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DIFFERENT FACETS OF THE DOKLAM FACE-OFF: AN OVERVIEW

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The 73-day face-off between India and China at Doklam that ended on August 28, 2017 marks an important juncture in India-China relations. The nature of the military deployments, kind of Chinese propaganda offensive not witnessed in over 40 years, and actions of the Chinese Foreign Ministry and Chinese Embassy in New Delhi, set it apart from earlier stand-offs. It was also for the first time since 2007 when China began projecting its strength that its policy of aggressive territorial expansion had been successfully challenged by any power. Importantly, the face-off reveals the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's intentions and thinking about India. For these reasons the face-off at Doklam requires a closer look.

The Backdrop

India-China relations have at least since 2015 been at a crucial and very uncertain juncture as they enter a new phase in readjusting their relationship. Since late 2007, China opted for an assertive and expansive foreign policy, which included enlarging territorial claims and testing its neighbours as it pushed to dominate and 'recover' claimed territory. With specific reference to India, China became more assertive in restating its claim on Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang, while expanding its territorial claims to depict the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir as disputed and include the region of Ladakh. Intrusions by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) increased in depth and aggressiveness. The extended intrusions in the Depsang Plains in 2013 and later in the Chumar area in 2014, both in Ladakh, were unusual and almost coincided, or overlapped, with the first visits of Li Keqiang and Xi Jinping to India as Chinese Premier and President respectively. The intrusions were premeditated and deliberate.

In May 2014, the BJP led by Narendra Modi formed a new government. It won the elections with a resounding popular mandate that allowed it to formulate and pursue a foreign and strategic policy unfettered by domestic constraints or politics. Signalling the initiation of a firmer, definitive foreign policy that underscored national interest and territorial integrity, at his swearing in ceremony itself Prime Minister Modi outlined the geographic perimeter of areas of India's strategic interest. This was discernible from the list of invitees to the swearing-in and visits by Modi soon thereafter to countries in India's neighbourhood. In the process, areas where India and China's interest potentially overlap were indicated. India very soon energised and began further consolidating relationships with Japan and the US, among other countries, with noticeable emphasis on their strategic content, in the process acquiring

enhanced strategic maneuverability. Modi simultaneously clearly indicated to China a desire for a collaborative relationship and enhanced economic interaction. At the same time he did not hesitate to raise outstanding and at times contentious issues, like the border and terrorism, with Chinese leaders at each meeting. It was now for Beijing to respond.

Bilateral relations soon came under strain, however, when Xi Jinping during a visit to Islamabad in April 2015 announced the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), valued by Pakistanis at an estimated US\$ 46 billion and later enhanced to US\$ 62 billion. By doing so the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership ignored India's sensitivities on issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity; discarded the ambiguity Beijing had maintained for decades on the status of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), Gilgit and Baltistan; and overtly highlighted the potential fusion of Chinese and Pakistani military power thereby directly increasing pressure on India. The CPEC initiated the process of attempting to unilaterally bend India's borders with Pakistan, which moved to fully integrate Gilgit-Baltistan to 'protect' the huge Chinese investment in these areas. This it did by getting Gilgit to send 'observers' to the Pakistan parliament with the stated plan of later having it 'elect' members to the Pakistan National Assembly. The CPEC represents China's commitment and enduring support to Pakistan. Within days of announcing the CPEC, Chinese officials began describing Pakistan as China's "only friend and ally"!

Significantly, China's commitment to Pakistan was made clear during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Beijing later in April 2015 – within weeks of Xi Jinping announcing the CPEC in Islamabad. It was conveyed then, and in subsequent months to delegations visiting China on one and a half or two track dialogues including a delegation of Indian think-tanks, that "India must ease tensions with Pakistan, resolve the Kashmir issue and then look to improve ties with China". This position holds till now and was reiterated at an interaction in early November 2017.

Though in mellower language, Yao Wen, Counsellor in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on October 18, 2017 on the sidelines of the 19th Party Congress, "invited" India to join the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) now renamed the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Stating that "India has expressed its concerns on the CPEC because they believe CPEC passes through territory they believe is their own", he listed the "Kashmir conflict" as a "top priority along with the Korean Peninsula, the South China sea and the instability in Afghanistan".

There are other visible indicators of Beijing's unstinted support to Pakistan. Beijing has consecutively vetoed India's requests at the UN Sanctions Committee thus supporting Pakistan harbouring internationally acknowledged terrorists and terrorist organizations like Masood Azhar (of the Jaish-e-Mohammed), Syed Salahuddin (of the Jamaat-ud-Dawaa), Hafez Sayed (of the Jamaat-ud-Dawaa) and Zaki-ur-Rahman (of the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba). China defends Pakistan against criticism claiming that it has itself suffered enormously from terrorism and should be lauded for combating it. Beijing is additionally assisting Pakistan develop tactical nuclear weapons and helping it frustrate US pressure to give these up. China also, in a break from past practice, did not hesitate to come to the forefront to deny India admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in order to prevent it gaining enhanced international stature. In addition to trying to demonstrate the limits of American power, it linked India's admission with that of Pakistan ignoring Pakistan's dubious record as a nuclear weapons proliferator. Beijing and

Islamabad continue to actively collude in blocking India's effort to get Permanent Membership of the UNSC.

In addition, China is insistent that India endorse the BRI and come on board the CPEC. During his visit to India in September 2014, Xi Jinping publicly recommended that India dovetail its 'Act East' and 'Sagarmala' initiatives with China's BRI and the Maritime Silk Route (MSR). There was particular interest in obtaining India's endorsement for the BRI, Xi Jinping's flagship project, with enormous pressure – including through the Indian media -- till even a day before the BRI Forum in Beijing in April 2017 with efforts to persuade India to send a representative even if from its Embassy in Beijing. India declined. These strains imposed on India-China relations saw the steady deterioration of ties.

Incorporation of the BRI in the CCP Constitution at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 implies the initiative will be pushed harder. The BRI was specifically mentioned in the communiqué issued after the Russia-India-China Trilateral Meeting of Foreign Ministers in Delhi on December 11, 2017.

The Face-Off

The operation at the Doklam Plateau in May-June 2017 was a 'localised' operation probably largely planned by the PLA's Western Theatre Command and Shigatse Military Division with limited objectives. The two commanders involved, namely 63-year General Zhao Zongqi and Major General Fang Jianguo, both have sterling military records with the latter commended as among the PLA's most promising and "outstanding" commanders. As per the PLA's standard practice the annual plans (which include patrols, exercises, intrusions etc.) of the erstwhile Military Regions -- now Theatre Commands -- are approved by the Central Military Commission (CMC). Particularly vetted are plans involving neighboring countries. In the case of the intrusion in the Depsang Plains of Ladakh carried out by troops of the PLA's Ali Military Sub-District in April 2013, for example, the plans are understood to have been discussed and approved by the CCP Central Committee (CC)'s Politburo (PB). In the case of resumption of the road construction by PLA personnel at Doklam, which meant unilateral violation of the agreement concluded between India and China in 2012 and intrusion in to Bhutan, the plans would certainly have been vetted by the CMC and PB.

The plan's limited objectives were to exert pressure on Bhutan to get it to agree to establish full diplomatic ties with China; acquiesce to handing over the Doklam Plateau to China, possibly in exchange for two portions of land claimed by China elsewhere in northern Bhutan; and build the road through the Doklam Plateau to Gyemochen to reinforce China's claim that Gyemochen -- and not Batang la -- is the trijunction and that the boundary between India and China should be drawn eastwards from there thus placing Arunachal Pradesh within Chinese territory. India's swift and robust military response to the Chinese intrusion caught the Chinese unawares and by surprise. They probably anticipated a diplomatic protest note from Thimpu followed at most by one from India. The Indian army's action stymied Chinese plans and blocked China's territorial expansion.

The 10-day lull before China made the stand-off at Doklam public on June 26 was pertinent. Undoubtedly in this interregnum the situation on the Doklam Plateau and how to counter India's action were discussed at length within the PLA and CCP and between the two. The PLA, and particularly the

commanders of the Western Theatre and Shigatse Division whose military reputations were at stake, would have recommended a military response. A section of senior CCP cadres had also for many months felt that India needed to be “punished” as it was opposing China and not endorsing the BRI. There was, additionally, a feeling that India was only “asking” for things, namely settlement of the border, admission to the UNSC, lifting of veto on its requests at the UN Sanctions Committee, entry to NSG etc.

From June 26 onwards, China’s propaganda apparatus mounted an intense vitriolic offensive comprising over 150 articles. This included personal attacks on Prime Minister Modi, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval. The English-language state-owned Global Times published articles each of the 73 days threatening India. Each of the threats had a historical background. In addition to warning India that it risked repetition of the 1962 debacle, the articles threatened that China would revive insurgency in India’s northeast, reverse its position on Sikkim and foment internal strife there, launch an international campaign to disrupt the close India-Bhutan ties and, as India had done at Doklam, send PLA troops to Kashmir ostensibly at the behest of Pakistan. The People’s Daily, the CCP’s official newspaper, on August 14, 2017 stated that “as of press time, China has laid out its position 67 times, with the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterating its firm stance on the issue for 54 times, while the Ministry of National Defense has issued 4 announcements regarding the incident”. There were also a large number of posts by Chinese ‘netizens’ and PLA ex-servicemen advocating war and that India ‘be taught a lesson’. The kind of language used by the Chinese media has not been seen in more than 40 years. Delhi-based Chinese diplomats adopted a similarly belligerent stance and in conversations with interlocutors repeatedly threatened “war”.

This propaganda offensive would have been launched with the twin objectives of buying time for Chinese leaders as they deliberated the best course of action open to them, and getting India to blink and back off. China’s propaganda offensive was certainly orchestrated by the CCP CC’s Propaganda Department, which keeps a tight grip on China’s official and other media, supervised at the time by Politburo Standing Committee member Liu Yunshun. Pertinently, Liu Yunshun was also (till his retirement at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017) the senior most member of the CCP CC Secretariat that reports directly to Xi Jinping and which, in Xi Jinping’s term, has grown to become more powerful than in the past. There is no doubt that the threats and statements of the Chinese media during this period reflect the views and intent of the CCP leadership towards India.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Central Leading Small Group on United Front Work in mid-2015 and strengthened the CCP CC’s United Front Work Department (UFWD). With its increased personnel strength and larger budget, the UFWD since at least 2016 increased its activities in India, some European countries, Australia, the US and countries along the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). The Chinese Embassy in India became noticeably more active since 2016 in projecting China and has been trying to ‘win over’ journalists, columnists, academics, think-tanks and opinion makers by offering all-expenses-paid trips to China, cash inducements and scholarships through ‘front’ organizations. The Embassy sought to publicise China’s stand through the Indian media and create divisions in the Indian media, strategic community and politicians.

During this time China moved additional troop reinforcements along with missiles to the Doklam area. Chinese fighter aircraft, UAVs and missiles were deployed at various airfields. By early August 2017, PLAAF aircraft were deployed at the airbases at Shigatse, Lhasa, Nyingchi, Changdu-Bangda, New Xining, Golmud, Chengdu and Chongqing Baishiyi. Far from seeing India yield ground, China met with an Indian response. At the same time India, which refused to engage in a tit-for-tat war of words with China or pay heed to China's demands that India first withdraw its troops from Doklam before negotiations could begin, consistently maintained that diplomacy was the only way to defuse the situation and kept channels open for negotiation.

With the passage of time it became increasingly difficult for either country to withdraw without loss of face. China had for years projected an image as a strong and powerful country intent on establishing its dominance in the region and 'recovering' territories 'lost' because of the imposition of "unequal treaties" by imperialist colonial powers. It had challenged countries as it expanded its territorial claims in the South China Sea and East Sea and on its periphery. Moreover, Xi Jinping had initiated the most extensive and far-reaching reforms intended to make the PLA one of the world's strongest armed forces. China was also trying to extend its influence in South Asia while undercutting India's. The momentum that China had built without being challenged by any power for decades was now stalled by India! The stakes were high for India too. Having opted to take a firm stance on issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity it could not buckle under Chinese pressure. Its stand vis-a-vis China would affect its relationships with neighbours like Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka etc. Equally importantly, the domestic political cost would be very high.

The BRICS Summit and 19th Party Congress scheduled from October 18 – 28, 2017, provided a time limit for the defusing of tensions. Indian Prime Minister Modi not attending the BRICS Summit would have been an embarrassment but, more importantly, tension continuing at Doklam during the 19th Party Congress would have made Xi Jinping -- who had effectively been using large doses of ideology and nationalism to boost the legitimacy and prestige of the CCP -- very vulnerable. Wang Dehua, Head of South Asia Studies at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, said on August 30, 2017, that "China understands the importance of creating a favourable atmosphere for the success of the summit and the all-important party congress." Indications that the Party Congress would be held in October had become available by mid-June. In a surprise, but welcome, development India's Ministry of External Affairs and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 28, 2017, announced the simultaneous disengagement of troops involved in the by now 73-day long face-off on the Doklam Plateau. Later that afternoon India confirmed that bulldozers and other road building equipment had been removed by the Chinese.

The Withdrawal

Throughout the face-off India had repeatedly said a diplomatic solution was the only way to defuse the situation, but China had been insistent that India first withdraw its troops before talks could begin.

In all probability when India did not yield ground despite sustained Chinese propaganda using language and threats not seen in over 40 years and mobilisation of PLA forces, Chinese President Xi Jinping

concluded that the PLA would not be able to achieve a decisive victory against India and agreed to the withdrawal of troops without insisting on the precondition that India withdraw its troops from Bhutanese territory before negotiations could commence. The state of morale of the PLA -- which by March 2017 had seen more than 4883 officers including 86 officers of the rank of Major General and above arrested and dismissed -- could have been a factor. Most important is that anything short of a decisive victory would have been a humiliation for China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Xi Jinping, especially before the 19th Party Congress.

Finally, with war not an option, quiet backdoor negotiations offered an acceptable solution. But suspicion remains and military personnel of both sides remain in a state of watchful wariness at a distance of 300 metres from each other with reinforcements and weaponry in the immediate vicinity. Recent reports indicate that China is reinforcing logistics in the area.

The Aftermath

Reluctance to accept the decision for disengagement has been apparent in China. On August 30, Yue Gang, a retired Colonel of the PLA's General Staff Department and frequent commentator on military matters, quite significantly said "Despite Beijing's deliberate ambiguity, China has apparently made substantial concessions in order to end the dispute. India has got exactly what it has wanted. It was a humiliating defeat for China to cave in to pressure from India despite all the tough talk." There were numerous comments on China's social media as well and their not being deleted suggests a degree of tacit official support. Netizens asked why there has been no "apology" from India, whether China gave up "legitimate rights such as building the road" and "whether India's withdrawal is unconditional." Meanwhile, a rumour spread in China claiming that it had purchased India's acquiescence to the withdrawal by giving it a loan of US\$20 billion! Revealing the Chinese leadership's discomfiture, separate denials were issued by the spokesman of China's Ministry of National Defence Colonel Ren Guoqiang, spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the CCP's official mouthpiece, People's Daily. In a widely circulated video clip the Editor-in-Chief of Global Times, He Jixin, declared the people are unhappy with the 'withdrawal'. Significant is the article in Global Times of September 12, by serving PLA Major General Qiao Liang, who justified the withdrawal as "strategic positioning". Arguing that "only doing the right thing at the right time is correct", he added that entering into a military conflict with India at this point of time would only harm China. Within a couple of days of announcement of the disengagement, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that Doklam is sovereign Chinese territory and that China will build the road to Gyemochen. He is the senior most Chinese official to make such a statement.

In Delhi, Chinese diplomats led by Chinese Ambassador Luo Zhaohui have been hosting journalists, politicians, academics and others to receptions and seminars and suggesting there is scope for "reconciliation" and "cooperation". Posts on the official Chinese Embassy website display pictures of the invitees to seminars hosted by the Embassy. A disconnect is apparent, however, with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and China's powerful propaganda apparatus adopting a stance different from that of China's diplomats. China's official media continues to publish articles critical of India. Unlike prior to the face-off at Doklam, PLA border personnel exchanged no pleasantries or visits with Indian

counterparts on China's National Day on October 1. Neither did China propose dates for the annual 'Hand-to-Hand' exercises between the two armies.

Future Trend

The Doklam face-off is undoubtedly an important event which will colour India-China relations for a long time. Despite the passage of three months, China appears unwilling to set it aside and move ahead. The PLA's sharp reaction to the Indian drone crashing inside China in the Doklam area on December 7, 2017 reflects this. The official news agency Xinhua quoted Zhang Shuili, Deputy Director of the PLA's Western Theatre Command Combat Bureau, as saying "India's move has infringed upon China's territorial sovereignty, and we are strongly dissatisfied with and opposed to this. We will fulfill our mission and responsibility and defend China's national sovereignty and security resolutely." The Western Theatre Command said it did not accept the Indian Defence Ministry's statement that the accident was due to technical reasons, adding that the statement contained no apology and China would decide what to do with the drone. It said India had learnt no lessons from Doklam.

In a further incremental toughening of tone, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi referred to the stand-off at Doklam after the Russia-India-China Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting in New Delhi on December 11, 2017. He stated "China is also firm in upholding its sovereign rights and interests and territorial integrity. We handled the Indian border troops trespass into China's Dong Lang area in our national interest, on just grounds and with restraint. Through diplomatic means, we engaged with the Indian side and it withdrew its equipment and personnel". He also asked India to drop its opposition to the BRI, which was separately recommended by Russia's Foreign Minister. The same day the Chinese Foreign Ministry website reported on Wang Yi's meeting with NSA Ajit Doval. It quoted Wang Yi as observing that "China-India relations are at a crucial moment at present, and both sides need to make the correct choice regarding the future development of bilateral relations".

Days after the 19th Party Congress the state-owned Global Times warned: "if for whatever reason the nation's peaceful development is thwarted by external influence, China will not hesitate to strike back with sharp strategic force, or if necessary, prepare for a full-scale showdown." The reference to BRI is implicit.

A new uneasy phase in India-China relations, which could be interspersed with periods of tension, has begun. What little trust there was in the bilateral relationship has dropped to negligible levels. It appears that China's leadership, urged by the military leadership and especially the Western Theatre Command which are smarting at being blocked by India, will look for ways to salvage what it feels is hurt pride as both countries also seek to find new accommodation.

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