



**CCAS**

**Centre for China Analysis & Strategy**

**中国分析及策略中心**

20 July 2024

**'CHINA IS UNBENDING ON IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH INDIA'**

by JAYADEVA RANADE

There is negligible prospect of improvement in India-China relations in the near future. The absence of communication at high leadership levels and China's recent protest against economic assistance to projects in Arunachal Pradesh, on the thin pretext that it is disputed, are brazen examples. In fact, they point to China expanding the areas of pressure on India.

2. The bilateral relationship has been subjected to considerable strain ever since Beijing decided to make it clear that it will attempt to forcibly take the territories it claims and India will have to acquiesce to China being the leading power in the region. China has simultaneously redoubled efforts to establish its dominance over Asia. These developments have coincided with the view in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership that India has drawn uncomfortably close to the US. Additionally, Beijing sees India as adopting a tougher, unyielding stance, which includes standing firm and building defences along the border as well as initiating steps to close-off the burgeoning Indian market to China. Beijing views these as unwelcome steps, but considers that India does not yet pose a serious challenge.

3. In a cosmetic attempt to show that China wants to improve ties but it is India that is playing spoil sport, Beijing put out reports that it had sent its Ambassador, Xu Feihong, to India to improve ties. Xu Feihong arrived in India almost 20 months after his predecessor Sun Weidong departed in October 2022. Reports that Xu Feihong was being sent to India were in circulation for at least the past 3-4 months. Xu Feihong has no prior history of engagement with India or its neighbours. His arrival was preceded by disinformation peddled in Delhi that it is a move by Beijing to enhance communication and improve bilateral ties. This "line" has been echoed by a number of Indian journalists, academics and others. Taking advantage of India's open, democratic system, from the time he arrived Xu Feihong has virtually been holding court and meeting Indian politicians, officials including former diplomats, and opinion makers calling on him. He has also met Indian businessmen and travelled to rural areas in India. The reality is, however, different. China has no intention of taking substantive steps to ease tensions on the border, but is interested in maintaining commercial and economic access to India's market. At the same time, it is determined to keep India under protracted and sustained pressure.

4. There are other signs of China's belligerent attitude. A clear recent indicator of Beijing's intentions was the failure of Chinese President Xi Jinping to observe even basic

diplomatic niceties and congratulate Modi on his election as India's Prime Minister for the third term. Xi Jinping has till today not congratulated Modi. In fact, Xi Jinping has initiated no direct contact or meeting with Indian Prime Minister Modi since April 2020! Chinese Premier Li Qiang did send a routine message of congratulations, but only after Modi's swearing in on May 5, as if there were any doubt that he would be sworn in! China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained it would have been "premature" to convey greetings prior to the swearing in. There was, however, no such apparent hesitation in inviting Indonesia's President-elect on an official visit prior to his swearing-in! There is no doubt that Xi Jinping's failure to send a message of congratulations was deliberate. Whether it is Beijing's ploy to restrict interactions between China and India at the level of the Chinese Premier remains to be seen.

5. China's prickliness was on display also when Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te congratulated Prime Minister Modi. Lai Ching-te's greetings mentioned expanding ties and Prime Minister Modi responded with similar sentiments. China objected, as expected, and elicited an appropriate reply from India's Ministry of External Affairs.

6. These steps are in conformity with Xi Jinping apparently not wanting to meet Prime Minister Modi or visit India. He skipped the G-20 Summit and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meetings. A senior CCP cadre had divulged a couple of months prior to the G-20 Summit that China had decided that Xi Jinping would not attend the G-20 Summit and calculated it would, therefore, be a failure. However, these decisions were blunders and, in reality, India scored a coup! Xi Jinping's absence ensured there would be no distractions. The G-20 communique was successfully drafted and unanimously approved and, importantly, India brought the Global South within the G-20s fold!

7. The situation on the border has not changed and both countries have between 60,000 to 70,000 troops deployed on the front lines. Accommodation has been built by the Chinese on the border to billet additional reinforcements. The Chinese continue to induct new advanced weaponry and new military units to the border. Border defence infrastructure continues to be built at a frenetic pace. China has plans to build 35 military or dual-use airports by 2035. China is also building major arterial railways and roads along the border in Tibet and connecting China's border provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan to Tibet.

8. Xi Jinping signaled his attitude towards India on the opening day of the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, at the start of his third term as China's President, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). A video of the fateful Galwan clashes of July 2020 was screened on the opening day of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing for the over 2000 senior Chinese cadres comprising the past, present and future leadership of the CCP. Foreign affairs does not figure prominently at the Party Congresses and this was an undiluted message to those present of Xi Jinping's views on India. Since April 2020 when he authorised China's PLA to conduct a major military manoeuvre and intrude in Ladakh, Xi Jinping has sought to ignore India. He has not initiated any communication with the Indian leadership. In these past 4 years he has not had a conversation with Prime

Minister Modi. The seniormost Chinese leader to communicate with Indian leaders has been Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. This effort to isolate India could presage an attempt to downgrade communications with India to the level of the Chinese Premier, who has no authority on Foreign, Military or Border Affairs. In recent years China's main interlocutors with South Asian countries have been the Foreign Minister or the head of the CCP CC International Liaison Department or, at a higher level, the Prime Minister.

9. China's real attitude towards India is now more clear. The Chinese foreign ministry's remark on July 10 that "South Tibet is China's territory," and India's development activities in the area are "illegal and invalid" underscored its adamant attitude on border issues and its approach. The same day Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who is also China's Special Representative for border talks, congratulated Ajit Doval on his reappointment as National Security Advisor and Special Representative observing he is ready to "properly handle" issues related to the situation on the ground in border areas. Use of the phrase "properly handle" indicates that discussions would be in accordance with China's stated position on the border since April 2020.

10. China's attitude will undoubtedly colour its position on Pakistan and in border negotiations with India. China will also explore other avenues for applying pressure on India, especially in international financial organisations. India needs to factor this while considering any proposals by Beijing to coordinate positions in international bodies or give China a free pass on issues like human rights, Tibet, Xinjiang etc. Beijing will additionally try to increasingly use and activate Indian businessmen and chambers of commerce to exert pressure on the Government to facilitate travel by Chinese personnel to India and imports from China. Such concessions by the Government would be at the cost of the public exchequer while further increasing the already galloping trade deficit and severely undermining the effort to 'make-in-India'. Indian businesses have other options, though more expensive, to acquire technical knowhow and machinery. India must not be taken in by Chinese propaganda or pressure, but further tighten controls on imports from China. Indonesia, for example, has recently imposed 200 percent duties on all Chinese goods.

-----

(The author is President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy and Member of the National Security Advisory Board.)