

China's Revisionism and the Cessation of the Doklam Impasse

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ABSTRACT

In the light of the Chinese and Indian perspectives on the cessation of the Doklam impasse, the present article analyses China's role and status in international politics. The Chinese perspective described China as a status quo power and never accepted Doklam as a disputed territory. While accusing India of aggression on Chinese territory, it portrayed China as a "responsible power" that ensured the cessation of the Doklam impasse with India through multiple diplomatic and military measures. Opposite to this, the Indian perspective viewed China as a revisionist power and termed the PLA's activities in Doklam as a source of consternation for its national security. From the Indian perspective, China's declining growth rate, increasing internal conflicts, the potential threat to its peaceful image, its apprehension regarding the BRI's derailment, the Korean crisis, the strategically advantageous position of the Indian military in Doklam and New Delhi's strategic relevance for Beijing in promoting its new economic and political groupings forced China to resolve the standoff peacefully.

KEYWORDS

Revisionism, China, India, Bhutan, Doklam, impasse, BRI, cessation

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Prior to the Ladakh standoff of 2020, in 2017, the international community witnessed a serious rivalry between the two Asian nuclear powers – China and India – in Doklam, a territory disputed between China and Bhutan. The recent rise of China has generated an extensive debate about its status quo or revisionist status, leading to the production of a huge body of literature and the emergence of two opposite schools of thought, one considering Beijing a status quo power and another viewing it as a revisionist state. Some studies (KENT 2002; JOHNSTON 2003; KANG 2007; CHAN 2008; SHIRK 2008; ZHONGQI 2008; FENG 2009; LANTEIGNE 2009; WANG 2010; KASTNER – SAUNDERS 2012; FENG – HE – LI 2019) portray China as a civilized citizen of the global community and a “*vocal defender*” of the status quo in IR. Scholars belonging to this school argue that China is a “responsible stakeholder” in the contemporary international system, has no logical desire to challenge or overthrow the existing order from which it has benefitted immensely and only wants some “constructive changes” in the global norms, values and institutions (IKENBERRY 2008). Opposite to the status quo viewpoint, other studies (CHRISTENSEN 1996; FRIEDBERG, 2005; CARTER – BULKELEY, 2007; KLEINE-AHLBRANDT – SMALL 2008; KEGAN 2009; MEARSHEIMER 2010; SAUNDERS 2015; KUMAR 2020) ruminate that China is a “narrow-minded” revisionist power aiming to remodel the existing global order. Studies which consider China a revisionist power, present Beijing as “*a high church of realpolitik*” possessing a centralized-authoritarian political system which shows no reverence for the prevailing liberal democratic values, norms and practices and finds it difficult to accept the US hegemony. So far, however, no attention has been given to the question of how Chinese officials and commentators interpret the role of China or how China’s behavior is interpreted from the Indian side. Using the situation in Doklam in 2017 as a concrete case, this article aims to analyse the Chinese and Indian representations of the role of China in international politics.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section is introductory, and it describes China’s foreign policy context in its Doklam standoff with India, studies regarding China’s revisionist and status quoist behaviour, and the nature, sources and structure of the present study. The second section explains the geo-strategic context of the Doklam impasse. The third section explains why the Doklam crisis was resolved without any use of military force or violent clashes. This section comprises two subsections that describe Chinese and Indian perspectives on the cessation of the impasse between the two Asian neighbours. The last section then contains the conclusion of the study.

GEO-STRATEGIC SETTINGS

The Doklam impasse was the result of China's territorial revisionism in its neighbourhood. Like the other neighbours, China has territorial disputes with Bhutan and Doklam is a disputed territory between these two countries. Doklam is situated between China, Bhutan and India. Strategically, it is important for India along with China and Bhutan as it provides a bigger buffer to India's Siliguri Corridor, which is an extremely narrow stretch of land (24 kilometers wide) between Nepal and Bangladesh in the Indian state of West Bengal that connects the central parts of India with its north-eastern states. It also serves as a hub of the railway network which connects to India's strategic military formations along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It is located just a little over 100 kilometers from the Chumbi Valley (GURUNG 2018). The Doklam area is also significant for Thimphu as it contains the main supply routes into the territory of Bhutan. Chumbi Valley and Siliguri were a part of the trade route between Sikkim and Tibet. It has a great strategic importance for Beijing, New Delhi and Thimphu. Beijing and Thimphu dispute over it along with other territories. Beijing has also been negotiating about it with Bhutan since 1984 to resolve the territorial disputes, including that pertaining to the Doklam area. It had even offered a package deal to Bhutan that had serious implications for India's security. Thimphu did not accept the Chinese offer due to its special relationship with New Delhi. Bhutan detected an intrusion of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the disputed Doklam area on June 16, 2017, in which the Chinese soldiers were involved in the construction of a road from Doka La to Jampheri Ridge. This was an attempt to change the ground realities and bring down the tri-junction point to Geymochen. Geymochen is the last major ridge line between the Siliguri Corridor and the Chumbi Valley (KUMAR 2017). Hence, China's move was an intrusion into a territory disputed with Bhutan. Furthermore, India considered this Chinese activity as a direct threat for India's national security (MITRA-THALIYAKKATTIL 2018: 240). The road construction, if completed, would have brought China closer to the Siliguri Corridor and deterred India's potential foray into Chumbi Valley. The Valley provides China with a launch pad for its operations to progress into the Siliguri Corridor. It is thus in India's security interests to ensure that it remains open (GURUNG 2018).

China's move to alter the status quo was targeted to Bhutan directly and India indirectly. The primary objective of its activity in Doklam, as Shyam Saran has argued, was to disturb the "close and privileged relationship"

of India with Bhutan, facilitate the entry of China for the negotiation and resolution of its border dispute with Bhutan, and promote its strategic and security interests vis-à-vis India ^(SARAN 2017). By creating the tension in Doklam, according to Srinath Raghvan, Beijing was assessing the relationship of New Delhi with its closest partner in South Asia, endeavouring to loosen them up a bit and gradually wean Bhutan away from India and also tilt the strategic and security environment in the region in China's favour ^(RAGHVAN 2017). When China's soldiers started the construction work, Bhutan's army opposed it and asked them to go back from the Bhutanese territory. The Chinese soldiers, however, did not pay any heed to the objections of Bhutan's soldiers. In the absence of sufficient material power to assert its claim over the disputed territory, Bhutan turned to India for assistance due to its special relationship with New Delhi and as the construction was also a threat to the security and strategic interests of India ^(GANGULY – SCOBELL 2018: 177; MITRA – THALIYAKKATTIL 2018: 259). India sent its troops to support Bhutan on June 18, 2017 and blocked the construction work in the disputed area. India's action was unprecedented as its army moved beyond the international border and engaged China from the territory of a third country for the first time. India's move was guided primarily by its security concerns, which arose from Beijing's unilateral attempts to alter the ground realities in the area concerned ^(MEHTA 2017: 10; KUMAR 2017). After obstructing the construction activities of China in the Doklam area, the Indian army in coordination with the Govt. of Bhutan, urged the PLA soldiers to avoid any alteration in the status quo ^(MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 2017A). The Govt. of India expressed its deep concerns regarding the PLA's actions in Doklam by referring to the Sino-Indian Agreement of 2012 and conveyed to China the message that the PLA's construction activities would represent a huge alteration in the status quo with serious implications for India's security. Besides this, New Delhi emphasized exhibiting the "utmost restraint" in this and abiding by the Sino-Indian bilateral understandings of the principle that none of the parties concerned should recast the status quo at unilateral level ^(MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 2017A; KUMAR 2017).

In spite of all this, China claims over 318 square kilometers of Bhutan's territory in the Western sector and 495 square kilometers in the Central sector. Beijing never accepted the Doklam area as a disputed territory, however. It asserted that the Doklam area is a part of its defined territory and thus presented its construction work there as a legal and legitimate activity. When China's territorial expansionism is challenged by

other countries, Beijing pretends to be a victim. It accuses the opposite party of making dangerous provocations and wages an indignant propaganda war to hide the actual matter involved (CHELLANEY 2017A). Beijing exhibited a similar behaviour against India during the Doklam impasse. It depicted New Delhi as an aggressor, claimed itself to be an aggrieved party and waged a full-throttle psychological warfare (CHELLANEY 2017B; CHELLANEY 2017C; CHELLANEY 2017D; DEEPAK 2017; HARA 2018: 164; PARTHASARATHY 2017). From Beijing's perspective, it was not an issue between India and China, but between China and Bhutan in which India as a third party had no right to interfere because of the sovereign status of Bhutan in IR. China accused India of treating Bhutan as an "effective client state" and said that its move in Doklam was a drive to create a wedge between China and Bhutan and also maintain its control over Thimphu (LIN 2017). Hence, Beijing, while using its media for this repeatedly, threatened to teach New Delhi a lesson (GING 2017). It contended that the presence of Indian forces in the area was "an act of aggression against its sovereignty" and hence demanded an unequivocal and expeditious pull-out of the Indian army from the site of the impasse (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017A; YOU 2017). India, on their side, demanded a simultaneous withdrawal of the PLA and the Indian army from Doklam. This resulted in a 74-day crisis lasting from June 16 to August 28, 2017 between the two countries and increased the possibility of a limited war between the two Asian neighbours. Beijing accused the Indian side of committing seven "sins" against the Chinese sovereignty and boasted of its military strength. It claimed that India lacks a military strength that would be comparable with China's (BISHT 2017; GLOBAL TIMES 2017A; MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017A; YOU 2017; YUROU 2017). In regard to this, its Ministry of National Defence said, "Shaking a mountain is easy but shaking the PLA is hard" (XINHUA 2017). The *Global Times*, a leading Chinese newspaper, in its editorial, said: "If New Delhi really keeps the faith that China will not take military action under any circumstances, then its analysis is not based on the principles of international politics and military science. If the Narendra Modi government continues ignoring the warning coming from a situation spiraling out of control, counter-measures from China will be unavoidable" (GLOBAL TIMES 2017A).

It further claimed that the construction of the road can alter neither the status quo nor the military equilibrium between China and India. While arguing that India can't live amicably with its neighbours, it claimed that New Delhi's illusory fear of a change in the status quo and of losing of its military advantage in South Asia is the main reason that had triggered the

standoff between the two countries ^(ZHANG 2017; ZHOU 2017). It suggested that if India contends that it is a major power, then it should learn the lessons from its “*rash behaviors*” ^(GLOBAL TIMES 2017B). Hence, China used all these tactics in its psychological warfare against India. The basic objective of the Chinese propaganda was to demoralize and pressurize India so that it would carry out a unilateral withdrawal from the site of the impasse. The standoff ceased on August 28, 2017 as New Delhi announced the completion of the meteoric disengagement of the security forces of the two countries at the site of the impasse ^(MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 2017B). Beijing also declared the settlement of the border standoff after the withdrawal of the Indian troops ^(MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017B; MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017C). Both China and India, and their media and strategic and security experts claimed the victories of their respective countries while speculating about the various reasons for the cessation of the Doklam impasse.

WHY WAS THE DOKLAM CRISIS RESOLVED?

After the cessation of the crisis, both China and India officially and unofficially discussed the circumstances which led to the cessation of the impasse. Besides this, their media and strategic commentators also opined various reasons for its peaceful cessation. Both sides claimed their victories in the standoff and also tried to get the credit for resolving it peacefully.

China's Perspective

China's perspective regarding the cessation of the Doklam standoff with India consists of the views of the Chinese government, its state-controlled media and strategic commentators.

First, the Govt. of China never acknowledged Doklam as a territory disputed with Bhutan. It also did not recognize the “*mutual disengagement*” of the Indian and Chinese military personnel from the site of face-off. In fact, it stated that the standoff was resolved because of the unilateral withdrawal of the Indian forces from the Chinese territory. Beijing informed the international community that it lodged its representations through diplomatic channels with India. The Spokesperson of its Foreign Ministry Hua Chunying disclosed that: “[*Beijing*]... made the facts and truth of this situation known to the international community, clarified China's solemn position and explicit demands, and urged India to immediately pull back its border troops to

India's side. In the meantime, the Chinese military...[took] effective countermeasures to ensure the territorial sovereignty and legitimate rights and interests of the state" (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017B).

Hua Chunying further opined that due to these efforts of China, the Indian military personnel withdrew to the Indian side of the border and their withdrawal was verified by the Chinese personnel present on the site of the impasse. Hua also asserted that Chinese border troops are still stationed and continuing the patrolling in the Doklam area, and that Beijing would persist in upholding its sovereign right to defend its territorial integrity (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017B). Beijing admitted to the abandonment of its construction work in Doklam but gave the weather conditions and not India's objections as the reason for that. On August 29, 2017 Hua Chunying stated that China had long been building infrastructure in the Doklam area to ameliorate the living and working environment of its people and military personnel. Hua further asserted that Beijing would chart out an appropriate plan for the construction work while considering the "*the actual situation*" and assessing the various other factors, including the weather (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017C). China's media said that it was a difficult decision for the Indian Government to withdraw its troops from Doklam because of the surging nationalist sentiment in India. Nevertheless, due to the pressure from China, India took a "*rational approach*" (GLOBAL TIMES 2017C). The media argued that China engaged India through multiple diplomatic channels and conducted effective military measures to protect its territorial sovereignty, as a result of which India withdrew its forces from the site of the standoff (GLOBAL TIMES 2017D). Besides this, the media also argued that by withdrawing its troops from the site of the impasse India had recognized China's sovereignty over Doklam. According to them, Beijing did not give any explicit assurance regarding its construction or other activities in Doklam to New Delhi, though India had expected such an assurance when the bilateral confrontation ended (GLOBAL TIMES 2017C). The Chinese media claimed the settlement of the standoff as China's strategic victory by arguing that it ended India's "*speculative tactical intervention*" in the border region (SHEN 2017). Thus, from China's official and media perspective, it took diplomatic and military measures, as a result of which India was forced to withdraw its troops from Doklam.

Second, the settlement of the impasse, as the Chinese media argued, was a result of strategy, the wisdom and ability of the Chinese leadership

and the “*responsible attitude*” of China as a major power. The media presented the cessation of the bilateral standoff as being as significant as the cease-fire of the Korean War (1950–1953) and the termination of China’s “*self-defense war*” with Vietnam (1979) (SHEN 2017). They argued that the Doklam incident illustrated that New Delhi can move or take action beyond the rationale of IR (GLOBAL TIMES 2017C). They also called the Doklam standoff a “*strategic battle*” between China and the US as India’s “*sudden fit of radicalness*” had US patronage. They claimed that the US did its “*utmost*” to drive a wedge in the bilateral relationship of China and India, and that for this purpose Washington had coveted a long-term conflict between Beijing and New Delhi. But Beijing did not fall into the snare of Washington as it did not enter into a border war with New Delhi at this decisive moment. The cessation of the Doklam crisis, in this sense, as the media argued, was not only a victory of Beijing in its “*tactical game*” with New Delhi, but also a victory in its broader strategic fight with Washington (SHEN 2017). The Chinese media termed the cessation of the crisis without resorting to war as “*a victory for Asia*” and said that it demonstrated the “*maturity of the Asian continent*” (GLOBAL TIMES 2017C). The “*strategic rivals*” of Beijing, as they claimed, have no intentions to recognize China’s upsurge from “*a kind perspective*” (SHEN 2017).

Third, China’s strategic and security experts opined that the standoff also ended due to a comprehensive assessment of China’s national power by India. According to them India did a broad evaluation of China’s overall national power and then decided not to fight with it. Prior to the cessation of the standoff, China had asserted its capability of defeating India in a potential military conflict. While boasting of China’s military strength, China’s strategic experts like Song Zhongping had also claimed that India cannot be compared to China in terms of both economics and technology. Moreover, China has far superior weapons, trained military personnel and strategic infrastructure to those of India (YANG 2017A). The Chinese experts admitted that India’s military is more experienced in mountain combat. But they also pointed out that India’s logistics are poor and its weapons are imported from different countries and thus lack compatibility in one comprehensive combat system. Besides this, they argued that India’s long-range missiles lack accuracy (YANG 2017B). On the other hand, the Chinese experts claimed that Beijing would be well positioned to defend its sovereign interests if a border combat became inevitable. All of its weapons, as per the experts’ claims, are backed by a comprehensive national defence system. These weapons are indigenously researched, manufactured and maintained

without any external dependence ^(CUI 2017). Thus, from the Chinese perspective, India analyzed China's military superiority and took a rational decision to withdraw its troops.

Fourth, the Government of China, and its media and security analysts also acknowledged the role of the forthcoming BRICS Summit and the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party (NNCCP) of China in the cessation of the impasse. After the cessation of the stand-off, while responding to the questions of the media related to the settlement of the dispute with India at a press conference, the Spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry Hua Chunying stated that: *"The BRICS Summit in Xiamen is an event for all BRICS countries. A successful BRICS Summit serves the common interests of BRICS and developing countries. As Chair, China stands ready to make active efforts and play a positive role in ensuring the success of this event. We hope that other parties of this meeting can also show support and cooperation"* ^(MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS 2017C).

Prior to this, Chinese media had accused India of "blackmailing" China during the Doklam standoff by refusing to withdraw its forces in the light of the then forthcoming events: the BRICS Summit and the NNCCP in China. According to Chinese perceptions India was trying to take advantage of the Chinese preference for an uninterrupted and smooth running of the said events. China's strategic experts like Ye Hailin, Xu Guangyu and Liu Zongyi had also opined that Beijing did not want to disrupt the upcoming BRICS Summit and the NNCCP of China ^(LIU 2017; YANG 2017A; YANG 2017C). Thus, China's perspective recognizes the importance of the BRICS Summit and the NNCCP in the resolution of the impasse.

India's Perspective

The Indian perspective regarding the cessation of the Doklam impasse, also comprised the views of India's government, media and strategic experts.

First, India officially maintained that the Doklam standoff ceased due to the diplomatic communication with China. In its first official brief, the Govt. of India, through its Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), claimed to have diplomatic contacts with China regarding the occurrence at Doklam. It revealed that through these contacts, New Delhi had conveyed to Beijing its concerns related to the construction of the road and the unilateral

alteration of the status quo, as these activities were perceived as detrimental to India's national security and interests. Subsequently, an "*expeditious disengagement*" of the Indian and PLA soldiers at Doklam was accepted by the two countries (MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 2017B). India's official statement indicated that the withdrawal of the Indian security forces was mutually agreed upon, but it was silent on the question of the reciprocal withdrawal of the PLA from the face-off site. On August 28, 2017, responding to questions related to the Doklam disengagement, the MEA again claimed that a swift withdrawal of the security forces of the two countries from the site of the standoff was occurring following the diplomatic communications (MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 2017C). Hence, here, India mentioned the withdrawal of the PLA from the area of the standoff as well and emphasized that this type of dispute can only be resolved through diplomatic channels. Moreover, while referring to the Sino-Indian Agreement of 2012 and countering the Chinese government's invoking of the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of 1890, the MEA asserted India's "*principled position*", which entails scrupulously respecting the bilateral understandings and agreements related to border disputes (MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 2017C). The Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi had met the President of China Xi Jinping during the Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on June 7–10, 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan and they agreed to respect each other's core concerns and appropriately handle all their disagreements without allowing them to become disputes (MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS 2017C). Thus, the second statement released by the MEA confirmed that both sides had been withdrawing their troops. India's government sources also informed the media about the "*mutual*" and "*simultaneous*" but "*sequential*" withdrawal of troops. It reported that both sides had gone back to their pre-impasse positions almost simultaneously by following standard operating procedures. It further clarified that the "*expeditious disengagement*" involved a pull-out of the security forces of both countries as a unilateral withdrawal of its security forces by New Delhi would not have required any agreement with Beijing (SINGH – ROY 2017). Hence, as per India's official logic, the "*expeditious disengagement*" was a bilateral and not a unilateral one and the Doklam standoff was ended due to its diplomatic communication with China.

Second, India's strategic analysts claimed the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) Summit and the NNCCP of China as vital elements in the final outcome of the Doklam impasse. The representatives of the BRICS countries had to attend the BRICS Summit at Xiamen, China

on September 3–5, 2017. Amidst the standoff, it would have been impossible for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to participate in the Summit in China. India had not confirmed the participation of Prime Minister Modi in the Summit. A boycott coming close on the heels of the boycott of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit or the cancellation of the BRICS Summit would have severely dented the image of President Xi Jinping as a leader of international repute (CHELLANEY 2017D; HAIDER 2017; NARAYANAN 2017; PANT 2017; SINGH, BHARTENDU KUMAR 2017). At that time, China wanted to attenuate the global perceptions of its aggressive designs. Besides this, its President Xi was keen to project himself as a global statesman. Amidst such circumstances, President Xi could have hardly afforded a military debacle with India (GUPTA 2017). The protracted crisis could have become a sore point for the Chinese leadership in the NNCCP on October 18–24, 2017 (SINGH, MAYANK 2017). As Chellaney opines: *“Beijing was left with little choice but to negotiate a deal with India... Two factors forced Beijing’s hand. It wished to save the September 3–5 BRICS summit in Xiamen, China. More importantly, it wanted to safeguard President Xi Jinping’s reputation in the run-up to the critical party congress this autumn. Had the standoff with India dragged on, it could potentially have taken a toll on Xi’s standing”* (CHELLANEY 2017E).

Therefore, India’s absence at the BRICS Summit or its cancellation would have tarnished the image of Beijing and President Xi Jinping’s reputation before the critical NNCCP (PANT 2017). The NNCCP was even more important for President Xi as he had planned to uphold his political and ideological bequest in the Communist Party of China while equalling Mao Zedong (NARAYANAN 2017; PANT 2017). Hence, President Xi needed peace to achieve his objectives.

Third, the majority of India’s strategic analysts also speculated that the topography of Doklam and India’s strategically strong position in the area was a *raison d’être* that forced China to negotiate with India to end the standoff. They argued that the location was also advantageous to India, and its military advantage in the Sikkim sector would have made an escalation of the conflict costly for China. The Indian army, as strategic analysts argued, had encircled the entire area of Doklam while having enough provisions to neutralize the Chinese forces. It had been occupying a geographically high altitude, due to which the Indian army had a strategically greater advantage in the area vis-a-vis the PLA soldiers. If China invaded India in that area, the PLA might have experienced an embarrassing

defeat ^(CHELLANEY 2017E; SINGH, MAYANK 2017). China had realized that: “...*the PLA was not fully trained for war. The PLA is undergoing massive reforms and reorganization, including purging of senior officers. The PLA, thus, is in a state of flux and the Chinese leadership was not very confident of its war-making capabilities, particularly in the Air Force and Navy... The Chinese leadership also conceded to the fact that India enjoyed both geographic and strategic advantage in the area. The onset of winters was also on the horizon and life on the plateau during these months is a nightmare. Once again the Chinese troops deployed in the open would have been in a state of disadvantage vis-a-vis the Indian troops*” ^(GUPTA 2017).

Hence, India's strategic analysts also contemplated that the PLA might have decided to invade other parts of the border area with India, where it has a strategic advantage. However, there are also numerous segments on the border of the two countries where India enjoys an advantageous position. In case of an armed conflict, the Indian army could also “[move] there to occupy territory under [the] control of China” ^(SAJJANHAR 2017). Thus, it had become obvious to Beijing that a “clear and decisive win” in a war with India over this issue, would be difficult and moreover, the loss would be unacceptably huge ^(SAJJANHAR 2017). Nevertheless, Zorawar Daulet Singh did not give much weight to this argument. He argued that India's deterrent power or military balance had little to do with the peaceful resolution of the Doklam impasse as China still had overall geographical, logistical and technological advantages vis-à-vis India. It is improbable, as Singh has opined, that Beijing's strategic restraint had predominantly been “shaped by fear of reprisals or high direct repercussions of a military escalation” ^(SINGH, ZORAWAR DAULET 2017A: 11).

Fourth, to some extent, the international environment, especially the mounting tension in the Korean Peninsula and the pressure from the international community, also assisted in resolving the dispute ^(DWIVEDI 2017). There were also reports of the Russian President Vladimir Putin's evinced enthusiastic interest in the resolution of the boundary dispute between the two competing Asian neighbours. The Chinese President Xi, as Brahma Chellaney argues, had been facing “a frustrating paradox”. On the one hand, President Xi was trying to prevent a possible armed conflict over the nuclear and missile programme of North Korea and on the other, he was searching for a way to punish India. However, China's hostility toward India over Doklam occurred at a crucial juncture when the nuclear and missile crisis in the Korean Peninsula was threatening the international

peace and security. Since Beijing was central to the US strategy and diplomacy against North Korea, any military conflict of the US and its allies, South Korea and Japan, with North Korea could have also easily impacted China. The US threats of war to Pyongyang had unnerved Beijing, which, as Chellaney observes, was one of the reasons why China had not proceeded with and acted on its *“constant threats to teach India a lesson”* (CHELLANEY 2017D).

Fifth, an armed conflict with India, as strategic analysts have argued, could have risked derailing China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in which President Xi has heavily invested. The BRI is a *“potent instrument”* of China for the implementation of its revisionist agenda (NARAYANAN, 2017). Any military conflict with India would have undermined China’s officially declared philosophy of internationalism surrounding the Belt and Road discourse (SINGH, ZORAWAR DAULET 2017B). Unlike in past imperialisms, in the contemporary era, coercion and commerce can’t be mixed (MISRA 2017). Hence, Beijing needs a peaceful environment to succeed in its agenda.

Sixth, Beijing’s authoritarian system and its increasingly suppressive policies have already exacerbated the domestic problems in China, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang. China, as Shayam Saran argues, is *“a brittle and opaque polity”* (SARAN 2017). Besides this, it is facing several cross-border security threats. In such a situation, as M.K. Narayanan observes, any military rendezvous with its neighbouring country could have further aggravated China’s problems (NARAYANAN 2017).

Seventh, Beijing has provided a *“doctrine of [a] peaceful rise”* and *“peaceful development”* to the world for an anodyne facilitation of its growth. A military conflict with India could have tainted its peaceful image globally, bolstered the perception of it as *“a rogue state”*, and made it *“a pariah”* in international eyes (NARAYAN 2017; SAJJANHAAR 2017; SINGH, MAYANK 2017; SINGH, ZORAWAR DAULET 2017B).

Eighth, any outbreak of hostilities between China and India in Doklam, as Zorawar Daulet Singh has argued, would have fuelled the anti-Chinese sentiment in India. Even on a sub-regional level, China’s conflict with India would have steered Beijing further towards the irredentist Pakistan as its exclusive partner. This would have been a suboptimal outcome for Beijing, which prefers to have a wider profile in the sub-continent (SINGH, ZORAWAR DAULET 2017B). Moreover, the premature assertiveness of Beijing

could have propelled its other strategic rivals, especially the US, Japan, and Vietnam, to unite with India against it (MISRA 2017).

Ninth, as India's strategic experts observe, China's declining economic growth and its increasing dependence on international trade also compelled it to resolve the impasse. M.K. Narayanan has observed in China an actual decline in its growth rate, extremely high levels of debt and an extensive increase in the cost of labour (NARAYANAN 2017). Its economy, as Shyam Saran observes, is facing stagnation like other major economies of the world. Furthermore, it has *"an ecologically ravaged landscape and [a] mounting debt that is 250 percent of GDP"* (SARAN 2017). Its overall government debt was about 4.03 trillion US dollars in 2016. This debt was almost 40 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of China (SINDNEY 2017). P. Stobdan writes: *"The economy is not expected to recover in the near future. With China's Central Bank piled with massive debts, global financial rating agencies seem loath to forecast a positive scenario for the country. China's corporate debt had touched \$17.8 trillion in 2016, or 166 percent of the country's GDP. As such, the fear of China facing another financial crisis very much exists"* (STOBDAN 2017).

China relies relatively more on its "international trade" and "global production chains" to maintain the high growth rate of its GDP. Hence, it wanted to be viewed as a pillar of the prevailing global economic order rather than a disruptor of the same by the international community (NARAYANAN 2017). The Chinese economy's vulnerable point is that it lacks resources. The supply of oil from the Gulf countries to China is vital for its growth (NARAYANAN 2017). Peace on the Asian continent is, therefore, crucial for ensuring the uninterrupted supply of oil from these countries to China. A suspicious and disruptive atmosphere in Asia can impede the growth of China's economy (CHELLANEY 2017D).

Lastly, the *"indirect costs and the positive facets"* of China's relations with India and other South Asian countries also shaped the choices of Beijing. A military conflict with New Delhi could have upset China's policies and relationships with other South Asian countries. Likewise, China is attempting to build a common order through institutions like the SCO and BRICS. It needs India to promote its new economic and political groupings and also to convince the Western countries that there should be a restructuring of the existing institutions of and beliefs about the global

economic and political order. Its trade with and growing investment in India also influenced its decision-making about the issue concerned. The depth of engagement, the overlapping interests and the fretting about its reputational costs in South Asia were enough for Beijing to feel compelled to defuse the Doklam impasse serenely (SINGH, ZORAWAR DAULET 2017A: 11).

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, China's status and role in contemporary international politics have been discussed widely in the global academic and political discourse. In the light of the Doklam impasse, the present article also analyzes the Chinese and Indian interpretations of China's role as a status quo or revisionist power in international politics.

China's official statements, its media and its strategic commentators never recognized Doklam as a disputed territory. Indeed, it presented itself as a victim of India's aggression and asserted to persist with its legitimate right to protect its territory. It portrayed itself as a "responsible power" which resolved the impasse amicably by engaging India through numerous diplomatic channels. Chinese media and strategic analysts claimed the superiority of China's hard power resources, which, according to their interpretation, obliged India to withdraw its forces from the area of conflict. Thus, the Chinese perspective on the cessation of the Doklam impasse highlighted the role of China as a status quo and responsible power in international politics. From the Chinese perspective, Beijing is not involved in any revisionist activity and yet is committed to exercise its sovereign right to defend its territory.

Opposite to this, the Indian interpretation of China's role in international politics depicted China as a revisionist power involved in territorial revisionism. In its official statements, India termed China's construction activities in Doklam as an attempt at a unilateral alteration of the status quo and a source of trepidation for India's national security. India's media and strategic commentators also dubbed China a revisionist power. According to them, China's deteriorating growth rate, its growing internal conflicts, the upcoming BRICS summit and the threat of it being boycotted by India, the event of the NNCCP, and the risk of China's "peaceful image" being spoiled, along with its fear of the BRI's possible derailment, constrained Beijing and forced it to resolve its impasse with New Delhi.

Besides this, as the Indian media and strategic analysts have argued, the Korean crisis, the strategically advantageous position of the Indian security forces in the area of the standoff and India's strategic relevance for China in the promotion of its new economic and political groupings and attempts to convince the Western powers for restructuring the existing global economic and political order also obliged China to defuse the impasse with India tranquilly. Hence, from the Indian perspective, China is behaving as a revisionist power which is trying to alter the existing territorial status quo in its neighbourhood. Beijing's move in Doklam was also steered by its policy of territorial revisionism.

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