

Is this the Theatre of the Absurd?

India Needs a Paradigm Shift Towards China

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It is obvious, painfully obvious that India's policy towards its big neighbor China has not been much of a success. Before we figure out a new policy frame work, we need to bear in mind that in the ongoing stand-off at the border, India has faulted diplomatically and militarily apart from permitting China to control, or almost control, the narrative as far as the international public is concerned.

We start with diplomacy. Following the brutal killing of 20 Indian soldiers by the Chinese military, China summoned the Indian Ambassador in Beijing and lodged a protest. Is this not paradoxical? Why is it that it never occurred to the MEA to summon the Chinese Ambassador and make a strong demarche? We can only speculate and feel sorry for ourselves.

China made another move. Its Foreign Minister called up his Indian counterpart. China put out a statement to the effect that China clearly told India that it had violated the LAC; those responsible for that violation should be punished; and demanded that the Indian patrols should be instructed not to do it again. The BBC, Reuters, and the Global Times carried the Chinese version.

Hours later, India came out with its version of what its Foreign Minister told his interlocutor. India told China that it was a 'premeditated attempt' by China to alter the status quo; China should stop it; and if it does not stop it, there would be repercussions on bilateral relations.

While we are glad that India stood its ground in the conversation, we are at a loss to understand why India let China take advantage by coming out with its version first.

Apart from the delay in communicating, there are other matters of concern. It will be good if the Foreign Minister could write an op-ed in New York Times and similar dailies. India has a strong case and there is no virtue in concealing it.

Government is at fault in not keeping the citizens informed. Anyone who has worked in the government knows that it cannot afford to come out with the whole truth in a dynamic and sensitive situation. That is why competent governments give a daily briefing where the public knows that while the government is not telling the whole truth it is not lying either.

What is shareable with the public is shared. The practice of giving inputs through 'sources' might be needed at times, but that should not come in the way of regular briefing. In the absence of a competent communication policy rumors spread. For example, there was a rumor that 20 Indians were under detention. Later, we were told, apparently by 'sources' that 10 Indians were released by China after talks at the military level.

Coming to the military, Colonel Santhosh Babu was taken by surprise and was badly outnumbered by the Chinese who were keeping an eye on India's strength and deployment in the area through drones. Are we to believe that the Indian Army has no way of knowing what our adversary is doing?

We need a paradigm shift at the military level and at the diplomatic level. When China makes an inroad at point A, India should do two things: Resist the intrusion and simultaneously make an inroad at point B into the Chinese side where India has local advantage. Of course, the military might have already compiled a list of such points.

When there are incursions by both sides at points A, B, C, D, E, and F, China might agree to sit at the double and the two sides can truthfully agree to 'mutually' disengage and withdraw. Otherwise, China takes two steps, India protests and China goes back only one step.

A word about the LAC. In the 1950s Zhou Enlai had pressed Nehru to start talking on the border on the basis of LAC. Nehru refused because that would have implied India's giving up its claim on its territory that China had already occupied.

In the 1980s, China made many inroads that India was not able to resist except for the *Operation Falcon (1986)* when General Sunderji was the Army Chief.

China again brought up the idea of LAC and in 1993 Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao decided to accept the notion of LAC. The 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas was signed. However, no map was attached to the agreement showing the LAC existing at the time of signing. The satellites could have produced a map with sufficient resolution and the LAC should have been drawn on the map that should have been part of the agreement.

The absence of a map made it possible for China to create new LACs from time to time. China has rebuffed India's attempts to exchange maps.

It is painfully clear that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's informal summits have delivered not even a mouse. If he had established a rapport with Xi Jinping, the two would have had a Skype summit and de-escalated the tension.

It was rather pathetic to see the two sides repeating ad nauseum that they have agreed to work out a solution based on the instruction of the two leaders not to let differences become disputes. It follows that one of the leaders, if not both, are unable to prevail with their subordinates.

What should be the paradigm shift required on India's side? We have already suggested a plan of action on periodical intrusion by China. What about a broader policy shift? Is it feasible to inflict some pain on China when it misbehaves? Chinese companies have been debarred from quoting for a BSNL tender. A contract given by the Railways has been canceled. There are calls for a boycott of Chinese goods.

It is important to avoid knee-jerk reactions. Let us look at the big picture. Imports from China have led to a degree of de-industrialization of India. But, it will be illogical to blame China for it. It is Indian companies that have imported as some of them found that it was more profitable to import and distribute rather than manufacture in India.

In this context it is good to recall how South Korea opened up its market. The government in consultation with the industry made three lists:

A of sectors where the country has the competitive edge over the rest of the world.

B of sectors where the country has no reasonable ground to gain any competitive edge with the rest of the world.

C of sectors the country might be able to establish an edge over two years.

The government told the industry that goods on lists A and B would be freely importable with immediate effect. As to C there will be another consultation after two years. If by then the industry has not gained the edge those items also will be importable.

It is rather late in the day to do what South Korea did. But India should start making the three lists. If manufacturing in India that contributes a decreasing share to the GDP has to be revised, we cannot have imports from China without any restrictions.

There is another matter of great importance. There are one or two corporate behemoths deeply engaged with and beholden to China. These behemoths are close to the government. Will they agree to any blockade? Further, there are sectors such as the pharmaceuticals substantially dependent on imports from China.

All told, economic blockade of China will cause more harm to India than to China. But it is high time India took its own slogan of 'Make in India' seriously.

The signaling to China should be that India has decided to revise its policy and it will expect China to respect its own word. Summoning the Chinese Ambassador in the morning of the 16th June would have conveyed the message. Why not do it now.

Post Scriptum:

The above was written an hour before the All-Party Meeting convened by the Prime Minister on June 19 where he categorically stated that there was no incursion into Indian territory and that no Indian posts had been taken over by China.

The Indian public is puzzled as the Prime Minister contradicts on the 19th what the External Affairs Minister told his Chinese counterpart on the 16th. Is this the theater of the absurd? Even Eugene Ionesco could not have written this.

Has not the Prime Minister caused a paradigm shift in the opposite direction? If any of our readers had anticipated this shift, they should tell us.

The reader can very well guess why the Chinese Ambassador was not summoned. Incidentally, India does not have posts everywhere on the absurdly called Line of Actual Control and China could not have taken over non-existent posts!

Ambassador KP Fabian is retired from the Indian Foreign Service

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