

Admiral (R) Arun Prakash advises on How to play against China

The sudden and tragic loss of 20 Indian army personnel in a treacherous ambush by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Ladakh's Galwan Valley has caused deep public anguish and anger, mollified, only partially, by the swift retribution visited on the assailants by our gallant jawans. Equally exasperating for the public has been the cavalier inconsistency of statements emanating from government sources in New Delhi on a matter of grave national importance, especially since the contradictions have given comfort to the adversary and caused confusion at home.

Given that the Sino-Indian territorial dispute has been festering since the late 1950s, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the current lack of clarity amongst our decision-makers is rooted in incomprehension of the long-term strategic aims and objectives that underpin China's belligerent conduct. This is hardly a surprise, considering that we have failed to devote adequate intellectual capital, intelligence resources and political attention to acquisition of a clear insight into China and its motivations. Even when intelligence is available, analysis and dissemination have fallen short.

Consequently, it would seem that from Jawaharlal Nehru's naïve hopes, encapsulated in the "Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai" mantra, to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's prolonged courtship of Xi Jinping, India has been groping in the dark, while grossly misreading China's real intent. As we watch Beijing's sinister border strategy unfold, the absence of a matching counter on India's part becomes painfully obvious.

Indians, as devotees of chess or *shatranj*, have been thinking in terms of striking blows, fighting pitched battles and finally, checkmating the opponent. A similar Chinese board game, *wei qui*, is described, thus, by Henry Kissinger: "If chess is about decisive battle, *wei qui* is about a protracted campaign and 'strategic encirclement' where opponents seek to occupy empty spaces and then surround and capture opposing pieces. While chess encourages single-mindedness, *wei qui* generates guile and strategic flexibility."

Since 1995, China has been issuing a Defence White Paper (DWP) every

two years or so. These thematic public documents articulate China's national security aims, objectives and vital interests and also address the 'ends-ways-means' issues related to its armed forces. The 11 DWPs issued so far are a model of clarity and vision, and provide many clues to current developments. It is a measure of our complacency and indifference towards national security that no Indian government since Independence has deemed it necessary to issue a Defence white paper, order a defence review or publish a national security strategy. Had we done so, it may have prepared us for the unexpected and brought order and alacrity to our crisis-response.

Historically, China is heir to an ancient system, based not on sovereign equality of states, but on the divine and boundless reach and authority of the Chinese Emperor. Even in the current discourse there are enough pointers to show that an ascendant China sees itself on track to realising its 'strong nation dream', of becoming the world's No.1 power by surpassing and then replacing the USA. A part of the 'China dream' is the establishment of a 'unified global system', or empire, termed *Tianxia* ('all under heaven' in Mandarin). Translating its enormous economic gains into coercive military power, China expects neighbouring nations to submit to its hegemony.

In order to show India its place, China had administered it a 'lesson' in 1962, and may, perhaps, be contemplating another one in 2020, with the objective of preventing the rise of a peer competitor. For China, the line of actual control or LAC, representing an unsettled border, provides strategic leverage to keep India on tenterhooks about its next move while repeatedly exposing the latter's vulnerabilities.

There is probably no other instance world-wide where two antagonistic neighbours have left such a long border, undetermined, unmarked and unresolved for so long. Our diplomats derive considerable satisfaction from the 1993 *Border Peace & Tranquility Agreement*, which, according to former foreign secretary, Shivshankar Menon, '...effectively delinked settlement of the boundary from the rest of the relationship'. But to a layman, it appears

that by failing to use available leverage for 27 years, and not insisting on bilateral exchange of LAC maps, we have created a ticking time-bomb, with the trigger in China's hands. While 'disengagement' may soon take place between troops in contact, it is most unlikely that the PLA will pull back or vacate any occupied position in Ladakh or elsewhere; in which case, India needs to consider a three-pronged strategy.

At the ground-level, we need to visibly reinforce our positions, and move forward to the LAC all along, enhancing the operational-tempo of the three services as a measure of deterrence. Indian warships should show heightened presence at the Indian Ocean choke-points. Cyber emergency response teams country-wide should remain on high alert. While building-up stocks of weapons, ammunition and spares, the Ministry of Defence should seize this opportunity to urgently launch some long-term *atma-nirbharta* schemes in defence-production.

At the strategic level, the government must moot a sustained process of engagement with China at the highest politico-diplomatic echelons. The negotiations should seek multi-dimensional Sino-Indian *modus-vivendi*, encompassing the full gamut of bilateral issues like trade, territorial disputes, border-management and security. Simultaneously, at the grand-strategic level, India should initiate a dialogue for the formation of an '*Indo-Pacific Concord for Peace and Tranquility*', inviting four members of the Quad as well as Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia.

Finally, in 1962, India's Parliament had expressed "the firm resolve of the Indian people to drive out the aggressor from the sacred soil of India", a resolution interpreted as a pledge for the restoration of the Aksai Chin. As a nation, we need to be pragmatic enough to realise that neither conquest nor re-conquest of territory is possible in the 21st century. Parliament should, now, resolve to ask the government "to establish with utmost urgency, stable, viable and peaceful national boundaries, all around, so that India can proceed, unhindered, with the vital tasks of nation-building and socio-economic development". 🦋