



China Is Deliberately Manufacturing Cartographic Nationalism Amidst COVID-19

Pandemic Exposes Weak Links In China's Political System & Aggressiveness Is To Whip Up Nationalism

Dr Raj Kumar Sharma

Dealing with China is not easy these days. After throwing public health systems across the world out of gear with its alleged mis-handling of COVID-19, China is now hell bent on violating sovereignty of its neighbours and busy in claiming their territory.

Asian rivals and frenemies, India and China are caught in yet another border stand-off in the high Himalayan region of eastern Ladakh. Chinese troops have intruded in to Indian territory violating the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at three places, Galwan Valley, northern bank of Pangong Tso lake and Demchok.

There is heavy troop deployment from both the sides and it seems that bilateral protocols and agreements to manage the border dispute have failed to deliver any breakthrough so far. In all likelihood, diplomatic channels would be activated to avoid further deterioration of the situation.

China's assertive behaviour with India is not an anomaly as Beijing has been also flexing its military muscles in South and East China Sea. China has unilaterally attempted to put fishing limits in the South China Sea while it has been bullying Vietnam and Philippines. Beijing has been needling Tokyo over the Senkaku island dispute in East China Sea.

Media reports from Taiwan have claimed that China is planning to set up an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea which would further up the ante against the US and its allies.

Beijing has also effectively abrogated the treaty with the United Kingdom wherein China had promised to maintain a special status for Hong Kong under the 'one country, two systems' principle. Something similar may soon happen to Taiwan as well. Assertiveness is nothing new to China's foreign policy under



Indian border patrol in the higher reaches of Ladakh. — IANS

President Xi Jinping but China has become more aggressive in these critical times when the world is fighting the COVID-19 pandemic while China seems to have controlled it.

The initial mismanagement of the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan by China allowed the epidemic to become a pandemic, threatening lives, economy, social fabric around the world as a over a quarter of million lost lives while many more would die in months to come.

A recent internal report by the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security, China's top intelligence body has claimed that global anti-China sentiment is at its highest since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

It further states that the US is likely to lead the wave of anti-China sentiment and China needs to be prepared in a worst-case scenario for armed confrontation with the US.

Instead of cooperating with the international community over the origins of COVID-19 and related matters, President Xi Jinping is turning the adversity in to an opportunity by whipping up nation-

alism to further strengthen his hold on the reins of power.

Unlike the events before, the Chinese public has shown dissent and disapproval of Xi's handling of the pandemic. Director of China's National Health Commission, Li Bin has said that the pandemic was a significant challenge for China's governance and had exposed the weak links in how China responded to epidemics and public health system.

To analyse China's border incursions in Indian territory, the above mentioned background would set the pieces in a larger picture. There are many layers to India-China border dispute. In the diplomatic context, India has a strategic relationship with the US which aims to balance China.

On the other hand, China feels that an alliance between the US and India would threaten its Malacca Dilemma, which in turn could have an impact on its economic progress and energy security. The real data would never come out of China but COVID-19 has dented Chinese economy as well. China's 5G giant, Huawei is already feeling the heat from Western countries.

The UK has proposed 5G club of ten democracies including India to cut out Huawei's domi-



Indian border camp at Chushul-Moldo in Ladakh. -IANS

nance. If India swings the Western way at this critical juncture, there will be more problems for China. Beijing would not wish India to push back against it at the WHO, where India has recently become president of World Health Assembly.

Hence, China is using the border dispute with India to send signals to New Delhi to stay away from the US in the New Cold War between Washington and Beijing.

At the bilateral military level, India is trying to catch up with China's upgraded road construction and infrastructure along its side of LAC. However, India has made rapid strides in recent years, like completion of 255-km Darbuk-Shayok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road which makes it easy to mobilise Indian troops for deployment along LAC in Ladakh. It is because of improved infrastructure along Indian side of LAC that Indian troops are now able to patrol new areas and challenge the PLA.

Chinese troops have shown aggression and engaged in physical fights with Indian army in violation of established protocols. They have been using weapons like wooden batons, stones and iron rods etc against Indian military and it is time to think that

Indian troops also are provided such weapons.

PLA's aggression against India is similar to their wolf warrior diplomats who are ruthlessly pushing against perceived international pressure on China. Beijing may be having a long-term plan and working to weaken India's presence in strategic areas like Siachen glacier to benefit its 'iron brother' Pakistan and safeguard the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

These developments come at a time when Chinese vaccines are emerging as front runners against Coronavirus. If successful, it remains to be seen whether China would use them for geopolitical gains.

The current border stand-off is unlikely to lead to a war between India and China and would be resolved in times to come. However, it has left an imprint on popular psyche in India that would further add to anti-China sentiment and harm long-term interests of the two Asian giants. The Wuhan virus has damaged the Wuhan spirit between India and China.

Raj Kumar Sharma is a Delhi-based foreign and security policy expert.

Now, You Can Drive To Mansarovar From Delhi

New Delhi: India has completed the first road connectivity to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China in Uttarakhand to ensure smooth ride of pilgrims to Kailash Mansarovar, the Ministry of Defence announced recently.

The Border Road Organisation (BRO) completed the 80 km stretch connecting Ghatiabgarh and Lipulekh on April 17. After the trials were successful,

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh opened the road by video conferencing on Friday.

"Delighted to inaugurate the Link Road to Mansarovar Yatra today. The BRO achieved road connectivity from Dharchula to Lipulekh (China Border) known as Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra Route. Also flagged off a convoy of vehicles from Pithoragarh to Gunji through video conferenc-



ing," Rajnath Singh tweeted.

He also said that the BRO team has done "tremendous work in the recent years and played a significant role in connecting the border areas". The road will also help in troops movement to the LAC.

The road ends at the 17,000 feet high Lipulekh pass. From there, Mount Kailash is located about 97 km north of the pass in Tibet. The Lipulekh pass, close to the Tri-junction of India-China-Nepal, is the lowest point in this section of the high Himalayas.

A senior Defence Ministry official said that with the construction of the road, pilgrims can travel to Lipulekh from Delhi in two days. The distance from Del-

hi to Lipulekh is 750 km.

Interestingly, the major travel would be in India -- 84 per cent -- and only 16 per cent in China.

The 80 km Ghatiabgarh-Lipulekh section has been made under the directions of the China Study Group (CSG) and it is funded by the Indo-China Border Road (ICBR).

The road was approved by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in 2005 at a cost of Rs 80.76 crore. In 2018, the CCS approved a revised cost of Rs 439.40 crore.

This route will reduce the usual travel time for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra by some six days.

The other route for the yatra via Sikkim is 2,780 km. It in-

volves taking a flight to Bagdogra (1,115 km from Delhi), thereafter 1,665 km of road travel, including 1,490 in China.

Another existing route is via Nepal. It involves taking a flight to Kathmandu in Nepal, 1,150 km from Delhi, and thereafter a combination of two flights with road travel (1,940 km total) or two flights and one helicopter sortie (755 km) or total road travel from Nepal (840 km). The distance excludes 43 km on foot in China.

The new route via Uttarakhand will reduce a lot of time for the pilgrims.

It would be the shortest and cheapest route and also one fifth distance of road travel as compared to the other routes. - IANS

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