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India will have to recalibrate its positioning depending upon how America-China relations oscillate between rivalry and rapprochement. China's age-old policy of 'pitching one barbarian against the other' to create a wedge amongst its adversaries is bound to exploit differences between Quad members and trans-Atlantic partners



Political thaw in the bilateral relations while maintaining status quo on the border conundrum only vindicates Dragon's age-old strategy of 'walking on two legs'. Image: REUTERS

Consequent to the signing of a key agreement to resolve the standoff in the Depsang-Demchok areas in Ladakh on October 21, 2024, endorsed two days later by Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping during their meeting at Kazan-Russia on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit, there has been a flurry of meetings between the two countries at various levels to normalise relations, including resolution of the border dispute.

In less than two months from inking the above agreement, India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on December 18 in Beijing for the 23rd Special Representatives (SRs) meeting, the first since Chinese military incursions in 2020. The Chinese side made it a point to reiterate their earlier stance to separate the border issue from the overall relationship. A month before the NSA's meeting, in November, External Affairs Minister S

Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh met with their Chinese counterparts Wang Yi and Dong Jun, respectively, on the sidelines of international events.

The recent visit of Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to Beijing on January 26-27 marked another step forward. It saw progress on a couple of people-centric issues, including the resumption of direct flights, the restart of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, and an agreement to hold an expert-level meeting on transboundary rivers, besides the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of bilateral ties this year. How the two sides viewed the outcome of the talks differently was evident from the respective readouts. While the Chinese stressed the commitment by the Indian side to support China's work as the rotating chair of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and 'actively participate' in events that it hosts, the Indian readout made no reference to it.

With regards to the border issue, apparently there are no indications of any tangible progress. Whereas China advocates a long-term strategic approach, India, on the other hand, favours step-by-step progress. Last month, the Chief of Army Staff, General Dwivedi, gave a pragmatic assessment of the ground situation during the press conference on the eve of the Army Day, wherein he stated, "The situation on the LAC remains 'stable but sensitive'... while the degree of standoff remains along the LAC in the sensitive Ladakh sector following the developments that took place after the border row erupted in April 2020". He ruled out any plans to cut troop levels along the disputed location during the current winter. The Chief also clarified that earlier disengagement from Galwan Valley, Pangong Tso, Gogra (PP-17A), and Hot Spring (PP-15) areas, so-called buffer zones, was created temporarily to restrict the patrolling by the two sides, where the chances of violence appeared high.

Incidentally, over the last five years, China has taken a number of actions to change the status quo on the border. The LAC has been fortified right from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh, alongside an extensive buildup of military infrastructure in the hinterland. Tibet has been converted into a defensive shield as per the directions of Chairman Xi. Over 720 model border villages (Xiaokangs) have been constructed, around a third in the proximity of LAC to act as border outposts. The Border Defence Law was enacted in 2022 to legitimise control over the occupied areas.

Renaming of locations, showing two counties in Aksai Chin as part of China, and referring to Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet (Zangnan) is part of China's 'three warfare' strategy. China has been engaged in building a series of dams over the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) for the past

decade. It recently announced a plan to construct a mega dam in the proximity of the Bend area, where the Brahmaputra enters India. Intriguingly, India's reactions have been rather muted, despite serious strategic ramifications.

Further, China has made deep inroads into India's neighbourhood. The Beijing-Islamabad-Dhaka-Ankara emerging quad is a cause of serious concern for Delhi. Nepal under Prime Minister Oli is back in the Chinese basket. Bhutan faces constant pressure to yield territory. Sinicisation of Myanmar remains a work in progress. These developments have further compounded India's security challenges, particularly in the north-east region. India has taken certain steps in pursuance of its 'Act East Policy' by consolidating strategic partnerships with the ASEAN nations.

Despite the border tension, bilateral trade has continued to grow due to India's heavy reliance on Chinese imports. In 2024, the turnover was \$118.4 billion, with China enjoying a favourable balance of around \$85 billion. This is one of the reasons why Beijing is keen to mend fences with Delhi, especially when its economy is slowing down. China is known to exploit asymmetric interdependence, substantiated by recent reports about Taiwanese firm Foxconn being prevented from investing in semiconductors in India, including the transfer of technicians and specialised machinery.

India-China relations are influenced by global geopolitics, especially the interplay of India-US ties, the China-Russia partnership, and US-China rivalry. The ongoing trade war with America is another reason for the Communist leadership to reset ties with India. In case Trump chooses reconciliation between Washington and Beijing, it will certainly curtail Delhi's strategic options and also undermine its geopolitical leverage. India will have to recalibrate its positioning depending upon how America-China relations oscillate between rivalry and rapprochement. China's age-old policy of 'pitching one barbarian against the other' to create a wedge amongst its adversaries is bound to exploit differences between Quad members and trans-Atlantic partners.

The Communist leadership does make tactical concessions to achieve strategic objectives. Political thaw in the bilateral relations while maintaining status quo on the border conundrum only vindicates Dragon's age-old strategy of 'walking on two legs'. India, therefore needs to adopt a 'whole of nation' approach, encompassing astute diplomacy and maintenance of robust posture on the LAC through effective border management to obviate any further loss of territory. More importantly, buildup of our national capacity and military capabilities needs to be accorded highest

priority to narrow down the current state of asymmetry vis-à-vis China, which ironically is only widening with time.

The writer is a Bangladesh war veteran, currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.