

When Silence Speaks Louder than Words: Indian Discourses on the 'China Threat'

Written by Chietigj Bajpae

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China has renewed its cartographic aggression towards India by unilaterally renaming 11 locations in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as 'South Tibet' ('Zangnan'). The announcement by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs on 1 April to 'standardise' the names of these locations was the third such move after Beijing renamed six districts in Arunachal Pradesh in 2017 and 15 more locations in 2022. Beyond demonstrating the precarious state of the China-India relationship following their border conflagration in 2020, this incident shows the importance of words, rhetoric and discourse in the bilateral relationship. In this context, there is a proclivity by Indian officials to remain restrained when talking about the China threat by downplaying tensions and criticising those raising concerns about China as scare- and warmongering. This came to light recently when India's outspoken Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar noted the futility of picking a fight with a 'bigger economy' (1:08).

Specific reasons can, of course, be cited for Jaishankar's statement. Most notably, with India holding the presidency of the G20 and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation this year and China being a member of both organisations, it makes little sense to escalate tensions with a country with which India will have to interact as the host country. Jaishankar is also right in noting that the balance of power is clearly tilted in China's favour with the country's nominal GDP roughly six times that of India.

But to hear the key foreign policy spokesperson of a government that prides itself on a muscular foreign policy essentially admit that it is no position to challenge China is out of character of the government and Jaishankar himself who is famed for taking a bold and blunt position on international affairs. This is the same person who shot down criticism of India's close relationship with Moscow following the Russian invasion of Ukraine by noting that Europeans buy more energy from Russia in an afternoon than India buys in a month. India is willing to "call out" European hypocrisy and double standards despite the fact that the EU economy is bigger than that of India, with the EU being India's major trade partner. But why is New Delhi unwilling or unable to be as forthright on China, a country that is not merely challenging India rhetorically but also threatening its sovereignty and security?

China Threat vs. Pakistan Threat

This becomes even more evident when comparing how Indian officials address the China threat and Pakistan threat, with a more vocal, blunt and assertive response to the latter compared to a more restrained response to the former. For example, India executed a provocative 'surgical strike' operation crossing the Line of Control into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir in 2016 following the Uri terrorist attacks, as well as carrying out a pre-emptive airstrike on terrorist training facilities in Balakot, Pakistan in 2019.

Contrast this to the response to the clashes between China and India in the Galwan Valley in June 2020, which culminated in the first casualties in hostilities between both countries in over four decades. In this case, New Delhi exercised restraint by downplaying tensions with China. Notably, the government initially denied that a border intrusion had taken place. Of course, specific reasons can be cited for this, including the fog of war and efforts to secure the release of captured Indian soldiers. But as scholar and journalist Manoj Joshi notes in his book (p.26), "having positioned himself as a nationalist and, indeed, a belligerent defender of India, the prime minister suddenly

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adopted a restrained tone”.

From 1962 to 1994

Before viewing this as a criticism of the current government, it should be noted that this has been a consistent theme across almost every Indian government since well before the infamous Sino-Indian war in 1962. The naiveté of India's China policy during the tenure of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru is well-known with the rhetoric of 'Hindi-Chin Bhai Bhai' ("India and China are brothers"). New Delhi made several strategic blunders during this time by either being unwilling or unable to publicly acknowledge that China was challenging India's security and strategic interests. Notably, the 1954 agreement between both countries – while heralded for launching the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence (or *'Panchsheel'*) – was a major strategic blunder in which New Delhi forfeited all its rights in Tibet by formally acknowledging that Tibet was part of China without getting any concessions in return. Moreover, as late as 1959, Nehru continued to cling to claims that there was no territorial disagreement with China, ignoring the fact that the border had not been mutually settled while the Chinese were constructing a road through disputed territory in Aksai Chin.

After Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988, both countries normalised relations. Undergirding this was a narrative to separate the unresolved territorial dispute from the broader contours of the bilateral relationship. This led to recurring instances of disagreements between both countries being downplayed for the greater good of the bilateral relationship. For instance, in 1994 Prime Minister Narasimha Rao made his famous Singapore lecture, which is regarded as the first public articulation of what would eventually become known as India's 'Look East' and subsequent 'Act East' Policy. During the subsequent discussion, numerous questions were raised about the China-India relationship, and in each instance, Rao dispelled the prospects for rivalry ("there are no tensions there right now, and there will not be" in the future), even going as far as to claim that those asking the questions were seeking to instigate tensions and raise controversies where none existed ("don't create a rivalry").

Again, specific reasons can be cited for this with India being in the early stages of recovering from a devastating economic crisis and the collapse of the Soviet Union – New Delhi's primary strategic patron – both in 1991. In this context, India needed to maintain a stable periphery as it focused on economic liberalisation. The military was also preoccupied with a raging insurgency in Kashmir, so there was limited interest in enflaming tensions with China.

Nonetheless, despite the specific circumstances surrounding these periods – from the pre-1962 focus on third world solidarity to the early post-Cold War focus on economic liberalisation to the renewed Sino-Indian hostilities following the clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020 – a consistent theme has been a desire to downplay the 'China threat'. This alludes to broader structural factors driving India's foreign policy towards China.

The Roots of Restraint

Several scholars have taken note of the Indian proclivity for restraint in discourses about the Sino-Indian relationship: Writing in 2010, Indian strategic analyst Raja Mohan noted that "the quaint-coded formal statements between New Delhi and Beijing often tend to obfuscate the tension between the two rising powers" (p.16). This echoed the view of academic John Garver a decade earlier when he noted in 2001 that the "conflictual aspect of the Sino-Indian relationship contrasts with the rhetoric of China-India friendship" at the official level (p.9).

Of course, the need to be diplomatic or non-confrontational in the language of official statements means that there will always be a gap between what policymakers signal in their official statements and their true or underlying motivations. However, this has been even more pronounced in the case of the Sino-Indian relationship where diplomatic rhetoric often masks more competitive and confrontational aspects of the bilateral relationship. In this context, it is often what is not said that may reveal more about the true intentions undergirding India's foreign policy towards China.

Returning to the comparison of the 'China threat' and 'Pakistan threat', it is easy to see why the latter receives a more vocal response in Indian official discourse. The legacy of partition, the separatist insurgency in Kashmir and recurring

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terrorist attacks in India by Pakistan-sponsored terrorist groups have clearly played a significant role in making the Pakistan threat more visceral to the Indian psyche. This has been further fuelled by the ruling BJP's Hindu nationalist (*Hindutva*) ideology, which has made the Pakistan threat more well-entrenched in the party's ideology.

However, one could argue that the Pakistan threat is less real today given a balance of power that is clearly tilted in India's favour. This is only set to grow amid renewed concerns about Pakistan emerging as a near-failed state following last year's devastating floods, and the country's dire economic situation and poor internal security situation, all of which has been exacerbated by the country's dysfunctional politics. Moreover, a ceasefire agreement between both countries has largely held despite the decision by the Indian government to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019, which has been a thorn in the India-Pakistan relationship.

Contrast this with China, which poses a more existential threat to India, both directly and militarily along their 3,400 km border and indirectly through its coercive economic influence, which has manifested in its support for countries around India's periphery and as a long-term threat to India's global aspirations. Contrary to Jaishankar's statement, it is not merely the power imbalance that is driving India's restraint on China. The power imbalance in the bilateral relationship is a relatively recent phenomenon with the GDP of both countries being almost equal as recently as 1990.

Rather, the roots of this restraint can be found in India's well-entrenched foreign policy stance of strategic autonomy, which is a successor to an earlier position of non-alignment. Embedded within this is solidarity with other countries in the 'Global South'. This is a legacy of India's leadership role in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War that has persisted into the present day. This means that if India has to choose between a bloc of countries comprising the West (which happened to lead former colonial empires) and emerging economies (comprising former colonies), it will more likely choose the latter. This puts India in a difficult position regarding China, which also claims to speak for the Global South and whose voice will only grow louder, as noted by Beijing's recently unveiled Global Development/ Security/ Civilisation Initiatives.

Conclusion

To be sure, restraint in official discourse has been less visible among India's broader strategic elite – comprising media, academic scholars and former government and military officials – that have been more willing to "call out" China's assertive behaviour. However, more often than not government officials have dismissed these views as overly alarmist and ill-informed. This has been complemented by a proclivity to limit public discourse on India's China policy through constraining informed public debate by maintaining an information blackout on sensitive areas of the bilateral relationship. A key example of this is the government's continued reluctance to release the findings of Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report, which presents an assessment of the 1962 war.

At the same time, restraint in public statements does not necessarily translate into restraint on the battlefield. The Indian military has strengthened its position along the border and shown a willingness to challenge Chinese transgressions time and time again (in 2013 (Depsang Plains), 2014 (Chumar area), 2017 (Doklam plateau) and in 2020 (Galwan Valley)). Coinciding with China's most recent cartographic aggression on the border, the Indian government unveiled the Vibrant Villages Programme, which aims to strengthen border infrastructure. This has been complemented by actions to limit China and Chinese companies' access to strategic sectors in India.

But discourse matters. This became evident during French President Macron's recent visit to China where his appeasing statements contrasted with France's position as arguably the most significant European military power in the Indo-Pacific. Interestingly, like India, France maintains a strong commitment to strategic autonomy, which demonstrates the importance of ideology as much as material considerations in the formulation of foreign policy.

In India, despite a lively public debate on China, the government has consistently downplayed the China threat. And while there may not be a direct correlation between official statements and the substance of India's actions in confronting the China threat, nor are they entirely mutually exclusive. At the very least, such statements can create a climate of strategic complacency. The most obvious example of this came in the decade preceding the 1962 war

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where Nehru's worldview – embedded in such concepts as 'third world solidarity', 'Asian brotherhood' and 'non-alignment' – prompted him to ignore ground realities that ultimately led to India's humiliating defeat on the battlefield.

While the current government is clearly more hawkish and pragmatic, there is no room for complacency. While China's growth has slowed and it appears to have toned down its 'wolf warrior' rhetoric recently, the long-term direction of travel is clear. President Xi Jinping aims to oversee the 'Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation': While China 'stood up' under Mao and 'became rich' under Deng Xiaoping, Xi intends to make China 'strong' during his tenure. Reclaiming so-called 'lost territories' is a key component of this. Taiwan is obviously the clear priority, but one shouldn't discount the possibility of Beijing 'testing the waters' with other disputes. This entails Beijing employing salami-slicing tactics aimed at challenging the robustness of US commitments in Asia.

In this context, India can be seen as the weakest link in a web of emerging and evolving regional initiatives aimed at countering China's growing assertiveness given its position as a country that both maintains active territorial disputes and difficult relations with China while also lacking a formal alliance commitment from the United States (unlike Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and even Taiwan). As such, evidence of Beijing's bid to remake the regional order may not begin in the Taiwan Strait or the South or East China Seas – where there are more robust US security commitments in areas that hold global strategic significance (e.g., protecting global shipping lanes) – but rather along the Himalayan border with India where incidents of Chinese aggression are more likely to slip under the global geopolitical radar.

Given this, New Delhi needs to become more forthright in speaking about the China threat. Doing so will be easier said than done given the material (power imbalance) and normative (strategic autonomy and alignment with Global South) considerations driving India's foreign policy. But this will ultimately help to ensure a more robust Indian response to China's growing assertiveness.

About the author:

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