



Non-Kinetic War in Doklam: A Post Mortem



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The Doklam incident was a textbook case of China using every weapon in their psychological warfare arsenal. As General Bipin Rawat stated: In fact, if you look at the recent incident that happened on our northern borders close to Sikkim, we did see information, psychological, media and legal warfare being launched by the adversary. It did not, however, lead to kinetic warfare.¹

Non-contact warfare is gaining momentum among nations, as noted by the incumbent Indian Army Chief, General Bipin Rawat.² The Chinese have mastered this art, using it across conflicts, from the South China Sea to Arunachal Pradesh. Officially recognised by China's Central Military Commission and Communist Party in 2003, the pillars of Three Warfares are psychological, media, and legal.³

As a nation, India is in a celebratory mood. The 'incident' at Doklam lasted a little over 2 months, from 18 July to 28 August 2017. India stood to Chinese bullying, upheld legal commitment to support a smaller

neighbour while also avoiding a full-fledged kinetic war with China. However, the nature of conflict is no longer restricted to battles between militaries. This is the right time analyse the trends in the Doklam conflict to gain a deeper understanding of an increasingly central method of warfare. All the statements by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the Chinese Ministry of Defence, and articles in the state-run or controlled newspapers (*Global Times*, *Xinhua*, and *China People's Daily*) have been analysed to understand the major trends in this Chinese propaganda war. The statements by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs have been used for a more limited purpose of understanding the Indian response as a counter-narrative to the Chinese perspective.

Eight Days of Silence

The Chinese claimed that the Indians entered Chinese territory on 18 June 2017. However, an observation of the statements from 18 to 25 June shows a curious pattern. There is no mention of Doklam or any incursion at all. The

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Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and all the state-run newspapers remain suspiciously silent. The foreign ministry spokesperson's remarks in this period stayed along expected lines; mentioned India's potential role in BRICs, the 19 July meeting between the two foreign ministers and their satisfaction at the steady development of the current China-India relations⁴ and developments in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor project.⁵ It was finally on 26 June 2017 that the Defence Ministry came out with a special statement regarding Doklam⁶ and the Foreign Ministry spokesperson elaborated further on the incident.⁷ Why did the Chinese wait till 26 June, 8 days after the alleged incident to even make a statement? It is extremely unlikely that they were unaware of the developments. As pointed out by a journalist to the Foreign Ministry spokesperson on 23 June itself, 26 June was the day that the Indian Minister Modi was scheduled to meet the US President Trump.⁸ There were concerns about India's potential Nuclear Suppliers Group membership and the growing bonhomie between India and the US, an alliance which has the potential to pose a direct challenge to China's expansionist claims in the South China Sea.⁹ By creating the illusion of a boundary violation by India, China could have been targeting India's image as a responsible law-abiding nation and attempting to limit the larger global role that India now aspires towards.

Legal Smokescreen

China tried to create legitimacy for its actions by relying on the 1890 Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet. It primarily relied on three documents—a 22 March 1959 letter by the then Prime Minister Nehru to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, another letter by the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 26 September 1959, and a note by the Indian Embassy in 1960 to prove 'repeated confirmations' of the 1890 Convention by the Indian government.¹⁰

Sovereign India has in fact repeatedly disputed the Convention. The central piece of evidence by the Chinese is the letter written by Nehru on 26 September 1959. This has been quoted selectively and out of context by China. When a Chinese journalist brought to light that the letter also mentioned how the Chinese maps show sizable areas of Bhutan as part of Tibet and that the rectification of errors in Chinese maps regarding the boundary of Bhutan and Tibet has to be discussed between China and India, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson suddenly became unaware of the specifics of the letter he had cited on multiple occasions.¹¹ In fact, both the statements are from Paragraph 17 of the letter and it is impossible for the Chinese to not be aware of the context of the statement they are quoting. China clearly feigned ignorance when facts became inconvenient.

The note sent by the Indian Embassy to the then Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 12 February 1960 was interpreted incorrectly by China. China extracted only the portion which stated that 'the Government of India welcomes the explanation given in the Chinese note relating to the boundary with Sikkim: Bhutan on the one side and Tibet on the other'.¹² However, it must be noted that the letter had also expressed "regret that the Chinese Government has not fully considered the various points raised in the Prime Minister of India's letter of September 26, 1959 to the Chinese Premier".¹³ As already discussed, this letter expressed Indian reservations about the tri-junction area of the border between Bhutan and Sikkim. While the Note does express agreement about the Sikkim-Tibet border, the northern border between Bhutan and Tibet, and the northern border of the erstwhile North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) province; when read in conjunction with the earlier 26 September letter which the Note expressly refers to, it is obvious that there was no consensus on the tri-junction. Therefore, reading it in isolation would be incorrect.

When asked if China has any document post-1962 which supports its border claims, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson refused to answer.¹⁴

As a nation which routinely disregards international conventions and treaties as recent as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) based on the argument that it is a colonial burden, China is particularly keen on implementing the 1890 Convention. It also rejected the Treaty for Hong Kong by questioning the legitimacy of a colonial power to make decisions for a colony. Inconsistent as always, China is rather insistent on implementing the 1890 Convention signed between the British Empire and the Qing dynasty, a Convention to which three of the parties involved (Sikkim, Tibet, and Bhutan) were missing and which one of the successor states, India has not since acknowledged.

In her prepared statement to the Rajya Sabha, the Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj stated as follows:

During the Eighth Special Representatives meeting in June 2006, the Chinese side had in fact handed over a non-paper for separate agreement on the boundary in Sikkim sector. The non-paper had proposed that “Both sides may, based on the above mentioned historical treaty, i.e. 1890 Convention, verify and determine the specific alignment of the Sikkim sector and produce a common record.”¹⁵

This shows that the Chinese had agreed in the past to use the 1890 position as a starting point for further negotiations. Therefore, even the Chinese did not believe that the 1890 Convention is binding.

The Indian side mentioned the violation of the 2012 Agreement where the two sides agreed that the tri-junction boundary points between India, China, and third countries will be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries, under the Special Representatives Framework.¹⁶ The 2012 Agreement specifically states that the boundary at the Sikkim section has not been finalised. When enquired, the Chinese simply refused to engage substantively, instead parroting a statement about the 1890 Convention which has allegedly been affirmed ‘many times’.¹⁷

The Bhutanese government called the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory a direct violation

of the 1988 and 1998 Agreements.¹⁸ The Chinese side acknowledged that ‘though the boundary (at Doklam) is yet to be demarcated officially, China and Bhutan have basic consensus on the situation on the ground in the border areas and the boundary alignment.’¹⁹ This is in contradiction of the Chinese position that the Doklam area is undisputed Chinese territory and there is no boundary dispute in the region.²⁰

Ignoring the Bhutanese Position

China turned a blind eye to the official position of the Bhutanese government. When asked if they had received a protest in a demarche asking China to stop road construction in the Doklam area at a press meeting, the roundabout answer was, “*Doklam has been a part of China since ancient times. That is an indisputable fact supported by historical and jurisprudential evidence and the ground situation. China’s activities in Doklam are acts of sovereignty on its own territory. It is completely justified and lawful.*”²¹

This lack of engagement shows that China is aware of its transgression of past agreements and unable to defend its actions on a factual basis.

The only time the Bhutanese protests were acknowledged by the Chinese media was to threaten Bhutan. China stated that Bhutan’s statement on 29 June that China has unilaterally changed the status quo ‘will only make negotiations in the future more complicated’.²² This throwaway remark in an article about India is easy to miss. However, it could be a part of the groundwork being laid by China to halt boundary negotiations with Bhutan in the future. This dangerous possibility must be recognised and international pressure be built to force China back to the negotiating table.

None of the Chinese newspapers mentioned the official protest by the Government of Bhutan. Instead, they only covered dissent within Bhutan. The *Global Times* prominently featured a legal scholar’s blog post, not even endorsed by the Bhutanese media, which spoke about how grateful Bhutan is to even be considered a sovereign nation since China has done it the courtesy of

entering boundary negotiations.²³ By only sharing one extreme view, China is doing an injustice to its people who should be exposed to the entire spectrum of opinion on the issue. However, promotion of free speech can hardly be expected from a nation which controls the internet and routinely punishes journalists to avoid the proliferation of inconvenient opinions.

Undermining the India-Bhutan Relationship

China spent a considerable amount of energy in attempting to discredit the India-Bhutan relationship. It called Indian actions in Bhutan hegemonic, incorrectly stating that India controls Bhutanese military and diplomatic relations. It described Indian actions in supporting Bhutan against Chinese aggression a violation of both Chinese and Bhutanese sovereignty.²⁴ China obviously failed to mention the Treaty of Friendship between India and Bhutan, under which both India and Bhutan have promised to work closely on issues of national security.²⁵ This Treaty legally obliged India to act when Bhutan's sovereignty was threatened by a third country.

The media also had various thought pieces on how India is bullying Bhutan and using it to secure its own ends.²⁶ It had 'experts' warning Bhutan of a potential takeover by India.²⁷ Another one painted India as a bully while China was given a clean chit for rescuing Bhutan from India's oppression.²⁸ It spoke about the presence of the Indian military in Bhutan but failed to mention that this is at the request of the sovereign Bhutanese government. The role that the Indian military plays in training the Bhutanese military or its past achievements like building infrastructure in the region were not highlighted, portraying Indian military presence as a threat instead of a support system. China publicised any opinions that are in favour of it—be it from unverified facebook forums or personal blog posts.²⁹ By printing over 2,500-word commentaries from such sources, China reduced the credibility of its own arguments.

Refuting International Consensus

Multiple nations came out in support of India and

Bhutan during the period of the dispute. Japan was the first major power that unequivocally came out in support of India. The announcement of the September visit by the Japanese Prime Minister rattled China. The Chinese media took the prerogative to give 'friendly advice' to India about the extent of support it can expect from its allies. It spoke of immediate concerns for both the US and Japan which would prevent them from getting involved in other countries' conflicts.³⁰ Another article questioned Japanese motives for supporting India.³¹ similar to the pattern of questioning Indian motives for stepping-up for Bhutan. It tried to portray Russian neutrality as support for China,³² even though in light of the close China-Russia relations, this must have been a considerable blow to its claims. Yet another piece argued that even though Western nations want to control China through India, their common interests with China will stop them from unilaterally siding with India.³³ It tried to portray Russian neutrality as support for China,³⁴ even though in light of the close China-Russia relations, this must have been a considerable blow to its claims. When the Australian government urged the involved nations to settle the dispute peacefully, China refused even the existence of a dispute.³⁵ It also warned Australia about the potential opportunities it would be missing out under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiative by increasing cooperation with India.³⁶ A common pattern is the reliance on its economic power to threaten nations to fall in line on diplomatic issues.

By stretching the truth to a fantastic degree, China tried to create the impression that India's smaller neighbours were coming out in support of China on the Doklam issue. For instance, Nepal entered into some minor agreements with China and instead of recognising this as an independent economic relationship, it was portrayed as support for China's actions in Doklam by the Chinese media.³⁷ Even after the dispute was settled, China felt it worthwhile to warn Nepal and Bhutan, India's smaller neighbours of the possibility of becoming Indian states like Sikkim.³⁸

Only Pakistan, China's satellite state, supported China

Flawed Social Commentary about India

China attempted to link every internal issue in India to Doklam. It made a series of tall claims without any facts to support them. These are so ridiculous that they do not even merit a factual response. Some of these will just be listed to demonstrate the extent of China's deviousness. It said that the Indian Army stirred up the Doklam conflict to demand more funds from the Centre.³⁹ It then tried to argue that the influence of the conservatives on the Indian Prime Minister is forcing him to take a tougher stance in foreign relations, portraying the Doklam incident as one where religious extremists were being appeased.⁴⁰ Commenting on the sporadic violence after the conviction of Ram Rahim Singh, China spoke at length about 'ongoing riots for the past few days', expressing concern 'that India may use the border disputes to divert public attention away from the domestic conflicts if the riots escalate'.⁴¹

Classic Propaganda Techniques

Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister for Nazi Germany, once said, "*It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and a psychological understanding of the people concerned that a square is in fact a circle. They are mere words, and words can be molded until they clothe ideas in disguise.*"⁴²

It is unnerving that this has been perfectly implemented by China. When writing about the Doklam incident, multiple newspapers repeated similar phrases over a short period of time. This built a narrative in the reader's mind, kept the issue alive over a prolonged stretch while simultaneously drowning out other opinions. For instance, on 9 July 2017, *Global Times* carried an article titled 'India Breaks International Law Over Unwarranted Fears'⁴³. On 10 July 2017, *People's Daily* had an article captioned 'India's Trespassing Action Tramples on International Law: Expert'.⁴⁴ Similarly, on 14 July 2017, the *Xinhua* published an article headlined 'Turning a Deaf Ear to China Will Not Help India on Doklam'.⁴⁵ This was followed by a China Daily article on 17 July titled 'India Should Not Turn

Deaf Ear'.⁴⁶ The various newspapers also quoted each other and responded to each other's articles, creating continuous threads for the audience to follow.

"*The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and thence to the heart of the broad masses.*"⁴⁷ Another tactic employed was to make catchy videos mocking India, portraying the Chinese version of the truth in a simplistic manner. The most viral of these was called 'Seven Sins of India'. India was depicted by a caricature of a Sikh man with a turban and a half-hearted accent. These caricatures are easy to recall and take a complex conflict into the average man's drawing room. It also asked questions like what will you do if someone enters your home with bulldozers without even knocking at the door. Widely viewed, such videos are just another means for China to shape public opinion in China.

While the Chinese media was creating more hurdles for resolution by hyping populist sentiment and spreading untruths, the Indian media took a more measured approach in its coverage of the issue.⁴⁸

Building Pressure

China gradually reneged existing obligations to India to force a withdrawal in Doklam. It cancelled the officially-organised Indian pilgrims' visit to Nathu La in Xi Zang on the same day that it announced the incursion.⁴⁹ The Chinese media urged the Indian side to 'correct its mistakes' to reestablish mutual trust to restore the pilgrimage.⁵⁰ It also cancelled a trip of Indian journalists to Xi Zang, although the Foreign Ministry spokesperson was 'unaware' when questioned about the cancellation.⁵¹

By mid-August, as the BRICS summit came closer, its desperation was obvious. It increased pressure on India by entering the Indian territory in the eastern Ladakh sector on the Indian Independence Day and publicised this incursion.⁵² When these actions failed to have an impact on India, China upped the ante further. It refused to share hydrological data regarding the Brahmaputra

despite the 2013 Memorandum of Agreement to do so.⁵³ The Indian north-east was suffering from floods at the time, and not sharing the data made it harder for India to deal with the disaster.

China's Achilles Heel

A major factor that ultimately forced China to back down was its economic relationship with India. With a disproportionate trade deficit in China's favour, a boycott by India would considerably hurt Chinese growth—the engine that powers Chinese ambition. Concerned about security and data leakage, India ordered a review of information technology (IT) exports from China. China interpreted this as 'turning the screws' for the Doklam incident and threatened against 'ill-advised policies such as placing import restrictions on electronics and IT products from China'.⁵⁴ It is clear that any restrictions on the \$22 billion Chinese IT imports⁵⁵ would hit China where it hurts.⁵⁶ The announcement of the Japanese Prime Minister's visit was also not taken very kindly. The *Global Times* spoke about Japan's inability to cater to Indian market's demand,⁵⁷ reflecting its insecurity about potential diversion of its trade. The Chinese were eager to not let the Doklam stand-off affect the economic relationship. Once the issue was resolved, the tenor of state-run media quoting Chinese 'experts' changed completely. For instance, Lu Yang, an assistant researcher at Tsinghua University's Belt and Road Strategic Research Institute, told the *Global Times* that economic demands were one of the reasons that drove the two countries to resolve the Doklam standoff.⁵⁸ Articles like the one titled 'Sino-Indian Economic, Trade Ties Growing Rapidly: MOFCOM' which spoke about the high economic interdependence between the two nations and their pragmatic attitude⁵⁹ began to replace the ones calling India delusional and a daydreamer.

International Reputation at Stake

"By exercising restraint and seeking [a] peaceful solution, China has played an exemplary role in safeguarding the unity of the BRICS nations and the

ultimate goal of cooperation between developing countries and demonstrated a sense of responsibility as a major global power."⁶⁰

China has ambitions to become a global superpower by 2050 and a regional superpower even earlier. China needs to create the impression of a leading nation and has increased its role in multilateral forums. Prolonging the stand-off further was simply not an option available to China if it wanted to continue its narrative as a responsible power. It tried portraying the non-withdrawal of Indian troops as a method to embarrass China at the BRICS Summit.⁶¹ However, by the time the BRICS Summit was hosted by China, it had project itself as a global leader instead of a local bully. *"Despite the border standoff, which is a bilateral issue, China and India have many common interests in multilateral and international cooperation. The cooperation interests outweigh our differences,"* Qian Feng, an expert at the Chinese Association for South Asian Studies, told the *Global Times*.⁶² This was one of the multiple articles waxing lyrical about the multi-faceted Sino-Indian relationship.⁶³ It must be noted that the opinions of experts and scholars in China always correspond to the party line.

Apart from this, India and Bhutan were two notable absentees from the Belt and Road Initiative Conference. As this initiative is the centrepiece of Chinese ambitions, any dissent is interpreted as a challenge to Chinese hegemony. China tried to spin India's voluntary absence from the Meet over sovereignty issues as insecurity over exclusion⁶⁴ and fear of loss of control over smaller nations in India's periphery.⁶⁵ Apart from attacking the Indian decision to stay away from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from every possible angle, China suggested Indian participation and cooperation in the BRI as the solution to the Doklam stand-off, revealing the intent behind the engineered conflict.⁶⁶

Resolution or Pause?

The Indian side released a short statement on 28 August 2017, only stating that the 'expeditious disengagement of border personnel is ongoing'.⁶⁷ The Chinese, on

the other hand, stated that, “*the Indian side withdrew all its border personnel and equipment that were illegally on the Chinese territory to the Indian side. The Chinese personnel onsite have verified this situation. China will continue fulfilling its sovereign rights to safeguard territorial sovereignty in compliance with the stipulations of the border-related historical treaty.*”⁶⁸ The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson was questioned multiple times about the Indian government’s position that the disengagement had been mutual.⁶⁹ The response stated, “*The Chinese border troops continue with their patrols and stationing in the Dong Lang area. China will continue with its exercise of sovereign rights to protect territorial sovereignty in accordance with the stipulations of the border-related historical treaty.*”⁷⁰

Not only has China not accepted the withdrawal of troops or return to pre-18 June status quo, it has not made any commitment to stop construction of the road in Doklam, the immediate cause of the stand-off either. Therefore, it is likely that China is simply biding its time till the surrounding circumstances become more favourable.

Conclusion

News reports in China as early as 3 July 2017 stated that ‘the use of force is not recommended. Both sides have agreed not to use military power.’⁷¹ Despite aggressive posturing,⁷² publicising military exercises being conducted⁷³ and increasing the number of troops; the common thread is that China never intended the conflict to escalate into a conventional war. This brings us to the real question, what did China hope to gain out of the incursion?

It is possible that China thought India would back down early on, ensuring a foreign policy victory for Chinese President Xi Jinping before the 19th Party Congress convened at the beginning of August. As it became prolonged, China used every possible means to distort facts, discredit India and shroud its illegitimate actions with legalese. Despite using the clever propaganda trick of accusing India of what China itself

was doing, like breaking international law or increasing control over smaller countries, China was not successful in convincing the world of its claims or to isolate India. Xi replaced the Chief of the People Liberation Army’s (PLA) joint staff department, General Fang Fenghui on the same day that the Doklam stand-off was resolved.⁷⁴ There is a strong possibility that the stand-off could have been forced on Xi Jinping by the PLA, creating embarrassment for Xi and reflecting his lack of control over the PLA.⁷⁵

Building roads in the Doklam region is the equivalent of building islands in the South China Sea. The uniquely Chinese combination of reckless assertion of control and large investments has changed the status quo in South China Sea. Even an adverse ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration has not had any tangible impact on the ground. While India is already wary of Chinese actions, it must go beyond that. It must counter propaganda by harnessing its international clout and the power of media to avoid becoming a victim of China’s Great Game.

Notes

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