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‘Chinese thinking on the India-China border issue’

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Recent utterances on the situation along the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC) by Chinese officials – though infrequent – reflect the sentiment within China of strategists and academics specialising in International Relations. While there has been negligible coverage of the developments by the main print or TV channels, except in the Global Times which has been prolific, views have been expressed in articles and comments on China’s social media. These uniformly maintain that India has violated China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in Ladakh, it is building up forces in the Sikkim sector, and that China must respond effectively. The sentiments were echoed in the recent statement by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and statement issued (September 7) by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Western Theatre Command. Two recent articles published by the Shanghai-based official ‘Paper’ reflect this. All emphasise that China will not give up even an inch of its territory and that China must respond effectively. At the same time they speak of retaining commercial ties with India.

2. Illustrative of Chinese views after the incident of September 7th, were those of Xu Liping, researcher at the Institute of Asia-Pacific and Global Strategies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Director of the Southeast Asian Studies Center. He observed that it was a very serious and provocative incident and ‘surpassed the bottom line’. Lin Minwang, researcher of the Institute of International Studies of Fudan University and Deputy Director of the South Asian Studies Center, described the situation as ‘relatively severe’ and said India’s firing of gun shots opens the Pandora’s box and poses a ‘great threat to our border guards’. He cautioned that if China continues to exercise restraint it will ‘actually pose a great threat to our security and China must have some new ideas about whether it should comply with the border control mechanism’.
3. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s remarks on August 30, at the French Institute for International Relations in Paris, though made before an international audience and therefore modulated, are interesting. Omitting the usual platitudes or use of words like ‘good-neighbourliness’ or ‘friendship’ that he used immediately earlier while replying to a question on relations with Japan, his comments on the situation along the LAC were matter of fact. Affirming that China will “safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity”, his formulation that “such situations are bound to occur till the boundary is not settled” suggests that China is prepared for the recurrence of such crises. Worth note, though he was addressing a foreign audience, was Wang Yi’s

comment that China will “not take the initiative to complicate and expand the situation”.

4. Writing in Global Times (September 8) its Editor-in-Chief Hu Xijin too commented "if the Indian army fires the first shot at the PLA, the consequence must be the annihilation of the Indian army on the spot". This hints at a possible intention of keeping the conflict confined to a specific area.
5. Of interest is the official version of Wang Yi’s remarks released (September 2) by Zhejiang Ribao which quoted him as stating: “China has always been committed to maintaining stability in the Sino-Indian border areas. We will not take the initiative to complicate and expand the situation. Of course, we must also firmly safeguard our sovereignty and territorial integrity. The border between China and India has not been demarcated, so there will always be problems of this kind. We are willing to manage various problems through dialogue with the Indian side. At the same time, these issues should be placed in appropriate places in bilateral relations”.
6. Pointedly, neither Chinese President Xi Jinping, who holds the posts of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and, since April 2016 of Commander-in-Chief of the PLA’s Joint Operations Command, nor any of the 25 members of the CCP CC Politburo have till now commented on the situation publicly. It was, however, on the agenda of the high-level ‘Safe China (Ping An) Construction Coordination Group Political Security Task Force’ on June 6, revealing that it is being discussed at the highest levels of the CCP leadership.
7. After the onset of tensions on May 5, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has so far publicly commented on the situation only twice earlier. Once after the bloody clash at Galwan on June 16 and, the second time, after the incident on August 29/30. Wang Yi did, however, pay a rare visit to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) on August 14, where he briefed officials in Lhasa on the current international situation and stressed that Tibet's security and stability is closely related to the overall development of the country. His visit possibly indicated some nervousness among CCP leaders about the situation inside Tibet. He was reported to have visited “border areas”, which could have included border counties in the Ngari (Ali) and Shigatse Administrative Districts. Dromo County in Yadong bordering China and Nepal could have been one.
8. The absence of comment by China’s leadership and tight control over the propaganda apparatus indicates that the planning of this military operation, which has been underway for many months and certainly since 2018-19, has been done in secrecy with few in the CCP aware of its details.
9. The statements issued after the meeting between the Defence Ministers of both sides reiterated the respective positions on territorial integrity. The joint statement issued on September 11 after the meeting of Foreign Ministers is devoid of specifics. It leaves progress in de-escalation to negotiations between the commanders of the forces at the border, though it calls for avoiding any action that escalates matters. There is no

indicated time line for disengagement of forces, or whether Chinese forces will withdraw to the pre-May positions.

10. Relevant in this context are two papers presented by Chinese scholars and published by the official Shanghai newspaper 'Paper' on August 29, which give an idea of the hardened position on India-China relations inside China. The papers were presented by: Dr. Tongyu Tao of the School of International Studies at Peking University and Dr. Zhu Chao, China Boundary and Ocean Research Institute, Wuhan University respectively. Summaries of their presentations are given in the succeeding paragraphs.
11. In his paper captioned "From Donglang to Galwan River Valley: Beware of Three Changes in the Sino-Indian Border Issue" reproduced in the 'Paper' on August 29, Dr. Tongyu Tao stated there would be frequent clashes on the border between India and China because the balance of power between the two in the border area has changed. He said India has undertaken construction of roads and camps. Observing that there had been two serious confrontations in three years, Tongyu Tao said 'China must pay sufficient attention to possible changes in the Sino-Indian border issue'. The confrontations at the Donglang region and East Ladakh region essentially reflect the changes in the Sino-Indian border issue. These changes have a significant impact on the "status" of the Sino-Indian border issue and development of Sino-Indian relations. He accused India of trying to change the "status quo" in recent years as the Indian government hopes 'to change the balance of power in disputed areas' and said 'the recent confrontation in East Ladakh was caused by India's infrastructure construction in the actual control zone. In the Galwan area, the dispute was the construction of the Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) road in India'. Saying studies based on satellite imagery of the border areas show that India has set up military bases along the highway, he said 'China should firmly oppose this'. Significant is his observation that 'In the past few decades, India has built a large number of facilities on the Sikkim section of the Sino-Indian border, deployed a large number of troops, and even built military installations such as bunkers in some places, constantly changing the border areas status quo'.
12. Attributing accelerated border infrastructure construction to the BJP government led by Modi coming to power, he asserted 'the reality that needs to be faced is that India's material capabilities on the side of the actual control line have been significantly improved. In the future, as the comprehensive national strength of China and India increases, infrastructure construction activities in border areas will inevitably increase'. He underscored 'the two sides have huge differences on the actual line of control. Delineating the actual line of control is not easier than delimiting the formal boundary line. Therefore, there is no solution to the actual line of control for the time being'.
13. Recounting that China and India had signed five border agreements, Tongyu Tao acknowledged the 'treaties have played an extremely restraining role in the recent border standoffs. Even in the East Ladakh standoff, before and after the casualties on the evening of June 15th, the two sides were able to conduct dialogue in accordance with relevant treaties'.

14. He cautioned that if restrictions on the use of weapons by the Indian army in the border areas are lifted, then the 1993 and 1996 treaties will essentially be broken with attendant huge risks and border issues will become increasingly uncontrollable. He warned that as India's military deployment and infrastructure construction increases, India may depart from some treaty restrictions and create a fait accompli that benefits India in the border areas. He assessed that the border issue may become the core issue of China-India relations for some time to come. He anticipated that after the current situation and based on actual political interests, India will be less active on other issues of Sino-Indian relations. While presently India's approach is to gradually dilute the border conflict and resolve it peacefully, on other strategic issues India may adopt a more negative attitude towards China. He said that so long as the Sino-Indian border issue is unresolved, it will be the core issue affecting the entire Sino-Indian relationship and negatively impact other areas of China-India relations.
15. Tongyu Tao additionally drew attention to India's policy towards Pakistan, describing it as 'increasingly radical and extreme'. Stating that India is willing to risk a full-scale war with a nuclear country and implement cross-border military strikes, he cautioned China to be vigilant of India's behaviour against Pakistan and advised it to effectively deter Indian military actions in the border area, and 'resolutely counterattack any form of force'.
16. Commenting on Sino-US relations, he said though cooperation between India and the United States is deepening, 'it cannot be judged that India has completely fallen to an alliance that "contains" China. However, after the Galwan incident, whether it will make India more strategically inclined to the United States deserves close attention'.
17. He said that the East Ladakh standoff has become an obstacle to the positive development of China-India relations, but hoped that after it ends India will return to the right track and put the Sino-Indian border issue at an appropriate position and avoid border issues.
18. Dr Chu Zhao's paper captioned "Looking at 'Modi Logic' from the main actions on the Indian border in the past three years" was also published by the 'Paper' on August 30, 2020. Dr. Chu Zhao observed that India has launched four major operations in the northern border zone since 2017, and each has caused tension in the border area. He listed them as: the China-India confrontation in 'Donglang'; cancellation of the special status of the Indian-controlled Kashmir region; the Ladakh region military exercise; and the conflict in the Galwan Valley. Assessing that these border incidents 'provoked by India' have profound domestic and international backgrounds, Chu Zhao elaborated on each.
19. He asserted that the confrontation between China and India in the 'Donglang area' had been caused by 'Indian border guards', crossing into 'Chinese territory at the Sikkim section of the China-India border' on June 18, 2017, in violation of the 1890 "Sino-British Conference Tibet-India Treaty". He claimed India's actions were because it felt China had obstructed pursuit of its dream of becoming a great power. For example, the attempt to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group in 2016, failed due to China's

opposition; India failed to have the 'leader of a religious army in Pakistan' listed as a terrorist in the UN because of China; and the riots in the Darjeeling region, which 'undoubtedly' posed a challenge to India's national unity and stability. India felt if its Army crossed the border and infringed China's sovereignty, it could divert attention from domestic conflicts and reduce pressure. He said this confrontation will have an adverse effect on the settlement of the Sino-Indian border issue and undermine the development of bilateral relations, but not fundamentally change the status quo: China-India relations will be normal like relations between major powers and be neither intimate nor deteriorate to the extreme.

20. Stating that revocation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019, by the Modi government, had a major impact domestically and internationally and generated anxiety among the people of Kashmir, he assessed that the main impact internationally had been felt by Pakistan. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly condemned it in a statement on August 5, calling Jammu and Kashmir 'an internationally recognized disputed area' and that unilateral measures by India cannot change disputed facts. Pakistan cut off trade and communications with India, downgraded diplomatic relations, "expelled" India's Ambassador and recalled its diplomats. Pakistan also decided to refer the Kashmir issue to the International Court of Justice.
21. Among the motives ascribed to cancellation of Kashmir's special status were that it was on the year's election manifesto of the BJP; the BJP's belief that its revocation was necessary for integrating Kashmir with the rest of India; and that it was a way to divert the people's attention as Modi's government came under criticism for the growing unemployment and its economic policies.
22. Chu Zhao additionally claimed it was done: to ease tension with the United States and cater to the US intention to contain China; India took actions in the Kashmir region leading to regional tension; since China and Pakistan are all-weather partners and have close relations and China and India are two of the most important economies in the world and share extensive common interests, India-Pakistan tensions could compel China to choose sides putting it in a dilemma; the more tense India-Pakistan relations are, the more uncomfortable China will be and, therefore, if India creates tension to the west of China it will certainly help United States calculations; India wanted to cater to the US intention to contain China in an all-round way.
23. He said on September 19, 2019, India held its first large-scale military exercise in the Ladakh region where infantry, mechanized troops, paratroopers, T-72 tanks, artillery, and drones were deployed. He said the exercises were aimed at: alleviating the pressure generated by cancellation of Kashmir's special status and resultant divisions and fragmentation in society which could threaten India's stability; and creating a good atmosphere for Modi's visit to the United States as the exercises would inevitably cause certain pressure on China. According to him, military exercises in Ladakh adversely affect regional stability since 'The Ladakh region is not only the border zone between China and India, but also close to the disputed Kashmir region between India and Pakistan'. They affect maintenance of the status quo between China and India.

24. The conflict in the Galwan Valley, Chu Zhao said, occurred because Indian troops unilaterally built roads, bridges and other facilities in the Galwan Valley area since April 2020 ignoring Chinese protests. On May 6, Indian border guards crossed into Chinese territory in the Galwan Valley region by night, constructed barriers, blocked the normal patrols of the Chinese border guards, deliberately provoked incidents, and tried to unilaterally change the status quo of border control. The Chinese border troops had to take necessary measures to strengthen on-site response and border area control. To ease the situation, China and India have maintained close communication through military and diplomatic channels. "At the strong request of the Chinese side, the Indian side agreed to withdraw the cross-line personnel and remove the cross-line facilities". Dr Chu Zhao claimed that India provoked the conflict in the Galwan Valley to divert attention from the negative impact caused by the epidemic and the locust disaster. It was also intended to "secretly" help the United States.
25. Explaining the "Modi Logic" in these actions, Dr. Chu Zhao claimed that in each of these four actions the intention was to divert domestic attention and cater to US checks and balances. In the case of cancellation of Kashmir's special status and the Ladakh military exercise, India chose to exert pressure on China without directly aiming the spearhead against it.
26. Dr Chu Zhao offered two suggestions for China's response:
- a. India will surely continue to pose challenges in the border areas in the future, and China should be fully prepared; and
 - b. Chinese should increase its troop-strength on the border and use exercises and other methods to deter India. The ultimate goal is to send India the signal: 'Actions must be modest, and patience is limited!'

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