

INDIA CHINA

Last week, both India and China announced that after high level military-to-military talks on intrusions and clashes in Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley, Demchok and Daulat Beg Oldie in eastern Ladakh, a disengagement process had started and that both sides had begun a withdrawal.

But come Tuesday, June 16, both sides announced fresh clashes of greater intensity in which at least 20 Indian Army soldiers were killed. The hope that India and China are on the road to peace was dashed. The renewal of the clashes, albeit unarmed, clearly indicates that the question is not about the border per se but is larger and geo-political. The border clashes are but reflections of a large conflict over the two countries' ambitions in the South Asian and Indo-Pacific region.

Under President Xi Jinping, China has acquired global economic and strategic ambitions which raise the hackles in New Delhi and Washington. Through its flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has already acquired considerable economic stakes in South Asia, some of which, like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, have great strategic value also.

In a bid to counter China's moves in the region, India spurned China's invitation to participate in the BRI. India is also openly indulging in propaganda against the BRI saying that it lacks transparency in funding and in its politico-strategic intent. India also alleges violation of its sovereignty over Gilgit Baltistan in Pakistan-held Kashmir, which comes under CPEC. Furthermore, India has joined the US and Australia to form the "Quad" a maritime alliance meant to thwart China's bid to change the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific Ocean.

Side by side with the popular call in India for a boycott of Chinese goods, the Indian government has said that all investments by China, whether direct or indirect, would have to get its clearance first, thus virtually keeping China out of the ambitious "Make in India" plan which envisages massive foreign investments.

On its part, China has been blocking India's entry into the UN Security Council as a permanent member, and to curry favor with Pakistan, which is hosting CPEC, China has been consistently opposing a UN ban on Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists. Given this background, it is hardly surprising that there are clashes on the Sino-Indian border and that there are claims and counter-claims on where the border lies.

China may well be keeping the border issue unresolved to needle, embarrass and pressurize India every time a need arises, Shivshankar Menon, India's former Foreign Secretary and National Security Advisor, suspects. In his book Choices: Menon says: "China will keep the boundary dispute alive as a lever in its relationship with India." He goes on to say that it is "very unlikely" that China will seek an early settlement of the boundary issue no matter how reasonable India may be.

According to Menon, a hardline is only to be expected from a Chinese leadership which is increasingly relying on nationalism for its legitimacy. Such a regime will not find it easy to make the compromises necessary for a boundary settlement, Menon explains. India too is in the grip of nationalism and a nationalist government which makes it difficult for Indian negotiators to make compromises. The expansion of the Indian media, particularly television and the social media, has resulted in nationalism being played up daily. The shrill voices over TV and provocative posts on the social media narrow the government's options in the negotiations, Menon points out.

In addition, there are other international factors which need to be taken into account to understand what is happening on the Sino-Indian border. China has become aggressive not only vis-à-vis India, but also vis-à-vis many of its other neighbors, especially those aligned with the US. India is included in this category as America and India have described themselves as "strategic partners" and "natural allies."

Being the world's second largest manufacturing nation, China is hungry for raw materials and these are available aplenty in its neighborhood. Beijing's forward policy in the South China Sea stems from the estimation that the sea has 290 trillion cubic feet of natural gas; one-tenth of the entire annual global fish catch; and 17.7 billion tons of crude oil which is higher than Kuwait's 13 billion tons. Besides the South China Sea is the waterway through which 50% of the world's crude oil is transported.

China is in dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands located in the East China Sea between Japan, China, and Taiwan. In the 1970s, China got interested in Senkaku islands when the existence of oil reserves surfaced. In 2012, Japan bought three of the disputed islands from their private owner prompting large-scale protests in China. To counter Japan, China set up the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone which included the Senkaku Islands. China also demanded that aircraft entering the zone should file a flight plan and submit radio frequency or transponder information.

When the Philippines took China to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) over its "nine-dotted line" claim which enabled China to claim a major part of the South China Sea, Beijing refused to participate in the arbitration proceedings and rejected the findings of the Tribunal.

China and Vietnam are fighting over the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. The Philippines, Malaysia and other countries also claim the same island. China is also seeks full sovereignty over "autonomous" Hong Kong by enabling its stringent security laws to be applicable to it. Of course China is determined to seize US-backed Taiwan which it has been claiming since 1949. Beijing has revived the old practice of carrying out military activities near Taiwan.

However, according to Prof. M.Taylor Flavel of MIT, China has solved many of its border problems with neighbors. Out of the 23 which it had in 1949, only six remain unresolved. For geo-political reasons and friendship, China has even surrendered 50% of its claim in some cases.

Sometimes, domestic crises have made Beijing amenable to compromise as was the case in the 1990s, when China's image was poor because of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. At that time, settlement of border disputes amicably helped bring about stability at home.

But Menon pointed out in a recent video interview to a website, that problems created by COVID-19 mismanagement in the initial stages have made the Xi Jinping regime aggressive. Its way of shoring up its image at home and aboard is to rouse nationalism and jingoism. Thus, there are aggressive military movements on its land and sea borders. China is now also into "wolf diplomacy" slamming critics abroad.

Severe criticism of China's COVID-19 mismanagement by the West has necessitated consolidation at home and aggression abroad. This was reflected in the "Two Sessions" of the Communist party held in Beijing in May. Among the resolutions passed at the sessions were those for domestic reform and for securing a tighter control over autonomous Hong Kong which, according to Beijing, has become a bridgehead in a Western plan to destroy mainland China.



More than 13000 cases reported on Wednesday. Total death crosses 12,000.