

## The Needle's Eye



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In China, our difficult and, to many of us, menacing neighbour, they say "If you speak a lot you are more likely to say something wrong; if you speak less you are less likely to say something wrong; and if you do not speak at all, you will not say anything wrong." In Confucian thought, silence does not necessarily mean submission. It can signify humility and, properly projected, even power.

It seems appropriate to think of power during a week when the navies of India, the United States and Japan are conducting the joint 'Malabar' exercises in the Bay of Bengal. It is the largest-ever exercise of its kind, and China is sending a surveillance ship to keep tabs on what goes on. Remember that New Delhi, Washington and Tokyo are all concerned about Beijing's territorial push in the South China Sea.

Nothing daunted, the Chinese have also despatched a small flotilla led by their most advanced guided-missile destroyer to the Baltic Sea where they will carry out their own exercises with the Russian navy. The 'Joint Sea 2017' manoeuvres will be followed by a second phase in September in the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk.

Foreign secretary S Jaishankar, in a speech on Tuesday in Singapore, painted the India-China relationship quite well.

"We are all aware by now of the complexity inherent in the rise of two major powers near simultaneously, that too in close proximity. That the powers in question are civilizational ones, with positive far history and difficult near history, adds to the challenge," he said.

Translated into Chinese, the proverb says: "Two suns cannot shine in the same sky."

So our stand-off over China's con-

# How to Talk to a Chinese Ghost, and Other Lessons in Power

struction of a road on the Doklam plateau, which Beijing describes as the "illegal trespassing of Indian border troops" and which India views as a seriously provocative act, is now over a month old.

I spoke to a few experts on the remote and disputed tri-junction between India, Bhutan and China and here is what I learned: the 1890 Convention between Great Britain and China (which Tibet rejected) set the water-parting (or mountain crest) between the Amo-chu and Teesta rivers as the boundary.

Experts say this makes Doklam Bhutanese territory, but China now says that the Bhutanese herders were paying it a 'grass tax' to use the meadow.

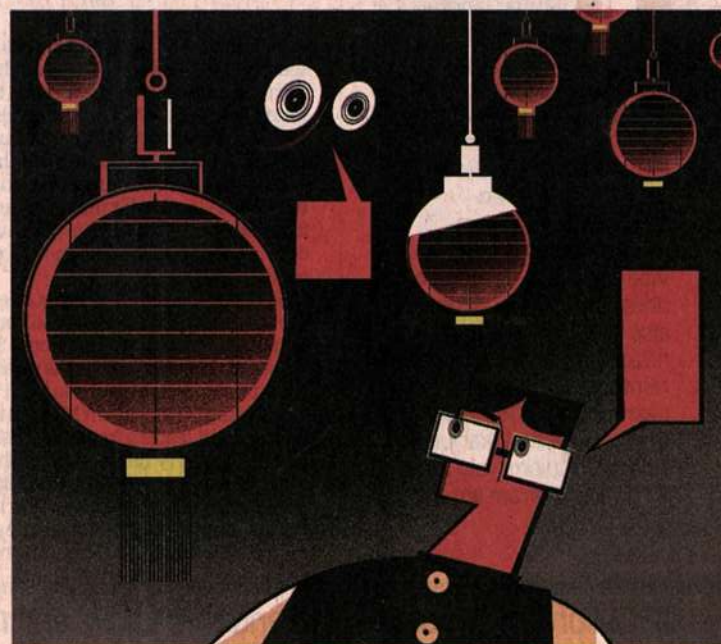
Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with China; an Indian army brigade is permanently stationed in the Buddhist kingdom. The boundary was demarcated by British political officer John Claude White around 1907.

The Chinese controlled the Chumbi valley, and the road they have built represents a southward thrust that could imperil the strategically vital chicken's-neck corridor that links north-east India to the rest of the country.

India has shooed away Chinese troops patrolling in the Doka La area in 2007 and 2012. "We've always sorted it out," an Indian expert familiar with the area told me. "But building a road is a big step. It is a permanent construction. Why build a road if it is going nowhere?" China is insisting that India should first withdraw its soldiers, who moved in swiftly, before any dialogue takes place.

The expert I spoke with compared the confrontation with events in the South China Sea. There, the Chinese take two steps forward and one step back, and everyone heaves a sigh of relief. Then six months later they again do it. Gradually, they extend their control over the area.

Why now? "You have an ultra-nationalist (Chinese) government that



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## POWER PLAY

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relies on nationalism and is riding a tiger," the expert said. It is interesting that Beijing has brought up Bhutan's sovereignty, although Thimphu has officially protested the incursion. The latest drama could be a fresh attempt to sunder the close Bhutan-India relationship.

It is interesting, if you remember the China-Russia naval exercises, that when the Francis Younghusband military expedition to Tibet in 1903-04 secured the Chumbi valley for the British, it was ceded to Chi-

## SILENCE SPEAKS

**China's ministers give themselves leeway to deny or back away from a bad situation. We plunge in, headlong**

na's Qing rulers by London, who wanted the Chinese to be a foil against the Russian empire. More than a century later, the Great Game continues over territory and influence. There are no permanent enemies.

Talking of civilizational history, we need to keep some of our friends' and neighbours' values in mind. I have written before about the Japanese concept of 'honno' (true attitudes) and 'tatemaie' (what is outwardly visible). The Chinese call it

'shuang huang' – a performance in which what you see is not necessarily what you get.

We in India need to get better at projecting our power, if indeed we consider ourselves a growing power, which Jaishankar noted had both Asia-Pacific and global implications.

Here, unfortunately, I believe the Chinese are ahead of us in the game. I remember on my visits to Beijing if I entered their leadership compound, Zhongnanhai, there was an aura of power. You felt you were near the pivot of the Middle Kingdom. If you visit our North and South Blocks and look at the traffic chaos outside, you have to wonder: why can we not put on a better show of our own?

Consider also: the Chinese have commented on the Doklam stand-off only through their foreign ministry and defence ministry spokesmen. Besides our own external affairs spokesman, India has already had very senior officials like the Army chief and the defence minister commenting on our readiness to take on all comers.

One of my old China-watcher friends told me that Chinese ministers fear three things: fire, burglars and reporters. In diplomacy, no issue is too small, but their ministers give themselves the leeway to deny or back away from a bad situation. We plunge in, headlong. We see their silence as arrogance; they see it as prudence. Of course we are a democracy and want open access to our leaders, but collectively we must learn to occasionally bite our tongues.

There is a more complex Chinese approach – speaking to your adversary in a language he will understand. It is called 'jian ren jiang ren hua, jian gui jiang gui hua' which, roughly translated, means "When you meet a man speak to him in his language, when you meet a ghost speak to it in its language." Let us remember this when we meet the ghosts of China's power.