

India's China strategy needs to be debated

The Chinese have a knack for making headlines on India's borders. The latest move, in April, saw them "renaming" 11 places in Arunachal Pradesh, which they consider to be "Zangnam" or, in English, "South Tibet". The announcement was made after approval from the State Council, implying a green light from the very top of the Chinese system. Zhang Yongpan, of the Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, claims that China's move to "standardise" names in Zangnam "completely falls within China's sovereignty and it is also in accordance with the regulation on the administration of geographical names".

Long-held tactic, much provocation

India responded typically by "rejecting outright" this act of nomenclatural aggression on part of the Chinese. But is that enough? The "re-naming" of disputed territories has been a long-held tactic of the Chinese government, and this is the third batch of "re-naming" with reference to Arunachal Pradesh. More significantly, it is not the first provocative act of Chinese provocation in recent months. Ever since the unresolved stand-off at Galwan in June 2020, there has been no serious attempt by Beijing at a resolution, let alone a restoration of the status quo ante, while several instances of further provocation have occurred from the Chinese side. Another border skirmish in December 2022 in the Tawang area showed that whatever policy the Ministry of External Affairs is masking with its anodyne statements, it is not ensuring deterrence.

India has lost access to 26 out of 65 Patrolling Points (PP) in eastern Ladakh, according to a research paper submitted by a senior police officer at the annual police meet in Delhi, last December. The "play safe" approach has turned areas that were accessible (before April 2020) for patrolling by the Indian Army into informal "buffer" zones, resulting in the loss of pasture lands at Gogra hills, the North Bank of Pangong Tso, and Kajokung areas. This is a matter of national security and of grave concern. Prime Minister Narendra Modi assures the nation that no "Indian territory" has been occupied, but such surrenders of access to lands traditionally used by Indians have become routine. Yet, the government refuses to openly call out the Chinese threat. The Prime Minister was willing to stand up and proclaim that "this is not an era of war" while sharing a platform with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin – the leader of a



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Is India repeating the errors made in its pre-1962 engagement with China?

warring country with which India shares deep and friendly relations. What stops him from speaking out on a series of egregious transgressions by China on his own country's borders?

Explaining the Indian stand

There are arguably several factors that have possibly led to the Indian aversion to denouncing the Chinese. Happyman Jacob has identified several: the growing power differential between the two countries; uncertainty about the strategic actions of major powers such as the U.S. in case of a military stand-off; the military capability differential between the two countries (India is not equipped for a major war with China); pressure from Indian business interests anxious to safeguard trade (India's trade dependence on China has now crossed over \$100 billion); lack of consensus within the various ministries of the government about the kind of response the Chinese threat merits; and lack of political will within an increasingly hyper-nationalist, image-conscious Bharatiya Janata Party government (Mr. Modi is obsessively anxious not to appear weak, especially just in advance of a general election).

These considerations have led to the emergence of overcautious self-restraint on the part of the Indian government, marked by a refusal to permit even a basic discussion of China in Parliament, on the grounds of national security. This overlooks growing Chinese self-assertiveness on its land and sea borders, bordering on belligerence, which has already set alarm bells ringing in a number of Asian capitals and in Washington. Is India repeating the errors made in its pre-1962 engagement with Communist China? Nehru's vision of India and China as the two major south Asian civilizations led to India being one of the first countries to recognise the Communist government in China and ended up with its softening its line on China's invasion and occupation of Tibet, its encroachment on India's borders and its cartographical aggression in the pursuit of Chinese goodwill. Mr. Modi's current policy of Chinese appeasement seems eerily similar, and could end just as badly.

What lesson does this have for the Indian response today? The ruling party vociferously argues that in the 1950s, India failed to call a spade a spade, behaved too cautiously in its diplomacy, and left too much for too late. The only difference 60 years later appears to be that

the Indian government is today reinforcing its border defences and building roads and other infrastructure on the Indian side. While these may prepare India better to resist a People's Liberation Army sweep into India, it does nothing to deter a Chinese build-up and continuing "salami-slicing" tactics on the disputed frontier, while India's diplomacy only emboldens Beijing and leaves potential allies puzzled. Only if there is an acknowledgement of the problem can there be the initiation of a process of resolving it.

China's assertive image building exercise

As a one-party state, China does not have to worry about public approval, but the Chinese Communist Party has shored up its domestic credibility by valorising its international image. Once anchored in the "peaceful rise" theory, it is now about showing strength, determination, economic might and an unwillingness to compromise on what it sees as its core national interests. The absence of a tough rhetorical response to Chinese actions in public is usually viewed there as a Chinese gain, whereas acrimony in public unsettles them.

In fact, China's public image is a source of its vulnerability. It has always had a fear of being isolated in global affairs: this is why its assertiveness today is accompanied by diplomatic overtures in Europe, Russia and West Asia, to add an adroit diplomatic gloss to its uncompromising military determination. India was able to capitalise on China's image-consciousness to get Masood Azhar blacklisted by the 1267 UN Sanctions Committee after China blocked India's efforts for more than a decade, cornering Beijing through nimble, stakeholder-oriented diplomacy, so that in the end, China did not want to be seen as the lone holdout. Hence, image matters to Beijing, and can be exploited to India's advantage.

When dealing with the Chinese, India must always remember Mark Twain's observation, that history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. The period since Galwan, 2020-23, is not the same as 1949-62, but the same pattern of appeasement and self-denial is ominously emerging: India is missing an opportunity to loudly and proudly raise matters of its own vital interest by not using a strategy that fractures China's image by challenging it publicly on its transgressions. The government must do what Nehru did, and take the Indian people into confidence. It is time for an urgent debate in Parliament on India's China strategy.

Buddhism, India's soft power projection tool

There is much significance to India having hosted a two-day global Buddhist summit in New Delhi (April 20-21), which was organised by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the International Buddhist Confederation. The summit saw the participation of key figures from the global Buddhist community, including the Dalai Lama. It was at this summit that the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, laid emphasis on the continuing relevance of the Buddha's teachings in today's world. The summit was a significant opportunity for India to project and connect with the Buddhist population around the world, thereby strengthening the country's soft power.

India's efforts so far

The Indian government has been actively investing in its Buddhist diplomacy efforts, with a focus on promoting tourism through the development of the "Buddhist tourist circuit". Additionally, Mr. Modi has made it a point to visit Buddhist sites during his Southeast and East Asian visits. By hosting such a high-profile event, the Indian government hopes to demonstrate its commitment to preserving and promoting Buddhist culture and heritage, as well as strengthening ties with the global Buddhist community. With its strong historical and cultural ties to Buddhism, India is well-positioned to play a leading role in shaping the discourse around Buddhist issues on the global stage.

Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Mr. Modi said, "India has not given 'Yuddha' to the world but 'Buddha'." This resonates with his earlier statement of his telling the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, that 'this is not the era of war'. The Delhi summit's theme, "Responses to Contemporary Challenges: Philosophy to Praxis", also highlights India's attempts to provide an alternative to contested



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global politics, with morality as the guiding principle.

Buddhist diplomacy has the potential to promote regional cohesion, given that nearly 97% of the global Buddhist population is based in Asia. During the Cold War, China effectively used Buddhist diplomacy to engage with its neighbouring countries, and it continues to employ this approach to gain legitimacy for its Belt and Road Initiative. As India and China compete to dominate the Buddhist heritage as a tool for soft power, India holds an advantage due to the faith's origins in the country. However, despite being home to a number of key Buddhist sites, such as Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, India has struggled to attract Buddhist tourists, who tend to favour sites in Thailand and Cambodia.

The guiding principle, China factor

India's efforts to position itself as a great power committed to cooperation rather than coercion are rooted in its deep historical and cultural ties to the region. The current government's guiding principles for foreign policy, Panchamrit principles include "Sanskriti Evam Sahyata" which means cultural and civilizational links, which were highlighted during the Delhi summit, which saw a diverse group of 171 foreign delegates from South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, and Taiwan, along with 150 delegates from Indian Buddhist organisations. Also in attendance were prominent scholars, sangha leaders, and dharma practitioners. Through such efforts, India hopes to reinforce its image as a responsible global power committed to peaceful cooperation and regional stability. By laying an emphasis on cultural and civilisational ties, India seeks to promote greater understanding and cooperation between nations and to demonstrate the unique role it can play in shaping the region's future.

India recognises the importance of Buddhism as a means of conducting public diplomacy and has utilised it to its advantage. However, to maintain its edge over China, more action is needed. China is actively seeking to exert control over the appointment of the next Dalai Lama, which would be a blow to India's efforts to project its soft power through Buddhism. India must act to ensure that it remains a key player in the global Buddhist community.

To further strengthen its Buddhist diplomacy, India should continue promoting Buddhism at the highest levels of government, while also organising cultural events to showcase the country's rich Buddhist history. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) could play a significant role in promoting such events within and outside India. Additionally, India should work to strengthen its ties with key Buddhist institutions and leaders around the world. The Delhi summit was a step in the right direction, providing a valuable opportunity for cultural exchange and the sharing of ideas.

The film link

India also needs to utilise the reach of Bollywood in promoting its Buddhist heritage. China, with its influence over Hollywood, has completely dominated the narrative around Buddhism through cinema. In contrast, India is behind in this domain; there have not been any efforts made through cinema. India's G-20 presidency this year could be used to promote Buddhist diplomacy on a bigger scale through various cultural meetings, especially as Buddhist teachings align with the motto of India's G-20 presidency, "One Earth, One Family, One Future". As Buddha was the first diplomat of peace, his teachings of peace and cooperation in these tough times can become the guiding light of Indian diplomacy on the world stage.