

Rutte's Apology or Borrell's Analogy Europe's Choices For 21st Century

Ever since his ascendancy to power, President Xi Jinping has been quite forthright in repetitively expressing the 'Chinese Dream', and has been vigorously and assertively pursuing its stated road-map within the declared timelines. So, whether it is the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), the economic outreach for securing of resources and partners, the strengthening of the PLA or its aim of re-unifying Taiwan, the Dragon has persevered to pursue the determined path despite the pandemic, economic downturn and the global opposition. So will China hold back for too long to act against India, its well identified and sole challenger in the region, to let it grow in strength, or even like to allow the US and the West to get their act together? Post the phase of 1967 (Nathula) to 1986 (Sumdorong Chu) during which India exhibited firm resolve to guard its interests, China very cleverly roped in India into a series of Agreements from 1993 to 2012 to continue to delay settlement of LAC and build its strength to achieve an asymmetric superiority. Therefore, despite a show of enhanced diplomatic bonhomie over the past decade, the concurrent and successive major military overtures along the LAC viz. Chumar in 2014, Doklam in 2017, Eastern Ladakh in 2020 and now Tawang in 2022, frantic pace of infrastructure development and continuing to keep the PLA deployed along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) post 2020, are too ominous indicators to still misread the Dragon's intent. It is to be clearly understood that while unification of Taiwan is important for China to open up its eastern seaboard to freely employ its combat power across the seas so essential for an aspirant global power, but opening up and securing of its westward continental corridors, especially to the Indian Ocean, too are an overriding strategic and logistical imperative before challenging the global powers on the eastern front. It is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and security of G 219 where the strategic interests have come to clash in a bigger way, as Indian statements regarding resumption of its territories of Aksai Chin, Gilgit-Baltistan and Pak Occupied Pakistan (PoK) haven't fallen on deaf ears!

China has since successfully aligned Pakistan into its strategic designs, and made 'two front' threat a reality for India. While CPEC and Gwadar would continue to cement their mutual interests into the future, retention of control over Indian Occupied Territories by both China and Pakistan would be the stronger strategic glue! So while the world can wait and speculate over the likelihood of a Black Swan event to derail the Chinese run due to its various internal problems, India cannot, and should not, fail to read the Chinese intent. China already has enough wherewithal and asymmetric edges to settle its Indian dilemma at the time and place of its choosing. And while the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have come forward to support Ukraine against the Russian onslaught as their own interests were threatened across Europe, India may not be as lucky during an India-China face off as no direct interests of the US or the West would get threatened or compromised. Rather in the larger geo-political or geo-strategic construct of the West, a threatened or a weakened India would become a more pliable and subservient partner, which is possibly their requirement.

After a long and undue obsession with Pakistan, India has now correctly identified China as its primary threat. However, despite China keeping pace with its declared milestones of strengthening the PLA and creation of required infrastructure along the LAC, surprisingly many in the diplomatic and strategic analysts' community, and in the military too, have been continuing to underplay the prospects and deferring the timelines of any major offensive by China. Even the government hierarchy has possibly been dulled into believing that the Chinese threat can be handled diplomatically.

Are we reading the Chinese Strategy and Design correctly?

With an ever increasing pace of blatant Chinese overtures at the LAC, it may be prudent to abandon the grooved thought and have a de-novo look at the possibility of a change in Chinese Strategy and Design to now deal with a more powerful and enabled India. At Chumar, Chinese got India to dismantle certain structures. At Doklam too, the infrastructure developments post the standoff has definitely given an added edge to China in the sensitive Sikkim sub-sector, and its follow up claim to Sakteng in Bhutan has raised a spectre regards tenability of Tawang defences if Chinese were to get control of or access through Sakteng. Similarly in Eastern Ladakh too, China has secured its immediate strategic interests – it has taken control of critical areas in Depsang and Demchok and is unwilling to discuss these, has negotiated for creation of ‘buffer zones’ in areas of Galwan, Hot Springs and Pangong Tso as a condition for disengagement, and has made India vacate the critical Kailash Ranges. The recent Tawang transgression too was aimed at securing the dominating plateau area in the sub-sector. So the point to deliberate is that whether in keeping with its other compulsions the Chinese Strategy and Design against India has now been changed from plans of launching a major offensive to gradual securing of critical advantageous areas all along the LAC in so called recurrent standoffs / limited actions, wherein India can be coerced with comparative ease to concede to smaller give aways / demands to avoid a major conflict with a superior adversary. After witnessing the US experience in Afghanistan and Russian experience in ongoing war against Ukraine where smaller weak nations have forced a prolonged engagement on large superior nations, it seems a distinct possibility that China may not like to get involved in a protracted war with India, which could delay / derail the Chinese trajectory of emerging as a global power by 2049, though resorting to an ‘All Out War’ would continue to remain an option if the need arises.

The clash of strategic interests between China and India are quite evident and Chinese behaviour and actions now clearly qualify it to be placed into the category of an adversary. Armed co-existence will hereafter be a reality, and predatory actions along the LAC a perennial threat. As such, it is time for India to give up its policies of risk aversion and strategic restraint, and seriously prepare and challenge the recurrent Chinese actions to force a settlement at the LAC, when India is still a sought for partner across the globe.

Are we really prepared to deal with such recurrent aggressions?

There is a distinct change in the risk-taking profile of the Indian political leadership, and the Indian Armed Forces are being backed by the government to the hilt for action against our adversaries. The resolve and tenacity of our soldiers to stand tall in the most inhospitable terrain and weather and even fight with bare hands to defend the territorial integrity of the nation has too, been well demonstrated at Galwan and Tawang. However, there is a dire need to bring about certain structural changes, review strategies / policies and hasten up the modernisation programmes, if the emerging challenges are to be faced with confidence and surety of outcomes.

- The Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) ought to be given full operational and administrative control over the Armed Forces, if he is expected to deliver on his mandate of bringing in jointness and integration, and coordinate operations for ‘Two Front’ threats.
- A National Security Strategy needs to be issued earliest to bring in strategic clarity and unity of thought amongst all stakeholders in regard to China, Pakistan and other threats.

- Creation of a 'National War Centre' incorporating the Armed Forces and all concerned ministries / stakeholders is also a need of the hour to conduct pro-active security reviews and ensure timely and coordinated whole of nation responses towards the current trend of multi-domain warfare.
- Theaterisation, which naturally enables two basic war winning factors viz. 'Unity of Command' and 'Synergy of Efforts', now needs to be adopted in a time bound manner, as enough debate has since ensued.
- The Nuclear Policy too needs a review to use its potential as a deterrent against a superior adversary as also balance out asymmetric edges.
- The ever-active Indian frontiers require men of steel nerves and extraordinary dedication who wish to serve the nation as their first choice. Agnipath Scheme needs a definite review to avoid any dilution of the ethos of the Indian Armed Forces, more so of an Indian Soldier!

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