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'COMPOSITION AND IMPLICATIONS OF CHINESE DEFENCE MINISTER WEI FENGHE'S VISIT TO INDIA'

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1. India and China have planned to exchange a few important visits in the remaining months of this year. An Army Commander from India is scheduled to travel to China in a few weeks, the first visit by an Army Commander since 2015, followed by National Security Advisor Doval and possibly another high level visit. Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, who was on a 4-day visit to India from August 21, is the first of the important visitors from China. He is to be followed in a couple of months by China's Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi, who has worked closely with one of Chinese President Xi Jinping's closest associates and current right hand man Li Zhangshu.

2. The visits are part of efforts to portray an emerging cordiality in the relationship, a reason why no other country was included in the itinerary of the Chinese Defence Minister's delegation. The Chinese also took care to ensure 'appropriate' coverage of the Chinese Defence Minister's visit by selecting only the authoritative official news agency Xinhua, the state-owned CCTV and the official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) newspaper People's Daily to cover the visit. Chinese journalists were instructed to provide only "correct" coverage. Significant, however, will be the assessment of the two Chinese visitors of India's political and economic situation including the state of India's armed forces, which will be important inputs for Xi Jinping in determining China's policy towards India. Both, General Wei Fenghe and Zhou Kezhi have direct access to Xi Jinping.

3. The visit of General Wei Fenghe, who led a 27-member Chinese military delegation which included six Lieutenant Generals and Major Generals, is important for its timing and interesting composition. Coming days after Imran Khan took over as Pakistan's new Prime Minister, the Chinese Defence Minister predictably pointed to Imran Khan's public comments about wanting to improve ties with India and urged India to take advantage. Especially since Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in April 2015, China has been insistent in official, Track-II and other interactions that India ease tensions with Pakistan and resolve the Kashmir issue preceding any improvement in ties with China. China is, additionally, concerned that India is involved in efforts to derail the CPEC.

4. At least four members of the Chinese delegation are reported to have arrived a few days earlier and would have held working level discussions. According to the Indian Government press release the Defence Ministers discussed a new MoU, more joint exercises, issues relating to border management and decided on greater interaction at the working level to ensure maintenance of peace and tranquillity. The Chinese-language edition of Global Times on August 21 said the Doklam incident would also be discussed. The most important issue of operationalising a hotline – a proposal pending for nearly a decade - is yet to be agreed upon. While both sides agree on the need for a hotline, differences persist as to whether this would link the Director General (Military Operations) in Indian Army HQrs with China's Central Military Commission (CMC) in Beijing or the Western Theatre Commander. The Chinese continue to insist on the latter. Till now, however, tensions have been noticed to have been defused only after intervention by Beijing.

5. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s Western Theatre Command, which has operational responsibility for the Chinese side of the entire 4057-kms long border with India, was represented in the delegation by one Lt General and two Major Generals. Pertinently, the Western Theatre Command's tasks include protection of the CPEC. The second ranking member of the delegation, Lt. General Chang Dingqiu is Deputy Chief of Staff in the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and is from the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), which is getting an increasingly important and growing role in the Tibetan Plateau. It is our assessment that he is the most likely to succeed the current PLAAF Commander when he retires. The delegation has considerable expertise on Sino-Indian border issues and three of its senior members have direct experience of the border areas across Ladakh and northern areas of Pakistan. In addition, Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, as a member of the CMC and till March 2018, Commander of the PLA Second Artillery and PLA Rocket Force – China's strategic missile force – is privy to high-level operational and other military decisions and is himself familiar with developments along the Sino-Indian border.

6. Of particular interest are the inclusion in the delegation of Major General Li Haiyang and Major General Kuang Dewang. Both have served for decades in the South Xinjiang Military District, which has operational responsibility for the area across Ladakh and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). They were in position during the major intrusions in April 2013 in the Depsang Plains just before Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India and in September 2014 in Chumar in Ladakh during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit. Major General Li Haiyang continues as Major General of the South Xinjiang Military District and Kuang Dewang, who till 2017 commanded the Hetian Military Sub-District (MSD) -- responsible for the area across the Depsang Plains and subordinate to the South Xinjiang Military District -- has been promoted as Major General and Deputy Chief of Staff of the Tibet Military Region. Similarly, though not part of this delegation Liu Geping, Commander of the adjoining Ali MSD subordinate to the South Xinjiang Military District and responsible

for the areas across Chushul, Pangong Lake, Demchok, Chumar and Shipkila Pass, was also promoted from Senior Colonel to Major General! Their promotions and inclusion in the delegation confirm that the intrusions in 2013, 2014 and thereafter were authorised and these officers continue to retain responsibility for the area.

7. Inclusion of officers from the South Xinjiang Military District and Western Theatre Command attracts notice because the ongoing intrusion in Demchok, for which they have direct operational responsibility, has now lingered nearly three weeks despite India's efforts to defuse it. This casts substantial doubt on the reported decision by the two leaders at the Wuhan Summit to give "strategic guidance" to the "respective militaries to strengthen communication". This was not included in the Chinese statement issued after the Wuhan Summit and neither has a single reference to this been noticed since in the official Chinese media.

8. In fact, the 73-day stand-off at Doklam remains a sensitive issue in China. The Chinese people and PLA remain dissatisfied with the decision to "disengage". The sustained propaganda of nationalism and ideology administered by Xi Jinping since taking over in November 2012, has contributed to inculcating strong sentiments among the people and the feeling that China should have administered India a 'sharp lesson'.

9. This is reinforced by the noticeable increase in the number of military exercises on the Tibetan Plateau and accelerated pace of development of military infrastructure post-Doklam. China's military press divulged that a new PLA Air Force (PLAAF) Base was established in Lhasa in March 2018, that construction will commence in 2019 of three new airports in Tibet across the borders with India, and that a new Special Warfare Battalion has been inducted into the Tibetan Plateau. PLAAF Aviation Assault Brigades have also been carrying out paradrop training and 'integrated joint operations' exercises with helicopter pilots for "low altitude deep penetration" operations in the high-altitude Tibetan Plateau.

10. The continuing intrusion at Demchok during the visit of a high-ranking Chinese military official conveyed an additional subtle message. Viewed along with the intrusions at the Depsang Plains in April 2013 and at Chumar in September 2014, it signals that regardless of high-level visits by Government, Party or Military officials, the PLA will remain unwavering in its stated mission of safeguarding China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and retrieving territories claimed to have been lost by the imposition of "unequal treaties".

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