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Pathak, Sriparna

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Doklam Stand-off in Juxtapose to 1962: An Assessment

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By Dr. Sriparna Pathak
Assistant Professor, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies,
Department of Political Science, Gauhati University



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The standoff at Doklam between India and China has been for more than three years now. Beyond the armies stationed at the border, the war of words has also ensued at the diplomatic level. Wherein, the polemics exchanged between the two sides have symbolically brought the buried past of 1962 into the present- playing on the victor-victim psyche. While both sides have stated their official positions, a lot has also been contributed to in the form of 'for and against' arguments as raised by the academic circles in India and China. In view of this, what remains unexplored is the way the situations today, both domestically within China as well as in the international sphere are reminiscent of the situations surrounding the 1962 border skirmish between India and China, which China repeatedly reminds India of.

The period of 1954- 58- the "*Hindi-Cheeni Bhai Bhai*" period, was marked by a superficial cordiality in Sino-Indian relations. In February this year, India and China upgraded their strategic dialogue to shore up their bilateral ties. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the official-level meetings made a very good foundation for the "*successful strategic dialogue*"; further adding that the Chinese side attaches importance to "*this reconstituted dialogue*"[1]. What is noteworthy is that despite multiple problems ranging from China blocking India's Nuclear Supplier's Group (NSG) bid to that of the UN ban on *Jaish-e-Mohammad* (JeM) Chief Masood Azhar, the Sino-Indian relations seemed to be unperturbed- similar to the atmosphere preceding 1962.

In this context, some significant circumstantial parallels can be drawn between the current stand-off to that of 1962. To say so, as prior to the 1962 scenario, domestically China was witnessing great economic difficulties due to the failure of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward which was launched to propel China's economic development but resulted in starvation and issues of low agricultural productivity. Similarly, in the year 2017, China is witnessing a lower economic growth rate under the phenomenon of 'new normal'. China's 'new normal' (新常态) was first admitted by Xi Jinping in 2014, in reference to China's economic slowdown- which suggested 7 percent growth rates in China for the foreseeable future. The oversupply- a characteristic feature of the new normal further adds to the woes of unemployment in the country. In 2016, Xu Shaoshi, Chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) stated that Beijing's attempts to curb overcapacity will increase unemployment in provinces with a high output of steel and coal, as Xu said that job losses in provinces such as Shanxi, Heilongjiang, and

Hebei will rise [2] .

In a similar tone, at beginning of the 1960s, Mao too had speculations about the probable implications of Soviet revisionism, particularly on domestic politics. As a result of his calculations, foreign policy accordingly started becoming more and more militant. This helped create a more 'revolutionary' atmosphere on the domestic front which helped justify militancy in international relations. In the current scenario, with Donald Trump's ascendance to power as the President of the United States of America, and his previous scathing remarks on China during the elections, the international atmosphere for China has changed. In July 2016, an international tribunal in The Hague delivered its verdict on the South China Sea dispute. Wherein, the verdict stated that China does not have any legal basis to claim historic rights to the bulk of the South China Sea and it has no right to resources within the 9 Dash Line. It also pointed that China's actions are tantamount to interfering with the economic rights of Philippines in fishing and oil exploration; China has damaged the fragile ecosystem by undertaking construction activities in these areas. It further noted that China "violated its obligations to refrain from aggravating or extending the Parties' disputes during the pendency of the settlement process" because of its large-scale reclamation activities. In its response, China boycotted the proceedings, and called the ruling "ill-founded", and challenged the tribunal's authority by stating that it will not be bound by the ruling and strongly emphasized on its sovereignty claims.

While in May 2017, Japan scrambled warplanes after four Chinese coastguard ships and a drone aircraft entered territory it claims around disputed islands in the East China Sea [3]. Recently, it was reported that the US is considering sanctions on Chinese companies that keep the North Korean economy afloat [4]; in the backdrop of the escalating nuclear tensions due to a belligerent North Korea. These fall of events help draw links to the scenario that preceded 1962. That is to suggest, international developments do have significant repercussions on the domestic situation, especially economy. In this light, keeping the parallel backdrops in mind, the increase in the levels of China's aggressive posture is clearly visible.

In the case of 1962, the unilateral "war" was to teach India a "lesson". As Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai explained that the 1962 war was meant to "teach India a lesson." Following suit, Deng Xiaoping used the same formulation in 1979 when he became the first Chinese Communist leader to visit Washington and told America's then-president Jimmy Carter that "Vietnam must be taught a lesson, like India"[5]. Continuing with this line of thought, in the current standoff, the term "lesson" has been used by the state-controlled Global Times in an editorial dated July 5, 2017 [6]. These statements exemplify the continuities in Chinese attitude towards a war situation.

Besides, Bruce Riedel, a former CIA official, in his book *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War* reveals that China had proposed that Ayub Khan, the then President of Pakistan, join in attacking India, presumably for the "trophy" of Kashmir. Similarly, in the current scenario, China is already building a so-called economic corridor- the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through the disputed territory of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), which is claimed by India. In February this year, in a show of absolute disregard for India's concerns on territorial integrity, China invited India to join Pakistan in the CPEC. China stated that it had no intention of getting involved in the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, however, it continues building projects in PoK. This too has a similar situation as that of 1962 when China invited Pakistan to join in attacking India. In the current scenario, the only difference being the fact that actual fighting has yet not broken out on the ground.

As stated by Samir Saran, Vice President of Observer Research Foundation, through the Doklam standoff, China has conveyed a message. He goes on to add that, one of the intentions is to convey that "China seeks to utilize its economic and political clout to emerge as the sole continental power and only arbiter of peace in the region. Multipolarity is good for the world, not for Asia. When India refused to pay tribute in the court of Emperor Xi Jinping, through debt, bondage and political servility that the Belt and Road Initiative sought from all in China's periphery, it invited the wrath of the middle kingdom".

What can be stated is that the present context exemplifies a reminiscent of the conditions that preceded 1962. When in the backdrop of a world divided into two blocs in the international system of the Cold War era, attempts for a dual leadership system in the communist world, clearly paved the way for the Sino- Soviet split; while reflecting China's increased arrogance and militancy in international relations. Intelligence reports from the Soviet embassy at that time pointed out that since the Eighth Congress of the CPC, there was a "public and arrogant nationalistic tendency in China". It listed the following 'apparently not individual cases' of public opinions of the CCP:

"Our party is more capable and right in applying Marxism-Leninism than the CPSU and other parties . . . From now on, the leadership role of the international Communist movement has been transferred to the hands of the CCP", and "the centre of the international Communist movement has now moved from the West to the East".[7]

In addition to vying for leadership of the Communist world, what also irked China were the attempts of Jawaharlal Nehru, who tried to build a bridge between democracy and communism and mediated in many world crises at the height of the Cold War between the two rival blocs led by the United States and the then Soviet Union. Similarly, the conditions today wherein India refused to gladly jump on to the grand Chinese OBOR plans, Indian attempts at nonalignment or opening up a third front in the

strict bipolar Cold War international system was much to the irritation of the Chinese.

Undoubtedly, the outcome of the current standoff is definitely bound to be different from what was in 1962. To say so, as the international system itself has changed and there are multiple players and alignments operating in the current system. Thereby, what needs a closer look is situations surrounding 1962, which might give a better insight into what lies ahead for India.

About the Author:

Dr. Sriparna Pathak (TR RID: [L-7702-2017](#)) is an Assistant Professor, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, **Department of Political Science, Gauhati University**. She is also a Member of the Governing Council of the Centre. Prior to this, she was a Consultant at the Policy Planning and Research Division at the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi. Also, She is a Fellow at the South Asia Democratic Forum in Brussels, Belgium.

She can be reached at [sriparnapathak\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:sriparnapathak(at)gmail(dot)com) or on Twitter - [@Sriparnapathak](#).

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