of the way the COVID-19 was handled by the leadership is negative at best. Additionally, a negative growth rate, joblessness, declining investment, Hong Kong protests have all caused questions to emerge about Xi's leadership. Like the conditions leading up to the border skirmish with India in 1962, an external enemy was found yet again in India in 2020.

China accused India of building roads beyond its own borders, whereas fact remains that the Galwan area, was traditionally a part of the Kashmir princely state and at no point in history has China had control over it. (Kondapalli, 2020) In fact there is no Chinese name for Galwan! The Chinese characters for Galwan are 加勒万 or *Jia le wan*- a direct translation of the Indian name for the region! After laying down extensive infrastructure in the form of roads, railways and fibre networks, in addition to deploying military forces, China now has an issue with India doing the same on the Indian side. To assuage domestic anger, India has time and again been used as an outward enemy, as it is seen as weaker by the CCP. India served the purpose in 1962, and as per the Chinese leadership's expectations, it will serve the purpose in 2020 as well. In addition to this, India fits the bill for China to display to the world its angst against increasing criticisms of China. China will refrain from unleashing a military attack of a similar kind on the U.S. or Australia or Japan. But given the

fact that India is seen as a weaker foe, India becomes the perfect candidate for China to display its disgruntlement over the hardened stance against China in the current COVID-19 world order.

How Long is Chinese Aggression Against India Going to Last?

China's economic woes are far from over. As far as closing the gap between realities and perceived goals of the Chinese Dream are concerned, a quick look at three indices which can affect people's happiness- the third tenet of Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream, reveals that the breach is huge. In terms of poverty, statistics from the office of Liu Yongfu, director of State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation, some 684,000 people fell back into poverty in 2016; 208,000 in 2017; and 58,000 in 2018. (Zhang 2019) The goal of poverty elimination is thus far away from realisation. Inequality remains chronic in China. The legitimacy of the CCP was established years ago as it successfully led the uprising of rural peasants and factory workers against imperial forces to lay the foundations of an independent China.

The very base of the CCP comprised peasants and workers who were promised a better life but got left behind as the country made economic strides post reforms and opening up in 1978. However, despite the growing wealth of China's major cities such as Shanghai or Beijing, parts of rural China live without electricity, fresh water and adequate clothing

and food. Inequality in China is interregional as well as intra-regional. In the COVID-19 world order, income inequality is set to expand in 2020 as the pandemic renders millions jobless and creates ripples throughout the Chinese economy. Poor Chinese are likely to be disproportionately hit- both in terms of lost earnings as well as in terms of their earnings to withstand public health risks. Unemployment, as stated previously, is a ticking bomb.

Therefore, the legitimacy of the CCP as being a pro-people Party is under a dark cloud. The best way to display how effective the Party is in dealing with crises, remains when it creates the crisis; emerges as the unifier of the nation and not creates a nationalist fervour in China, along with deflecting the citizens' attention from the pressing issues of livelihood, shelter and equality. China's woes are far from over, and the creation of the external enemy in India is likely to continue for a considerable time in the near future.

Conclusion: What Can India Do?

While the CCP might want to display India as an aggressive irritant, which can be dealt with easily when it attacks China's sovereignty, Indian forces have withheld ground this time, as they did in the recent past in 2017 during the Doklam crisis. In addition to military rebuttal, India also needs to explore economic and diplomatic actions ranging from cutting the umbilical cord with Chinese products in the most important segments such as active

pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs). India depends on China for about 70 per cent of the APIs that it uses in pharmaceutical manufacturing. Over a quarter of these come from factories in Hubei and Shandong provinces. (The Pharma Letter 2020)

A complete ban of Chinese products is simply illogical and not possible given the simple fact that consumers will always like to have the consumer surplus that emerges in buying cheaply manufactured goods. No amount of nationalism can be useful in banning Chinese products in totality. Chinese companies on online portals such as Amazon and Flipkart use deceptive names, which resemble Western companies or Indian companies. However, with research on the companies' names on these portals, it is found that companies are either bankrupt companies or are not listed in the countries they claim to be. These are Chinese companies operating under fake names. Given the benefits online shopping has bought to consumers in India, it is impossible to crack down on every such company operating online. What could be done, however, is looking at crucial sectors like the health sector, reducing reliance on APIs for example and building one's own manufacturing prowess in these arenas. Also, award of government contracts to Chinese producers could be avoided.

India also needs to strengthen the Quad, further its economic and diplomatic ties with Taiwan, voice greater support for Hong Kong, greater support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, as well as strengthening the Indian

narrative about Chinese transgressions at the international level. At the very least, India must be prepared for a long haul, and for being portrayed as the external irritant by the CCP, for the simple reason that attention deflection of the domestic Chinese public at this juncture is crucial for the Party.

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