

# China Learns that 2009 is Not 1962

The inscrutable Chinese are supposed to take every step after careful deliberation. Whether it is Mao Zedong's smile for an Indian envoy to open a new chapter after the 1962 Conflict or the Summoning of the Indian ambassador in Beijing to the foreign office at 2am to express displeasure, the Mandarins are believed to be sticklers for sign language.

The perceptible downturn in Sino-Indian relations, therefore, could not have been an unrehearsed event. It began a few years ago with the Chinese ambassador's assertions on the disputed status of Arunachal Pradesh and Beijing's decision to unilaterally disown the 2005 agreement to leave inhabited areas out of the proposed solutions for the boundary question.

These incidents were followed by reports of an increase in border incursions by Chinese patrols, attempts to block the Asian Development Bank's loans for Arunachal Pradesh, the filibustering by Chinese delegates at the Nuclear Suppliers Group's meetings on the India-US nuclear deal, the stapling of visas on the passports of Kashmiris, the depiction of Kashmir as a separate country in Chinese made globes, involvement in development projects in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and so on.

Arguably, the Chinese had convinced themselves that India needed to be taught another 'lesson', as they purportedly did in 1962, to show who was the boss in Asia especially to the neighboring countries, none of which matched (or hoped to match) Beijing's might. It is also possible that China believed that its expected emergence as No 2 to the US necessitated a perceptible snubbing of India, its only potential rival in Asia.

These long dormant Middle Kingdom sentiments are not entertained by the communist regime alone. For instance, Chiang Kai-shek's book "China's Destiny" listed Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Burma and Vietnam as his country's lost territories. Well-known historian RC Mazumdar also noted that "if a region once acknowledged her (China's) nominal suzerainty even for a short period, she would regard it as a part of her empire forever and would automatically revive her claim over it even after a thousand years".

This attitude of aggrandisement contrasts sharply with India's benignity and lack of imperialistic ambitions. Although Southeast Asia, from Cambodia to Bali demonstrates the overwhelming presence of Indian influence there has never been any question of India claiming these lands as its own.

The same spirit of generosity and friendship was shown by India to Beijing when it rejected the Two China theory preferred by the US in the 1950s and 60s and strongly advocated Beijing's membership of the United Nations even after the deterioration in Sino-Indian relations.

As a report on a conference of governors in 1959 said, late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru gave the "reasons for the stand taken by India in the UN on the question of the entry of India into the organization though there was resentment in the country about China's hostile attitude towards India". Nehru had also accompanied Zhou Enlai as a big brother at the Bandung conference in 1955.

But China never reciprocated these friendly gestures. Instead, as Nehru said after the 1962 war, "it was wrong to assume that the Chinese undertook this aggression

only because they wanted some patches of territory. China did not want any country near her which was not prepared to accept her leadership; so India had to be humiliated”.

Continuing, he said, Though India would not interfere with what was happening within China, yet she came in China’s way by the mere fact of her separate political structure and pursuing a separate policy which was succeeding”.

These factors are apparently still riling China. Not only is India emerging as a major regional power with a robust economy which has weathered the storm of recession with reasonable success, its ‘separate political structure’ of a widely admired multi-cultural democracy contrasts sharply with China’s obviously repressive one-party role.

What is more, while Pakistan’s degeneration into a dysfunctional state robs China of an ‘all-weather friend’ which it could use to needle India, Beijing’s own peripheries have become seedbeds of trouble. Let alone subdue its neighbours, the aspiring Middle Kingdom is not even in full control over Tibet and Xinjiang, not to mention Taiwan. Nor is it able to hide the growing rural unrest over the disparity between the rich and the poor.

It is apparently because of such restiveness that even the supposedly monolithic communist party is divided. On one side are the so-called populists, who include President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, with their preference for a level-playing field between the poor Western regions and the more affluent urban areas on the eastern coast and on the other side are the elitists, who want faster growth based on the free market.

It was perhaps to divert attention from all these difficulties by ratcheting up nationalistic fervor that China thought of provoking India. But its miscalculation was that it did not take into account the fact that India in 2009 was different from its naive and militarily unprepared self in 1962.

The blow to its pride in that year has led to an augmentation of its military prowess, which it is no longer hesitant to display. India also seems to have realised that the Chinese misinterpret politeness as weakness. Hence it chose to ignore Beijing’s objections to the Dalai Lama’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh.

It is possible that the Chinese will now pay greater heed to the second part of the advice of Sun Tzu, the military genius of 6th century BC, who said the winner is the person who “knows when to fight and when not to fight”.

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