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Article

Perilous Deterrent: Pandemic and the Consequent Re-evaluation of India's National Security

Souradeep Sen

Abstract

For the last century or so, the world has not seen a pandemic as lethal as the one which presently has it in its throes. It has been argued that the Covid-19 pandemic may seem to serve as a prelude to war, especially in the aftermath of the recent border skirmish between India and China. The present paper attempts to negate this argument, delineating instead a strategy by which the pandemic and its massively devastating after-effects would act as a new form of deterrence between the two Asian states—a 'perilous deterrent', but a deterrent nonetheless. The pandemic will arguably impel both nations to embark upon an urgent re-evaluation of their respective security policies. The hypothesis of this paper is verified by invoking the contingent realist theory of International Relations. India also needs to develop a more robust nuclear security protocol which would effectively deter further aggression from China and Pakistan. As a contingent realist strategy, 'perilous deterrent' would proffer conditional strategic choices based upon security-seeking and revisionist motives of states locked in a conflictual dyadic relationship.

It is difficult to comment upon an event of great contemporary interest, especially when it has not ceased to be a part of lived experience and has not yet receded into the annals of contemporary history. Any estimation of or commentary upon the Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) health crisis by contemporary analysts would naturally be value-laden and polemical, unaided by the distance and objectivity such events gain with the passage of time.ⁱ It is indeed premature to deliver any sound proclamation and/or prognosis

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upon the implications of the pandemic in the long haul.ⁱⁱ But, it can be argued—by the observation of human and state behaviour during the early months of the pandemic—that in the foreseeable future, certain aspects of human life and global politics would hardly be dislodged from their preeminent positions even by the massive loss of human lives and the worldwide unravelling of political systems as the twin bequest of the pandemic.

Since the World Health Organization's announcement of Covid-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020, there has been little analysis in academic and other circles that have not included in some form or the other, its purported long-term implications upon the world economy, national healthcare facilities and policies, education and research, disability and demographics—to name a few. The present year has already encountered some serious threats within its first six months. Although there has been a paucity of literature on the pandemic's impact upon national security—as this time pestilence has not followed war unlike in 1918-19—no serious expert of security studies can discount the imperative of innovating novel paradigms to deal with security threats occurring even amidst a raging global health crisis.

The present author undertakes a similar endeavour in this article, assuming that national security is one such aspect of global politics which would remain unchanged, notwithstanding the changed circumstances fostered by Covid-19. As long as the age-old state system remains unaffected, national security is perhaps the only enterprise which would not have to suit itself to the 'new normal' engendered by the pandemic. And it is perhaps not an exaggeration to assume instead, that the 'new normal' would have to suit itself to a state's security needs as and when the latter's survival is at stake. For now, one cannot predict the actual course of this dialectic. And can only strategize realistically about how—in the short run—the fallouts of the pandemic could be utilized to bolster the security of a particular nation. Herein, the role of innovation in strategic studies becomes a plinth upon which the edifice of a new strategy can be created. This strategy, albeit one which would be outdated once the lasting effects of the pandemic wear off, would be christened 'perilous deterrent' in the present article.

For the last century or so, the world has not seen a pandemic as lethal as the one which presently has it in its throes. Although the Covid-19 pandemic is being compared with its predecessor—the Spanish Flu pandemic (1918-1919)—in scope and lethality, there are vast differences between the two which this article would articulate to underscore the

ii This article was written during the early days of August, 2020. The present author would state facts and infer from facts within the scope of realist ontology (objectivity) and realist epistemology (subjectivity) which would help him navigate through the plethora of facts and lived experiences of the pandemic, and its attendant security risks without getting lost in the quagmire of hyper-factualism.

novelty of the present outbreak. The article rests its arguments in favour of dissimilarities between the two outbreaks with the most convincing point of departure: that the Spanish Flu became a pandemic because of the First World War, whereas the coronavirus pandemic has spread by the global movement of peoples during peacetime. Furthermore, it has been claimed—especially by those hit hard by the pandemic—that Covid-19 is ostensibly serving as a prelude to crisis: if not a world crisis then as a catalyst for a limited war between India and China.¹

Although the latter's perpetually irredentist stance vis-à-vis Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh has recently led to a fresh crisis with India, the present article attempts to challenge this casual causation of events.² It argues instead that the pandemic and its massively devastating after-effects would act as a new form of deterrence between the two Asian states—a 'perilous deterrent', but a deterrent nonetheless. The article assumes a two-pronged argument to establish the strategy and its importance: first, that in the wake of the devastation wreaked by the pandemic, India and China may embark upon an urgent re-evaluation of their respective security policies, which would—despite brinkmanship and rhetorical escalation—emphasize more upon cooperation and effective signalling during escalatory crises; and second, that India being among the worst hit by the pandemic, would need more time for reconstruction and resuscitation and is expected to favour a cooperative security approach towards a powerful adversary. An approach which would effectively de-escalate conflicts with China but at once not impede upon its show of strength through leadership, starker foreign policy choices and more stringent border security protocols. The conundrum for India is to balance cooperation and competition vis-à-vis China.

...the costs of conflict far outweigh its benefits even for an increasingly aggressive China...

But, the costs of conflict far outweigh its benefits even for an increasingly aggressive China, especially in the light of its recent unpopularity in the comity of nations. The author analyses these aspects with an eye towards the development of the strategy of 'perilous deterrent', by operating within the aegis of the realist theory of International Relations. More specifically, the author endeavours to establish the hypothesis by invoking Charles Glaser's 'contingent realist' theory of International Relations. Contingent realism highlights cooperation as self-help—even at the time of impending and outstanding conflicts—to be a proven way of preserving national interest. As a contingent realist narrative, the currency would be on cooperation and effective signalling during crises. India's ongoing diplomatic-strategic tussles with China is analysed, with an eye towards the possibility of developing a more robust nuclear security protocol: as the only stable basis for any conventional security

protocol to function effectively when the belligerents are nuclear armed nations. Finally, it proffers some strategic choices to strengthen the diplomatic groundwork of nuclear deterrence for providing greater security in the inexorable period of economic and human resource reconstruction following the recession of the pandemic.

The Covid-19 Pandemic: China *contra* Rest of the World?

It is now common knowledge that the Covid-19 first appeared in the resort town of Wuhan, China, and is believed to be hosted by bats—also identified as sources of at least two previous coronavirus outbreaks—which are sold for their flesh in wet markets around China. However, there are several theories regarding how it accomplished the inter-species jump required to infect humans on a large scale. Bats and other animals have long served as culinary choices for not only communities within China, but others as well: including some tribal communities in India's northeast. The question regarding how suddenly bats, as the repository of the novel coronavirus, successfully transmitted the same onto humans in the closing months of 2019, thereby transforming it into a zoonotic disease, is one which has led to some informed research and a few conspiracy theories. It would be chronologically sound to first discuss the origins of the disease and only then focus upon its global spread and implications. And finally, to analyse the extent of any informed parallels existing between the coronavirus outbreak and the Spanish Flu pandemic.

A study published in October 2019 gained wide publicity at the outbreak of the pandemic. It soon became a matter of great uproar in the international arena for its list of participants. The study, entitled "Filovirus-reactive antibodies in humans and bats in Northeast India implying zoonotic spill-over,"³ appeared in the *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases*, a highly regarded peer reviewed open-access journal. It was a result of a collaborative study conducted in Nagaland during 2017 by India's Bengaluru based National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) and the Duke-National University of Singapore Medical School (Duke-NUS). The former has been involved in the study of bat antibodies in Nagaland since 2012, while the latter has been studying bat populations across Southeast Asia. The interests of various international parties involved in this study have raised eyebrows: the *PLoS* journal being a direct beneficiary of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the involvement—apart from Indian and Southeast Asian experts—of American and Chinese scientists in the project representing the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, US, and the Wuhan Institute of Virology, respectively, and the funding obtained by Duke-NUS from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) which deals in countering weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).⁴ So much was the heat generated by the publicity of this research—after a leading Indian newspaper printed a news item on it—

that the Indian Ministry of Health challenged the study on technical grounds, officials in China and the US refused to comment upon their respective involvements, and the NCBS had to clarify that the research was in no way related to the coronavirus outbreak.⁵

The point, however, was almost obtrusive. And the publicity surrounding the funds proffered by no less than the DTRA and Biological Research Directorate of the Naval Medical Research Center (US) could successfully obfuscate the boundaries between the study's factual findings and its attendant conspiracies. But, independent reviewers have upheld the sanctity of its findings⁶—that bats are major reservoirs of novel zoonotic diseases which can jump from animals to humans and preparedness to combat the rapid spread of such viral diseases would require tapping into the natural types of immune-system antibodies that are prevalent in wild bats, which were tested with their kidney, lung and spleen samples, and humans coming in close contact with bats, such as the members of the Bomrr clan in India's Nagaland, whose blood samples were also tested in the study— which suggests that the research is authentic and the interests of the parties involved are being deliberately concealed by discrediting its findings on technical grounds.⁷

If developments within China during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus are collated with the politics encapsulating the NCBS-Duke-NUS study, a clearer picture of China's onus in the present outbreak can be ascertained. According to a paper published in *The Lancet* medical journal, Wuhan had its first known patient of Covid-19 on December 1, 2019.⁸ By the end of December, China's tightly controlled state media reports nothing more than a dozen cases of a 'mysterious pneumonia' in Wuhan. Whilst by January 3, 2020, the virus had spread well beyond Wuhan to Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In ten days, Shanghai identified the Wuhan virus, which by then had spread to Thailand and Japan. By the end of the month, Wuhan, along with the whole of Hubei province was under strict lockdown and more cases appeared in the Philippines and South Korea. It was evident that a wave of infection had started to sweep Asia, sparing not even cruise ships and other naval vessels operating from the US to Australia by the beginning of February 2020. Li Wenliang, a young doctor who was one of the first whistle-blowers at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, subsequently contracted the infection and died. The Chinese government's obfuscation over his death triggered a massive online outrage.

The buck did not stop with China's gross negligence regarding one of its own health experts.⁹ Fresh information emerged by June 2020 about Beijing's complicity in the crisis, which also roped in the World Health Organization (WHO). An *Associated Press* (AP) report revealed that China caused 'significant delay' in releasing information about the outbreak to the WHO, which, far from condemning the country, praised China for its timely and

transparent response against Covid-19. Also, ironically thanking the Chinese government for 'immediately' sharing the genetic map of the virus.¹⁰ When the US put pressure on the WHO, announcing termination of its funding, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared US\$ 2 billion as largesse to the agency. In what the media immediately dubbed as a move which at once outfoxed the US and the rest of China's antagonists—since a stigmatization was already afoot with President Trump's ill-fated comment on the new 'Chinese virus'—it can be inferred as nothing more than an obtrusive display of munificence to mask China's moral depravity. The AP report claimed that China had pieced together the genome of coronavirus, which was found to have striking similarities to SARS, by December 27, 2019 and still did not share any significant data with the multilateral organization even as late as January 22, 2020. This speaks volumes on two significant aspects: first, that the WHO was equally lax in its initial management of the disease, despite its chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus making an extraordinary trip to Beijing to 'request' data on the virus as late as January 28; and second, even if speculations of the virus being unleashed by China as an agent of mass destruction seem farfetched, bordering upon stigmatization—despite the unusual interests of Chinese and US agencies involved in the NCBS study, also regardless of the accusations made from respectable quarters¹¹—there is no denying the fact that China is culpable of remaining silent about an impending global health disaster. In the process, it is guilty of relinquishing all responsibility towards its own people, let alone the international community.

The 1918 H1N1 influenza pandemic—'Spanish Flu' was the nomenclature wrongfully attached to it as only the Spanish press covered the contagion where wartime censorship prevented the other countries from reporting on it—infected more than half the world's population and led to an estimated 50 to 100 million deaths. Stigmatization and wartime propaganda appended a myriad of epithets to it: the 'German Plague', 'Black Man's Disease', 'Hun Flu', and so on. There were rumours that the German pharmaceutical company Bayer had deliberately introduced the pathogen into aspirin tablets; or that the Germans carried flasks of pathogens in submarines and dumped them into water bodies, milk and at mass gatherings; and some even claimed that the disease was spread in the air like chemical weapons.¹² The stigmatization and suspicion of the 'other' by a combination of wartime propaganda, racism and the intense fear of the pandemic not only obliterated any sane research vis-à-vis the origins of the pathogen, but also affected adversely the mitigation of the pandemic. Parallels could be drawn with the contemporary experience of Covid-19, where there are scant international efforts at mitigating the pandemic—with examples of the obverse, such as President Trump's threat of retaliation if India refused to supply its stock of prophylactic medicines to the US¹³—and a stigmatization of China, where

the virus was first reported. Although stigmatization is indeed unproductive, the Wuhan laboratory has time and again come under the scanner for its alleged role in unleashing the pandemic and has been accused of destroying samples of the virus before an enquiry could commence. Furthermore, a recent report by an investigative journalist has levelled fresh allegations against the Wuhan lab for its covert collaboration with Pakistan in the study of various pathogens, especially the *Bacillus Anthracis* –or anthrax, a classified bio-warfare agent.¹⁴ Since the study is a product of a covert accord between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and Pakistan's Defense Science and Technology Organization (DESTO), it has been alleged that such research can only be twice removed from the goal of preventing and controlling emerging contagious diseases.

The presence of the devil's hand seems unmistakable and ubiquitous. Liberal scholars would clamour about the unfairness of stigmatization, despite facts pointing at a single theory. But, since facts are as subjective as the sources which engender them, nothing more conclusive can be said till the time another devastation of a massive scale is in the offing. Thus, in the long run, we are all indeed dead.¹⁵

There is no evidence that the First World War created the H1N1 influenza pandemic. Nor were the countries most affected by it in anyway the prime belligerents in the war. The war, however, played a crucial role in the propagation of the influenza, subsequently transforming it into a pandemic. The concentration and mixing of humans, the large and rapid circulation of troops, the mobilization and demobilization of soldiers, crowded barracks, internment camps, gatherings related to war propaganda, and factories running at full speed to cater to the war economy, all created a favourable environment for a pandemic of epic proportions. Decisions such as forgoing quarantine and travel bans for military advances, redirecting medical personnel from infected areas to warzones, and the destruction already wrecked by the war further intensified the death toll. The trajectory of contagion that the Spanish Flu followed is axiomatically dissimilar to that of Covid-19 in recent times. In the century following the Spanish Flu, there have been tremendous advancements in medical science which has helped in controlling the global death toll. Also, Covid-19 did not originate in a country at war. It did not spread around the world through the bandwagon of troops and ammunitions, but through the global movement of peoples during peacetime. And China's deliberate suppression of information from the rest of the world—with no restriction placed on its citizens to travel around the world even as late as a month after detecting the virus¹⁶—is an act which deliberately imperilled the security of other nations.

South Asia: Pandemic and other Insecurities

The South Asian region has not remained a stranger to the pandemic. Being the most populous region in the world—also one of the poorest—it has seen a steep rise in coronavirus cases and deaths since March 2020.¹⁷ India being the largest country in the region and the second most populous in the world is now globally the third most affected country, trailing only behind Brazil and the United States—at the end of July 2020—despite lockdown and quarantine measures which have seriously dented its economy. India is gradually coming to terms with the security threat posed by the coronavirus, generally, and China, specifically. The disease is not a traditional security threat requiring an equally traditional response. It is an assault on 'human security', and the Indian state can very well establish that. The world today is indeed an insecure place, replete with threats such as the protracted war in Syria, violent conflicts in the rest of the Middle East, natural disasters in Brazil and Australia, persistent poverty in Asia and Africa, and most importantly the ongoing pandemic and its serious economic ramifications. Since their overlap with the advent of Covid-19, such crises have grown exponentially, directly affecting peoples' lives, destroying entire communities, and crossing national boundaries.

The United Nations General Assembly, vide resolution 66/290 has defined human security as, "an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people."¹⁸ Such challenges require "people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people."¹⁹ The pandemic fits perfectly as an exemplification of human insecurity. India, suffering the brunt of the pandemic—which is yet to reach its zenith even after five months of the outbreak—has been paying in blood for its resultant economic slowdown. While China, with much less officially reported death toll and destruction resulting from the pandemic, is already seemingly on the road to reconstruction. One can only surmise whether to praise its level of preparedness in the face of a sudden outbreak or condemn the draconian measures undertaken by its government to slow the contagion albeit at the cost of human lives. Whatever be the case, the ascendance of China on the world stage has not been peaceful, and the security threat India faces from it—for being a strong, if late, contender for Asian supremacy—seems compounded by recent investigative reports.

The media, in recent times, has been rife with rumours of China being in cahoots with Pakistan to develop DNA research that could potentially enable a biological weapon to target, or be ineffective against, people of 'specific races'.²⁰ Belying the Biological Weapons Convention (1975) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (1997), China and Pakistan seem

to be developing a strategy based upon plausible deniability. Whereby, both countries are bestowing testing permits of potentially lethal pathogens on labs which are not equipped to handle Bio-safety Level-4 diseases. This increases the chances of accidental release and the risks of contamination.²¹ Perhaps by this machination—which would disable the international community from legitimately blaming either of them for using biological weapons against humanity—they expect to unleash the dogs of war upon their adversaries with an immaculate conscience. India's takeaway from such reports is much starker than accusations of speculative journalism can supersede. *The Klaxon* report quotes a security expert, speaking on conditions of anonymity, that,

“India and key western intelligence agencies viewed China's involvement in the project as being “driven chiefly by its agenda to engage Pakistan against India”... and to conduct potentially dangerous experiments on foreign soil, without subjecting its own land and people to risk... [as] this can draw criticism and condemnation from the international community.”²²

Since independence, India has been subject to constant insecurities from the north and the west. And in recent years this has been accentuated by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan is arguably China's closest ally, with the growing economic ties and nuclear weapons assistance programmes propping their bonhomie. The camaraderie, ironically generated by the mounting Chinese debt trap, has enabled it to appropriate Pakistan's Gwadar port without demur. Other infrastructural collaborations, under the CPEC, among perhaps more nefarious, ventures. *The Klaxon* report also mentions a proposal to test a new coronavirus vaccine, made by the Chinese state-owned company 'Sinopharm', on Pakistani citizens. If this is not a solid enough proof of the China-Pakistan axis, perhaps focus should be sharpened upon what else China has been doing to deflect attention not only from its role in the propagation of Covid-19, but also its own leadership problems and strategic failures.

China has been accused of using the pandemic to pursue its irredentist and expansionist agendas, with fresh aggressions in the Himalaya and South China Sea.²³ In recent times, there has been a steady exodus of India's closest South Asian allies to the Chinese camp. China has been playing the stick and carrot game well with the smaller South Asian countries. And these countries are plunging headlong in friendship with China, despite the knowledge of the Chinese debt trap which will certainly wrest from them a significant amount of their territories and infrastructure in the long run. On the one hand, China has deftly negotiated the political vacuum that has emerged between India and some of its neighbours at times to its own advantage by proffering various sops to these nations.

While on the other hand, slowly encroaching upon territories belonging to these countries: in Bhutan, by claiming the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary area which borders both India and China; similarly in Nepal, by constructing a road in Tibet that runs through Nepalese land and establishing border outposts in nearly 33 hectares of Nepalese territory. It is also wooing

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Bangladesh—by such moves as its recent waiving off 97% tariff on goods traded with China even as it imports little from Bangladesh²⁴—as a fresh manoeuvre to alienate India from its neighbours. To complicate matters more for India, it even openly exhorted Afghanistan and Nepal—in a four-party cooperation conference—to imitate the example of its 'iron brother' Pakistan, in their choice of a

big brother, not least, in their fight against the pandemic. As part of post-pandemic recovery and economic development, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi also said that Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal should firmly promote the joint construction of the BRI, encourage the resumption of key cooperation projects, maintain the stability of industrial and supply chains, and create new economic growth points in the digital field.²⁵ However, the most treacherous Chinese obduracy against India is arguably its recent barbarity in Ladakh.

The Compounding Chinese Security Threat: The Galwan Valley Skirmish

The magnitude of the Chinese security threat for India can be understood by delineating the key points of the recent border skirmish embroiling both countries in the month of June 2020. The threat to human security posed by the pandemic is evidently serving as the base upon which China is now planning the superstructure of its more traditional offensive against nations; most significantly against India. A retired Indian Deputy National Security Advisor (NSA), in a recent interview has adumbrated upon the reasons behind such belligerence²⁶: China, being a hegemonic power is loath to accept multipolarity in Asia, and since India maintains a degree of strategic autonomy in the region, it becomes a natural adversary to the Chinese. Also, in terms of comprehensive power, India is indeed behind China—especially if nuclear capabilities are factored in²⁷—and this gap has been increasing between the two over the years. China has circumscribed Indian ambitions at the UN, has repeatedly traduced India's domestic policies towards Kashmir—even moving against the country in the Security Council—and has literally projected solidarity towards Pakistan's proxy war on India by refusing to brand Masood Azhar a global terrorist.

The India-China boundary is usually divided into western, central, and eastern sectors. Disputes concerning shared boundaries have been endemic to their chequered relations, and have led to two wars between the states.²⁸ The region where the most recent

skirmish has taken place—the Galwan Valley, lying on Line of Actual Control (LAC) between Ladakh and Aksai Chin—shares an equally disputed background, and has been a site of conflict since 1962. The valley is located between steep mountains that buffet the Galwan River, which originates in Aksai Chin and flows east to Ladakh, where it meets the Shyok River on the Indian side of the LAC. The valley is strategically located between Ladakh in the west and Aksai China in the east, the latter currently controlled by China as part of its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. At its western end are the Shyok River and the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulet Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road, and its eastern mouth lies close to China’s vital G219 highway linking Xinjiang with Tibet.

In the wake of the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, the then Indian Foreign Secretary K.P.S. Menon noted that, “irredentism has always played a part in the policy of the Chinese Government, whether Imperial, Kuomintang or Communist.”²⁹ Now is perhaps the proper time to recall this adage. Maps have always painted a complicated picture of Sino-Indian relations: in 1959, then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai opined that the 1956 map correctly showed Galwan Valley as a part of India; whereas, in June 1960, a Chinese map claimed sovereignty over the valley; subsequently, another Chinese map from November 1962 claimed the entire valley without the western tip of the river, as part of China.³⁰ Indeed, India committed an error by agreeing to the concept of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 1993, as it has remained undefined even after twenty seven years. The lack of clear delineation, however, bestows equal space upon both India and China to alter it to their advantages. Since early May, China has been objecting to India’s road construction activities at the western end of the valley, in the area between the Galwan-Shyok confluence and the LAC. After a scuffle, both sides moved additional troops in the region. By the end of May, Indian and Chinese troops in Galwan were engaged in aggressive posturing, with President Xi racking up the military to battle preparedness—in the recently concluded NPC convention—by the grandiloquence of defending China’s sovereignty. And just when de-escalation was at sight—following the Major General-rank deliberations involving both sides—the unthinkable happened: on June 15-16, the worst violence on the India-China border since 1967 claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers and an unspecified number of Chinese soldiers.³¹

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For one expert, recent Chinese maps show most of Galwan River on China’s side of the line, but short of the confluence. This to an extent corresponds with the LAC as India sees it. And in India’s view, as China saw it, until recently. The present discrepancy, the expert opines, is that China discounts the western tip of the Galwan River as it meets

the Shyok River. Here, the last few kilometres of the Galwan River are often depicted as lying beyond China's border.³² The distinction between territorial claims and LAC claims has been obfuscated by China's assertion of the entire Galwan valley. India has accused China of unilaterally altering the LAC here, undermining the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA) and the 1996 agreement on confidence-building measures (CBMs) which forbade the use of firearms in the region. For Satish Chandra, "...the Defence Minister's statement that Indian Army commanders can use the weapon according to the situation is an indication of what is going to be India's future roadmap."³³ India has indirectly told its officers on the ground that the restraint of not using weapons has been lifted. Although India and China agreed on early and complete disengagement of troops in eastern Ladakh by the end of July—following NSA Ajit Doval's telephonic conversation with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi—it cannot be expected that the dragon will raise its head no more.³⁴

Whatever modicum of trust there was between the two countries has now been eviscerated by the barbaric attack on Indian troops in Galwan. History is a great teacher and it must be teaching Indians to be wary of a fresh Chinese offensive, perhaps this time involving its 'iron brother'. It is a fact of history that barely four months after the end of 1962 war, China signed an agreement with Pakistan, gaining control over disputed, but strategic, areas in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). It is also a contemporary fact that by the Galwan clash, China has saved Gilgit-Baltistan for itself and Pakistan. Both countries condemned India's domestic decision to promulgate the Citizenship Amendment Act, and to do away with Articles 370 and 35A of its constitution. Chinese ire was felt when India imposed restrictions on investments from that country, also when Prime Minister Modi and President Trump were publicly rejoicing in their bonhomie. The Indian Home Minister's statement in parliament in favour of reclaiming Gilgit-Baltistan—territories under Pakistani occupation, sans any constitutional declaration claiming it to be theirs—has rung alarm bells in Rawalpindi GHQ. Both China and Pakistan are fully aware that these territories are crucial not only to buy off Pakistan's rising CPEC debts, but also for securing Chinese trade routes to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Chinese brinkmanship in Galwan could have many reasons. It can be imagined as being part of a two-front war worst case scenario in which Indian defence assets would be bogged down in eastern Ladakh for a few weeks. And this would stretch them so thin that any opportunity to take Gilgit-Baltistan in the opposite direction will remain unachievable. By the same scenario, after stopping Indians from moving across the LoC, China and Pakistan would quickly change the status quo in Gilgit-Baltistan by first making it the fifth Province of Pakistan. Becoming, thus, the sovereign rulers of the territory, Pakistan would then hastily handover de-facto control of Gilgit-Baltistan to China, thereby absolving itself of the CPEC debts.³⁵

Lasting ramifications of the Galwan skirmish will be felt by both India and China, with perhaps only Pakistan gaining directly from this misdemeanour. For China, the embarrassments in Doklam and now Galwan are perhaps too much for President Xi to stomach. It must be remembered that of late, Xi has been lashing out at a number of countries to mask his insecurities surrounding the leadership struggle presently underway in China. His posturing towards South China Sea, the US, Kazakhstan, Western Europe, and China's bordering states is a gambit that Xi can ill-afford to lose. If Galwan was a success, the Chinese state media would have trumpeted it as a victory of Jinping's leadership style. But the obverse took place when Indian army's resolve in the LAC betrayed the fallibility of the 'mighty' Peoples' Liberation Army. If Xi does not correct this situation, his position in the global strong men's club would become untenable. More so, as in the aftermath of Galwan, China has been losing its credibility in Asia: the ASEAN has been resolute against China vis-à-vis South China Sea; similarly, Philippines, Bhutan and Myanmar refused to buckle under their respective security threats from Xi; Japan deployed anti-aircraft assets against China, being emboldened by India's stance in Galwan which deconstructed the Chinese army's carefully projected image of invincibility.³⁶ China is now on the defensive in the comity of nations, with its aggression and its purported use of the pandemic cover being extolled only by its all-weather allies, Pakistan and North Korea. India, on the other hand, cannot be lackadaisical in the post-Galwan scenario, and must strategize to the utmost to ward off a fresh Chinese offensive by this year's fall or thereafter. China is indeed unpredictable, but its predictability lies in the fact that it believes it can inflict on India and Prime Minister Modi—who with his recent decisions aimed at hurting the Chinese economy, has become all the more an existential threat for Xi—the kind of punishment that it had heaped upon Nehru in the 1960s. But what strategy can be sanely pursued amidst a devastating pandemic? And can the pandemic be conceived in terms contrary to what has enabled the Chinese to take its advantage with impunity? Enter 'perilous deterrent'.

A Contingent Realist Strategy

Whatever China has been pursuing under the cover of the pandemic cannot be condoned even from a realist standpoint. It is not only for the savagery of its acts, but the sheer imprudence of its timing. It could have very well projected solidarity with the rest of the world in the common fight against the pandemic, thereby increasing its stock in the international arena. It could have also kept in abeyance its natural aggression and treachery, only to be unleashed inexorably later. That would have been a realist stance. Any realist position could only expect the Chinese 'state' to characteristically lash out at its most formidable Asian adversary as a 'self-help' tactic for its own aggrandizement, if not for 'survival'.³⁷ Realism, especially its structural variant, is value-agnostic about state behaviour

in the international arena. But it is not uncritical of strategies which are doomed to failure. In the light of the growing Chinese unpopularity around the globe and the mounting Indian insecurities within South Asia, both countries would be compelled to re-evaluate their respective security policies and to strategize as per contingencies. The solution to the impending crisis in the region—following Galwan, with the pandemic surprisingly buttressing it—can be proffered from a contingent realist perspective.

Writing in 1995, Charles L. Glaser contested the theory flowing from the standardized assumptions of world politics in the works of Kenneth N. Waltz and Joseph Grieco, among others.³⁸ Structural realism, as conceived originally, is pessimistic about the prospects of international cooperation in an anarchical and self-help international system. Arguing instead that realists are not axiomatically pessimists and that self-help could generate cooperation, Glaser's 'contingent realism' is a reformulation of the structural realist narrative by reviewing its basic assumptions. It predicts that, under a wide range of conditions, seemingly adversarial states can best achieve their security goals through cooperative policies. And they can, therefore, choose cooperation based upon prevailing conditions and contingencies. Most importantly—and with great relevance for the present analysis—contingent realism removes the standardized structural-realist version's 'competition bias', thereby making conditional predictions about when states must compete, when they can cooperate and when they might form a possible community of interests by aligning themselves with other states in the pursuit of common goals. Strategy is a rational choice or a response to the vicissitudes of the international security environment. 'Deterrence' is one such national security strategy, apart from being at once a theory, a tactic, a larger defense approach, and a "critical component of security for the international system."³⁹ These undoubtedly hint at the variable nature of deterrence. Although deterrence can be defined as, "a preventive influence based upon the issuance of military threats as negative incentives to thwart prospective military attacks,"ⁱⁱⁱ it is essentially a variable—or one among the many choices available to a state for securing its interests—and will have variable importance as circumstances change. This must be the first and foremost consideration while formulating the strategy of 'perilous deterrent'.^{iv}

'Perilous deterrent', as the name suggests, is a multifaceted strategy of deterrence, premised upon the fundamental principles of contingent realism. It advocates cooperation between hostile states—in tune with their national interests—when competition is unlikely

iii This is the definition of deterrence arrived at by the present author in his doctoral dissertation. There are, undoubtedly, other equally or more convincing definitions of the same. Cf., Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

iv The word 'deterrence' can be used as a noun, verb or an adjective—deterrence and deterrent can be both noun and adjective, whereas, 'to deter' is the verb form.

to yield favourable results. Although this is the present author's original conception—by this is meant that it is yet devoid of application—the aftermath of Galwan could serve to establish its utility. In the wake of the fateful incident of June 15, 2020 India and to some extent China indicated their intent to de-escalate tensions along the LAC, through various diplomatic manoeuvres and high-level military talks, with the onus being upon quickly restoring the status quo in the region. In short, the currency was more on cooperation rather than competition, as the latter was creating a spin-off escalation dynamic between nuclear armed adversaries already encumbered with controlling the pandemic and its serious economic ramifications. If the pandemic has been an ideal cover for the Chinese to launch various offensives against unassuming countries already mired in their respective health crisis, it can also be used in the obverse to serve as the catalyst for peace. The pandemic is the 'perilous' risk a country like India must affirm and utilize to be better prepared to face conventional threats, including those increasingly posed by China. Ergo, the pandemic serves as a deterrent against conflicts having marked escalatory potentials, but only if its perils—human lives at the risk of its contagion—are extant within the milieu of nations already locked in escalating conflicts.

The question necessitating a move towards 'perilous deterrent' is whether a country can at once tackle the long-term economic setbacks engendered by the pandemic and still happen to dominate an escalation dynamic which can spin-off into a limited war under the nuclear umbrella. If the answer is resoundingly in the negative, 'perilous deterrent' may serve as a strategy among others for ushering in a modicum of incidental peace to the already overwhelmed political systems of India and China. And since in the case of a

If the pandemic has been an ideal cover for the Chinese to launch various offensives against unassuming countries...

nuclear dyad—or 'triad' in this case if Pakistan is not treated as a neutral state when conflicts erupt between India and China⁴⁰—any non-nuclear security protocol worth its salt, must invariably be based upon the plinth of a state's nuclear capability, 'perilous deterrent' also shares a symbiotic relationship with nuclear deterrence.

It is based upon two tenets of contingent realism: the first impels considerations of offense and defense to be factored in while shifting focus from power to military capabilities; and the second enables the incorporation of a state's motives and intentions within any workable strategy by means of military policy and signalling.⁴¹

The first denotes a shift from the standard structural-realist theory of balance-of-power to a military-capability theory. This theory correlates security with a state's mission capability rather than with the abstract concept of power. It allows a state to distinguish between offensive and defensive capabilities, thereby expanding its scope not only for

cooperation with another state via arms control and unilateral defense, but also for competition via arms racing and so on. India can be more inclined to prefer arms control vis-à-vis China because arms control is a proven way of improving the military status quo.⁴² The second denotes the dilemma of any security seeking state—like India in the present dyad—concerning whether its adversary understands that its motivations are benign. The standard structural-realist model denies that such motives can be communicated at the systemic level, but contingent realism posits the possibility of such communication by manipulating a state's military policies. Revisionist states—like China in the present dyad—have an incentive to misrepresent their motives, thereby compelling a purely security seeking state to communicate information about its motives only by adopting a policy that is less costly for it than it would be for a greedy or revisionist state. A greedy state would like to mislead its adversaries into believing that it is interested only in security, since its adversaries would then be more likely to pursue policies that leave them vulnerable, enabling the greedy state to meet its expansionist objectives. Adopting a particular military policy can thus communicate information about which type of state it is, i.e., about its motives.⁴³ The dilemma of status quo or security seeking states vis-à-vis signalling is greater. It lies in the fact that while cooperative or other unthreatening military policies improve understanding of their motives, when such policies involve reduction in necessary military capabilities, a status quo state faces a much more difficult choice since it would then have to worry not only about deterring, but also about defending in case deterrence fails. This leads the present analysis to proffer conditional choices to both status quo and revisionist states within this dyad.

Conclusion: Strategic Choices *a la* Perilous Deterrent

How can China and India re-evaluate their respective security policies vis-à-vis one another and manifest the strategy of 'perilous deterrent'? The answer is based upon a simple contingent realist adage: cooperate when you can, compete when you must. This adage will have different implications for revisionist and security-seeking states.

First, the case of China—since it is easier to explain away a revisionist state. China has of late committed a plethora of strategic errors: by alienating not just the formidable nations of the European Union, but also the smaller states of Central and Eastern Europe⁴⁴; by attempting to browbeat ASEAN in the South China Sea which prompted the US to move three aircraft carriers into the Indo-Pacific; by pushing economic sanctions against Australia, and adding to its own security concerns by uniting the West and India; and finally, by attempting to regain the prestige lost during Doklam by moving into Ladakh.⁴⁵ Any further misadventure would certainly make heads roll—especially those of Xi Jinping and of

his favourite PLA Major General Xu Qiling, who incidentally was responsible for the Galwan mishap.

If China follows the strategy of 'perilous deterrent', it would have to refrain from taking further advantage of the pandemic, and instead cite it as a reason behind its economic slowdown and possibly a decision to revert its sight toward pressing domestic issues. China must immediately cease to pose a security threat to both great and smaller powers if it is to retain its credibility within the comity of nations. And since its natural aggression and irredentism cannot be washed away by a mere removal of the present leadership—and since it is natural for any country with the necessary wherewithal to pursue great power ambitions—China could reserve its clawing 'wolf warrior diplomacy' for a later date. If anything, the threat posed by the pandemic can be utilized by nations to promote more cooperative endeavours. This can augment the net security of stakeholders by not repeating the mistakes born out of faulty decisions as it happened during the confused days of Spanish Flu, amidst an already raging world war. However, such endeavours must not serve as an ameliorating shield protecting one or two revisionist states against a coalition of security seeking states that are simply reacting to threats posed by the former –unaided by greedy intent. This is not to absolve all the adversaries of China, but those assailed by its ambitions cannot be indicted for initiating a major international crisis under the pandemic shield.

If China follows the strategy of 'perilous deterrent', it would have to refrain from taking further advantage of the pandemic...

There is a significant nuclear angle to this as well that hints at the afore mentioned symbiosis. China has refused to acknowledge India as a nuclear-capable state. It felt humiliated when Prime Minister Vajpayee categorically named the Chinese threat to justify India's push towards overt nuclear capability in May 1998.⁴⁶ The Chinese were also instrumental in getting the UNSC Resolution 1172 passed in the council.⁴⁷ It has shown characteristic double-standards in its dealings vis-à-vis India and Pakistan, despite both being victims of the same resolution.⁴⁸ China continues its failures to formally recognize India as a nuclear state, considering it a nuclear defaulter for not signing the NPT. Therefore, China does not apply the concept of 'No-First-Use' (NFU) to India. And in the absence of Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures (NRRMs) between India and China, any possibility of uncontrolled escalation between their nuclear forces both at land and at sea would be devoid of legitimate control mechanisms.⁴⁹

Vide the strategy of 'perilous deterrent', China in the post-Galwan period, may

cease to view India as a non-existent security threat—apt only to be outsourced as a strategic border irritant to the Pakistani army and the ISI—and recognize India for what it is: a strong and intrepid military presence in the subcontinent, and a nuclear state on the brink of discarding its NFU stance. This can open the way for benign motives to be communicated from both sides, ultimately leading to arms control initiatives for reducing the triadic security dilemma in the region. More CBMs and NRRMs and proper arms control initiatives are required between the two countries to construct the diplomatic groundwork of nuclear deterrence, upon which 'perilous deterrent' can function as a stabilizer of economic relationships in the post-pandemic reconstruction period. Although this might seem far-fetched, the rigmarole for India is indeed far greater.

India, being the status quo state, must show an admixture of engagement and resolve through a contingent realist strategy. If it follows a 'perilous deterrent' strategy, even allegorically, it must pursue a two-pronged tactic. In signalling benign motive, India can start by placing only defensive weapons and troops along the LAC once the tensions ease, thwarting China's reasons to resume hostilities; second, it can continue its dialogue to diffuse tensions with China by engaging it constructively in multilateral fora, abjuring reluctance despite its risks⁵⁰; third, through such dialogues India can also bargain for better

India, being the status quo state, must show an admixture of engagement and resolve through a contingent realist strategy.

terms of trade with China, along with signalling its intent to create and implement an array of non-nuclear CBMs aimed most importantly at defining the LAC in a time-bound manner and re-demarcating the levels of force soldiers can legitimately use in case of a breach of peace; and fourth, depending upon whether China recognizes India as an equal member of the responsible nuclear states, India can signal intent to pursue arms control and bilateral defense protocols along shared borders, with a willingness to resolve the outstanding border disputes with China. Many of these steps India has consistently taken and has persisted with some of them even through the current crisis.

On the other hand, showing resolve would involve a more direct attitude but may lead to tipping off a revisionist giant. First, India's non-permanent membership to the UNSC could not have come at a better time. India can very well endeavour to take China to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) and indict it for using weapons of torture that caused injuries and even death to its soldiers in Galwan. India can also indict China of violating Article 35 of Part III Section I of the Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Convention.⁵¹ Second, it can rubbish Chinese claims along the LAC, its intent to unilaterally change the LAC in other places, and its endeavour to promote rhetorical brinkmanship in Gilgit-Baltistan. Third,

India can move closer to its partners in the QUAD to counterbalance Chinese ambitions in the region and can involve the US to exercise 'pivotal deterrence'⁵² in South Asia, by either discounting Pakistan altogether this time or by citing its axis with China as a single front against India. Finally, with the recent arrival of the Rafale jets, India can soon test an air launched nuclear-capable missile and put mainland China within its range of attack. Perhaps only then China will acknowledge its security threat, and also realise how India has quietly emerged stronger than itself by nurturing cooperation and pursuing security amidst a raging pandemic.

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47. The resolution condemned the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998, and ordered an immediate cessation of all further nuclear tests by them. See, "Security Council Resolution 1172," United Nations Security Council, U.N. Doc. S/RES/1172, accessed July 31, 2020, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1172>. Needless to say, India rejected it as prescriptive, violating its sovereignty.
48. See, Gurmeet Kanwal, "Countering China's Strategic Encirclement", in *Bharat Rakshak Monitor*, eds. K. Chatterjee et al., 3(3), November-December, 2000, <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/archives/MONITOR/ISSUE3-3/index.html>
49. See, Fiona Cunningham and Rory Medcalf, *The Dangers of Denial: Nuclear Weapons in China-*

India Relations (Sydney: Lowy institute for International Policy, 2011), 6-7. See also, Sen, "The Nuclearization of the Indian Ocean Region: Toward a Security Paradox?" 38-40.

50. Akin to how external affairs minister S. Jaishankar engaged with China right after Galwan through the RIC (Russia-India China) virtual meeting, valiantly yet gently citing the need for recognizing the legitimate interests of partners, along with respecting international law as imperatives for building a durable world order. See, "At Russia-India-China Meet, India Talks of Need to Respect Legitimate Interest of Partners," *The Wire*, June 23, 2020, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-russia-china-ric-trilateral-meeting>.
51. See, International Committee of the Red Cross, *Commentary on the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949* (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 389-420.
52. 'Pivotal deterrence' is a concept proffered by Timothy Crawford which "tries to prevent war by making potential belligerents fear the costs, by confronting them with risks they do not want to run." See, Timothy Crawford, *Pivotal Deterrence: Third-Party Statecraft and the Pursuit of Peace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5-6.