

'One India' for 'One China': Delhi needs sound strategy to contend with Dragon's design

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi • November 8, 2024, 18:56:03 IST



Due to the vast differential in the comprehensive national power, China does not consider India an equal



Indian Army soldiers stand on a snow-covered road, bordering China. File image/AFP

The landmark agreement to resolve the military standoff in Ladakh got the seal of approval when Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping endorsed it during their bilateral meeting in Kazan on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit in Russia on October 23, 2024. The new pact set into motion the process of disengagement at Depsang and Demchok, ending the prolonged

crisis. It is expected to pave the way for the resumption of the politico-diplomatic process between the two neighbours.

The Communist leadership is known to make concessions in the wake of major political events. The Depsang face-off in March-April 2013 was resolved days before Chinese PM Li Keqiang's visit to India. The Doklam imbroglio in 2017 was sorted out just before the 9th BRICS Summit, held in China. Likewise, a recent border pact was inked on the eve of the Modi-Xi bilateral meeting, coming after a gap of almost five years.

While the current agreement is confined to Depsang and Demchok areas, Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi, while speaking on the sidelines at an event, explained that 'normal management' of the LAC would be achieved in a phased manner, including restoring the April 2020 status quo, de-scalation, and restarting patrolling. Foreign Minister S Jaishankar also clarified that it does not mean issues between the two countries have been resolved with the recent pact. Given China's opaque system, unpredictable actions, and poor track record of walking the talk, engaging with Communist leadership is known to be an exasperating exercise.

Building trust is a foremost challenge, as the Chinese have repeatedly belied it. Even in May 2020, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) blatantly violated key agreements on maintaining peace and tranquillity on the borders and disregarded even the strategic guidance mechanism evolved during 'Modi-Xi' earlier meetings. Further, Chinese are known for misinterpretations and selective approaches in honouring agreements. With regard to the current pact too, there was no joint statement, and Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Li Jian referred to it as 'important progress' that has been reached on issues concerning the border area. With previous five key agreements on border management in a state of limbo, the recent agreement could well be *fait accompli*.

In China, defence diplomacy is driven by the military, known to be hard negotiators. Post-Doklam pullback, the PLA doubled down on creating military infrastructure in the area. Disengagement in the north and south banks of Pangong Tso, Gogra-Hot Spring, and Galwan Valley came about with new protocols by way of buffer zones. It resulted in the disruption of patrolling activity, wherein of the 65 patrolling points (PPs), 26 were rendered inaccessible. In the Depsang plains, the Chinese troops blocked access to PPs 10 to 13, including Y Junction, and in Demchok, they had positioned themselves on the Charding Nullah. PLA even refused to discuss these two locations, asserting the issues to be dated, pre-2020.

Going by the official reports, as a sequel to the new agreement, the disengagement process in Depsang and Demchok has been completed, and joint patrolling has commenced. The next step of de-escalation is expected to be complex and arduous due to the terrain configuration, which favours the Chinese. Additionally, de-escalation involves the air forces as well, wherein both sides have located the fighter jets and other assets in the forward bases. Suffice to say, restoring peace and stability along the LAC is a politico-military process. We need to move with caution and strictly adhere to the Chinese dictum of 'seeing is believing' (*Yan Jian Wei Shi*).

During his visit to Lhasa in July 2021, Xi Jinping directed that Tibet be turned into a formidable shield. The manner in which PLA has gone about building military infrastructure across the entire length of the Line of Actual Control, including roads, tunnels, airfields, heliports, and logistics installations, particularly opposite Arunachal Pradesh, indicates China's aggressive posture. 'Border Defence Law' passed in 2022 entails marking the border with a view to consolidate control over the occupied areas. Alongside, as part of the model villages (*Xiaokang*) project, over 720 clusters have been constructed, around a third in the close proximity of the LAC to act as the first line of defence.

Regaining claimed lands is central to China's sovereignty. Chinese maps routinely depict Aksai Chin and Arunachal (*Zangnan*) as its territories. Giving Mandarin names to places in these areas is part of China's 'Three Warfare Strategy' to legitimise its assertion. Keeping the border disputes unresolved enables China to keep India under pressure. It also serves the Communist leadership well to garner support at home as well as draw the attention of the international community. The border talks steered by Special Representatives have made no progress over the last decade.

Xi's 'China Dream' is largely dependent on the state of the nation's economy, which is definitely showing signs of slowing down. India is an important market for China, with current bilateral trade amounting to \$ 115 billion, a surplus of \$83 billion in Chinese favour. Additionally, in China's quest to emerge as a global power, a hostile India could impede the process. Hence, by making tactical concessions coupled with carrot and stick policy, Xi hopes to restrain Delhi from joining hands with anti-China Western alliances and draw it into the fold of Beijing-led groups like BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Due to the vast differential in the comprehensive national power, China does not consider India an equal.

Given the divergent national interests and overlapping strategic objectives, rivalry between India and China is inherent. Currently, ensuring territorial integrity through effective border management ought to be accorded highest priority. The thaw in Ladakh signals signs of

rapprochement, will facilitate easing of tension and provide the Indian Army an opportunity to build military infrastructure to offset Chinese advantage. Capacity building is an imperative to correct the prevailing state of asymmetry vis-à-vis China. 'One China' policy ought to be linked with 'One India' policy. Above all, India needs a sound strategy to contend with Dragon's design.

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.