

Threat at the Trijunction

Has China miscalculated on the border? Or, is this a deliberate provocation?
Either way, it raises huge diplomatic challenges for New Delhi



Indian Army personnel on India-China border

diplomatic drive in the region to convince India's neighbours to balance against India with China's help. This will require astute Indian diplomatic response because there is a natural and understandable tendency for smaller states to counter a more powerful neighbour by seeking help from a distant power.

Second, it might also be an effort by China to stop the growing strategic entente between India and the US, given that this happened around the same time as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprisingly successful Washington visit. If so, it is another example of China's strategic ineptitude because this will only drive India closer towards the US by demonstrating seriousness of the China threat.

Finally, China's action might be a warning of something more serious coming down the pike, especially since it was China that complained first, taking the role of the victim. The idea that China might be deliberately planning a war appears implausible on the surface but it cannot entirely be ruled out either. In India, there is a general tendency to assume that states do not calculatingly start wars because India has rarely done so. Despite claiming territory that both Pakistan and China occupy, New Delhi has never attempted a military effort to retake it, with the partial exception of Siachen. Nevertheless, Indian decisionmakers will have to consider this possibility and India's defence preparedness if this should be the case. India in 2017 may not be the India of 1962 but New Delhi should remember that overconfidence was part of the problem then.

Irrespective of whether this was deliberate or a miscalculation, in the larger political context, China is leaving India with little strategic choice. New Delhi is realising slowly that, whether at the NSG or on the border, when China pushes, there is no middle ground. ■

:: Rajesh Rajagopalan

As with much of China's foreign policy, it is difficult to figure out whether China's actions at the China-Bhutan-India border trijunction is an example of China misperceiving how far it can push without creating a problem or deliberately intending to create a crisis with India as a way of sending a message. Either way, this raises some important challenges that New Delhi has to consider.

One important reason to consider the possibility that this was caused by China's misperception of how far it could push is the area where this incident is taking place. Though details about the incident and its exact location are still somewhat unclear, there seems to be agreement on all sides that the area in question – Doklam – is the one disputed between China and Bhutan, not China and India, though it does have implications for the Sino-Indian border as well as for Indian security in the region. This might suggest that China did not consider the possibility of India coming to Bhutan's aid. Some reports suggest that Chinese troops had intruded into this area before and that it pushed back Bhutaneese soldiers when they objected. China seems to have been trying to build a more permanent road through this area when India intervened. Thus, it is possible that the Chinese forces expected only the Bhutanese

forces to respond, whom they were confident of overpowering.

Such a hypothesis sits well with China's recent behaviour in other areas such as the South China Sea. There, China is trying to assert control over the entire area by building several artificial islands, in addition to those it already controls. China's approach appears to be to place its military forces in unoccupied areas, assert control and dare anyone who wants to challenge it to shoot first. This, of course, is similar to what it did along the disputed Sino-Indian border in the period leading up to the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Though there have been some exceptions, in most cases, China has mastered the art of using its military forces rather than military force to take over territory. China assumes, correctly, that once it has possession of the territory it wants, its overwhelming strength can deter smaller neighbours from militarily challenging it. This leaves diplomacy, international opinion, or international law as the only recourse which, as the Philippines discovered last year, isn't of much help.

Such an approach also carries risks. In this case, it leaves India with no choice but to respond, even though such a response carries with it obvious risks of escalation. This is not new either: China has shown such shortsightedness repeatedly. Its ag-

gressive behaviour in the South China Sea is leading to the very outcome that it was trying to prevent: driving its neighbours into tightening their security relationships with the US, and driving the US to shift from viewing Beijing as a global partner to a strategic competitor and even a threat. In South Asia, China's nuclear weapons technological assistance to Pakistan arguably hastened Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme and, in turn, India's decision to restart its own nuclear weapons programme, to China's detriment.

No Middle Ground

However, if this was a deliberate attempt by China to send a message to India, it raises other challenges for New Delhi. First, it may indicate an effort to split Bhutan and India. Though Bhutan has also sent a demarche to China, Beijing may have calculated that Bhutan would be unhappy about getting in the middle of a Sino-Indian squabble, driving Bhutan to a more neutral position, away from India and closer to China. This gives China an opportunity to offer concessions to Bhutan on the condition that Bhutan rescind its traditional security and political relationship with India. If this happens, it will create a very delicate diplomatic problem for New Delhi. But this will be in keeping with China's



The writer is professor of international politics, JNU, Delhi

NP AV

**PC, Laptop
Tablet, Mobile**

सुरक्षा

**Ransomware
Protection**

www.npav.net

**92.72.70.70.50
98.22.88.25.66**