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## There is a method in China's Doklam Stand

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By Bhaskar Roy

The basic issue is of making President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" a success. This a hugely ambitious project that he has launched and he cannot fail. And at the moment, he cannot back off on Doklam.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is coming up in late October or November this year, where he will be re-elected with all his powers, and a Politburo and its Standing Committee (PBSC) will be packed with his chosen people. The same is being done in the appointment of provincial party chiefs and governors. This, however, is not abnormal in Chinese politics. The only thing that is new in the Post-Mao era is that Xi Jinping has almost decimated all his opponents and detractors in the Communist Party through his anti-corruption campaign.

President Xi's "Chinese Dream" project unequivocally states returning China to its imperial glory, led by the son of heaven in Beijing. The implicit message is Chinese expansionism and creation of vassal states along its borders.

According to San Hongnian a researcher with the Research Centre of China's Borderland History and Geography under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)- Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan had been vassal states of the Qing Empire (1644-1911). The British Empire took over control of these countries to expand its influence in Tibet, and India wanted to inherit these assets (*Global Times*, May 7, 2017). This is a message that Nepal must read and India must be alert about. The *Global Times* is a subsidiary of the Communist Party mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*, and it has been ordained by President Xi that the Chinese media must report what is good for the party and good for the country.

China has almost successfully been able to cow down its South China Sea neighbours who partially claim parts of the Spratley islands. They have created artificial islands in the South China Sea with military posts on some of the existing islands like the Fiery Cross.

President Xi is projecting power projection to his people, and most Chinese people have been trained to be hyper nationalistic from their very early school days. The other project very close to President Xi's heart is the One Road, One Belt (OBOR). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) the flagship of the OBOR, which is now known as the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) is not going as well as they had hoped. Although the Pakistani government, most political parties and military are in full support of the CPEC, there is scathing criticism from Pakistani experts and media that Pakistan is destined to be mortgaged to China, and exploited by China for at least 50 years if not more. Other neighbouring countries who have agreed to join the BRI, like Myanmar, are no longer so sure about it. Sri Lanka is also rethinking about it but they are already caught in a "debt trap" by China. This may not stand well for President Xi at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

India's refusal to join the BRI has severely upset China. India is not only critical geographically for BRI, but as a power of consequence, New Delhi's position is bound to be examined by other countries. The CPEC, the flagship project of the BRI passes through Pakistan occupied Kashmir which is claimed day India as its sovereign territory. The CPEC, therefore trespasses on India's sovereignty. This has been pointed out to China. It has been noticed that many of the Chinese official media articles on Doklam issue somehow draws in India's position on the BRI. This speaks for itself.

China has rapidly raised its rhetoric against India since the Doklam stand-off started just over a month ago, to a sharpness not noticed since the 1962 India-China border war more than fifty years ago.

The warnings have come both at the official level and from the propaganda organs. A week back, the Chinese foreign ministry briefed foreign missions in Beijing that India had trespassed into Chinese territory and China's patience was not indefinite. At the moment this does not mean that Beijing is warning of an immediate war, but is trying to exert international pressure on India to withdraw from Doklam. The Chinese foreign ministry is also openly accusing India of trespass.

It is important to note that China has unleashed its "three warfares" strategy in full. The strategy perfected around 2005, is as follows:

**Media Warfare:** is being witnessed in the Chinese media (along with the foreign ministry's media briefings). This includes Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang's statement that brought in the Kashmir issue and exchange of fire between Indian and Pakistani troops across the LOC as "undermining regional stability". A media commentary also suggested that if Indian troops could enter Doklam, then a third party could intervene in Kashmir.

**Psychological Warfare:** The recent live fire exercise in the Tibet-Qinghai plateau at a height of 5000 feet and telecast over Chinese Central

Television, suggesting China is prepared for a war in the Himalayan region, is to strike fear in the hearts of the Indian troops. Reports of Chinese T-96 tanks training at high altitudes suggests Chinese attacks could extend to other parts of the long disputed Indo-Chinese border.

**Legal Warfare:** Creating historical texts to argue Chinese claims. There is a Chinese saying “Use the past to serve the present”, which means reconstruct history. Chinese foreign ministry spokes persons claimed that the 1890 tripartite treaty between British Indian government, the Chinese government and Bhutan had settled the boundary between India, Sikkim and Tibet, and that India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had confirmed it to Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in a letter of March 1959. But the Chinese official was quoting selectively from the 1890 treaty and Nehru’s letter. Nehru had only confirmed that the border of northern Sikkim, and the tri-junction between Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet was still to be negotiated. Since then, the Chinese have desisted from voicing this line.

Doklam has traditionally been Bhutanese territory, which now China claims. The road that China is trying to build in Doklam is strategically important for them vis-a-vis India, hovering over the “Siliguri Chicken neck” that joins north-east India with the rest of the country.

In the Doklam incident, the Bhutanese army had first tried to push out the Chinese army’s road building party. Having failed, Thimpu called upon India. (Imagine a country with 1.4 billion people with the largest standing army pushing and threatening a tiny country with a population of under one million!) India has centuries old relations with Bhutan, and has a treaty obligation to come to its aid. It was not India which went out first to challenge China’s efforts to take over the Bhutanese territory by brute force. It was the Bhutanese government which first issued the demarche to the Chinese government.

The Chinese embassy in New Delhi is hyper active in trying to appease Bhutan. What has exactly transpired is not known, but a good guess is they will persuade Thimpu to dump India and deal bilaterally with China. Promises may have been made or would be made. It is highly unlikely, however, that Bhutan will change track at this moment.

Why President Xi Jinping chose this moment for the Doklam misadventure can only be speculated with some informed guess work. The confusion in Washington with President Donald Trump’s inexperience, China believes, may encourage him to put pressure on India which has recently been showing some assertiveness, with growing influence in the international arena. India and Japan are two countries in Asia which counter China’s over lordship in the region, and New Delhi and Tokyo are moving closer. Beijing has to counter that, and threats and fictitious construction of history is China’s new narrative.

India has decided not to exacerbate the situation in Doklam. New Delhi is not willing to engage China in a hectoring match. India has made it clear that diplomacy is its preferred choice.

China, on the other hand, is adamant that India must withdraw first from Doklam for diplomatic talks on the subject to happen. Beijing has publicly painted itself into a difficult corner especially with its domestic constituency and the CPC Central Committee.

It is unlikely that official discussions will take place when Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) visits China for the July 27-28 BRICS meeting of national security advisors. More high level visits from India are scheduled, including by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The embarrassment will be for China. A face saving formula for both sides is urgently required.

**Is President Xi Jinping suffering from Imperial Hubris? If that is so, it can be very dangerous.** (Please refer to SAAG Paper No. 6275 dated 05 July 2017).

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