India-China Face-off - A peep into tetchy shades of Chinese Diplomacy!

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CONFLICT-RESOLUTION
has direct nexus with the efficiency of diplomacy! And diplomacy is a precious art of carrying negotiations between two nations tactfully and without hostility, to a mutually desirable outcome. Sometimes when the official channel gets stalemated, back channels get activated as part of the Track-II diplomacy (a term coined during the Cold War era). And it has worked on many occasions in the past. One noteworthy example of Track-II is the behind-the-stage dialogue between the ruling Whites and the African National Congress to end apartheid in South Africa . The entire event of negotiations took place in an English country house owned by a gold-mining firm. And it palpably produced the result the entire world wanted to talk about!

But nothing of this sort appears to be either deployed or may work in case of the on-going India-China border stand-off! With the bilateral relations being in apparent freefall, the entire clan of Chinese diplomats appears to be in an exceedingly narcissistic and febrile mood! Although the world views Chinese President Xi Jinping as highly aggressive and assertive but his army of sombre-suited diplomats has evidently left him behind by miles! The entire world knows that the Chinese troops have been camping in the Indian territories but even after 100 days, its New Delhi Ambassador Sun Weidong has cryptically stated that the "onus is on India". Undoubtedly, many experts may dismiss his statement as the one intended to be a pistil of platitudes but
he is certainly not the 'lone wolf warrior' in the newly-nourished culture which has enveloped the global chain of Chinese Embassies and Consulates!

Let me give examples of some more interesting outbursts of Chinese diplomats in the recent months. Responding to a critic of China's handling of the pandemic through Twitter on February 16th, the Consul-General in Kolkata tweeted:
â€œYou speak in such a way that you look like part of the virus and you will be eradicated just like virus. Shame on youâ
. Let me illustrate another example. A garrulous Ambassador to Sweden, during an interview on public radio in November last year, boasted:
"We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns".

In the UN backrooms, the Chinese diplomats have, of late, begun to demonstrate their overt willingness to flex muscles and lock horns with their Western counterparts. On the human rights issue, Britain last year condemned China and issued a statement signed by 22 other countries including the US, urging for UN access to prison camps in Xinjiang. This prodded Chinese diplomats to coax or coerce several autocratic countries to sign a counter-statement praising China! This episode also involved many thrilling chapters on threats and reprisals. Probably, not aware of the maxim that
revenge is a dish best eaten cold, the Chinese diplomats reportedly told Austrian counterparts that if they support the British demand, their request for land to build new embassy in Beijing may remain a pipe dream!
In case of Albania, they simply put their bilateral event in Beijing in deep-freeze! They unmistakably bristle at any criticism of the Communist Party.

There are litanies of such anecdotes demonstrating 'Hugh Hefner' and 'Rambo' tendencies and unusual behavioural showboating by not only the latest crop of diplomats but even the veterans unblushingly switching over to a newly-forceful brand of diplomacy. The underlying ***leitmotif*** is to quickly take umbrage, and hit back more aggressively! Historically speaking, Chinese diplomats were always a laconic, demure, languid and highly reserved community! Then, what has changed? Two significant events may be underlined for the insalubrious change - a) Ascension of Mr Xi Jinping for lifetime and, b) Debilitating impact of COVID-19 on China's competing powers!

Mr Xi strongly believes that the time has arrived for China to herald its claim to global superpower mantle and also the superiority of Chinese-brand of political system. As the COVID-19 outbreak had begun to spread to new destinations in the world, Mr Xi had convened a Politburo Standing Committee meeting on February 3, 2020 and discussed at length - how to manage publicity. Officials were told to launch all-round propaganda and showboat the Chinese edge in combating the pandemic.
Though Twitter is banned in China and it was a 'forbidden zone' a year back but there was a virtual rush among the diplomats to open

accounts. And the number swelled from a little over a dozen in 2018 to close to three digits now. The 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy was rolled out to vilify and pillory the American soldiers for being the origin of Coronavirus rather than China. The 'fake news' diplomacy gnawingly worked for some time till the US retaliated angrily and demanded a probe into the origin of Wuhan virus (WHO episode is an old story now!).

If one analyses the colour of Chinese diplomacy in the recent past, one may end up being wide-eyed. Some of the popular shades being practiced by China are
Panda diplomacy, pandemic diplomacy, shotgun diplomacy, boatgun diplomacy, phishing diplomacy and chequebook diplomacy or debt-trap diplomacy.
Let me begin with Panda diplomacy. All pandas originate in China. History tells us that China had gifted two pandas to the Japanese Empress in the 7th century. Pandas were always used to earn goodwill for China. But neo-capitalist China uses panda as an economic instrument. In the 80s China began giving them on rent - USD 50,000 per month! Any offspring of such rented bears remained Chinese asset. In recent years, China started gifting pandas as part of trade pacts. In case of Malaysia, as part of the deal in 2014,
an eye-watering rent of USD one million per year was to be paid to China.
But when the government changed in 2018, the panda diplomacy melted as Malaysia decided to return them to China. In a nutshell, pandas are commercial tools for China.

Let's now move to COVID-19 diplomacy. After the pandemic roiled many countries in Europe, Africa and Latin America, China claimed that it had effectively ensnared the virus and began dispatching masks, PPEs and other medical equipment as part of the pandemic diplomacy. Though it is another matter that a part of the cargo was found to be substandard and also the fact that
commercial prices were extracted from the recipients but China also extracted a big thank you from the heads of States like Slovenia, Hungary and some Latin American countries.

Sweden which I have talked about in an earlier para, is a good example of shotgun diplomacy. Then comes boatgun diplomacy which Chinese ***militias*** keep practicing against Japan, Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia in South China sea. Chinese forces in plain clothes masquerade as fishermen and venture into others' territorial waters for fishing (phishing is a new genre!), backed by gunboats of coast guards! In recent months they have sunk some of the vessels of littoral countries as China claims sole ownership of this part notwithstanding an adverse ruling on Philippines' petition by Hague-based UN Tribunal.
Phishing diplomacy is all about cyber-attacks which Australia recently reported in a big way.
If any country does not see eye to eye with China, its sophisticated army of cyber-soldiers launch assaults to bring the enemy on knees! India has also come under such attacks but is yet to face an all-out assault!

Chequebook or debt-trap diplomacy has been clothed in Mr Xi's favourite scheme called Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Although its stated objective is to develop infrastructure for a friendly country but its subtle goal is to weave a cobweb for trapping the recipient country into a back-breaking trap. Pakistan is a good example where USD 60 bn is being invested in its economic corridor.
Iran is likely to be the crowning jewel in the tally of China's victims with its USD 400 bn partnership agreement.
The newly-elected Malaysian Government has recently cancelled its agreement for BRI project on the ground that it cannot afford it. Several African and Indo-Pacific countries like Papua New Guinea have already reported that they cannot service the huge debts given by China and they have petitioned to IMF and World Bank for bail-out package. Using its economic success as a part of diplomatic tool-box, China has ravaged the economies of many countries which are close to embracing debt-death!

Having talked about the different hues of Chinese diplomacy, what lesson is to be learnt by the competing countries like India, Australia, Japan, Germany, Britain, Canada and even America? If evil designs of China are to be effectively neutralised, more budget has to be allocated for opening up embassies and global publicity.
In contrast to the Trump Administration which has downsized America's budget for diplomacy, China has doubled it in past one decade. China last year left behind America as the country with the highest number of embassies and consulates across the world.
And China's investment appears to be paying tangible dividends. It has begun garnering votes of smaller countries which are equal in the UN and Chinese nationals now head **FOUR of 15 UN high-profile agencies.**
It was about to capture WIPO but the democratically-ruled countries came together to defeat it. A collective pushback is the need of the hour! In recent years, the US has also lost the traditional edge as most Presidents opted for political appointees over career diplomats who suffered more because of stagnation and fund-crunch. The lesson for India is to spend more on soft power diplomacy and also expand the size of its diplomatic community if Mr Narendra Modi is keen to play a more critical role in the newly-emerging geostrategic arena and also to avoid diplomatic trenches!