

EDITOR'S NOTE

Nothing dominated the year 2020 more than the impact of COVID-19 on the planet where, except eleven countries—of which nine were from the South Pacific group—the rest of the world came under the severe grip of the virus, with some countries also registering a second and a third wave. By the end of the year more than 1.7 million people had died worldwide. Although this figure of people losing their lives is not as startling as the number that died in earlier pandemics like the Spanish Flu in 1918-20 when more than 100 million died worldwide, or the bubonic plague of AD 541-542 that killed almost 10 per cent of the world's population, the impact of the present pandemic on world economies has been disastrous. Social media went viral with images of hospitals in advanced countries getting overwhelmed with people—mostly the elderly—lying in corridors with no one to care for them as health-care workers themselves fell victim to the virus. This created a fear psychosis amongst all about the debilitating effect of the virus. Now, amidst the scare of a second (and a third) wave in some of the Western nations, there appears to be some respite with the news of early approvals for the various vaccines to fight the virus.

Has China been silent after labelling itself as the 'epicentre' for the spread of the deadly 'Wuhan virus'? Far from it. It has used its mouthpiece—*Global Times*—to argue that although the West banned flights from China once news about the novel corona virus originating in Wuhan spread worldwide, they did not ban incoming flights from other nations. Therefore, if there was any tourist who had travelled from China to a destination in Europe and onwards to the US, he could easily carry the virus to the US since flights from Europe to the US had not been banned. By this the *Global Times* was defending China's position as being solely responsible for the

spread of the virus. The *Global Times* has also been used by China recently to vilify other nations with conspiracy theories of 'exporting' the virus to China when it claimed that traces of COVID-19 were found on cold-chain imports (of fish, beef, cuttlefish, etc.) from different countries, including India, Australia, Brazil, Russia, and some countries from Europe. When China included New Zealand to the list, the New Zealand Prime Minister reacted strongly as her country is known to have contained the spread of COVID-19 admirably well. The actions taken by the customs department of China in declaring transshipments to be COVID-19 positive were thus seen to be highly suspicious as the result of the findings of the Chinese Customs Department, was never shared with the exporting country, particularly after the WHO clarified that there is no evidence of transmission of coronavirus from food or food packaging. This resulted in a huge uproar at the WTO for 'unfair trade restrictions' being placed by China on certain countries. Was this any skin off China's back? Not in the least!

The stand-off between India and China along the LAC, particularly in the Ladakh sector, continued till the closing stages of the year. PLA troops dug in for the harsh winter and tested out the logistics support provided by the Western Theatre Command. Reports of building metalled roads where earlier only 'kutchra' tracks had existed were also some indications of the Chinese intent of staying entrenched for the long haul. This was to be expected, as China cannot be seen to be 'weak kneed' against a 'less powerful' India; domestic audiences in China would just not stand for this, particularly at a time when the CPC completes one hundred years next year since its inception in 1921. On December 26, 2020, the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress approved a revised National Defence Law, which will come into effect from January 1, 2021. What this law proposes is to seek greater participation of its strengthened military in safeguarding its territorial, economic, and sovereign interests. Put simply, although China proclaims to the world that it does not seek any other nation's territory, it will do its utmost to defend its sovereignty; in other words, reclaim lands that it 'believes' rightfully once 'belonged' to China(?). It may be recalled

that during the Shimla Convention in February 1914, while showing the territorial limits of Tibet—a sovereign nation at the time—Lt Col Sir Arthur Henry McMahon displayed a map in which the ‘historic frontiers’ of Tibet were shown for acceptance. These ‘frontiers’ along the borders with India later came to be known as the McMahon Line. There was no disagreement by the Chinese representative present at the Convention. However, China repudiated the initialling of the document by its plenipotentiary at the convention, claiming that the McMahon Line was included in the document without his prior knowledge. It is ‘historically’ a fact that from the time of the Shimla Convention of 1914 till January 23, 1959, the Chinese government has never officially, in any document, ever challenged the McMahon Line. The late Ambassador RS Kalha had surmised that even International Law is quite clear on the subject:

If a state acquires knowledge of an act which it considers internationally illegal, and in violation, and nevertheless does not protest; this attitude implies a renunciation of such rights, provided that a protest would have been necessary to preserve a claim.

From a legal point of view, too, Tibet remains an independent state under illegal occupation; a fact that China wishes it could somehow remove from the pages of History.

All this, however, is water under the bridge now; the fact remains that China is firmly entrenched in Tibet after carrying out Tibet’s ‘peaceful liberation’ from the Guomindang (KMT) reactionary government forces in 1951. Coming back to the current stand-off in Ladakh. After the PLA had carried out pre-emptive actions to ‘intrude’ into strategically important Indian areas like Depsang, Galwan, Hot Springs-Gogra-Kugrang and north bank of Pangong Tso in May 2020, the ‘tactical’ actions by the Special Frontier Force, along with troops of the Indian Army, to occupy the high peaks in the Kailash Range opposite the Chushul Bowl proved to be of ‘strategic’ import as events unfolded on the morning of August 30. The Chinese were shocked. India now held the dominating peaks South of the Pangong Tso and had a clear look at the Spanggur Gap.

Of course, despite this tactical victory, it would be important for India to consolidate its positions and not allow any over-confidence to set in; we should remain vigilant for a Chinese riposte that is likely to come. To overcome this 'setback'—a humiliation if you may call it—the Chinese response is likely to be with overwhelming force to capture these strategically important positions in the Kailash Range. This would, of course, not be possible with a Galwan type of operation—something the Chinese tried and were beaten back on September 7-8 at Mukhpari. Any attempt to use greater force could, of course, lead to war. Use of unconventional techniques by China—including non-lethal means—should not be ruled out, as Grey Zone warfare is the Chinese preferred style of warfare.

Our military leadership would be well advised to assume that the lessons of the recent conflict in the Caucasus have certainly not been lost on the PLA as these offer the least risk to aircrew. It should be assumed that the PLA would be tempted to employ similar tactics, albeit with greater weight of attack. Defensive measures against such attacks need consideration urgently.

The geostrategic advantage that India enjoys in the Indian Ocean region needs to be 'advertised' continuously through seminars and writings at regular intervals. Actions to further strengthen the 'unsinkable aircraft carriers' in the Bay of Bengal (the Andaman and Nicobar Islands) and in the Arabian Sea (Lakshadweep group of islands) with appropriate weapons would send a strong message to those whose actions and designs in the IOR are inimical to India's national interests. The IAF, along with the maritime reconnaissance assets of the Indian Navy, would be the linchpin in creating the necessary deterrence in the IOR, including around the choke points in the Straits, both to the East as well as to the West of India.

With the impetus being given to the Make in India initiative—particularly in the defence sector—towards the PM's vision of *Atma Nirbharta* in *Raksha Utpadan*, a turnover of US\$ 25 billion (including export worth US\$ 5 billion) is expected to be achieved in the aerospace and defence sector by 2025. Significant efforts of the DRDO towards enhancing defence preparedness, for example, SMART (Supersonic Missile Assisted Release of Torpedo) anti-

sub missile, SHAURYA hypersonic missile, Brahmos II hypersonic cruise missile, AURA autonomous UCAV, high power microwaves (HPM) and High Energy Lasers need to be pursued with greater gusto to ensure their early entry into service for use by the armed forces. The early commissioning of the defence industrial corridors would greatly assist in realising the *Atma Nirbharta* in *Raksha Utpadan* aims set by the PM.

Let us look towards 2021 with optimism.

My best wishes to all readers for a safe, healthy, and prosperous New Year.

Happy reading

