

DUCKING THE DRAGON

DELHI SENDING WRONG SIGNALS



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Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India last week did not generate adequate debate it should have, on the purpose and outcome. Many admirers of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi are trying desperately to discern some sagacity and strategy in Ministry of Foreign Affairs in hosting the Chinese premier in the wake of his critical reactions vis-a-vis the developments in Kashmir. Some of us thought it was a self-goal as it may have sent wrong signals to both our friends and critics in the international community.

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There are two schools of thought on our dealing with China. One would think it is a zero-sum-game, yet we have to deal with China as it is our biggest neighbour. The second school suggests that, given Chinese military and economic might, we have to manage China and minimise its animosity towards India. The third school of thought, which is sadly absent, is to confront and contain Chinese hegemonic ambitions. I, for one, argue for this line and show how it would help India's international image.

According to the first school, even though we may not expect much goodwill from Beijing, we need to continue the dialogue, so that bonhomie can dilute the brinkmanship, and China would do less harm to India. That is why even though, we do not have a concrete agenda to talk, the informal summits can help rebuild confidence and make-up the trust deficit etc. Some analysts would optimistically suggest that such summits hint at bigger things through symbolism, backed by pomp and pageantry. It is for the diplomats, bureaucrats and strategy analysts to fathom deep into the moods and minds of the leaders, unpack their postures and perspectives and translate them into action.

This was the spirit of Wuhan, the outcome of Modi's meeting Xi at Sanghai in 2017 in terms of 'Asthana consensus' and the atmosphere at Mamallapuram, in southern State of Tamil Nadu. They would refer to the helpful pronouncement in Wuhan, "to solve bilateral problems through dialogue and cooperation", and in Mamallapuram "to deepen economic corporation, to achieve enhanced trade and commercial relations, to better balance bilateral trade and to encourage mutual investments etc." In such summits, the apologists argue the gains are incremental and optical.

The second group talks about a practical approach of dealing with the Chinese mighty economy and to an extent the military. They tell us that the biggest take-away from this meeting is the High-level Economic and Trade Dialogue. Modi got Xi to pay "sincere" attention to the growing trade deficit for India which stands at \$53 billion. China has agreed to 2+1 formulae for projects, meaning India and China together doing projects in the third countries. The example touted for such cooperation is the joint training offered by Beijing- New Delhi to Afghan diplomats. Xi Jinping also offered India cooperation in defence sector, allowed Indian pharma companies to invest in China.

Both the leaders carefully avoided the 'touchy issues' like Kashmir, BRI, Regional Commercial and Economic Cooperation led by China and so on. India offered 5 year visa to Chinese nationals with multiple entries etc. These again are symbolic gestures.

The third way is to confront and contain China for which New Delhi is evading or unwilling. When the Dragon hisses, the elephant does not even wag its tale, forget its roar-

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ing. In fact, this has been the dilemma of New Delhi's policy towards China, starting from the off. Our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was inexplicably enamoured or sympathetic to Chinese who were struggling to shake off dictatorship. He allowed himself to be charmed by the Chinese lulling him to complacency that resulted in the war of 1962. He gave up the Security Council membership offered by both USA and USSR in favour of China. Tibet, a buffer zone, created by the British between India & China was given away without reciprocal gains. We are still paying for such costly mistakes.

The Modi regime is doing no better vis-a-vis China. Modi admirers would say New Delhi is demanding reciprocity from Beijing. That is a tall and unverifiable claim. Modi administration is unable to read the Chinese mind, for instance, the Chinese strategy for endless negotiations and the tactics to tire the enemy out by protracted parleys, in the line of 'Art of War' by Tsun Sui. Modi still thinks he can charm his way to Xi Jinping, so he still believes in "swing and stroll" diplomacy, which they began in Wuhan. In Mamallapuram, they strolled around for hours in the beaches of Tamil Nadu, and had two-and-half-hour long dinner. What was the result? Tangibly little!

Well, Modi was perhaps wanting to build and manage perceptions about Beijing-New Delhi relations. Evaluating the 'perception diplomacy', one can decode again two kinds of impact. One, New Delhi is attempting to tell the world that India can stand on par with China despite having 5 times less GDP, and 2 times less or so in military. The other could be that New Delhi is simply ducking the Dragon, avoiding a direct confrontation. To my mind, the latter is more probable as the actions of India's allies and partners show.

Given the overt antagonism by Beijing, for New Delhi not to react at all and host the Chinese premier with much pomp and show, amounted to a self-goal. Beijing was the first and only country in the world to take Kashmir to the UN. Later Turkey and Malaysia followed. It was Beijing that blocked for 10 years the declaration of Masood Azhar as the international terrorist. It is Beijing that is blocking India's membership of the Security Council and nuclear supplier group. China is making territorial claims on Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh and other parts.

Leaving only hours before for India, Xi Jinping said, "he was watching Kashmir" and days before, he had hosted the Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and Pak Army General Bajwa. New Delhi refuses to talk to Pakistan as it funds terror and attempts to destabilise India. Why does India engage with China which openly supports Pakistan and its terrorists? Is it simply because China is a bigger power? When Beijing says, "We are watching Kashmir", why not New Delhi says, "we are watching Hong Kong, Tibet and

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Xinjiang”. Such strategy of ‘no retaliation’ which can be perceived as ducking can be used as an alibi for countries like Nepal to jump into Chinese bandwagon.

That is what exactly happened. Nepal signed about 20 agreements with China. Kathmandu could turn around and say, if you spread the red carpet for your rival China, shall we not welcome them as we are a lesser power. New Delhi must realise, China secured independence through a violent arms struggle unlike our pacifist movement for independence.

China understands the language of ‘power’. Agreed, New Delhi cannot match one-to-one China in economy or military terms, not now or in near future. But there is a thing called ‘derived power’. New Delhi could draw power from its strategic alliances like ‘Quad’. It can construct a ‘virtuous circle’, to make up its capacity gap’ with China which suffers heavily from political deficit. New Delhi is sending wrong signals by ducking the dragon.

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