

India's chequered relationship with China

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50 years from 1962, Sino-Indian ties are marked by friction over territory, the Tibet question and Indo-US ties.

Can history repeat itself? This question is on the top of many minds as we mark the 50th anniversary of the 1962 war with China. That mauling encounter and defeat left a deep impress on our strategic outlook. Not surprisingly, the question tends to be answered mostly in military terms. But these do not exhaust the range of issues in play.

Strategy in the 21st century remains a continuation of politics. Four aspects of the relationship between India and China were important in the run-up to 1962 — and continue to be salient today.

'PACKAGE DEAL' APPROACH

The first was the boundary dispute that came to the fore in the late 1950s. During his negotiations with Jawaharlal Nehru in April 1960, Zhou Enlai indicated that if India accepted China's claims in the western sector (Ladakh and Aksai Chin), they would adopt a reasonable stance on the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh). Nehru, however, called for a sector-by-sector examination of claims.

When negotiations resumed in 1980, Deng Xiaoping revived the idea of a "package deal." New Delhi stuck to its position of sector-wise negotiations. China agreed to this approach, but began emphasising its claims over Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang. It was not until 2003 that India finally agreed to work towards a "package deal" encompassing all sectors.

A framework agreement was signed in 2005. But the Chinese have since resiled from their earlier flexible stance. This rigidity in China's position is evidently influenced by the other dimension of its relations with India.

TIBET QUESTION

This brings us to the second factor in Sino-Indian relations: Tibet. This has always been a thorny issue. As far back as 1956, China suspected India of harbouring Tibetan rebels. The outbreak of the revolt in Tibet in 1958 and the Dalai Lama's decision to seek asylum in India strengthened Chinese suspicions.

The Chinese believed, wrongly, that India was colluding with the Central Intelligence Agency in arming and assisting the rebels to make Tibet independent of China. This misreading of India's actions and intentions contributed in no small measure to China's decision to go to war in 1962.

Matters were further complicated by the establishment of the Tibetan government-in-exile in India. Although New Delhi neither recognises this government nor supports its political activities, its mere presence remains a cause for concern to China.

The government-in-exile is a standing reminder of the plight of the Tibetans and is the nerve centre of the global network of Tibetan exiles.

Beijing appears to assume that once the Dalai Lama passes on, the problem will become more amenable to resolution.

The Tibetan leader, for his part, is working to ensure that the exile movement will survive his departure. Developments on this front will likely impose strains on Sino-Indian relations in the years ahead.

The third key aspect of the relationship is trade. Few now recall that the upswing in Sino-Indian relations in the early 1950s was spurred by trade. India initially allowed China to import food into Tibet via Calcutta. The famous Panchsheel agreement of 1954 was formally about "trade and intercourse" between "Tibet region of China" and India.

The volume of trade was not particularly significant, but the optics of it were important. It also bears recalling that when the treaty came up for renewal in 1961, it was India that refused to oblige owing to concerns about a domestic backlash. China interpreted India's refusal as yet another indication of its grand designs for an independent Tibet.

Today, India-China trade stands at \$60 billion and is expected to touch \$100 billion by 2015. But the trade balance is sharply tilted in favour of China. India has had limited success in securing market access for its IT, pharmaceuticals and agricultural products.

As both China and India enter a period of slower growth, tensions over trade could increase. But this unprecedented level of inter-dependence is a force for stability.

TIES WITH US

The last factor that impinges on bilateral ties is the wider international context. During the Cold War, Sino-Indian ties waxed and waned with changes in the two countries' relationships with the superpowers. The upward turn in the mid-1950s was enabled both by improving ties between India and the Soviet Union — China's key patron at the time.

The deterioration in the early 1960s occurred in the context of the Sino-Soviet split. Indeed, the Chinese attack of 1962 was aimed partly at demonstrating China's ideological edge over the Soviet Union. The tightening relationship between Moscow and New Delhi in the next decade was paralleled by the normalisation of Sino-American relations. China's attitude towards India began to thaw in the late 1980s when its relations with the USSR were improving and its ties with the US were fraying in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident.

The collapse of the Soviet Union dramatically changed the context of US-China relations. In recent years, their relationship has acquired an adversarial quality. The sharp upturn in US-India relations over this period has led China to regard India as a “swing state.” From India’s standpoint, this is not an unwelcome development. So long as India’s ties with the US force China to take it more seriously, India’s menu of options will expand. This is evident from China’s willingness to work with India on a range of multilateral issues such as climate change. At the same time, India needs to avoid moving so close to the US that it needlessly antagonises China.

So, 50 years after the war, Sino-Indian relations continue to be dogged by the old problems of the boundary dispute and Tibet. When it comes to trade and wider international dimensions, the relationship has considerably improved. Yet, there is little room for complacency. For, even the positive features of the relationship have elements of tension that could lead to a downward slide.

At the same time, it would be unwise to proceed on the assumption that a conflict with China is somehow inevitable. This could turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. We will then find ourselves in the unenviable position of having learnt so much from history that we are condemned to repeat it.

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