

EDITOR'S NOTE

The COVID-19 pandemic dominated news during the quarter just gone by.

By the end of the first quarter, India had gone into a nationwide lockdown with about 1,400 cases and 35 deaths recorded. Unfortunately, the situation has not eased, and India has recorded a total of 566,840 cases and about 17,500 deaths by June 30, with no signs of the 'curve flattening out'—usually an indication that the spread of the virus is being brought under control. By contrast, China—which has been held responsible for the spread of the coronavirus globally—has had a little over 83,000 cases, recording about 4,600 deaths so far. Of course, there is no way of confirming these figures, coming as they are from the State-controlled media in China. Recent indications are that there has been a fresh resurgence of the pandemic in China with the capital city going into a lockdown once again.

The debate over the origin of the virus has intensified worldwide. Independent Science News (that covers global events relating to health, food and agriculture), in a recent article ('The Case is Building that COVID-19 had a Lab Origin'; June 2, 2020), discussed the lab escape theory convincingly. It posits that of the two labs that are close to each other in Wuhan, one is a Biosafety Level 4 (BSL-4) facility, i.e., the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), while the other, the Wuhan Center for Disease Prevention and Control (WCDPC) is a BSL-2 lab that is just 250 metres away from the Huanan live animal market. ISN goes on to suggest that since bat coronaviruses have been kept in the WCDPC in the past, the possibility of the virus escaping from the lab cannot be ruled out. Although BSL-4 is the highest pathogen security level for a lab, a visit by US Embassy officials to the WIV Lab as early as in 2018 are believed to have raised concerns 'about biosecurity'.

The European Commission has blamed China for the dissemination of fake news and misinformation about the spread of Covid-19 in the EU and globally. In another development related to China's likely role in covering up the information relating to the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak, major newspapers in Germany are known to have prepared an invoice for 149 billion Euros—the amount China owes Germany due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The US has been extremely vocal about blaming China for the spread of the coronavirus pandemic; others, including Britain, Germany and Australia have also joined the US in blaming China.

The ongoing riots in Hong Kong—and the Communist Party of China's (CPC) seeming inability to deal with the situation with a heavy hand, lest it receives international opprobrium—forced the leadership in China to think of new ways to skin the cat. At literally the eleventh hour before the end of the quarter (at 2300 hrs on June 30), President Xi Jinping signed the controversial Security Law that enables punishing protesters in Hong Kong with up to a maximum sentence of a lifetime in prison, besides permitting 'a few' being sent to mainland China for trial. Pro-democracy operations were known to have ceased immediately after the new law came into force. The move has been seen by nations as a violation of the 'One country two systems' principle. While this action by Xi Jinping would have strengthened his domestic image, it sure has alienated China from most nations across the developed world. Of course, this is no skin off China's back!

With nations finding China to be an unreliable partner as far as coming clean on the Covid-19 crisis is concerned, most member nations of the BRI have stopped China from continuing its BRI projects in their countries. The fallout of stoppage/slowdown of the BRI—its flagship project—on China's economy, has been significant.

Another factor that has impacted the economy is the displacement of migrant labour once factories were shut down in China. This, along with the lack of funding for the MSME sector in China—that accounts for almost 60 percent of China's GDP—have derailed its economy significantly, and

are likely to impact Xi Jinping's move towards achievement of the China Dream.

China's neighbours in the South/East China Sea regions—Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan—have recently lodged official protests at the bilateral level as well as with the UN for various acts of 'bullying' and high-handedness by the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG)/Maritime Militia (CMM). The CCG and CMM, along with some survey vessels of China, were responsible for sinking a Vietnamese fishing vessel in April and attacking another near Paracel islands in June; engaging in a stand-off with a Malaysian vessel that was prospecting off the coast of Borneo in an authorised manner; sending its coast guard vessels into Japanese territory near the disputed Senkaku islands repeatedly, etc. China has also been upping the ante against those nations that have sought an inquiry into the origin of the coronavirus, holding China accountable for its spread worldwide. In the Indo-Pacific region, Australia has felt the brunt of China's backlash when it faced a string of sophisticated cyberattacks from China.

It can thus be seen that China is being 'targeted' on various fronts, mostly for events and misdemeanours of its own making. In some cases, to maintain a modicum of face-saving in front of its domestic audience, the Chinese leadership has been forced to take belligerent actions as far as international relations are concerned.

One such action taken by China was to block Taiwan's entry to the World Health Assembly (virtual) meeting in May and stepping up military drills around the island by sailing its aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, around the island nation. With indications from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence that China could set up an ADIZ over the South China Sea shortly, it appears that the PRC is playing to a plan in its efforts to dominate the South China Sea—the area that falls within the Nine Dash Line—besides its ongoing attempts at Finlandisation of its neighbouring states.

The US, however, reacted in a most unexpected (for China) manner to come to the support of the nations being bullied by China in the South China Sea region. Despite news that most of the crew aboard its aircraft carrier,

the USS Theodore Roosevelt, was affected by Covid-19—thereby effectively rendering the ship non-operational alongside at Guam—another carrier, the USS Ronald Reagan, completed its period of quarantine and refit at Yokosuka in Japan and was ready to sail into the South China Sea in the Western Pacific as a mark of solidarity. It is likely to be joined by another aircraft carrier—the USS Nimitz—in a twin carrier group operation in the South China Sea. This would send the necessary signal to China that the US is not about to relinquish its responsibilities towards its friends and allies in the South East and East Asian region. China was possibly blindsided by this action as it had hoped that it could coerce Taiwan into submission during the period that the US was fighting the pandemic within its borders. This resolute action follows the signing into Law of the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act by President Trump on March 26, 2020 which requires the United States to ‘alter engagement with countries that undermine Taiwan’s security or prosperity’.

Another action by the Chinese was to disturb the peace and tranquillity that existed along its border with India for 45 years by carrying out a most shameful act on June 15—that could best be described as ‘barbaric’—when it killed 20 Indian soldiers in cold blood at the Galwan Valley. The PLA had been building infrastructure in the areas opposite Eastern Ladakh ever since Xi Jinping came to power in March 2013. In his opening directives to the PLA, Xi had emphasised that it should not spare any effort to ‘defend China’s territorial integrity and core interests’. It will be recalled that on April 16, 2013, the earliest ‘face-off’ in the region of Ladakh was in the region of Daulat Beg Oldi where the PLA had, with renewed vigour, encroached 19 km inside what India considers its side of the LAC in the Depsang Plains. This action preceded the visit to India by Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang from May 19 to 22, 2013. The Chinese believe in coercive diplomacy, backed by the strength of its military. In this case, the intrusion and the ‘tough’ stand taken by the Chinese in their diplomatic parleys with their Indian counterparts to defuse the situation was meant to influence the Indian leadership into accepting the Chinese agenda during the meeting of the two Premiers. Forty PLA soldiers had pitched their

tents and refused to budge for three weeks, during which hectic diplomatic parleys were afoot on both sides to restore the 'status quo ante'—a term that meant that the PLA soldiers would remove their tents and leave. But would they 'vacate' the 19 km they had 'intruded' into Indian territory in the Depsang plains? It was believed that 'political and diplomatic sagacity' had won.

But was it really so?

Although the Chinese did withdraw their troops, but not before arm-twisting India to first demolish its tin sheds (over the hardened bunkers) at Chumar—legitimately on the well-established Indian side of the LAC—just because these overlooked Chinese positions in the region. Also, the recent operationalising of ALGs by India at DBO, Fukche and Nyoma could have irked the Chinese somewhat.

A year later, during the first official visit by President Xi Jinping to India from September 17 to 19, 2014, the Chinese began building a road from their side of the LAC towards Chumar in the Demchok sector. When this was challenged by the Indian soldiers, the PLA gathered in strength and both armies were eyeball to eyeball for sixteen days. The situation was defused with the Chinese agreeing to stop building the road; in return, India agreed to stop building observation posts on the Indian side at Chumar. There were reports of an attempt by some elements in the PLA that were believed to have taken this action unilaterally to 'embarrass' the Chinese President during his official visit to India for his recent actions against military leaders involved in corruption cases. With Xi Jinping also being the Chairman of the Chinese Military Commission, such reports could be considered baseless; 'coercive diplomacy' was once again on display, as it would certainly have had the clearance of the Chinese leader. The Chinese leader's anticipated response to the events on the LAC was that the boundary between the two countries is not well-defined and which could lead to the occasional tensions at the LAC. The visit, however, did not achieve the predicted objective for India in securing a US\$ 100 billion investment from China; the visit ended with barely US\$ 20 billion being agreed to by the Chinese leader for developing infrastructure projects in India over the next five years. The Chinese plan had worked once again.

China had strong objections to India building the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road—that passes close to the Galwan Valley—as it would facilitate the Indian Army to build up troops and supplies to the DBO sector which is close (barely 15 km) from the Karakoram Pass, a strategic area for China. [Does India ever object to the NH-219 that passes through Aksai Chin—an area that was once Indian territory—and other similar roads built by the Chinese over the years in areas close to the LAC?] Also, in this sector, the LAC is not clearly demarcated. The Chinese state this in their defence and took advantage of this fact to build infrastructure along the Galwan river. When they were challenged by the Indian Army on June 15, 2020, the PLA attacked the Indian Army personnel with batons that had spikes embedded in them—a most primitive but lethal tool for hand-to-hand fighting. Twenty Indian Army soldiers were killed—in cold blood—including the Commanding Officer, Colonel Santosh Babu. The Indian Army unit retaliated and came out in large numbers to avenge the death of their CO. In the ensuing hand-to-hand combat it is believed that the Chinese suffered a large number of casualties, although they have not acknowledged this fact; they never expected such a strong reaction from the Indian side. This was the first time in 45 years that casualties had been caused on both sides along the LAC.

The biggest casualty of this event, however, was 'Trust', which was broken, especially after it emerged that this was not a spontaneous reaction by the Chinese, but a premeditated activity. The Digital Strong Innovation Team from Australia has recently stated that the PLAAF was involved in a sand model discussion on exactly the scenario that emerged on June 15; only, that the exact replica of the Area of Operations was 2,500 km to the East of Galwan. Also, the sand model discussion took place almost a decade ago.

This goes to show that the build-up of forces and infrastructure in the Galwan Valley was according to a well-calibrated plan; also, the brutal means used to kill and maim Indian soldiers was done by forces 'not the usual ones that the Indian troops recognised'.

The PLA is known to have also carried out exercises to capture airfields and 'passes' at high altitudes with special forces during the STRIDE series of exercises along with the PLAAF for the last one decade.

'Capture passes'? One does not need to capture 'passes' and airfields at high altitudes in a Taiwan contingency; the practices were obviously aimed at a future confrontation with India.

Of greater significance is the eighth edition of the SHAHEEN series of exercises between PAF and PLAAF that were held in 'the region adjoining Ladakh'. This was as involved an exercise as one can imagine—complete with DACT, AWACS, Special Forces, Red versus Blue large force engagements, and others. The only difference was that it was held in the 'likely area of operations for a future conflict where a two-front dilemma could have been posed to India'. That the practised scenario almost became a reality is a chilling reminder about the designs that our adversaries harbour against the Indian state—triggered into overdrive possibly by the declarations of August 5, 2019.

It was only due to the alacrity of the Indian Army and the timely forward deployment of the IAF that any serious developments were avoided. Of course, diplomacy played an important part in defusing the situation.

It appears that the advantage that China was seeking under the Covid-19 umbrella has backfired; India needs to remain vigilant and literally 'pull out all stops' to ensure 'not an inch of its territory' is ever lost. Also, diplomatic and economic action against China merits a fresh look.

Meanwhile, it is important that you all STAY SAFE, STAY HEALTHY, STAY CHEERFUL in these troubled times.

Happy reading.

