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'Brief Analysis of Chinese Propaganda during India-China Face-off at Doklum'

(June 16 – August 1, 2017)

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1. An analysis of China's propaganda effort and its state-owned media's coverage between June 16 and August 1, 2017, during the ongoing face-off between Indian and Chinese troops on the Doklum Plateau, yields some interesting insights. Main features are that: (i) it showed little concern for the long-term damage it would do to the India-China relationship; (ii) China's anti-India propaganda offensive diminished whatever little trust existed between the two countries; (iii) Beijing took a deliberate decision to reduce the room for negotiations by insisting that Doklum is Chinese territory and accusing India of "invading" China and launching a "surgical strike" against it; and (iv) there appears to have been a stiffening in China's position in the past week. The Indian Establishment is likely to keep these in mind while proceeding with the relationship with China in the future.
2. Noticeably, while the face-off commenced around June 16, 2017, Beijing went public with the incident only on June 26, or almost 10 days after the face-off began, with a statement by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesman at a press briefing. In the interim, two border flag meetings including one on June 20 failed to ease the tension. During this period China would have weighed its options before deciding to confront India. Undoubtedly the seriously strained India-China relationship and India declining to attend the 'One Belt, One Road'

Forum in April 2017, have been factors and this was corroborated in the subsequent 'warnings' and 'threats' issued by China's propaganda apparatus.

3. On the ground though, Commanders of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s Western Theatre Command who planned and approved the road building activity were clearly caught unawares and unprepared. They had not anticipated India's swift and robust response. They would have been expecting that in view of the already strained India-China relationship, New Delhi's desire to persuade Beijing to relax its opposition to India's entry to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), India's past responses etc., India would restrict itself to nudging Thimpu to lodge a diplomatic protest and, at most, follow with a protest note of its own. It is discernible from China's propaganda that in this interval of 10 days before China reacted publicly there would have been a series of discussions at higher echelons of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the Party as to the next steps that China should take. The strained relationship would have been prominent in these discussions as also the views of the PLA. Senior officers of the PLA's Western Theatre Command must be smarting after having been stymied by the Indian Army and would want to retrieve their dented prestige. Specifically, the Commanders of the Western Theatre Command and Shigatse Military Division, both officers with excellent records and assessed to be on the fast track for promotion, would want to redeem their military reputations.
4. In contrast to the shrill stream of anti-India criticism by the Chinese media and numerous, though restrained, MFA statements, India has displayed quiet confidence and refrained from reacting, thereby indicating its desire not to escalate matters. Bhutan's Foreign Ministry issued a statement on the incident on June 29, and India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) similarly followed with a solitary statement on June 30, 2017.
5. By going public and consistently asserting that India had "invaded" China, Beijing has sought to use its propaganda machinery along with comments by MFA spokespersons to push the dispute between China and Bhutan over the Doklum Plateau into the background and, instead, emphasise that Doklum is Chinese territory. It reinforced this by accusing India of "invading" China and conducting a "surgical strike" against China -- protesting that China is not Pakistan or Myanmar. It insisted that Indian troops must first "unconditionally" withdraw.

Beijing's effort to build a case to support its claim over this territory in the Doklum Plateau is unmistakable and a classic part of its 'Three Warfares' (Propaganda, Legal and Psychological).

6. China also attempted to divide the Indian political class. China's Ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, quite unusually met leaders of opposition parties including Rahul Gandhi of the Congress, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and former Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and his son Gaurav. He also met former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon and another former Indian Foreign Secretary. Luo Zhaohui's wife, a Counsellor in the Chinese Embassy in Delhi, Dr Jiang Yili, contributed to the effort and flew to Bhutan and called on the royalty there, including the Queen Mother. Meanwhile, New Delhi-based Chinese diplomats met their interlocutors and think-tanks to propagate China's views.
7. Pertinent in this context was the Chinese Embassy posting on its website the news of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi calling on the Chinese Ambassador. The post was quickly deleted after, as anticipated, it attracted notice and became an issue of political debate. The object of reporting the meeting on the Embassy's website is questionable as is the Chinese Ambassador's visit to Darjeeling at this juncture.
8. Pro-China 'intellectuals', journalists and columnists seemed to have been activated with many expressing doubts about the wisdom of the Government's decision to take a stand and direction to the Indian Army to block the PLA building the road through the Doklum Plateau. Doubts were raised about India's interpretation of the Convention of 1890, referred to by China, and whether India's security would actually be jeopardised with China building the road till Gyemochen. Concerns have been expressed too about the Indian Army's preparedness to confront the Chinese.
9. Between June 26, 2017 and August 1, 2017 alone, 36 articles on the stand-off at Doklum were noticed in the English-language state-owned Global Times. The PLA Daily, which caters to China's armed forces, published 6 articles in English. In addition there were 33 in the official English-language China Daily. The official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mouthpiece People's Daily published 21

articles in English while the authoritative official news agency Xinhua issued 6 despatches in English.

10. In an indication that popular opinion was being sensitised to the tension at the Doklum Plateau, there were a greater number of articles in Chinese-language newspapers on the Doklum issue. The Chinese-language edition of the People's Daily published 49 articles, the PLA Daily's Chinese-language version published 31 articles and the Hongkong-based China-owned newspapers namely the Wen Wei Bo and Ta Kung Pao published 30 and 20 articles each respectively. The official news agency Xinhua restricted itself to issuing 2 despatches in Chinese.
11. The tenor and content of the articles differed considerably though, with the Global Times publishing the maximum number of provocative articles warning India of dire consequences. Despite disingenuous remarks downplaying the importance of the Global Times, it is pertinent that the Global Times is a subsidiary of the CCP's mouthpiece People's Daily with a former Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the People's Daily as its Editor-in-Chief. The Global Times is equally subject to the vetting and 'advisories' of the CCP Central Committee's Propaganda Department as other official Chinese media. The articles appearing in the Global Times cannot have been published without high-level clearance from the CCP's Propaganda Department. One reason for Global Times having been chosen as the propaganda vehicle of choice would be the awareness that Indian journalists do not speak Chinese and would, therefore, readily republish reports from the Global Times and disseminate them to a wider Indian audience. It is significant that New Delhi-based Chinese diplomats in their briefings to think-tanks and others in New Delhi used the same arguments that were repeated a day or two later by the Global Times!
12. Of concern is that the threats and warnings issued by the Global Times have not yet been denied or contradicted by any Chinese official. By late July, the state-owned Global Times had published nearly 20 articles. In addition to warning India of a repeat of the 1962 war and an image of a People's Daily edition of 1962 being posted on the People's Daily's website and circulated on the popular Chinese sites Weibo and WeChat on July 12, 2017, each of the articles sought to prick India on sensitive issues and has a background. The threat about China's intention to reverse its recognition of Sikkim as part of India, repeated by

Chinese diplomats in New Delhi, underscores the remark by a Chinese Vice Foreign Minister to the visiting Indian External Affairs Minister in 2008 that the issue of Sikkim remains unsettled. The warning about promoting insurgency in the northeast, after Deng Xiaoping reversed Mao's policy of "exporting revolution" in 1979, has as backdrop the persistent reports about weapons purchases by northeast insurgent groups from China and the clandestine links maintained by Chinese Intelligence over the years with these groups. The warning can impact on the proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor. China, incidentally, has a consulate in Kolkata though it has refused to permit India to reopen one in Lhasa. The article attempting to draw a parallel between India's action in Doklum in support of Bhutan and mentioning the possibility of a Chinese intrusion in Kashmir ostensibly at Pakistan's instance, brings into focus China's links with Kashmiri separatists and the growing collusion between China and Pakistan and the pronounced military content of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). These articles as well as the statements by official Chinese spokesmen reveal the thinking in the CCP's senior echelons about India.

13. The Global Times has also not hesitated in 'personal attacks' on Indian personages including External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. On July 21, it called her a "liar". Another article attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and ascribed the "rise of Hindu nationalism" as one of the reasons for pushing India and China into another war. The Global Times stated, "'Nationalist fervor that demands revenge against China has taken root in India since the border war. The election of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has fueled the country's nationalist sentiments. Modi took advantage of rising Hindu nationalism to come to power.... The border row this time is an action targeted at China that caters to the demand of India's religious nationalists.'" Later another article described Ajit Doval as the "main schemer" who planned the incident and said his visit will not "sway Beijing".
14. Articles in the Chinese media have been noticeably consistent in asserting that 'India's withdrawal from the Doklum area is the precondition for talks', that China will not budge from this stand and that "the longer the standoff, the more

disadvantageous India's position will be". They have declared too that "China will make no concessions over the territorial issue nor will it yield to anyone when it comes to national security". Similar statements have been made by Chinese MFA spokesmen. On July 25, on the eve of NSA Ajit Doval's visit to Beijing for the Meeting of BRICS Nations NSAs, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi elevated the level of the Chinese demand and became the senior most Chinese official to blame India for triggering the military standoff at Doklum and asked it "to withdraw its border troops". A disingenuous statement in Chinese issued by the MFA quoted Wang Yi as telling reporters in Thailand that the "problem was very straightforward" and "even Indian officials publicly said that Chinese soldiers didn't enter the Indian territory. In other words, Indian side admitted (crossing) into Chinese territory."

15. There were other articles too questioning the wisdom of boycotting Chinese goods. In this context, one lauded Prime Minister Modi for following an 'open policy" of trade. A Xinhua commentary published immediately after Doval's bilateral meeting with Yang Jiechi, however, struck a conciliatory note. It said "Instead of being rivals, India and China have much more common ground, common interests and common aspirations. Both as developing countries, the two need to work together on important issues like fighting climate change, protectionism and the financial privileges of Washington. Hopefully, wisdom will guide the two countries to common prosperity. There is more than enough room for them to co-exist and thrive in Asia and in the world. Both China and India need to enhance communication and nurture trust between them, first by recognizing that the two are not born rivals and that harboring ill will against each other is dangerous." This is the first time an article published by China's official media uses a conciliatory tone and does not ask India to withdraw first.
16. Interesting are the posts and blogs that have appeared on People's Liberation Army (PLA) owned or maintained websites. While the face-off at Doklum did not seem to dominate the military social media, the posts and blogs on the subject

were noticeably firm and categorical. Some of them merit attention and are indicative of the thinking in sections of the PLA. At least one post authored by a serving and 'informed' PLA officer, stated that August will be the crucial month for military hostilities as the weather would become too inhospitable thereafter. Another military 'expert' recommended that the best time for China to strike India is in August, arguing that "from September weather conditions in the theatre of combat will change and not be conducive for soldiers to survive and fight at such high altitudes". He said if the two countries are able to prevent the situation from worsening and escalating till September, then the possibility of an armed confrontation could reduce substantially as both countries would have to withdraw troops in September.

17. Other posts on these military sites listed the advantages for China of "teaching India a lesson", asserting that this time around China should not make the same mistake as in the past and "recover" the whole of "southern Tibet", or Arunachal Pradesh. One recommended that China should block the flow of river waters to India and especially cited the need to accelerate building the planned dams on the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river. None of the postings and blogs were noticed referring to any statements on the face-off that might have been made by higher PLA Commanders or CMC Chairman Xi Jinping.
18. A few posts on the military's social media did, however, express concern at the possibility of outbreak of hostilities with India. Some said the PLA was inadequately prepared and not equipped to undertake such a venture, while others argued that differences should be resolved through diplomatic channels.
19. The PLA's stated position was stiffened by the remarks on July 30, of retired PLA Major General Yao Yunzhu, presently Director Emeritus at the PLA's prestigious Academy of Military Science (AMS) Centre on China-America

Defence Relations and whose remarks usually reflect the official Chinese 'line'. Describing the face-off as of "unprecedented nature" that could make Beijing look for a strong resolution, she claimed the CCP and the PLA are under "huge pressure" to take strong action against the "invasion". Yao Yunzhu was quoted as saying "China and India are unlikely to go to war, depending how you define war. If it is very small, if it is a limited-scale military operation against an aggression, it is possible. So, we are talking about very specific military operational issues. What I want to say is that for this Doklam (Donglang) event, Indians have intruded, invaded Chinese territory. That is something that has to be corrected. That is what I have been stressing." She added "trespass" is "intolerable". Saying she is: "not going to be talk about war or military operations, limited or unlimited without a context. The context is this — not only India, any country that has invaded China (or) Chinese territory and stayed on would have to be dealt with whatever means we have, because we cannot accept Chinese territory to be invaded and occupied." She also said "Let us be specific. We are talking about Doklam (Donglang) incident, not generally along the border. Because on the border we have other mechanisms (to resolve disputes). We should analyse them case by case. But Doklam is an unique case, it is an established border line, uncontested territory. I will not say surgical operation, or missile strike or whatever. I will not specify....with whatever means, It has to be corrected...you have an invasion, you have to defeat that invasion." She added "We are stronger. The Chinese military is stronger compared to the Indian military... not only in numbers of aircraft, warships, artillery pieces, tanks, we have a much stronger defence industrial base."

20. China's propaganda offensive against India during the period (June 26 – Aug 1, 2017) of the face-off at Doklum appears to have been particularly critical. Such public warnings have not been seen in the past 3 to 4 decades and clearly reflect the level of tension in the India-China relationship. Posts on the PLA websites have been firm in expressing the resolve to defend sovereignty and territory. Inherent in China's propaganda offensive is undoubtedly a high level of psywar but China, which has projected itself as a major world power, will not want this image dented. Xi Jinping has also, since he took over in November 2012, used ideology and nationalism to consolidate the Party's and personal

power. With the crucial 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress scheduled two months hence he cannot afford to appear weak. Other factors including the recent tension between the US and North Korea could, however, prompt Beijing to defer action against India.

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