

# In ending standoff, magnanimity must prevail

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India's border dispute with China calls for peaceful resolution, and has no place for moral outrage or military might

India's oft-quoted mantra when it comes to international relations has been *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the earth is our only family). It is not in India's DNA, so to speak, to demonise any country in its neighbourhood, including China, South Asia and South East Asia, all the way to Indonesia; that is because of long-standing civilisational ties. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke in Shanghai just five years ago, in 2015, he recounted to the Indian community living there how China's President Xi Jinping took him to his native village in Xian province and showed him the book written by the seventh century Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, whose travels connected the birthplaces of both leaders. This was symbolic, he said of the bond between India and China in terms of *aatmiata* (soulful intimacy), *nikatata* (closeness) and *bhaichaara* (solidarity). There could not be more genuine and sincere affirmation of the spirit of friendship.

## Keep a cool head

Presently, India is on the brink of regarding China as Enemy Number One. This has happened because of a bloody, hand-to-hand combat, without firearms, between Indian and

Chinese soldiers in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh, which left 20 Indian soldiers dead and many more wounded. It may never be known how many Chinese soldiers died or were injured. These deaths on the frontier are a tragic break in an admirable record of avoiding casualties on both sides, despite face-offs on numerous occasions, along a long frontier between India and China. Both sides have accepted that the border between the two countries must be settled by agreement for the sake of peace.

China has refused to recognise the McMahon line and the demarcation of boundaries done by the British colonial power. Pending a final settlement of the boundary, India and China signed the **Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas**, in 1993. Another similar agreement (**Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas**), signed in 1996 contains a specific clause related to the use of firearms by both sides: “Neither side shall open fire, cause biodegradation, use hazardous chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosives within two kilometres from the Line of Actual Control. This prohibition shall not apply to routine firing activities in small arms firing ranges.”

Apparently, this provision was respected by both sides during the clash on June 15. Tragically, they fought much more barbarically, with nail-studded sticks, knives and stones, causing inhuman suffering. This incident threatens unofficial partition of territories that has stood the good test of time: Aksai Chin is claimed by India, but China, de facto, rules; China claims Arunachal Pradesh, but India, constitutionally, rules.

Will it ever be possible to resolve the boundary dispute, which is at the root of the conflict? And if so, how? The dispute cannot be resolved by going to war. No war has permanent winners. No losers can willingly accept defeat. The only way to resolve disputes, in post-nuclear times, is through negotiations, as equal powers, with mutual respect.

## **China's record**

During his visit to India in April 1960, China's Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai made a proposal to settle the boundary dispute. It was rejected by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In hindsight, history must record that as a lost opportunity which has had tragic consequences.

Today, China regards itself as a superpower in the making, which implies that negotiation will be condescending, tantamount to “my way or the highway”. The more China feels beleaguered, the more intransigent it is likely to be in negotiations to resolve the border dispute with India. China has flexed its muscle. It refused to recognise the authority of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The PCA rejected China's legal claims. It ruled that China had breached its obligations under the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea and Article 94 of UNCLOS concerning maritime safety, and

that China violated international obligations. China has not paid any heed to international opinion that supports unimpeded commerce, freedom of navigation, overflights, and peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea. The same hubris has made China more intolerant of infrastructure built by India, while it continues to build its own along that frontier.

## **Weighing in on the options**

Should India counter China, tit for tat, by adopting a posture of aggression? Or should India redouble its diplomatic efforts to counter China's intransigence with the support from Japan, Australia, the United States, Russia, and other countries, including those disputing China's claims in the South China Sea?

What must matter to India is whatever is good for its people. Focusing on strengthening military might, when the economy is suffering and COVID-19 is taking its toll, will not be wise. Nor is it wise to call for a boycott of Chinese imports. Sanctions and boycotts are justifiable only when there is strong moral justification. Boycott of South Africa during the Apartheid period was justified and it served its purpose in hastening South Africa's turn to equality and democratic governance. Arguably, there is moral justification for sanctions against Israel if it expands its illegal settlements in the West Bank and Palestine territories. Moral outrage has been triggered by actions of regimes in South Africa and Israel. But India's border dispute with China calls for peaceful resolution, not moral outrage.

It is understandable, in the immediate aftermath of the sacrifice made by India's soldiers, that nationalist ferment will come to fore. As has happened with other incidents when sovereignty seemed to have been transgressed, this one also will run its course. If India boycotts goods from China, it will hurt itself more and barely make a dent in China's economic prospects. India is lauded as the pharmacy of the world because it is able to import essential raw materials from China. India's sports goods exports are likewise dependent on imports from China. The world buys Chinese goods because their quality and price are compelling. It has been reported that Steve Jobs wanted to change the iPhone screen barely three days before its formal launch. China's factory that assembled the phone for Apple mobilised its workforce to get the screens replaced in quick time. India should emulate China in its manufacturing practices and agility to adapt to international demand. There is little parity between India and China in trade terms; there is much more parity in military might, at present, compared to the 1960s.

## **The home watch**

It is unfortunate that in many cities in India, people from the North-east, who have features resembling Chinese, have been ostracised. India must be on guard, in the aftermath of current tensions with China, not to unleash any kind of hostility against anyone, especially resident Chinese nationals. India must learn the hard lesson, which it did not in 1962, that warm and

gushing expressions of friendship towards China will not stop hostilities; only pragmatic and shrewd diplomacy can do that. Oscillating to the opposite end and attacking China as the enemy is not wise.

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