



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

The breakdown with China

India must hope for accommodation, even as it prepares for confrontation

On Monday night, India repelled — yet again — a possible attempt by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) to intrude into Indian territory across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This comes a week after India successfully resisted such attempts, and held on to strategic positions on the southern banks of the Pangong Tso. The escalation in tensions in eastern Ladakh is not surprising. With both armies mobilised in large numbers and staring at each other in close proximity, it is but natural that skirmishes will happen — especially when one army, PLA, wants to change the facts on the ground and force India to accept a new reality. It is also natural because over the past fortnight, there has been a sharp uptick in rhetoric on both sides.

All of this indicates that the India-China relationship has broken down at two levels. The first is with regard to the border management framework that has been in place for close to three decades. It is clear that China no longer sees the advantage of maintaining peace and tranquillity on the border — and is keen to maintain this peace only on its terms, after wresting territory over which it has no legitimate claim. This is unacceptable to India, and rightly so. The second is with regard to the broader framework of the relationship. For years, India has convinced itself that the dynamic with China has both a cooperative and competitive element — and while this was true, it is also now clear that the competitive dynamic is on the ascendant, and is becoming sharply adversarial.

With external affairs minister S Jaishankar scheduled to meet his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Moscow on Thursday, it is this breakdown that must be the focus of the discussion. Is it the case that China has decided that it is comfortable with a hot LAC, and an outright adversarial relationship with India? If that is so — and the conversation will give the Indian establishment a sense of Beijing's mood — India has no choice but to prepare itself in the military, economic, diplomatic domains and respond accordingly. Or is it the case that China has read Indian motivations wrong, that apprehensions can be allayed, and Beijing can be persuaded to disengage and de-escalate? If that is so, it will help tackle the immediate crisis — even though the long-term orientation of the relationship will still be troubled. India must hope for accommodation, even as it prepares for confrontation.

The Bihar assembly election challenge

In an era gone by — pre-Covid-19 — elections were synonymous with crowds. Parties were concerned about how to get their message out through direct contact with voters, using a range of campaign techniques, especially rallies. They were focused on ensuring that party candidates could establish a personal connect with voters. But in this new era — post-Covid-19 — elections are becoming synonymous with digital connectivity. Parties are primarily concerned about whether they have the digital tools to communicate their campaign message, and whether voters are digitally equipped to access these messages.

This change in the nature of political communication is most starkly being felt in Bihar, the first state that will hold assembly polls in this year of the pandemic. As a story in this newspaper on Monday pointed out, Bihar's teledensity (the number of telephone connections per 100 people), at the end of 2019, was 59, while it was 89 nationally. In terms of internet penetration, Bihar had 32 internet subscribers per 100 people, while, nationally, there were 54 subscribers per 100 people. 61% women and 36% men in Bihar also have no access to mass media.

All of this means that both parties and citizens will face challenges. It will not be easy for political formations, across the divide, to reach out to voters — especially those who belong to marginalised groups and live in remote areas. It will also not be easy for citizens to make informed decisions about their candidates and parties. Elections are necessary in a democracy, but ensuring access is as necessary for enabling citizens to make choices. Strike a balance between safety and rights.

Air pollution can intensify Covid-19

India will now witness higher pollution. There are additional dangers this year. Act soon

As India faces a steep rise in Covid-19 cases, it is critical to employ all reasonable strategies to decrease transmission and to lower the number of severe infections which burden the health care system. Reducing air pollution is one such strategy that may be more important for India than any other country globally. So far, the spread of the pandemic has occurred during spring and summer when air pollution is relatively mild, but the interaction of high winter pollution levels with Covid-19 infections can have serious consequences.

India has some of the highest exposures to air pollution in the world and faces a double impact from outdoor air pollution in cities and throughout the Indo-Gangetic Plain, plus household air pollution from the millions of *chulhas* in daily use especially in rural areas. Covid-19 is a respiratory infection, and we know from other such infections that air pollution can worsen their severity through its impact on the immune response. In 2019, nearly 200,000 respiratory infection deaths in India were linked to air pollution exposure. Simply put, air pollution may be an important factor that moves a mild Covid-19 infection to

one that requires acute medical care. Although direct evidence of the impact of air pollution on Covid-19 is limited, and more time will be needed to conduct proper studies, evidence from the SARS epidemic in 2003 (caused by a similar virus) indicated a link between air pollution and increased mortality. Evidence from multiple countries, including studies from India, shows consistent associations between both short-term exposure to air pollution and hospitalisation for pneumonia infections (in children), and between long-term exposure and several types of respiratory infections in children.

Studies of short-term increases in air pollution suggest a worsening severity of co-incident respiratory infections. This co-exposure interaction is supported by mechanistic studies which show how air pollution reduces the immune response to respiratory infections. For example, in the lower airways, where respiratory infections are most damaging, immune cells called macrophages can digest and destroy viruses and bacteria, but under conditions of air pollution exposure, these cells become filled up with particles and are no longer effective against the infection. Emerging research also suggests that air pollution may alter lung cells to increase the number of Sars-CoV-2 virus receptors.

In addition, another group of stud-

ies indicates that longer-term exposure to air pollution increases the risk of infections, especially in those with pre-existing chronic lung disease. In this case, air pollution can lead to permanent structural changes in the lungs that erode a person's reserves. An infection that might lead to mild symptoms in a healthy person results in severe impact in those with chronic lung disease. This may be one reason that many of the same diseases caused by air pollution are also present in the majority of people with Covid-19 infections severe enough to require hospitalisation.

Along with these roles in increasing susceptibility to infections and worsening infection severity, some reports also suggest a role of air pollution in increasing transmission of the virus.

Studies have detected the presence of the virus on air pollution particles, but this does not mean these particles are themselves infectious and current evidence does not suggest that the virus hitching a ride on air pollution particles is an important route of transmission. Further, there is little evidence to indicate that infections occur outdoors except when people are in very close proximity. Although there is no direct evidence, there is a plausible pathway by which air pollution may enhance transmission by making it more likely that an infected individual will cough.

So, what does this all mean for



Michael Brauer



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MOHD ZAKIR/HT PHOTO

India? From one perspective, the current timing of the pandemic in India during the months of the year when air pollution is at its lowest levels suggests a window of opportunity during which concerted actions to reduce virus transmission may be effective in "flattening the curve".

However, timing is important, as winter typically brings much higher levels of air pollution and the potential for the interaction with Covid-19 infections to lead to far larger impacts. Thus it is critical, even as economic activity increases, to accelerate the air pollution control measures already described in the National Clean Air Programme.

Actions such as agricultural (stubble) burning that may lead to episodes need to be either curtailed entirely or managed in a way that is timed with tightening of pandemic management measures. In the future, full-scale lockdowns are unlikely, but may be

replaced by on-again/off-again measures that could be targeted towards periods of high and low air pollution, to balance Covid-19 cases and air pollution against economic activity and employment. More rapid expansion of LPG use may reduce household pollution.

There has never been a more important time for action on air pollution. Efforts implemented today will have immediate impact related to Covid-19 and will also continue to bear dividends long into the future via benefits on diabetes and chronic heart and lung diseases. What's more, actions taken to improve air quality will benefit everyone.

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The views expressed are personal

Shinzo Abe redefined India-Japan ties

From capturing global strategic imagination with his "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech in the Indian Parliament to articulating the India-Japan Indo-Pacific Vision 2025 — the Shinzo Abe era is defined by high-powered diplomacy that delivered.

As the challenges to the liberal order grew, India and Japan turned their geopolitical and geo-economic concerns into concerted actions. They advanced issue-based alignments, be it defending the rules-based order through Japan-United States (US)-India (JAI) and Quad or designing the Australia-India-Japan Supply Chain Resilience Initiative.

China's rise, alliance politics and hedging against American abandonment shaped Tokyo's policy discourse. Abe's strategic calculations manifested internal and external balancing. He rewired Japan's post-war security posture, reinforced the US-Japan alliance, and wove a network of strategic partnerships across Indo-Pacific.

Abe envisaged Tokyo's role in the international system as a stabiliser and a rules-promoter. His Indo-Pacific Vision remained anchored on rule of law, freedom of navigation and over flight, trade liberalisation, and multilateralism.

As Japan conceptualised universal value-based strategic designs, India has been accorded primacy in the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, Asia's Democratic Security Diamond, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

Abe's strategic imagination was complemented by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Act East policy. Mutuality of values and convergence of strategic interests added qualitative depth. Much of the dynamism draws from the personal comradery between the two leaders. The high-resolution optics — from *shinkansen* ride to Kobe and private dinner at Yamanashi home, Ganga *aarti* at Dashashwamedh Ghat and road show to Sabarmati Ashram — Abe has left a deep impression in Indian public memory.

The leaders pushed for collective responsibility in securing the global maritime commons. Firming up maritime security cooperation with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, advancing maritime domain awareness, finalising reciprocal sup-

port concerning logistics, supplies, and services through Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), and augmenting interoperability within Indo-Pacific navies through Malabar exercises enabled greater leeway in managing a range of shared challenges.

The Abe era also played an instrumental role in enabling India's economic modernisation. Tokyo is not just a leading source of Official Development Assistance (ODA), but also a top source of foreign direct investment. From mega industrial corridors, high-speed rail and modernising urban rapid transport system, Japanese development assistance has been an enabler. But it is not just mega projects in economic epicentres, Abe has successfully steered development assistance in strategic peripheries, including the Northeast and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Japan's commitment to the Northeast is projected through the upcoming industrial township in Assam to road connectivity projects that advances quality infrastructure and links the Northeast to the regional value chains and markets of Southeast Asia.

Abe drove infrastructure financing to engineer new frontiers of growth by seizing the international infrastructure market and buttressing strategic partnerships across Southeast and South Asia. Abe designed Japan's Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure initiative, which served as a win-win formulation for Delhi as it intersected with the Make in India initiative. Fostering economic linkages, industrial networks and connectivity by employing collective capabilities with other like-minded countries has led to joint projects in a few Bay of Bengal states.

In navigating the geopolitics of Indo-Pacific, India-Japan prioritised the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) centrality and coordinated strategic agendas in the Asean-led multilateral frameworks. In shaping geo-economics, the Abe administration favoured India's membership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), even though India has had unresolved outstanding issues.

But there have been some misses as well. Trade balance and progress in high-technology trade needs more attention. As Abe eased Japan's arms export policy, the latitude for defence technology cooperation has been redefined.

Key policy documents and business lobbies in Japan have prioritised markets such as India, but trade in defence technology is a relatively new domain. While cooperative research on Unmanned Ground Vehicle/robotics have been undertaken, concluding the maiden G2G defence equipment cooperation has proved challenging.

As Delhi gears up for a post-Abe leadership, India's ascendancy in Japan's strategic frame will endure and outlive the Abe administration. This is primarily because the variables that pushed Tokyo to incorporate Delhi in its Indo-Pacific matrix will perhaps become even more urgent, given the geopolitics and geo-economics of the post-Covid-19 world.



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The views expressed are personal

{ NARENDRA MODI } PRIME MINISTER

India's local products are going global. India's voice is also becoming more global. The world listens to India more intently



What will drive India's next economic transformation

With global supply chains being reformed, India must position itself as a vital link in this new order. Governments across the world are encouraging countries to shift their manufacturing out of China. A strong export orientation, cost-competitive manufacturing and creation of domestic champions is the need of the hour. An *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India) will not be possible without growing exports to serve global markets. Therefore, global orientation is imperative.

At the same time, India imports a large number of commodities that are available in abundance within India itself. Take coal for instance. Despite having some of the largest reserves in the world, India still imported coal worth ₹1.7 lakh crore in 2018-19. Now, with commercial coal mining a reality, we should see steady reductions in our import bills. Defence is another area where India has been a large importer. A gradual import substitution of 101 items worth ₹3.5 lakh crore over the next five years has already been announced and a bold move of increasing FDI limits from 49% to 74% also announced.

India has an abundance of minerals which can go into making metals like aluminium which has strategic future uses and super-alloys needed for defence production and in a range of industries. Providing a reform-based stimulus to the economy during the Covid-19-induced recession, historic reforms were announced in the agriculture sector and the coal sector was de-monopolised, paving the way for private sector investment. A conducive business environment will enable both domestic and foreign investment. However, there are a few critical elements that must be addressed to create a business environment that is the envy of the world.

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's vision for an *Atmanirbhar Bharat* hinges decisively on the success we are able to achieve in our manufacturing sector. We must move away from capital-linked subsidies to production-linked incentives. And this has been showing encouraging results. The production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for mobile phone manufacturing has been showing

impressive results. Several other PLI schemes have been announced. This is one of the vital cogs in enabling large-scale, low-cost manufacturing.

While imposing tariffs on imports seems like an easy solution to reducing imports, the effect is some time the opposite of what was expected. If duties are raised on critical inputs for exports, then the cost of exports would rise, making them uncompetitive in global markets. Even if duties are imposed on consumer goods, the duties should contain a sunset clause and be phased out in a clearly-defined timeline, allowing the domestic industry to grow.

Land and labour have been the traditional constraints in achieving scale in manufacturing. Multiple labour laws at the central government-level will be subsumed into four labour codes, with three set to be tabled in the coming monsoon session of Parliament.

Another vital element is that of easing the regulatory burden. India has already made progress in this regard, as evidenced by our jump of 79 positions in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Rankings. Going forward, delays in clearances and multiple permissions must become a thing of the past. The states must take the lead and cooperate on this front.

India's high cost of logistics relative to other competing nations has been a disadvantage. The central government will continue its push towards elevating India's infrastructure to world-class standards through the National Infrastructure Pipeline. Our port turnaround time stands at approximately 60 hours, despite significant improvements in the past years. Digitisation of our ports will be critical in reducing our turnaround time.

India's domestic market will serve as the base of an *Atmanirbhar Bharat*. Combined with world class infrastructure and a conducive business environment, India will attract both domestic and foreign investments in manufacturing. These investments will, in turn, promote high quality, cost-competitive manufacturing, leading to India taking its rightful place in global value chains.



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