

# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

### **CROSSING CHINESE REDLINES**



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China had always laid down redlines which it expected nations to follow. These included Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea (SCS). It had repeatedly claimed that Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong are its internal matters. Any nation moving close to Taiwan was warned of crossing Chinese redlines. It currently claims 90% of the SCS and most islands within them. Prior to it adopting hostility towards the globe and its neighbours, China's laid down redlines were adhered to. The world cooperated with China, signed economic partnerships, well aware that China failed to adhere to WTO guidelines and illegally gained global technology with little concern to intellectual property rights.

For India, these redlines meant much more. An interlinked economy and close ties between leaders implied that adhering to Chinese redlines meant peace and sanctity along the LAC. With the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in exile based within, India was extra cautious in giving space to the Dalai Lama. India never commented on Hong Kong and Xinjiang, though there are thousands of Indians in Hong Kong. Indian relations with Taiwan were perfunctory.

However, in recent times, Chinese redlines appeared to have increased. It currently claims that Indian proposals to sell its BrahMos missiles to countries with whom China is in dispute over the SCS is crossing its strategic redlines. Currently, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines have shown interest towards procuring the BrahMos medium-range cruise missile. Of them, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia are currently in dispute with China over territories within the SCS.

The BrahMos missile can be launched from submarines, ships, aircraft or land, and is slated to be the fastest supersonic cruise missile in the world. Further, its precision makes it lethal to most seaborne targets, including China's aircraft carriers. What irks China most is that this missile cannot be intercepted by current Chinese missile defence systems. For any sale of this missile, India and Russia have to be in sync. Currently, Russia has no objection to the sale of this missile and has already proposed its sale to the Philippines. It would also be willing for its sale to Vietnam as Russia-Vietnam relations have always been close.

China also abhors Indian naval exercises with Vietnam considering it as Indian expansion into the disputed SCS. These objections have been regularly highlighted by its mouthpiece, The Global Times. It had also objected to India training Vietnamese pilots to fly the Su-30 fighter aircraft on which BrahMos missiles are mounted. Vietnam is currently the most vociferous nation against China on its demands in the SCS. It had defeated China in the 1979 China-Vietnam war, forcing it to retreat.

China is most vulnerable in the SCS, where it has disputes with multiple neighbours. A large part of its naval force is based in this region as also almost 40% of its trade moves through it. Vietnam shares a 1600 km coastline with China, apart from a land border, and a number of Chinese major industrial hubs are within range from Vietnam. Possession of this missile with Vietnam could change the scenario in the SCS. Talks between India and Vietnam have been ongoing on the BrahMos. It is India which is delaying the sale.

For China, movement of missiles into its backyard would impact their overwhelming superiority as also provide the recipients the confidence to challenge Chinese hegemony. On the contrary, China has been providing weapons to Pakistan to enhance its ability to challenge India. It has recently considered selling Pakistan fifty armed drones. Relations between nations can never be one-sided.

China has ignored Indian redlines, commented on its internal matters, joined hands with Pakistan in the UN and supported secessionist activities in India in the North East and with Pakistan in the West. Its arming of Pakistan as also providing it nuclear technology has impacted India. It further crossed redlines by breaking border agreements reached over decades and intruding into Ladakh. The use of force at Galwan was possibly crossing the limit of Indian tolerance.

Thus, it is time for India to reconsider its self-imposed restrictions on crossing Chinese redlines. Post Galwan and occupation of the Kailash Ridge, India has displayed that it will no longer be pushed militarily. Its economic actions of blocking Chinese apps, stopping Chinese investments and banning procurement of Chinese telecom products is an indication of its willingness to challenge China in multiple domains.

Its hesitation to continue avoid crossing Chinese redlines could also be on the premise that military and diplomatic talks would provide a solution to the current crisis. However, Chinese intentions appear to be otherwise. Its proposals for de-escalation and disengagement are unacceptable and if implemented would imply India falling back in its own territory.

With the world now crossing Chinese redlines at will, India also needs to reconsider its stance. It needs to convey a message to China that both nations can play the same game as also India is no longer the pushover that China had presumed it to be. No other nation has the multitude of options against China as India has.

While nations would question China on its curbs in Tibet and Xinjiang, India has the option of enhancing the visibility of the Tibetan government in exile

and the Dalai Lama. This itself, backed by the recent US bill, Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which China has vociferously protested on, is an indicator of how India can act. The bill projects Tibet as a priority for the United States and that it will continue to provide support to the Dalai Lama. Thus, freeing the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile from current restrictions must be considered.

The Indian navy conducted a PASSEX (passing exercise) with its Vietnamese counterparts in the SCS last week. It is time to take this collaboration to the next level of regular joint exercises in the SCS. Vietnam has already granted the Indian Navy rights to use its port in Nha Trang, located close to the strategically significant Cam Ranh Bay, a deep-sea inlet shelter in southern Vietnam. Regular use of this port will irk China, but it is time for India to commence challenging China.

The sale of the BrahMos missile to the Philippines was delayed due to budget shortfalls. It is rumoured that Manila was also concerned on Chinese reactions to it procuring the missile. With Vietnam willing for its procurement, its sale to Hanoi, will enhance confidence of Manila to follow suit. There is a view within strategic circles that India is possibly employing the sale of missiles as a bargaining chip with China. This should not be the Indian approach.

There should be no hesitation within the government on the sale of this missile to Chinese adversaries. It is time for India to pay back China for its arming of Pakistan in the same coin. It is only by displaying a tit for tat approach that China will be compelled to reconsider its approach to India. India must cross Chinese redlines by multiple means, sale of BrahMos, exercises with Vietnam and enhancing the visibility of the Dalai Lama.

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