

### Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visits India in atmosphere of distrust

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China's deliberate and prolonged military intrusion near Daulet Beg Oldi in the Depsang Plains in Aksai Chin cast a perceptible shadow over Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's first visit (May 19-22, 2013) to India as Premier as well as over India-China relations. Beijing's thin attempt at dismissing the intrusion and mollifying India, by stating that Li Keqiang's choice of India as the first stop on his four nation tour indicated the importance he attached to relations with India, did not cut much ice.

The timing of the intrusion, its extended depth, and Beijing's failure to respond to New Delhi's requests to withdraw or pay heed to the damage caused to India-China relations by this action, make clear that this was a deliberate act. The intrusion, though not the first in a series whose frequency has been increasing since 2008, was timed to deliver a multiplicity of messages. The intrusion and its coverage by the media ensured that while Li Keqiang, in keeping with age-old Indian traditions of hospitality was not snubbed, neither did his visit yield positive or substantive results. It has also substantially damaged India-China relations.

Confirmation that the military intrusion had Beijing's approval was borne out by the remarks in late April of some diplomats of the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi. In conversations with a few foreign diplomats from South East Asia, they dismissed the description of the PLA's action as "intrusion" or "incursion" asserting that the troops were inside Chinese territory. They added that Chinese Premier Li Keqiang would reiterate this position in his meeting with his Indian counterpart and not yield ground. Interestingly, at least one Beijing-based foreign diplomat says he was told by an official in Beijing that there had been no intrusion and that Chinese troops were inside their territory.

An intriguing aspect of the intrusion is its timing, occurring as it did just weeks before the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Delhi. Moreover, it was Beijing that had requested the visit despite the fact that it was the turn of the Indian Prime Minister to visit. Unless it was Beijing's calculation that India would yet again gloss over, or try to sweep, the intrusion under the carpet, such an incident should have been expected to impact adversely on the visit. The contention that it was an isolated incident, or a venture by a local commander, is untenable.

Intrusions by Chinese forces have been occurring with increasing frequency since 2008 along the length of the entire 4057 kilometers border and in each case are intended to test Indian responses and preparedness in addition to keeping India under

pressure. Given that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been steadily tightening the already firm grip it has on the People's Liberation Army (PLA), it is not feasible that any local commander could have attempted such an adventure. Further, there have been no such behavioral aberrations by local Chinese troops over the past so many years. The action was definitely approved by the top CCP leadership in Beijing.

The intrusion had at least three assessed objectives. In addition to demonstrating the extent of China's territorial claims, it sought to probe the readiness and response capability of the Indian forces deployed along the border. This has become particularly important for PLA Commanders as their preparations are for a quick, decisive local war. Current Chinese military literature makes amply clear that China's leadership and the PLA envisage a decisive short-duration conflict using overwhelming firepower that concludes with a Chinese victory within a few days and certainly before it can enlarge and involve other powers. In fact, China is preparing for a local war where the initial first phase opens with a cyber-offensive targeted at military and civilian public utilities. The next stage involves the use of missiles and that is followed by use of the PLA Air Force. Ground troops would be used only in the final mopping up stage if required. This doctrine is a major factor prompting Beijing's recent proposal to Delhi on border management, which suggests that neither side should patrol the LAC up to a specified depth on their own side. Realities of capability and terrain would place India at a disadvantage in case this is accepted.

The larger objective was to warn India against expressing support to Japan during the upcoming visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Tokyo. Beijing is very suspicious of US designs and apprehensive that the US is putting together an anti-China coalition aimed at 'containing' China. It sees this coalition as comprising US, Japan, Australia, India, Vietnam and the Philippines. Beijing has separately on a few occasions stated that its territorial claims with India and Japan would be resolved only through the use of force and that, in such a case, China would 'pick' India as its choice of target.

This aggressive policy is not new and is being followed by the Chinese leadership since 2008. Its reassertion of maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea, where it has resorted to tough actions including the use of PLA Navy vessels against the Philippines and Vietnam, is an example. China has simultaneously assertively pushed its territorial claims with Japan over the Senkakus, called the Diaoyu by the Chinese. Notwithstanding the growing tension that these actions prompted, Beijing chose to revive and recently assert its claims over the Leodo rock off South Korea and the James' Shoal off Malaysia. These were accompanied by equally hostile actions and pressure against India.

China's leaders are continuing with their aggressive policies despite the adverse international reaction. Doubts expressed by Chinese scholars and analysts of the effectiveness of China's diplomacy and jettisoning of the policy advocated by Deng Xiaoping of 'lie low, bide your time', have been disregarded. The new policy is intrinsically more insensitive to the concerns of its neighbours. China's pursuit of the tough new stance despite the damage to the policy of ensuring a 'peaceful neighbourhood environment', suggests that China's foreign policy objectives have changed. It also displays the Chinese leadership's confidence including in the capability of its armed forces to tackle pressure on more than one front simultaneously.

The 35 paragraph joint statement issued at the end of Li Keqiang's stay in Delhi on May 20, reveals little forward movement on substantive issues. 57-year old Li Keqiang, who arrived with an economic agenda, perhaps did not get all that he wished for. India did raise issues of concern like the border issue and incident in Ladakh, but he offered no clarity on the latter. Regarding resolution of the border dispute, he reportedly said it was dealt with by Chinese President Xi Jinping. On the issue of diversion of the Brahmaputra River, the Chinese did agree to consult and share data, but given their past record and the absence of definitive time-lines the prospects for tangible progress appear negligible. India also departed from usual practice and declined to reiterate that Tibet was an integral part of China in the joint statement. The last occasion such a stand was taken was during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit in 2010. Reference to the Asia-Pacific was broad and focused on international cooperation and law.

Li Keqiang did raise the question of the Dalai Lama and insist that his activities be restricted, but the Indian riposte was that he was a spiritual leader. China continued to deny India any support for its bid for a Permanent seat on the UNSC. The joint statement contained references to nuclear non-proliferation, total nuclear disarmament, need for development of civil nuclear energy and the fight against terrorism. It contained an odd reference to not permitting the use of each other's territory for activities against the other, obviously pointing to the north-east insurgents operating out of China and the Dalai Lama.

While the Chinese Premier's visit does not appear to have resulted in tangible gains for either side, both countries did demonstrate a desire to continue dialogue and engagement and resolve contentious issues peacefully. For India, though, it remains a distinct probability that actions similar to the recent one in Aksai Chin will recur. It must contend with the reality that China will divert the Brahmaputra and continue to follow an aggressive policy intended to keep India under pressure. India needs to evolve an effective policy to counter Chinese ambitions and ensure a calibrated enhancement of resistance to Chinese pressure. China's domestic economic difficulties and growing societal discontent are also vulnerabilities that would constrain Chinese leaders.

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