

CHINA'S EMERGING POSTURE

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Since the 19th Communist Party Congress in October 2017, China's domestic and external posture has witnessed a radical departure from "*taoguang yanghui*" [keeping a low profile] to that of "*fenfa youwei*" [accomplish something] with implications to regional and global orders. At the May 2014 meeting at Shanghai of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, President Xi Jinping implied that Asian countries should look after their own security—a euphemism to China's drive to acquire hegemony in the region. As the second largest economy in the world since 2010 and the second largest defence spender in the world, China's domestic and external postures naturally impact the neighbourhood and beyond, specifically as assertive policies are being followed and implemented. The following sections identify the changes at the domestic and external levels with focus on implications for Indian national security.

DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

In March 2021, China launched its 14th Five-Year Plan that called for China emerging as a Superpower in various fields, such as manufacturing, education, S&T, quality, talent, digital, cyber, maritime, culture, sports and others, while its 2002 strategy of

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building a “well-off society” is said to have been fulfilled by 2021, specifically in eradicating “extreme poverty” (in the villages). These are intended to be internal balancing efforts in order to position China at the highest pedestal in global power transition with the United States.

Communist Party's 6th Plenum met on November 8-11, 2021 at Beijing. The communiqué issued thereafter glorified Xi Jinping's contributions—suggesting that unlike in the recent past, he would probably get an extension for the party-army positions a third time. In the communiqué, the word “core”—associated with Xi Jinping since 2016 plenum results—was mentioned 16 times, while Xi Jinping himself was mentioned 18 times and Xi Jinping “Thought” 7 times. The communiqué mentioned that Xi's policies lead to “significant progress ... in all areas of the Party and country's endeavors”, including his contribution in poverty alleviation campaign, anti-corruption drive, overcoming “lax and weak governance over Party organizations”, ushering in a “new pattern of development”, “high quality development”, holding of the first centennial of the CCP in July. It credits Xi for taking decisions left in the CCP “that were wanted but never got done”. It praised Xi for “advancing our great struggle, great project, great cause, and great dream”. Comparing with the West, China today boasts of rapid growth in a few decades and achieving “the two miracles of rapid economic growth and enduring social stability”. The deliberate disruptions that Xi brought in the CCP and China in the fields of politics, economy, culture and other domains reflected in anti-corruption drive, new land border law, military modernisation, dual circulation economy, restrictions on fintechs, edutechs, vehicle hailing and food delivery apps and ephemeral characters on TV and others are seen as rebooting China's party-state mechanisms and regaining control which seemingly were lost during the last four decades of reform.

The communiqué mentioned that “the external environment has grown increasingly complex and grave over the past year under the combined impact of worldwide changes of a scale unseen in a century and the global coronavirus pandemic, while China has faced extremely arduous tasks in COVID-19 prevention and control as well as economic and social development at home.” Specific issues raised

at the plenum include reunification efforts with Taiwan, “major country diplomacy”, expanding “China’s international influence, appeal and the power to shape” and others.

The communiqué’s stress on “major-country diplomacy” suggests China’s continuing focus on the US, Russia and the EU, while India and other countries are likely to be marginalised in the overall foreign policy matrix of China. This is reflected in the four meetings of the Himalayan Quad that China had organised with select South Asian countries or its Afghan policy that emphasises more on the role of Pakistan. In the background of the Galwan fallout between China and India since June 2020, the “equal” stress on economy and security in the plenum communiqué suggests that China is likely to up the ante by furthering border dual-use constructions such as 200 “well-off society” villages across the LAC and dams across the Yarlung Zangbo.

TIBET IN FOCUS

With the consolidation of Xi’s rule, Tibet and border areas have come under the spotlight recently. Xi wrote a letter to Yume village herders (which is 30 km north of Asaphila in Arunachal Pradesh). This comes in the wake of the resolution of the Doklam crisis. In his letter to Drolkar and Yangzom on October 28, 2017, Xi said, “Without peace in the territory, there will be no peaceful lives for millions of families. [I] hope you will motivate more herders to set down roots in the border area like galsang flowers, and become guardians of the Chinese territory and constructors of a happy hometown”. Yangzom was later chosen by the Communist Party as a “model” at its 100th anniversary on July 1 this year.

Another major development is that on August 29, 2020, Xi Jinping attended the Tibet Forum Meeting at Beijing which passed a resolution for “sinicization” of Tibetan Buddhism. The Communist Party intends to change the fundamentals of Tibetan identity, much like its project in Xinjiang which has over a million people in internment camps.

As a part of the 14th Five Year Plan, China is intending to spend \$ 24 billion in Tibet. Tibet already has 118,000 km of roads, building at the rate of 4,000 km every year with the Nyingchi to Medog road,

on the borders with India, completed this May. Much of the road construction previously was in Ngari prefecture bordering Ladakh but with the armed stalemate with India inconclusive, China is shifting toward the eastern sector for transferring its troops and building pressure on India in areas opposite to Arunachal Pradesh. The Tibet railway network was constructed in 2006 and China is planning the \$5.8 billion 409-km railway to Nyingchi that Xi inspected. These have significant military logistics' signalling to India in Arunachal Pradesh. The *People's Daily* also mentioned missile transport through the railways, communicating to India about strategic deterrence signalling. Apart from Ngari prefecture in western Tibet (bordering Ladakh), China reportedly deployed the Russian supplied S-400 missile defence systems in Nyingchi prefecture in eastern Tibet (opposite to Arunachal Pradesh).

In this backdrop, Xi Jinping visited Tibet (and Nyingchi which is a few kilometres north of Arunachal Pradesh) on July 21-23, and 11 out of 15 existing Politburo members of the communist party visited Tibet in the last few months. Earlier Xi visited Tibet in 1998 (as party secretary of Fujian) and in 2011 (as vice president). The last president to visit Tibet was Jiang Zemin in 1990. In June, Xi visited Qinghai (Amdo) province. Xi visited Nyingchi (opposite to Arunachal Pradesh) and Lhasa.

During the visit, Xi visited a railway line under construction, a water conservancy project at Yanni wetland of Niyang River Bridge, an urban park, religious sites and others—first arriving at Linzhi Milin airfield and leaving by train to Lhasa. Xi stated that the locals need to preserve landscapes and forests and strengthen ecological environment protection and restoration of river basins, utilisation of water resources of the Yarlung Zangbo. The same afternoon on July 21, Xi visited Linzhi city planning museum and underlined the need for interdependencies between different nationalities and harmonious development. Xi also visited Gala village, famous for peach blossoms in spring. Xi stressed party building. Dawa Jianshen (the first is a Tibetan title but the given name is clearly a Han) was reported in the press to have received Xi in this village and his family income was cited at Yuan 300,000 last year. Xi stressed rural revitalisation process and greeted the villagers in traditional Tashi Delek, an indication of

catering to the Tibetan majority but exhibiting the deep insecurity of Han rule in Tibet. The video clippings of Xi's entourage and the throwing of traditional *hada* on his car suggests that the crowd either do not know the deep religious meaning of offering of a *hada* or they must be mostly Han Chinese masquerading as Tibetans. Xi later visited Gongbu Park to inspect the greenery and infrastructure of the park. The next day on July 22, Xi visited Linzhi railway station which is on the Sichuan-Tibet railway line under construction. China is building Dali (Yunnan) to Lhasa, Chengdu (Sichuan) to Lhasa and Lanzhou (Gansu) to Nagqu (Tibet) railway links previously targeted by 2038, but want to expedite the work. On June 25, Tibet's first electrified railway was opened at Lalin. Xi heard the status of Ya'an-Nyingchi section of the railway and sat on a special train to observe Lalin. That afternoon, Xi went to Drepung monastery in Lhasa. Xi stated that religious affairs should be managed "to guide Tibetan Buddhism adapt to socialist society." Xi walked across Barkhor Street, which is said to have a history of 1,300 years and which now is controlled by the Han Chinese migrated from the rest of China. Xi next visited Potala Palace Square and stated that Tibet was "developed jointly by all ethnic groups and the history of Tibet is written jointly by all ethnic groups", although Tibet had an independent history prior to the 1950-1951 occupation by the PLA. Xi again here greeted the crowd *Tashi Delek*. That evening, Xi was present at the Tibetan People's Hall for a cultural programme. On July 23, Xi heard the work report of the Tibet party committee and government and said to build a "modern, civilised, harmonious and beautiful socialist new Tibet". He also suggested to strengthen social governance, ensure national security, improve socialist core values education, patriotic education and anti-separatism education. He also said that "border infrastructure should be strengthened and encourage ethnic groups to take root in the border, guard the country and build their hometowns." Xi alluded to "maintaining the red blood". Xi stated that due to the extremely difficult work and life in Tibet, the party cadres will receive special salary and welfare policies for the health and protection of cadres and employees. Later, Xi met with PLA officers and soldiers in order to implement the military strategy of the new era, party thinking, military training and preparations.

Yet another major development is the October 23 passing of the Land Border Law by China's National People's Congress. In March, the annual session of the NPC decided to prepare such a law and was proposed by the foreign affairs committee of the NPC (whose deputy director is Gen Zhao Zongqi who retired as Western Theatre Commander). This is the first law since the PRC was established in 1949. It has 7 chapters and 62 articles. It delves into leadership system, responsibilities of different departments, military tasks and local government's duties, delineation and survey of land border, defence of borders, border management and transboundary international cooperation efforts. This law is intended to further consolidate the party-state apparatuses in the border areas, expand the Belt and Road connectivity projects, and expand China's influence operations in the neighbouring states.

That China is serious about extending its hold further on Tibet and the border areas was revealed when from July 2017 it began setting up of 628 *xiaokang* (well-off) society villages all across Tibet border areas, with one-third closer to the 3,488 km Line of Actual Control with India. About 21 border counties were identified with India for the construction of these party-army outposts. By late 2020, it was announced that over 600 such villages were already constructed with at least one Communist Party cadre, surveillance systems, telecommunications, border defence duties and others, and indicate their primary role of border domination. These are comprehensive party-state backed units with long-term consequences to the regional security, economy and environment. Subsequently, China built a village at Metok bordering Upper Subansari district in Arunachal Pradesh where it also intends to build one of the largest hydroelectricity dams in the world across the Yarlung Zangbo river that becomes the Brahmaputra. Metok is connected to Nyingchi by a highway that was constructed with a budget of over \$300 million. Other such "model villages" include those at Migyitun at Tsari Chu, Chayu, Lower Chayu, Yume, Cona Lepo and others. An aggressive China did not even leave smaller countries like Bhutan or Nepal and built villages in Pangda, Sedewo, Mabjathang, Menchuma, Gyalaphug, Dermalung and other areas in Bhutan. These encroachments were happening in the backdrop of

China's three-stage border dispute MoU signed on October 14 this year with Bhutan. A land hungry China even disregarded its own 1961 treaty with Nepal and demolished border markers in several border areas such as at Humla, Darchula, Daulkha, Gorkha, Rasuwa and other places. According to recent reports, China is also planning to set up such "well-off villages" in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir as well.

These developments should be seen in the backdrop of China's military reorganisation since 2015 in order to convert them into joint integrated troops. The Western Theatre Command was established as a result along with other changes. On September 6, 2021, Central Military Commission Chairman Xi Jinping presented certificate of order to promote five senior military officers to the rank of General, including to the Western Theatre Command (WTC) commander Wang Haijiang (1963). Generally, in the PLA, promotion to the General is made before the PLA Day on August 1st but in this case the promotion happened in September. Some suggest that the promotions are linked to a smooth transfer in the military before the big events of the 20th party congress next year, but more specifically the 6th Plenary session this year.

Wang Haijiang is the fourth commander of the WTC since the clashes with India at Pangong Tso and Galwan in 2020. Wang Haijiang in WTC was preceded by Xu Qiliang (who served only for 2 months as Commander since July 2021), Gen Zhang Xudong (who was appointed in December 2020) and Gen Zhao Zongqi (who was elevated to foreign affairs committee of National People's Congress after superannuation). Zhao Zongqi took over the newly formed WTC in early 2016 and is said to have been responsible for the Doklam crisis in 2017 and Pangong Tso and Galwan crises.

IMPACT ON INDIA-CHINA

These have implications for India's security. In the light of China's assertiveness on the Indian borders reflected in Depsang Plains incident during Xi's visit to India in September 2014, Doklam incident in 2017 and the recent Galwan incident in June 2020, despite border protocols signed in 1993, 1996, 2005, 2013 and others. The resolution of the impasse on the border has become intractable. The three levels

of interactions between ministerial level, institutional level and the local military level have not yielded peace and stability in the border areas. The foreign ministerial meeting at Moscow on September 11 last year led to a five-point agreement, that included “quickly disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions” and abide by all previous agreements. The February 10 announcement by the two defence ministries for “synchronised disengagement” mentioned “phased, coordinated and verifiable”. Subsequent meetings between the two foreign ministers at Dushanbe on July 14 and September 17 reiterated the need to disengage troops at the earliest.

At the institutional level is the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China border affairs conducted by the foreign ministries. It was set up in January 2012 on China's suggestion and met 22 times till June this year. The 23rd meeting was held on November 18, 2021. The Indian side stated that both “agreed on the need to find an early resolution to the remaining issues along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh while fully abiding by bilateral agreements and protocols so as to restore peace and tranquillity”. However, the Chinese version of the meeting is different, implying status quo on the border.

At the theatre level is the military talks. Corps commanders' meetings in Eastern Ladakh-Aksai Chin region were held thirteen times, eight times last year and five times this year so far. The first three were held in the tumultuous days of June 2020 when 20 Indian soldiers were killed, the fourth on July 14, the fifth on August 2, the sixth on September 2, the seventh on October 12 and the eighth on November 6 last year. This year the ninth meeting was held on January 24, the tenth on February 20, the eleventh on April 9, the twelfth on July 31 and the latest, the thirteenth, on October 10. On October 10, the 13th round of Corps commanders meeting between India and China remained inconclusive. These 13 meetings provided only partial success in the disengagement process with a modicum of normalcy returning at Pangong Tso, Gogra Heights (patrol point 17A) and other areas while in more than a dozen places, including Hot Springs (patrol point 15), Kurang Nala (closer to patrol point 14), Demchok, Depsang Bulge and others, China refused to disengage its troops. After the Chinese troops withdrew from Pangong Tso from

finger point 4 to beyond finger point 8 at Sirijap, the Western Theatre Command, which is overseeing the overall military operations against India, Vietnam and Central Asia, stated that India “should be happy with what has been achieved” so far in the disengagement process. Inherent to this posture is the refusal to vacate occupied areas in dispute with India in the region.

The revisions in China’s position towards India was synchronised at the United Nations Security Council where it brazenly began interfering in the Kashmir issue thrice on August 16 and December 19 of 2019 and on January 16, 2020, in vain. As other permanent members evinced no interest for such discussions and saw through the perfidious nature, China felt isolated in this forum.

PLA IN XINJIANG AND TIBET

The above events brought the presence and modernisation of the People’s Liberation Army forces bordering India into focus. First, China escalated the situation by sending additional troops or reinducting troops in the forward areas on the border. An estimated 50,000 to 60,000 troops from the Western Theatre Command’s 76th and 77th Group Army are mobilised with 6th high-mechanised infantry division from Kashgar and 4th high-mechanised infantry division from Aksu tasked with operations in Aksai Chin.

Second, China has deployed the latest, terrain-specific kinetic systems to wage mountainous warfare with India. Thus, the light-weight 38-tonne Type 15 tanks were mobilised in large numbers, along with T-99, T-96B, WZ-551 armoured personnel carriers and the latest Dongfeng Mengshi vehicles since November last, converted 122 mm towed artillery guns, deployed PCL-181, PCL-191 truck howitzers and PHL-03 multiple rocket launchers. China’s air force is also in overdrive with surface-to-air missile systems such as FN-6, HQ-16, HQ-17, PG 59 and HQ7A deployed to counter the Indian air force. It has also inducted latest fighter aircraft like J-20, J-20A, J-20B, J-10B and J-11 (Su-27), besides its helicopter fleet of Z-9 and Z-20. There are 12 airfields facing India with 5 dual-use in nature and with underground shelters. Expansion of the runways is seen and efforts to made to overcome high-altitude problems in aviation. China is also building heliports opposite Indian advanced landing grounds.

A large number of drones such as Y-9 and Y-20 are deployed to the area. China has also strengthened its non-kinetic responses through cyber, information and electronic warfare platforms. Indeed, China has an advantage in ISR capabilities. China clearly has a quantitative edge over the Indian forces, but straddled with professionalism among the ranks. As Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Bipan Rawat, stated at the Raisina Dialogue in April 2021, China is attempting to change the status quo on the borders by disruptive technologies.

Third, China has stepped up its military exercises in the border areas with India. In July last year, it conducted artillery exercises to test “long-range precision strikes and fire-assault capabilities in plateau environments”. Two months later, troops in Tibet conducted exercises to test “adaptability and strike capability in ultra-high-altitude areas”. An “emergency mission 2021” was conducted by the military and paramilitary forces in Western Theatre Command. Twenty fighter aircraft of J-11 (Su-27) and others conducted aerial exercises closer to the borders in the western sector in June this year. This was followed by 76th brigade with helicopters and 77th “tiger brigade” with armoured exercises in Tibet. Army aviation units at Kunlun Mountains as well conducted exercises with Z-10 helicopters.

Fourth, China is enhancing its outreach to the border areas through a series of dual-use infrastructure build-up. It has already built nearly 118,000 km of roads in Tibet, with Ngari prefecture opposite to Ladakh getting the lion’s share of connectivity. Roads linking Nyingqi prefecture opposite to Arunachal Pradesh have also been constructed. On May 16 this year, China connected the last border county in Tibet at Medog by a highway. The new 14th Five-Year Plan has further allocations for constructing defence infrastructure. In the western sector, China’s aim is strategic domination from Highway 219 in Aksai Chin. China also constructed over 20 tunnels in borders with Pakistan. In 2006, it had inaugurated the Tibet railway to Lhasa, which has been extended to Shigatse and now plan to connect border areas. The *People’s Daily* advertised transport of missiles by these railways as a deterrence posture against India.

Fifth, to further militarise border areas, China is forcibly vacating Tibetan nomads from their traditional habitats and converting these

into military bases and camps at Rutok, Gampa, Dingri, Shigatse, Ngamring, Nyalam and other counties, thus engineering further demographic profile of the region. As mentioned above, it has also implemented 628 “xiaogang” (well-off society) villages across the Line of Actual Control with India, populating these with Han. A special Tibetan army unit is also being raised since February this year from Ngari and Zamda areas.

Sixth, China is waging psychological warfare against India. A barrage of articles in the Communist Party-led publications in the last year have been warning India of the growing asymmetry in power relations, showcasing military exercises and equipment, advising India to play “second fiddle” to China, focus on epidemic control and desist from improving relations with the United States.

Seventh, as China was unable to clinch matters with India in the western sector, it has been invoking its “iron brother” Pakistan recently. Defence minister Wei Fenghe visited Islamabad last December to “safeguard regional peace and security”. Prior to that the all-powerful Central Military Commission vice chairman Xu Qiliang visited Pakistan in August and helped set up an artificial intelligence centre. These have led to speculations about initiating a proxy “two-front war” against India both in the continental and maritime spheres. A joint biowarfare against India also cannot be ruled out given the collaboration between the two at Wuhan and other places.

CONCLUSIONS

The above brief analysis suggests the comprehensive challenge that the emerging Chinese posture has on India and other countries recently. India has tried to address this challenge by a whole of government approach, if not so far a whole of the country approach. While not yet revising the “One-China” policy, India has attempted to address this issue through military mobilisation, modernisation, building 44 strategic infrastructure projects as well as intensifying its association with Quad members and Russia recently. As with Doklam crisis, India stood up to China’s assertiveness at Galwan and other areas resulting in the emergence of new equations in Asia.

While the threat from China is still looming in the border areas, India has indicated its stout resistance. India needs to comprehensively review the China policy and strengthen further its conventional and strategic deterrence capabilities.