

Essay

What Does the Chinaman Think?

Gautam Banerjee

Vanity is the quicksand of reason – George Sand

The May 2020 India-China military confrontation in Eastern Ladakh followed by a year-long stalemate, with no end in sight, has thrown up a common concern in the Indian mind: ‘What would the Chinaman *Do?*’ That concern, in turn, has thrown up various considerations over the issue, all of them converging to the possible options we might have to deal with this irascible menace to our nationhood – indeed, the Chinese Communist Regime’s formally declared objective of capturing our Western and Eastern states pose serious threat to very spirit of the India and the Indian nationhood.

However, the equations of contradictions and leverages at play in the bilateral, domestic as well as regional arena being many, there is difficulty in finding a rational way out of the Chinese Regime’s obdurate imperialist fixations. Meanwhile, there has been no let up from the Indian Government to manage the crisis in a rational manner. But the problem is that the crisis has been a deliberate creation of the Chinese Regime and its resolution too lies but in the potent instigator’s hands.

In that context, before considering as to what the Chinaman will hereafter do, it is pertinent to raise the question as to ‘What Does the Chinaman *Think?*’

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China's Communist-Imperialist Dream

China's Communist Regime has not only adapted to the Han imperialists' self-assuming, feudal mentality, it has gone a step further ahead. It has committed to give shape to what had been but a romantic imperialist 'dream' of expanding China's territorial expanse into neighbouring lands. The Regime seeks to fulfil that dream by laying fantastic claims over territories of the neighbouring sovereign nation-states and forcefully seizing these at opportune moments. So ingrained is its sense of superior entitlement that the Regime finds no dichotomy in justifying organised violations of its neighbours' territories or their water resources, and at the same time expect the targeted lot to honour its Taiwan policy or stay away from 'ganging-up' to oppose its highhanded behaviour!

A formally declared solemn objective of 'integration' and 'reunification' of whatever catches its fancy is thus at the core of the Chinese Communist Regime's political culture; that in fact, is a device for the autocratic Regime to gain legitimacy among its captive, voiceless masses. The Regime also believes that making the neighbourhood states submit to its hegemonic ambitions by coercion, and by force if necessary, is the surest way to assumption of its naturally ordained great power status.

Chinese Regime's India View

Interactions with Chinese intelligentsia indicates that Indian's hoary intellectual and religious status does not conform to the Han propensity of claiming unchallenged superiority over all 'Under the Heaven'. During centuries of monarchical and even the shortened republican times that understanding had been translated to appreciation, if not deference, for India; that sentiment is seen even today amongst the contemporary generations of Chinese people.¹ But with the innately brash and pompous 'Red' autocrats assuming the reins of Chinese state in 1949, that educated view of India was turned into a compulsive intimidator's disparage, even amongst, over the presence of a potential 'rival' in spiritual, cultural, political and economic domains.

In the post-2008 period when China began to energise her ambitious 'rise' into firm action, India's indifference to being China's beholden tributary, despite the latter's self-appropriated 'superior status', has dismayed the Red autocrats no end. Indeed, a democratic India's disinterest in servile clapping for the Communist Regime is viewed as an underling upstart's haughty profanity. India's firm refute - even after a 'lesson

administered' to her in 1962 - of the Chinese Regime's outlandish territorial claims and firm disapproval of its arbitrary inflictions on the neighbouring co-habitants have riled the autocrats no end. The Indian state has thus been a cause of immense frustration among the kingpins of the Chinese autocracy. The Regime's consternation is also fuelled by India's repudiation of its 'Belt and Road' dream, impeding Sinification of Indic-cultured nations of South Asia and staring down on its habitual territorial violations. These acts might be maddening experiences for the Chinese autocrats, nonplussed as they are in managing divergence.

The Regime's India Strategy

Looking across the bamboo curtain, the inferences from the Regime's strategic discourses are clear: the 'barrel of gun' mentality continues to rule Chinese hierarchy's ideology. The Regime believes, with due justification, that military power is fundamental to realising its objective of emerging as a political and economic power at the global level. As an upshot of that, the Regime has embarked upon profound modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ostensibly to safeguard its global economic interests. Further, the Regime is convinced that India is a competitor, even a spoiler, in its race to China's destined throne. India's geo-strategic centrality in South Asia and dominant geographic locus over the global lifeline of the Indian Ocean reinforces that conviction. That conviction is palpably cemented by seminal writings of well-respected Indian personalities like Swami Vivekananda, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore as well as a host of such past and present nationalists who aver that India is destined to play a stellar role in the world affairs. In fact, the Indian ideology of '*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*' ('world is my family') and similar incantations raise suspicion, even alarm in the Regime's cognition.²

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Going beyond the routinely published White Papers and formal pronouncements to access China's original India-focused publications, it is clear Chinese strategists are heavily influenced with the propositions on sea-power made by United States' Admiral Alfred Mahan and India's Ambassador KM Panikkar. Hegemony over the Indian Ocean Region and assumption of control position over what is seen as the ultimately 'inevitable' maritime power rivalries is therefore viewed as India's foundational objective.³ That

view point has made the Regime's strategists wary of India's potential to dominate China's economic lifeline that has to run across the Indian Ocean. India's policies of hosting of Dalai Lama and the Tibet Government in exile, maintaining an all-Tibetan force to operate into China-held Tibet, blooming strategic partnership with the-super-power United States and its allies, and support for free navigation across the Indo-Pacific Seas add to the reasons for the Regime's wariness of India. Finally, considering the Regime's inability to conclusively alienate India's close neighbours from their deep-rooted bonds with India, its antagonism, to be practical, must be irrepressible.

Viewing India's purported obduracy against its claimed hegemonic destiny, *China's India-strategy revolves around keeping India's national power potential grounded in her immediate South Asian vicinity. India's strategic encirclement, weaning away her Indic-oriented neighbours and keeping the threat of military aggression across the entire frontage of the Indo-Tibet border belt just below the boiling point are the methods adopted to do so.*

Coping Strategies for India

Right from the time the Communist Party of China (CPC) captured power, the Sino-Indian relations have been marred by the Regime's persistent haughtiness at quieter times and brash belligerency when its predatory quest is not acceded to. Diplomatic niceties apart, a neighbour who violates formally endorsed agreements and insists on destabilising our nationhood can no more be just an 'adversary'. It follows, therefore, that India's policy makers must shed their seven decades of repeatedly failed hope of finding relief from the dragon's torment and get down to strategising to cope with a persistently hostile power looming overhead.

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But before considering strategies to stall the Chinese Regime's unilateral animosity, two key determinants need to be appreciated:

One, the current Chinese opinion makers' supercilious *perception* of India; and,

Two, the PLA's current state of *war-worthiness*.

The First Determinant: Schools of Chinese Opinion Makers

Straight from the papers and statements circulating in the Chinese media since the beginning of the confrontation in Eastern Ladakh, it is apparent that the Chinese Communist Regime's strategic opinion makers, both of virulent and sober kind, may be aligned into three schools.

One school is dipped in a jaundiced kind of condescendingly neo-Confucian complex which views other nationalities, the 'lesser' earthlings, as but the Han's tributaries, and believes in the Chinaman's right to be the first partaker of everything 'under the heaven', 'harmoniously', of course, unless the quarry's intransigence becomes intolerable. Dismissing the intrinsic superiority of the pristine Indian civilisation, this school sees Indians as weak, backward and pompous upstarts who are stupid enough to affront China's naturally entitled hegemony. As virulent 'nationalists', this school sets sight on India as the principal 'spoiler' against the Chinese Regime's expansionist ambitions. It therefore advocates administration of a hard, sharp rap to bring India to her senses and then allow Indians a magnanimous 'waive-off' after 'reclaiming' China's superior entitlements. In fact, this school wonders as to why has the Regime been 'tolerant' so far of India 'crossing all lines to launch all-out attack' in Galwan and elsewhere and has refrained from inflicting 'reciprocal counter-attack in self-defence'. Stating that the 'Indian military was not a worthy opponent of the PLA', some have advised the Indian forces to 'either withdraw unconditionally or be wiped out'. Some analysts of this school go on to aver that China's India policy needs to be more assertive and its military deterrence applied more tellingly.

Next comes a school which advocates overt display of forbearance in China's rise and taking to trampling over its quarries only after all that could be secured through virulent 'non-violent' assertions. No less haughty behind a Machiavellian demeanour, this school surmises that the Chinese government is avoiding conflict at this present juncture when there is ostensibly an international 'gang-up' against it, and meanwhile setting the stage for a chastising counterattack against India in the near future.

Some of China's leading strategic analysts from various prestigious institutions form a third school of opinion. These scholars propose that confronting China is not, cannot be, India's purpose, and that India is only trying to secure bargaining stakes in the final border settlement when that comes. This school advocates restraint on over-

reaction to 'India's provocations' in favour of application of a subtle but enduring push. Some analysts have even suggested a possible upturn in mutually profitable Sino-Indian relations in the aftermath of post-stand-off negotiations. The hint obviously is at the profitability of capturing the Indian market.

The Communist Party Regime's Perception

Notably, the virulent arguments mentioned above must have had the Party Regime's endorsement. But in recent months, the Regime cut-off these hard-liners' kettle-rattling to switch to educating the domestic audiences on its purportedly 'righteous' version of the border contest. One significant measure to that purpose has been to promote the Party's invented versions of 'historical facts' and Sinicisation of traditional place names in Tibet and even across the border. *Inter alia*, by this approach the Party seeks to further advance its territorial claims and push the existing border alignments. The other measure has been to paint the PLA's aggression in Eastern Ladakh as a 'defensive' reaction to India's perceived breach of the mutual confidence building agreements. Herein, India is accused of intruding into areas that are stated to be under the PLA's control, thus altering, in the Regime's perception, the mutually agreed *status quo*.⁴

Presently, the third school seems to have found the Party's favour. This is indicated by its leaders and scholars soft phrasing their India related statements in formal as well as informal media briefings and diplomatic exchanges. Wang Yi's statement during the BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting on 1st June is the latest example. President Xi Jinping's call to the Communist Party Study Group the same day to create a "trustworthy, lovable and respectable" China is also aimed at softening the Chinese Regime's opportunist and bullying image in the larger world.

After years of belligerent approach to regional disputations, it is certain that this turn about to maturity is not triggered by the Party Regime's realisation of the value of neighbourly political accommodation. Instead, its current show of reasonability is possibly conditioned by certain key considerations: *One*, a certainty of burgeoning adverse ramifications against the Regime's mischiefs like violation of international understandings, theft of propriety rights, clandestine spread of Wuhan Virus, human rights violations, etc.; and *two*, rise of widespread abhorrence of its bellicose conduct, both overt and muted, across the entire Asian and Western worlds which is affecting its economic profiteering as well as leadership ambitions. A third key consideration

could be that the PLA may not be fully ready at this stage for a war with assured accomplishment of its political and strategic objectives.

Given its political culture, it is obvious that the Party's present demeanour will last only till the situation turns conducive to its discard and resumption of the Regime's hegemonic comportment. This observation is founded in the Regime's belief that persistent advancement of its agenda – territorial, economic and political – in varying tempo in accordance with the situation would ultimately cause the target countries to just give up and acquiesce, particularly when presented with economic enticements.

Domestic Perception of PLA's War Strategy

One conjecture in China's internal discussions posits that the PLA withholds reaction against India's 'provocations' because its preparations along the Western frontiers have been limited due to its lower prioritisation vis-a-vis the Eastern sea-board. This concern has been repeated since the time of the stand-off on Indo-Bhutan-Tibet border in 2017. The concern is that in a limited war the deployable force-ratios on the Indo-Tibet Border are perhaps not overtly favourable for the PLA. India's gradual catch-up with infrastructure development along the Line of Actual control (LAC) has added to that concern. It is averred that these factors have limited China's military superiority and encouraged India to, as stated, to 'use its tactical build-up to counter China's overall strategic advantages'.

Some indignant Chinese commentators posing as noble Samaritans express their concern that by pushing her troops into inhuman conditions of high-altitude borders only to be cannon fodder of the PLA's high-technology weaponry, India has tried to 'trade human lives' to exasperate a 'moralist' PLA into leaving them alone (sic). According to them, Indians will push their soldiers to death but remain stubborn on the boundary issue. Despair is also expressed over the PLA 'allowing' the Indian Army's to occupy the Kailash Range and Pangong Tso heights that had been captured by the PLA in 1962 at the cost of considerable Chinese casualties, and which would be difficult to recapture by counterattack now. The plaint ends with a suggestion that the delay in wrecking retribution on India is perhaps attributable to the PLA's brisk preparations for a forthcoming counterattack at times of its choosing. Going further, it is averred that China could, if needed, undertake 'large scale offensives to capture the entire Ladakh'.

Notably, the Chinese Regime realises that though inferior in overall power equation, India's significant ability to resist, and inflict severe pain, against any PLA offensive cannot be overlooked. But even then, fixated with its expansionist objectives, the Regime gives no indication of considering, leave alone accommodating, India's case. Inference from the three schools of Chinese perceptions is therefore indicative: *Unremitting India-specific and Indo-Pacific conflict are perhaps inevitable, and by handling it well, the Chinese Regime looks at consolidating its domestic legitimacy and establishing China's regional hegemony before embarking on shadowing the globe.*

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The Second Determinant: PLA's Contextual War-worthiness

There are also certain contextual issues which weigh on the PLA's realistic, not simulated, war-worthiness. Thus, besides the traditional military intangibilities and the usual communist bombast of exaggerated claims, there are certain unique determinants to explore the Party-PLA's aggressive deportment. In this context the following questions arise:

One, can absolute loyalty to the Party and its top leader be enough to elevate *professionalism* in complex battle procedures and operational systems of a modernised PLA, or will it lead back to the practice of massed attrition warfare.

Two, in view of its no real war experience since the rather forgettable Vietnam War of 1979, how realistically competent is the PLA's *training and assimilation* of its modernised inventory of sophisticated military hardware in a severely hostile battle environment.

Three, self-certified and tested under controlled training exercises as these are, how practically *battle-efficient* are the PLA's modernised weapons and equipment inventories.

Four, how realistic from economic and industrial angles are the *timelines* set to make the PLA a fully modern military machine by 2027, a dominant regional force

by 2035 and a global power by 2050. The consideration here is on battle-worthy tanks, guns, battleships and combat aircraft and not just the weapon prototypes, floating hulls and flying machines.

But all that aside, it is notable that notwithstanding the above considerations, *the PLA appears capable of overwhelming, at some cost of course, any of the mid-level military opponent that it might confront in the Indo-Pacific region.* However, it is also notable that this equation would change if the PLA were confronted with conjoined resistance from the lot of Regime's victimised parties.

Dragon in the Courtyard

China rejects the reality of a restructured Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh notwithstanding India's sincere attempts to assuage its concerns. In that, the Regime has sought to pose as a second party, alongside Pakistan, to claim Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh as a 'disputed area'. Further, the Chinese Regime insists that in 2003 India had recognised Tibet as a part of China, and that the Indo-Tibet border has to be demarcated according to its self-certified 'historical interpretations' of the erstwhile suzerain Tibet's territorial spread. It views India's patrolling up to the limits of India's declared alignment of the LAC as a breach of the mutually agreed confidence building and border tranquillity measures.⁵ Thus feigning injury to nationalist pride, the Communist Regime has left no occasion to reiterate its 'will' never to compromise its territorial ambitions; its claim over Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh (calling it 'Zangnan' or South Tibet) is also parroted frequently.

Observing the trends it has followed in the past, it is also quite possible that in tune with its rising power the Chinese Regime would extend its expansionist ambitions further, in a mix of flagrant and furtive forms, to the regions of Bhutan, Nepal, Western Tibet-Xinjiang, Gilgit-Baltistan and the Arabian Sea.⁶ From that consideration, China's ambition goes beyond the Indo-Tibet territorial borderlines, and that has to be seen as one defining part of its expansionist scheme that also covers Taiwan and the South China Sea region. The Regime's brewing of amilitary satrapy in Pakistan, as indicated by recentstrategic confabulations and supplies of military hardware, is a part of that larger expansionist scheme. In that context, the Chinese Regime possesses three formidable strengths:

One, the autocracy is *unencumbered by popular accountability* over casualties, destruction, expenditure or debacle.

Two, its '*will*' to use force remains strong as ever.

Three, in spite of its doubtful combat competence, the *PLA* possesses the *ability to potentially smother the opponent with huge numbers of combatants, men and material*.

India's Obligations

India's arrest of PLA's further advance across the LAC in Eastern Ladakh, securing key Kailash heights in August 2020 and firing incidents in South of Pangong Tso the following month have marked the new round of escalation in China-India border confrontation. Given its propensity, the PLA is unlikely to reconcile to such 'affronts', a third time after the resistance put up at the Sikkim-Bhutan border in 2017 and at the Galwan Post in Jun 2020. The Regime's non-compliance of its agreed vacation of Depsang, Hot Springs, and Demchok encroachments is indicative of its coming agenda. As such, the ever-high-headed PLA has enough motivation to attempt to 'administer another lesson' to India for the other neighbours wanting to rebut its expansionism to see. Brisk preparations to that purpose are known to be afoot.

Whereas in seeking fulfilment of its objectives, the Chinese Regime accords primacy to the use of military power, it needs no emphasis that under the present circumstances when the power differential is clearly in China's favour, it will be impractical for India to attempt to restrain China force-on-force. The option for India therefore is to buy time to build politico-security and diplomatic partnerships at the bilateral and multi-lateral levels while strengthening own border posture through military modernisation and logistic upgrades. The purpose here would be to utilise the time so available to build up a robust military deterrence that would convince the ever-belligerent Regime to resolve its issues in a peaceful manner. Meanwhile, it will be necessary to bear the costs of contesting every intrusion and encroachment on the ground and raising diplomatic heckles simultaneously.

Buying time should work well for India while the Xi Jinping Regime recovers its standing against the coalescence of global angst over its litany of offending arrogations - including the spread of Corona-19 pandemic and its atrocities on the Uighurs - before

resuming its predatory behaviour. That situation offers India an opportunity, if with certain capacity handicaps, to firmly dig-in to impede, even halt, China's impending encroachments, and in the meanwhile build-up her military power and defence posture.

That leaves us with the exercise to ponder as to 'What would the Chinaman do next'?

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4. In border related discussions, China's Foreign Ministry does not tire of asserting that the confrontation in Eastern Ladakh was triggered by India's 'violation' of the mutually agreed confidence building and border tranquillity understandings.
5. China argues that India's LAC alignment runs across the points which had been captured by the PLA during the 1962 aggression, and that patrolling beyond such points breaches the confidence building agreement. The argument is dubious - having reached such points they could not or did not hold those points and withdrew after announcing unilateral ceasefire. The LAC is thus marked, not by the extent of the PLA's penetration, but by the line marking the extent of India's control after the war. Contrary to the Indian diplomacy's recently adopted jargon, the Line is not a 'perception', it is a reality.
6. Mao Zedong's proposition for 'integration of Tibet's - and by implication China's - 'Five Fingers' continues to be held sanctified.