Article -III

Chinese Military Adventurism and Assertive Behaviour

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Abstract

China’s expansionist vision has led to the violation of its neighbouring countries’ territories, antagonising many Indo-Pacific member states. Beijing’s resolution to unilaterally change the physical status quo in the South China Sea (SCS), and in the Himalayan plains has resulted in military stand-offs and clashes, while exacerbating China’s bilateral relations. China’s belligerent adventurism in the SCS has triggered several flashpoints and consequently, tensions have escalated in the region. China’s highhandedness as well as aggressive posturing in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh has led to the culmination of one of the biggest bloody military clashes between India and China since 1962. India has responded to China’s belligerence in a befitting manner that has rattled its adversary by using various tools of statecraft to stage its strong displeasure and signalled that it will no longer cow down to any sort of pressure.

Keywords: Adventurism, aggression, conflict, economic independence, expansionism, military development, and status quo.

From the cold arid mountains in the Himalayan plains, to further south in the Indian Ocean and far east to the East China Sea and SCS, China has been flexing its muscle and exercising its belligerent and aggressive expansionist posture to alter the territorial and maritime status quo unilaterally by its military. This deliberate hostile act, which has gone against the grain for several Indo-Pacific member countries including India and America, has united the ASEAN member states to raise voices against Beijing’s rising hostilities in the SCS. In the recently concluded 36th ASEAN Summit on June 26, 2020 the South East Asian nations have unanimously condemned China of not respecting and abiding by the 1982 United Nations Oceans’ treaty, and of repeatedly violating the international maritime norms with the intent to unilaterally iron out its maritime differences in the region. In a press statement post the summit, the Southeast Asian Association stated, “We reaffirmed that the 1982 UNCLOS is the basis for determining maritime entitlements, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and legitimate interests over maritime zones... The UNCLOS sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out.”

Furthermore, the ASEAN leaders stressed the importance of the use of self-restraint to ensure that maritime disputes be resolved peacefully and amicably in accordance with the existing international legal framework, while maintaining peace and stability in the region. They strongly opposed China’s use of military force to acquire and reclaim territories in disputed regions based on historical narratives and articulated that such actions would not only exacerbate hostilities between the member countries and China, but also entail towards the de-stabilisation of regional maritime peace.

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Likewise, China has threatened to disrupt the peaceful order in the Himalayan plains while attempting to unilaterally change the territorial status quo and by illegally laying claims over territories in countries like Bhutan, India, Myanmar, and Nepal. Amid the border tension with India, China has made new claims over Eastern Bhutan to which the latter rebuffed. Unlike the verbal duel with Bhutan, China encroached into India’s sovereign territory across the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) into the Union Territory of Ladakh, claiming it to be theirs, but were opposed and pushed back by the Indian armed forces. This unprovoked act of aggression cost India 20 brave lives including 76 soldiers who sustained major and minor injuries. Countries that are regarded as Beijing’s allies have also suffered the same fate as the other Indo-Pacific countries under China’s expansionist policy. In a recent development, Myanmar has come forward indirectly accusing China of hatching a nefarious plot to destabilise the country from within by supplying state of art weapons to insurgent groups along the Myanmar China border. Nepal, a long-term political ally of Beijing, has surrendered territories to China, including an entire village in the district of Gorkha along with 11 strategic areas and still chooses to remain completely mute over the illegal occupations of its territories. Despite China’s treacherous acts, Nepal, in show of support, has gone to the extent of raising anti-India protests under Beijing’s instructions.

**China Muscling Its Way Through the Disputed Territories**

The ASEAN members’ concern comes at a time when China has announced its intention of conducting a five-day military drill around the Paracel Islands in the SCS, a disputed territory between Vietnam and China. This military exercise has been termed as “highly provocative” by Philippines and has been viewed as a violation of territorial sovereignty by Vietnam which could bear adverse implications for Beijing’s ties with ASEAN. Along the lines of aggression, China’s attempt to unilaterally change the territorial status quo in Galwan Valley, in the Union Territory of Ladakh has culminated in an eight-week long military stand-off between India and China, where both armies are presently battle-ready on either side of the front.

While the stand-off continues to persist, the Chinese Navy has augmented its activities in SCS, raising security concerns for the regional member states. At the time of the fatal clashes in the Galwan Valley, Chinese submarines were spotted navigating through the Japanese waters, and in response Japan scrambled its jets and warships to locate and monitor the surreptitious movements of the foreign submersible. The age-old territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku islands has revived due to the daily presence and activities of Chinese vessels near the islands since mid-April, causing a growing hostility between the two countries. Additionally, Chinese combat aircrafts along with bombers have been regularly spotted breaching the Taiwan airspace in an act to claim and project Taiwan as an integral part of China since the time Taiwan’s President, Tsai-Ing Wen declared Taiwan as an independent sovereign state, openly denouncing and refuting China’s claim, and its ‘one country two systems’ policy.

Moreover, Taiwan’s announcement, to conduct its annual live-fire drill and military exercise in the month of July and September this year with the sole purpose of deterring Chinese forces from landing on its shores, has chagrined Beijing. In a riposte, Beijing deployed additional squadrons of fighter jets and warships near the Taiwan Strait, while augmenting its maritime patrol and air activities in and around the island nation. To
acquire full control over Taiwan, China has resorted to the “island encirclement” strategy, an offensive military exercise that involves routine military drills around the island nation. In an extension of this strategy, earlier this year in April, a flotilla of Chinese warships including an aircraft carrier cruised close to Taiwan in a show of strength, signalling explicitly Beijing’s intent to take control of Taiwan by force.

Following the incident on May 29, 2020, Li Zuocheng, the Chinese Chief of Joint Staff Department, confirmed that China is determined to use all the necessary means and resources available at its disposal to thwart Taiwan from gaining its self-determination. He stated, “If the possibility for peaceful reunification is lost, the people’s armed forces will, with the whole nation, including the people of Taiwan, take all the necessary steps to resolutely smash any separatist plots or actions... We do not promise to abandon the use of force, and reserve the option to take all necessary measures, to stabilise and control situation in the Taiwan Strait.” Beijing has unequivocally stated that it will not hesitate to use its military force to seize Taiwan, if required.

Since Beijing made its intentions clear vis-à-vis its stance on Taiwan, the United States (U.S) was forced to intervene to protect the democratic national interest of its ally and intensified its military activities around the island to safeguard Taiwanese sovereignty and national interests.

In yet another act of provocation and aggression by the Chinese, a Vietnamese fishing boat was sunk by a Chinese vessel in the disputed waters of the SCS in the Paracel Islands, sometime in the first week of April of this year. Philippines, a cordial partner of China, came to the support of Vietnam and condemned the Chinese for their aggressive posture and expressed their “deep concern” over the incident. Philippines reminded China of a similar incident that occurred last year, where a Filipino fishing trawler was sunk by a Chinese vessel in the contentious Reed Bank area, leaving 22 Filipino fishermen stranded in the open sea, until a Vietnamese boat came to their rescue. The Philippines foreign ministry stated that “Our similar experience revealed how much trust in a friendship is lost by it, and how much trust was created by Vietnam’s humanitarian act of directly saving the lives of our Filipino fishermen.”

In the same vein, earlier this year Chinese and Malaysian vessels wrangled in the SCS for a month, before the latter drillship returned to its waters after completing its task. A Malaysian state-run oil corporate drillship was exploring for maritime resources in the contested waters claimed by Malaysia, Vietnam, and China near Borneo Island. While the ship was exploring the waters, it encountered a Chinese Survey Ship escorted by a couple Chinese Coast Guard vessels that harassed the Malaysian vessel. As a countervail, Malaysia deployed its naval ships to negotiate the threat. In addition, America sent its warships to the scene as additional force for the Malaysian Navy. Beijing, in defence of its aggression, stated that its survey vessel was merely conducting routine naval activities in the area which falls under its control.

Clearly, the littoral nations in the SCS region have grown indignant at the atrocities committed by the Chinese, leading to attenuated relations. The military presence of the United States in the region has provided some sort of comfort and reassurance against the Chinese belligerence. The interception of the United States and its increasing military presence and activity in the SCS has amplified the military competition and exacerbated regional tensions in the area, as China attempts to militarily engage and
commensurate by gaining a strategic mileage over its adversary. As China uses its militarily muscle to illegally alter and expand its territorial and maritime boundaries, it only provides an opportunity for all the Indo-Pacific member countries to unite and form a strategic alliance to confront Chinese hegemony and coerce China to adhere to the international conventions and hold Beijing accountable for its aggressive and hostile acts.

Beijing is seen to be pursuing and exercising coercive strategy in the SCS by deploying intimidating tactics on its maritime neighbours which has exponentially increased the likelihood of conflict in the region. The principal motive behind Beijing’s unrestrained hostile tactics is the drive to acquire and seize the entire maritime energy resources in the region and to subsequently take complete control over the vital maritime trade routes. To galvanise the process of acquiring these natural resources, China is building artificial islands and militarising them by equipping the islands with radar systems airfields and harbours. These islands act as listening posts for the Chinese to monitor and interdict exploratory activities by foreign countries, as well as expand its outreach all over the SCS. The rising number of maritime confrontations in the region is the effect of Chinese intimidating tactics coupled with the commissioning of large number of fleets of coast guard and fishing trawlers aimed at harasing foreign vessels.

Shifting focus from the SCS to the Himalayan plains, one has witnessed similar hostility and menacing tactics deployed by the Chinese around their frontiers. China’s new claim over the Eastern region of Bhutan has been strongly rebutted. In a firm reply to Beijing, Bhutan has proclaimed that the Eastern region has not once been under contestation between the two countries in the past and that the region is indisputably an integral and sovereign territory of Bhutan. This baseless claim over Bhutan’s territory has come in the backdrop of China’s stand-off with India and is viewed as an attempt to harass and torment countries that are standing by India against China. In 2017, in an attempt to intrude into Bhutan, China encroached into Doklam, a trijunction point where Bhutan, China and India share borders, but were stopped by the Indian troops, resulting in a fierce two-month long stand-off before reinstating the status quo ante. China has been pushing the envelope far too often, with the intent to alter the status quo among the smaller nations, as it finds it convenient to coerce them to act in accordance with its own interests.

Discussing about intrusions, the Chinese Army had attempted to encroach into Indian sovereign territory across the disputed LAC in the Galwan Valley, in the Union Territory of Ladakh. It was fiercely opposed by the Indian troops while attempting to unilaterally change the status quo in several disputed areas. This military adventurism displayed by the Chinese has culminated in an intense military stand-off for over two months between the two countries which has not only witnessed bloodshed, expedited military build-up in a show of strength but has also included several rounds of diplomatic and military dialogues at various levels, to diffuse and disengage the escalating tension. Having reached a mutual agreement over military de-escalation and disengagement in disputed areas on June 14, both countries agreed to withdraw their troops and pull down all infrastructure in the designated points. However, China diverged from the agreement by laying an ambush on an Indian patrolling unit that was out to overlook whether the PLA had complied with the military agreement. To the unit’s surprise it found Chinese infrastructure still erected in the area. In compliance with the mutual
agreement, the patrolling party began to dismantle the Chinese infrastructure when they were suddenly and deliberately attacked by the Chinese. In the ambush, 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives and many others sustained serious injuries, not before giving the Chinese a bloody nose. According to the U.S intelligence reports and Indian military reports, China has sustained higher casualty than India and these reports have been recently confirmed by a recent statement issued by a PLA veteran in China.

The bloody debacle has exacerbated India-China relations and has culminated in a war-like situation on either side of the LAC, where the two militaries have rapidly stepped up their deployment on a war scale to stare each other down. China’s expansionist posture and hostility in the Union territory of Ladakh is a reaction of India’s speedy strategic infrastructural development, along the LAC and on the India-China border that facilitates rapid deployment of troops and military artillery to forward positions. The strategic border development project along the India-China border, not only provides the Indian armed forces easy access to the most remote areas along the LAC and the MacMohan Line, which was otherwise absent, but also mitigates the strategic vulnerability on the borders for want of prior surveillance capabilities. With better road connectivity and infrastructure, the Indian border security forces are enabled to carry out regular, rigorous, and deep patrols while enhancing its surveillance activities along the frontiers which has displeased the Chinese as it interferes and compromises its ‘Forward Policy’ and also eliminates the strategic edge over its counterpart.

Moreover, India’s recent act to reorganise the state of Jammu and Kashmir has not gone well with China, as it lays illegal claims over several parts of the Union Territory of Ladakh. Earlier this year, New Delhi issued a demarche to Pakistan, instructing it to vacate Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), since it rightfully belongs to India. Following this demarche, China grew wary of India’s intent and was perturbed that any such move by New Delhi, could jeopardise the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multi-billion-dollar economic project in POK. Keeping in view these points, China has resorted to exercise offensive measures against India to deter the latter from affecting its national interests.

In contrast to Bhutan and India, Myanmar has always maintained a steady and healthy relation with Beijing. Despite that, Myanmar has articulated its displeasure with China’s recent involvement in its internal affairs by aiding terror outfits. Myanmar has alleged that insurgent groups within Myanmar are economically funded and are equipped by a “foreign country” which is none other than China. These allegations were recently made after the Myanmar military seized a large cache of sophisticated weapons made in China from the Ta’ang National Liberation Army. Many of the terror outfits operate in the Myanmar-China border and hence get regular supply of arms and ammunition from the country.

China is believed to be meddling in the internal affairs of Myanmar, to promote and kickstart its One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI) in the country. According to intelligence reports, China is equipping, training, and funding a militia of 23,000 men called the United Wa State Army who are conversant with Mandarin and who operate on the Myanmar China border. The purpose to support armed insurgency in Myanmar is to create an environment for political instability. H
terror outfits, it will earn the politico-diplomatic credibility in the foreign government. In doing so, it will gradually infiltrate into the functioning of the state affairs and influence the decision makers to converge the state’s interests with Chinese interests. Bearing in mind, China’s art of political brinkmanship, Myanmar needs to be wary of China’s immediate and long-term strategy.

Discussing China’s long-term strategy and expansionist attitude, Nepal, a close ally of Communist China, has ironically suffered the most in terms of land ceded. In a latest development on June 24, China occupied an entire village in the district of Gorkha, Nepal, by simply dismantling the boundary pillars and extending them further into the Nepalese territory, and thereby legitimising the newly acquired territory as their own. Excluding this village, China has already seized 11 other strategic areas across the country, amounting to 33 hectares. Despite such outrage, the Nepal Government has been reticent regarding the land relinquished to the Chinese which delineates the current government’s political position vis-à-vis China.

**China’s Hegemonic Ambitions**

China’s highhandedness and expansionist posture both on land and on water has created profound unrest and has strained relations with most of its neighbouring countries including India. China’s ability to assert itself in the maritime front is a result of its steadfast maritime enterprise and its single pointed focus of transforming from a regional hegemony to a global hegemony. The capability of building the largest number of warships in the world has led China, to expand its maritime interests and claims beyond the East China Sea, SCS into the Indian Ocean, more than ever. China is resorting to the use of force to keep itself abreast with its expanding national and economic interests. This ambitious expansion by the Chinese in the East and South China Sea are essentially economic and energy centric, driven by the desire to monopolise the entire regional maritime trade routes, while paving way to eventually control and dominate the adjacent oceans.

In the context of the adventurism over land, Beijing has sought to consolidate and assert its position at various strategic points where it intends to build a trade route connecting the BRI infrastructure along with its economic corridor which would then enable a free flow of trade and commerce over land from the Easternmost region of China to the Western part of the Indian Ocean, through the Gwadar Port. However, to execute its plan, China needs India’s cooperation, to help facilitate the completion of the project, as it is strategically located in the Indian Ocean. Since, it has failed to convince the latter of the BRI over its existing territorial disputes with China and Pakistan, China has resorted to use coercion to unilaterally alter its status quo in the Himalayan plains.

China’s desire to project itself as a global power has been explicitly characterised in the promotion of the “G2” model. The concept being that China and America, two equal powers would share the global community in two spheres, reviving a colonial-style hierarchic structure. This Chinese narrative is veiled with the intention of making America recognise China as an equal, while covertly harbouring the resolution of eventually displacing it as a global super-power. This “G2” model cannot prevail for the simple reason being that Communist China is politically too ambitious and is
uninterested in collective work. Moreover, Beijing perceives the Asian order as a hierarchy, through the currency of power politics and places itself at the helm of the structure since it regards itself as a natural superior power. It opposes the construct of an equal partner, as it seeks to transform from a regional power to a global hegemon.

Additionally, China’s national security narrative treats America as its primary threat. This argument is substantiated by observing the concentration of the Chinese military strength on the Eastern front facing the SCS, with the intent of engaging the Americans in the region. Its entire strategic construct is directed towards displacing the United States as a global economic and military power. By doing so, it will achieve its goal of projecting itself as a global super-power and therewith, control the global hierarchy. It seeks to achieve this endeavour by the year 2049, to earmark and commemorate 100 years of Communist rule in China. To realise its ambitious drive within the stipulated time, Beijing has sought to consolidate and bulwark its hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region, by resorting to the use of military might before heading into the extra regional domains.

In the attempt to consolidate its primacy in the region, China must negotiate its regional threat. As per the Chinese discourse, India is perceived to be an obstruction for its regional aspirations due to multiple factors, namely, its growing economy, military capability, geo-strategic positioning, clashing of regional interests and its increasing regional and global influence. The ongoing military standoff over territorial disputes in Union Territory of Ladakh and its longstanding claim over the state of Arunachal Pradesh has further stymied and challenged China’s primacy in the region.

Besides using coercive action, Beijing has devised an economic strategy to expand its geo-strategic footprint up to the African continent. Under its grand economic strategy, Beijing offers loans to developing countries by supporting in the construction and development of their infrastructure. China not only provides monetary assistance but also manpower for infrastructure development which leads to the reduction of local employment opportunities in the respective countries. The economic aid programme offered by China is not intended for the betterment and upliftment of developing states, but is, in reality, a strategic manoeuvre to help foray into the country, to gain access to its natural resources and paralyse the local market by flooding it with its cheap goods. Unable to repay the exorbitant loans with its due interest, countries fall into the Chinese debt-trap and are compelled to surrender their strategic assets and infrastructure underlease as compensation and subsequently fall under Chinese control. By doing so, China establishes its footprint beyond its regional periphery. Using this geostrategic economic model, it has extended its footprint into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and has created a “String of Pearls” around India to curtail and limit its influence within the subcontinent, while it flourishes further west of the Indian Ocean, towards East Africa. Aligning with its strategic interest of dominating the IOR, China has enhanced its naval presence and activities in the ocean and has developed listening posts and naval and military installations in and around the IOR to safeguard its economic and security stakes in the region.
India’s Multi-Prong Response to Tame China’s Pugnaciousness

The recent unprovoked bloody clashes that occurred in the Galwan Valley due to China’s deceitful act has prompted India to take unprecedented stringent countermeasures against Beijing economically, technologically, and militarily. In response to the clashes on June 15, 2020, between India and China, the Indian Government has recently banned 59 Chinese apps in a “digital airstrike”, citing the safety and security of India’s digital data. Chinese apps are used as backchannels for gathering individuals’ data from countries of strategic interest, monitoring the political and social behaviour of its competitors, and influencing decision makers to converge with its own interests. The National Intelligence Law (2017) permits China’s intelligence office to gain unlimited access to all restricted facilities and gather private records, data, and communications of consumers from both the domestic and foreign commercial institutions in China. Therefore, by banning these Chinese apps the Indian Government has not only countered snooping activities and prevented violation of privacy but has also assured the integrity of its technological sovereignty.

As part of its economic offensive on China, India has cancelled several major multi-billion-dollar telecommunication, railway, and infrastructural investment projects with China. It has also banned the import of power equipment including a couple of its e-commerce platforms namely Club Factory and Shein. Emulating the Indian initiative of boycotting Chinese investments, the U.S has recently banned Chinese Huawei Technologies and ZTE Corp, citing national security threats and proposed to substitute the telecom equipment and networks with domestic ones. This economic strike has rattled the Chinese, as India is an important market for Chinese goods and services and this move has made China incur a heavy loss of several billion dollars. In a push towards Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India), Prime Minister Modi has pitched for indigenous production of goods and services while advocating the boycott of Chinese products in India. This initiative has stimulated the development of an indigenous economic hub for local produce of goods and services while resuscitating its parent idea of “Make in India.” With Chinese apps being scrapped from the country, it has provided opportunities for the domestic software industry to enter the technological innovation race and substitute the digital dependence and void created by the Chinese apps.

In conjunction with the digital and economic strike on Beijing, India has reinforced its military presence on the LAC, in the Eastern Theatre of Ladakh by operationalising three army divisions and deploying specialised mountain units including several tank squads, artillery, mechanised infantry squads and air defence missile systems to respond in equal measure with the Chinese military fortification and to deter any further military adventurism. Apart from the army, the Indian Air Force has operationalised squadrons of Apache attack helicopters and squadrons of upgraded Mig-29s and Sukhoi-30s MKI at the Leh airbase. Amidst the standoff with China, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) on July 2, 2020, has approved the procurement of military hardware to bulwark the operational capabilities of the Indian Armed Forces. Converging with the principle of Atmanirbhar Bharat, the MoD has invested Rs 31,482 crores of the total budget of Rs 39,800 crores in the indigenous defence industry. The procurement includes 21 Mig-29 aircrafts from Russia along with the upgradation of the existing 59 Mig-29s for Rs 7,418 crores. The government will also procure 12 Sukhoi-30 MKI from Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, for a price of Rs 10,730 crores. The rest of the budget has been used for the
development and production of the indigenous rocket system, long range land attack cruise missile systems, purchase of ammunition, Astra air-to-air missiles for the Indian Air Force and Navy, upgradation of the BMP armament and the purchase of software Defined radio system for the army. Awaiting the arrival of the first batch of the 36 Rafale fighter aircrafts from France later this month and the approval of procuring and upgrading the existing Russian aircrafts, the Indian Air Force will see a rise in the number of fighter squadrons and provide teeth to the overall air capabilities.

Deepening Diplomatic Ties

On July 3, 2020, the Indian Prime Minister visited Leh to take stock of the situation near the LAC, meeting and interacting with the injured soldiers who were involved in the bloody fracas with the Chinese while expressing his support and gratitude. During his address he stated, ‘The age of expansionism is over, now it is the Age of Development’, indirectly hinting at China. In a communication to the world community, he stated that India’s show of strength is to only maintain peace, while India’s progress is for the benefit and betterment of the world.

Following the address, Japan has sought to extend its cooperation with India and wished to deepen its strategic ties by offering to share defence intelligence with partners such as India, Australia, and the United Kingdom by amending its secrets law. In doing so, it could enable and facilitate information exchange of Chinese military movements in the region with its partners. This proposal comes weeks after India had signed the Mutual Logistics Support and communication sharing agreement with Australia for enhancing maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific against China’s maritime aggression. This pact facilitates the access of logistical support for a country’s military in its partnering country, while also providing the Indian Navy and the Airforce a greater outreach in the Pacific. This strategic partnership will lead to several joint exercises, training missions and joint operations between the two militaries. Additionally, both countries have signed to collaborate in defence science, technological research, and cyber technology. This strategic cooperation between the two countries not only signals to Beijing their intent of collaborating and ensuring a free, safe and ‘rules-based maritime order’ in the region but also of India’s entry into the Indo-Pacific region.

India has signed similar logistical support pacts with the United States and France which permits the refuelling and refitting of the military platforms at each other’s bases around the globe. As far as the agreement regarding the communication of intelligence is concerned, both America and France are pro-active with their Indian counterpart. Japan’s move to share its defence intelligence with India culminates in the completion of the Quad in terms of military between America, Australia, India, and Japan.

A combined institutional effort is imperative to deter and curb China’s bold adventurism in the Indo-Pacific region. Along with bilateral efforts, multilateral approaches need to be adopted to signal Beijing that such impudent expansionist behaviour will not be permissible. China needs to learn to respect and tread along a ‘rules-based’ international order, to resolve its mutual differences with its neighbours as well as with other states, rather than attempting to unilaterally change the status quo using coercion. In case China fails to comply with the international order, it needs to be held accountable for its actions. One of the effective ways to address the situation is to
strengthen the cooperation of the existing regional multilateral institutions by not only being more supportive of each other but also being more vocal and decisive against Chinese belligerence and adventurism. Regional institutions like ASEAN and BIMSTEC need to operate beyond the short-term individual parochial interests, to form a larger common long-term strategy for the collective well-being and security against Chinese adventurism. The members of the regional institutions need to be more vocal and unanimous in their stand against China when it violates the international norms or threatens the interest of any of the regional member states without fearing the consequence of their bilateral relation with the latter. They need to step up and reinforce the collective security apparatus to safeguard not only one another’s national interests but simultaneously ensuring the protection of the regional interests.

An effective response to the Chinese aggression is to strike where it hurts China most which is Beijing’s under-belly - its economy. India’s economic riposte of banning 59 apps including the cancellation of several major government multi-billion-dollar investment projects - while giving an opportunity for indigenisation - has shaken the Chinese dominant position on the economic front. In the process of promoting indigenisation in the country, not only does India develop a self-reliant market but also reduces its dependence on the Chinese goods and services without having to compromise on its core national interests. Furthermore, it entails not only doing away with Chinese goods and services but also puts an end to the arm twisting that is involved because of overdependence on its products. Following India’s initiative, America too has banned Chinese telecommunication investments in the country and is proposing to ban more apps and investments in the days to come. The regional multilateral institutions could take a leaf out of India’s book, to reduce its economic dependence on China and develop a pro-active commerce between the institutional members while extending its trade with other major countries in the region. ASEAN member countries should look to foster stronger economic relations with countries like Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., to marginalise its economic reliance over China. In doing so, it could eliminate the chances of China bullying the smaller countries into acting under duress. If more countries come together to boycott Chinese products and investments, it will have a substantial impact on China’s economy, and affect proportionally its military expenditure and dent its military capabilities.

In the wake of China’s adventurism on land and in the seas, it is imperative that the Quad and ASEAN enhance their strategic and defence cooperation with long term goals vis-à-vis China. The two regional institutions need to design a regional strategy to deter Chinese expansionism by initiating and engaging in joint military exercises, sharing of military intelligence, and jointly collaborating in developing the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and the “Blue Dot Network” initiatives as counter to the BRI. Taking forward the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” and “Blue Dot Network” initiatives, would synthesise the ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific members’ interests by providing an economic impetus, freedom of navigation, and establishing rule of law and ensuring peace and security in the region against the Chinese onslaught.
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