India should be cautious of its steps in Dragon-Elephant Tango

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No tangible policy shift can be expected as China's strategic calculus seeks a conducive periphery and a subdued neighbourhood; marginalised India well aligns with its grand design



India needs to adopt a whole-of-nation approach to deal with China from a position of strength. Representational image: REUTERS

While exchanging congratulatory messages to mark the 75th anniversary of bilateral relations on April 1, 2025, President Xi Jinping told President Draupadi Murmu that the China-India relationship should take the form

of the ‘Dragon-Elephant Tango’ to serve the interests of both sides. Even the Chinese Premier Li Qiang in a message to Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that China is ready to work with India to enhance strategic mutual interest, promote exchanges and cooperation and properly handle the boundary.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had made a similar proclamation at a press conference last month in Beijing when he stated that a cooperative ‘*pas de deux*’ of Dragon and Elephant is the only right choice for China and India. Wang Yi also noted that the relations between the two countries made positive strides as a sequel to the successful meeting between Xi and Modi in Kazan last October.

The diplomatic activity between Delhi and Beijing picked up pace consequent to the signing of a crucial agreement to resolve the standoff at the Depsang-Demchok areas in Eastern Ladakh on October 21, 2024. There have been a series of ministerial and top diplomatic level meetings between the two sides, including the Special Representatives (SRs). Delhi’s openness to a better relationship with Beijing is apparent from PM Modi’s recent interview with American podcaster Lex Fridman, wherein he spoke positively about the bilateral relations and noted that normalcy has returned to the disputed India-China border.

India-China relations are marked by many signposts, emitting mixed signals. The two are in intense competition in the geopolitical arena. Beijing has continuously frustrated Delhi’s great power ambitions by blocking its membership to the key influential bodies. China has also made deep inroads into India’s neighbourhood and maintains close security ties with Pakistan, besides wielding significant influence in Nepal, the Maldives, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Beijing remains sceptical about Delhi's relations with Washington, deepening ties with Taiwan and Dalai Lama's presence in India. Communist leadership views forums like Quad and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as attempts to counter China. Additionally, China is also averse to India developing closer defence ties with Southeast Asian nations to help them cope with China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea.

The border issue is a major irritant between the two neighbours. The Chinese military's massive transgressions in Eastern Ladakh in May 2020 to alter the status of the 'Line of Actual Control' (LAC) by violating key border agreements led to a prolonged standoff. While the opposing troops have disengaged in the contentious areas with buffer zones in place, there has been no progress on de-escalation as both sides continue to maintain heightened forward deployment. As per the Chief of Army Staff General Upendra Dwivedi, the situation on the LAC remains 'stable but sensitive'. He ruled out any plans to cut troops along the disputed locations at present. In fact, the Indian Army is raising another division for deployment in Eastern Ladakh.

Over the last couple of years, China has fortified the LAC right from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh and concurrently undertaken extensive buildup of military infrastructure in the areas along the line. Tibet has been converted into a formidable defence shield. Over 720 border villages (Xiaokangs) have been constructed, around one third in the vicinity of the LAC to act as forward border outposts. To legitimise the control over the annexed territories, Border Defence Law was enacted in 2022. Chinese leaders remain persistent on delinking the border issue from the bilateral relations.

Despite the border tension, bilateral trade has shown robust growth, with the balance of trade tipped in China's favour. It is primarily due to India's dependence on upstream imports of goods from China used for further exports in sectors like electronics, chemicals and machinery. However, over-reliance on Chinese imports exposes vulnerability to supply chain disruption due to geopolitical tensions, trade restrictions and pandemic-related shutdowns.

Though allowing Chinese investment in India's manufacturing sectors is under consideration, critical sectors such as telecom, defence equipment and data-sensitive IT product-services should be kept out of the purview of Chinese funding in view of security considerations.

The 33rd Meeting of the 'Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination' (WMCC) on India-China Border Affairs was held in Beijing on March 25, 2025. The two sides reviewed the situation along the LAC and explored measures to progress the decisions taken during the 23rd meeting of SRs on the boundary issue in Beijing in December 2024.

Further progress was made to facilitate and promote people-to-people exchanges, including the resumption of direct flights and the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra. A day after the above WMCC meeting, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar acknowledged that India and China will have issues in the foreseeable future but stated that there are ways to handle these without conflict.

During this year's 'Two Sessions', a key political yearly event, the Chinese leadership has reviewed its policies, evident from the softened tone and quest for innovations to endure the disruptive global economic-technological competition. Beijing is redrawing the supply chains and

shifting towards technology-led growth to contain global diversification efforts under the ‘China Plus One’ strategy and trade war with the US.

Chinese policy makers are known to make modest concessions to achieve their geopolitical ambitions and safeguard the national interests. The recent political ’thaw’ between India and China should be seen as part of the realignment process being undertaken by the Communist leadership. No tangible policy shift can be expected as China’s strategic calculus seeks a conducive periphery and a subdued neighbourhood; marginalised India well aligns with its grand design.

India needs to adopt a whole-of-nation approach to deal with China from a position of strength. In Elephant-Dragon Tango, Delhi ought to exercise cautious optimism and a calibrated approach and be fully cognisant of Communist leadership’s past record of blatantly disregarding agreements and protocols to suit its convenience.

The writer is a war veteran, currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost’s views.