
Revisionism and History Revisited: China and the Doklam Saga

Monika Chansoria

China's recent aggression in the landlocked Himalayan borderland, Bhutan, demonstrates a predominantly fixated combination of military intimidation and stealth economic infiltration in redrawing borders and rewriting history. China's policy of injecting investments and reaping disproportionate economic and strategic benefits is strikingly reminiscent of mercantilism. The mercantilist policy approach adopted has resulted in a steep rise in Beijing's capacity to invest further and hold unprecedented foreign exchange reserves. The same policy can be credited for China becoming a global economic powerhouse that is launching strategic ambitions well beyond its immediate territory and shores.

History and Reconciliation

In a Chinese commentary published as the standoff was going on, the deadlock was referenced to the looming colonial past of the region, stating, "As two big developing countries, India and China both had a history of past colonisation."¹ But what this argument failed to acknowledge was the selective approach that China takes to history, especially colonial history. Historical revisions, reinterpretations, and distortions have often been

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cited by China to justify the redrawing of frontiers and expanding spheres of influence. Revisiting the historical and geopolitical narratives of 20th century Asia and the enduring legacies of its colonisation, has often generated a debate on how nation-states and their people view the impact and fallout of colonialism in varying ways. The 20th century remained enmeshed in terms of disputes, wars, economics, and politics. Colonialism and the period thereafter did, after all, make an indelible mark on demographics, borders, political

systems, laws and customs, economies, cultural influx, and, identities. The defining trends of Asia's colonial past during the 20th century, for that matter, seem to be continuing to cast a shadow on the ensuing century and Asia's future that remains weaved with it.

The larger conceptual debate surrounding colonialism and the Asian experience does not get limited to historical connotations only. There is a vital contemporary geopolitical and geostrategic relevance to it. Historical narratives, reinterpretations, and/or distortions of history have been critically linked to colonial legacies and experiences, with the objective of redrawing frontiers and expanding spheres of influence by some states in the name of history. China selectively interprets colonial-era decisions in accordance with its own prerogatives, and accepts colonial-era accords and treaties when doing so suits Beijing's agenda. On the other hand, China ignores those agreements, and even openly dishonours them when bypassing the rule of law is more expedient to its goals. For example, why does China reject the McMahon Line as a colonial era accord, but repeatedly cite the 1890 Anglo-Sikkim Convention in the

case of the Doklam scenario? The only plausible explanation is that the former is inconvenient to Beijing's geopolitical ambitions, while the latter fits in quite effectively.

Manipulation of historical consciousness has long dominated the political discourse and foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has perennially employed selective versions of history to glorify the Party, reestablish its legitimacy, and consolidate national identity time and again. One example of this is the PRC's claim to have been the victor in China's war with Japan. Unfortunately for those who assert this, the Fifteen-Year War in Asia ended in 1945, while the PRC did not come into existence until 1949. And yet, Beijing seems never to get tired of repeating this obvious fabrication.

By intensifying its influence, both economically and politically, across Asia, and stretching to Africa and beyond, it would not be hyperbolic to argue that Beijing's mounting expansionist agenda is fast tilting the strategic scales in China's favour. Providing shape to a cherished dream of reinstating its stature as the Middle Kingdom by multiple means, the most noteworthy strategy is the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative that could well become the defining legacy of Xi Jinping's rule. By unveiling an infrastructural blueprint which places China at the centre of the world over land and sea links, Beijing's Maritime Silk Route and Silk Road Economic Belt are expected to become the launch pads from which Xi Jinping's China aims to reshape Asia-Pacific strategically, beginning with totalitarian geographical domination.²

Never really known to have had allies or befriended big powers in quintessential terms, China did make an exception during the decade

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of the 1950s, when it was allied with the erstwhile USSR – that ultimately ended in a bitter fallout with the Sino-Soviet split in the following decade. In the contemporary context, Chinese domination in nearly every regional forum further amplifies the complexities of Asia's regional equations—be it the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, or the proposed Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area spearheaded by China.³

The prospect of any positive development in the Indo-Pacific and the Indian Ocean security arenas continues to be bleak, owing to China's constant attempts to alter the status quo. The theories of functional integration will be profoundly tested by the deepest disputes within Asia. Going by indicators, Xi Jinping's strategic track remains fixated at reestablishing the Middle Kingdom and building an "affluent, strong... socialist modern country" by 2049, which is the 100th anniversary of the Communist People's Republic of China. It is incumbent upon the major players in Asia to collaborate more closely, or else there will be serious repercussions for Asia's future, especially in the face of a China that is becoming more aggressive militarily.

In the above contextual reference, the Doklam standoff lasting nearly 73 days in the summer of 2017 reinforced long-standing concerns surrounding China's growing revisionism. Beijing's campaign that its "sovereignty" extends right till Doklam, was being watched by the entire world and its desperate attempt to launch a misleading campaign from what actually led to the incident at Doklam, from June 16 until August 28, stood exposed, globally. Although it was the small landlocked Himalayan kingdom nation of Bhutan, whose sovereignty was getting violated by China's burgeoning revisionism, Beijing, instead, was making

a full throttle attempt at bullying, muscle flexing, and misinformation by launching an acidic media campaign against India and Bhutan.

Chinese domestic politics, including multiple pressures on the central government to craft a strong Chinese national identity, remain among the main drivers behind Chinese provocations. In constantly reworking its image, Beijing necessarily is engaged in an on-going, wholesale revision of its foreign policy – the purpose of which is nothing less than realising its vision of becoming the centre of Asia again.⁴

The unprovoked and unilateral attempt to change the status quo in Bhutan was a consequence to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) moving in an area inside the sovereign territory of Bhutan under orders from Beijing. There remains little doubt that China made a full throttle attempt at bullying, muscle flexing and launching a deceptive media campaign against India during the standoff. However, it was the official statement released by the Bhutanese government on June 29 that left no room for any false interpretation or misrepresentation of the incident and clearly identified China as the aggressor. The Bhutanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated:

On 16th June 2017, the Chinese Army started constructing a motorable road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri. Boundary talks are ongoing between Bhutan and China, and we have written agreements of 1988 and 1998 stating that the two sides agree to maintain peace and tranquility in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959. The agreements also

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state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary. Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic channel that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16th June 2017.⁵

It needs to be recalled that under the purview of the Indian-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, signed in New Delhi in February 2007, the kingdom called for India's help after the PLA moved in. The aim of the treaty was to reaffirm mutual respect for Bhutanese and Indian independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. China's unprovoked and unilateral attempt to change the status quo in Bhutan left India with no option but to rush to the aid of Bhutan. However, it turns out that the biggest threat to the independence, sovereignty, and territory of Bhutan came, not from India, but from the People's Republic of China.

China's Strategy of Redrawing Borders, Rewriting History

The Doklam incident spells out at large, the image of a rising China, which is growing ever more revisionist, expansionist, and combative. Doklam is not the first instance in which China has tried to alter the status quo in the midst of a territorial and boundary dispute. In April

2012, for instance, during the standoff between China and the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal, China excused its aggression by claiming that Chinese vessels were operating in the “traditional fishing grounds for Chinese” around the islands. Following a short standoff, the Philippine frigate sent to patrol the area was withdrawn, leaving Chinese naval law enforcement ships in control of what Beijing calls “Huang Yan Island.” Often touting its “peaceful rise,” Beijing’s endless status

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quo revisionism in almost all its existing territorial disputes—from the East China Sea to the South China Sea to the Himalayan borderlands—suggests that 21st century Asian political geography shall continue to be shaped, and reshaped, by Beijing’s selective historical amnesia and cartographic subjectivity.⁶ However, unlike the Scarborough Shoal, where the Filipino forces quit without contesting, India refused to withdraw its troops unilaterally from the Doklam border area and China was pushed to agree to peacefully retreat and revert to status quo ante.

Asserting ambiguous claims and thereafter engaging in bullying and revisionism to get its way—has, indeed, become an oft-repeated Chinese pattern. During the offensive launched in June 2017 in the Doklam plateau—which China now claims is a “traditional pasture for Tibetans” (ignoring completely the fact that China predicates the claim in Doklam upon its equally untenable claim over Tibet)—China attempted to build a road near the critical tri-junction border area among China, India, and Bhutan. This area is vital to India’s security. According to a 2012 agreement with India, China promised to discuss with Bhutan, any/all issues involving the tri-junction border area. Despite this agreement,

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China appears to be in the midst of a unilateral attempt to alter the status quo with Bhutan by encroaching upon Bhutanese territory. In fact, Chinese writings published after the incursion admitted that Doklam is a Bhutanese enclave.

The national identity created through these innumerable historical fictions furthers Chinese national interest. And it is this national interest, which, in turn, determines Chinese foreign policy and state action. The political and military standoff between India and China over Doklam is but the latest

example of China—the new age revisionist power—redrawing borders and remaking a new status quo in order to justify acts of brazen aggression.

Referring to the civil war in Qing China, the 1798 edition of the *Philadelphia Monthly* wrote, “Any lay estimate of current Communist Chinese military capabilities, or future potential, is likely at best to be but partially correct; at worst, flagrantly inaccurate.”⁷ Written more than 200 years ago, this assessment of the Chinese military and its orientation holds ground even today. Xi Jinping is taking a page out of Mao Zedong’s playbook in “keeping the enemy in the dark about where and when [Chinese] forces will attack.” Mao was fully in favour of launching a “just war” if it contributed to the aim of ensuring the predominance of the Party and injecting national morale. What is Doklam if not, disturbingly enough, more of the same?

China’s objective to redraw frontiers and its failure to adhere to the existential status quo by reinterpreting and distorting history is becoming

only too apparent, and repetitive, thereby underlining its growing revisionism. China needs to understand that the concept of a broader Asia that is fast transcending geographical boundaries and lines, makes adherence to international norms, laws, and agreements even more pronounced. Proving to emerge a revisionist state that seeks to operate outside the boundaries of international norms, rules, and laws, Beijing needs to be challenged at every given step.

It is incumbent upon major players in Asia to collaborate more closely, or else there will be serious repercussions for Asia's future, especially in the face of a China that is becoming more aggressive militarily.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has begun his second, five-year term as China's paramount leader and also as Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), by ushering in sweeping organisational military reforms since 2016. It is widely known that, in Communist China, political power flows out from the barrel of the gun, since the time of Chairman Mao. In political terms, the strength of the CCP stems largely from its military might. In terms of the historical relationship between the CCP and the PLA, Yang Shangkun, the late President of the National People's Congress and military ironman, commented in 1990: "The victory of the Chinese revolution was only won after many battles had been fought over scores of years. Therefore, there is a great proportion of historical military documents and materials in those of the Party."⁸

The complexity of the PLA's influence on policy-making derives necessarily from both its relations with the Party and its role in times of war.⁹ Fraught as CCP history is with military struggles and wars against enemies, both at home and abroad, the PLA forms an inseparable part of that history, and many national leaders were strongly connected to the military. Traditionally, political leaders have been able to hold military positions while military commanders have also been allowed to play

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substantial roles in political decision-making.¹⁰ With Xi reigning supreme, at least until 2022, his continuing influence, unceasing control and political relic within the Party will loom large. While the title of “core” leader puts Xi on par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the litmus test for Xi would be ensuring economic stability throughout China, and prevailing through the economic muddle, given that China’s economic

growth rate is becoming progressively difficult to predict with precision.

Economic steadiness has often been interpreted as an essential prerequisite to preserve the Communist regime’s continuing reign in China. A dwindling economic chart could cause far-reaching social strife—a scenario that any Chinese “core” leader would dread to grapple with. And to meet this challenge, which could well threaten the regime’s survival, the PLA would be expected to serve as the ultimate guarantor—a guarantor that has not fought a major combat war since 1979,¹¹ including during the summer of 2017, when it agreed to peacefully retreat and revert to the status quo ante, following nearly two and a half months of jaw clenching intimidation. In the inherent dualistic entanglement between the Party and the military, given both politico-military and civil-military relations, the more institutionalised the duality of the Chinese leadership, the more the PLA tends to exert its influence in politics, particularly on foreign policy-making.¹² Without any change in Party-Army relations, the PLA’s structural influence in the policy-making sphere will be an on-going phenomenon, along with other forms of influence.¹³

Outcomes consistent with internal Chinese balancing efforts are discernible as China develops global interests and increases its national wealth.¹⁴ This will raise the questions: will a revisionist China reconcile

with features of the existing order, such as non-use of force in territorial disputes, or will it cross the threshold in its raring attempts of altering the status quo on multiple fronts?

By constituting vigilance bodies, such as the Discipline Inspection Commission within the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping has placed effective checks on the military's power elite—thereby further strengthening his grip on power and eliminating any potential opposition

or challenge.¹⁵ The military reforms are being interpreted as being characteristic in achieving great power status and what President Xi often terms the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation. The Chinese leadership, and Xi Jinping particularly, appear keen on portraying that a strong military is critical in advancing Chinese interests, preventing other countries from taking steps that would challenge those interests, and ensuring that China's will shall ultimately prevail when it comes to sovereignty claims.¹⁶

All this notwithstanding, China did not foresee India's tenacious military resistance and political fortitude in response to the PLA's attempted Doklam encroachment. Unlike the Scarborough Shoal episode, where the Filipino forces quit without contesting, the Indian Army and its Eastern Command dug in their heels and deterred the Chinese troops from making any movement forward—in a non-violent and non-escalatory manner. This made way for Indian diplomacy to negotiate from a position of strength to maintain regional peace and stability.¹⁷ Beijing found itself embarrassed and defeated in its attempt to go into the 2017 Congress as a “victorious nation” that had managed to alter and create a fresh status quo situation, this time in the Himalayan borderlands, in the name of

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sovereignty. This would have been China’s second success at creating a fresh status quo situation, having done that previously in the South China Sea. However, this was not meant to be. But, nonetheless, the writing on the wall says it loud and clear, that an expansionist and combative China, will increasingly seek a wholesale revision of its foreign policy in its vision of becoming the centre of Asia.

Revisionism is often linked to a state’s ‘satisfaction’ or ‘dissatisfaction’ with the international order, seeking to “undermine the established order for the purpose of increasing its power and prestige in the system”. Revisionist states will “employ military force to change the status quo and extend their values”.¹⁸ The successive incidents discussed in this paper tend to point out that revisionism seemingly has been injected profoundly in the Chinese foreign policy discourse and all elements of state power have been readied to extend its value systems. The People’s Republic of China is not just the most influential player in Asia at large, but emerging as the great power China that refuses to accept the extant security order. The degree to which China acts in a revisionist fashion, will significantly shape, if not determine, the character of the Indo-Pacific security environment. Modern age revisionist China appears on course to pursue what it covets, and knit *Zhonggou* (the Middle Kingdom) geographically, strategically, and politically.

In reference to ‘redrawing frontiers’ and failure to adhere to the existential status quo, present day political geography contains noteworthy dichotomies that remain hard to ignore. States with a revisionist approach have selectively interpreted colonial-era decisions, and accepted colonial-era accords/treaties when it has suited their geopolitical and geostrategic agendas, while choosing to scrap and dishonour them in other references.

Asia has also been witness to the use of colonial exploits to justify ultra-nationalist posturing, engagement in territorial revisionism, cartographic onslaught, and employment of trademark colonial practices. In addition, there are newer innovative exploitative methods being put into practice by certain states – i.e., instead of following the traditional colonisers’ footsteps and setting up donor relationships with cash-strapped states, new-age Asia is witnessing a trend of trading development revenue for finite natural resources and their unconcealed exploitation.

An expansionist and combative China, will increasingly seek a wholesale revision of its foreign policy with the beginning of Xi Jinping’s second term in office.

Notes

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