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Modi-Trump meet incites the dragon



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India must prove that the “history” China crows about does not necessarily repeat itself but can be rewritten.



📷 President Donald Trump meeting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington. (Photo: AP)

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi was being received with high honours by US President Donald Trump in Washington on June 26, China ratcheted up pressure on India along the sensitive Sikkim-Bhutan-Tibet trijunction of the 4,057-km-long Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Beijing harshly denounced New Delhi for violation of Chinese sovereignty through “illegal trespass” by the Indian Army into the Doklam Plateau to halt construction of a road by the People’s Liberation Army and “obstruct Chinese border troops’ normal activities”. It also blocked access to Indian pilgrims headed for the Kailash Mansarovar journey through the Nathu La pass until India unconditionally withdrew forces from Doklam.

In the context of the first Modi-Trump one-on-one, China ominously reminded India that the latter “cannot afford a showdown with China on border issues” because it “lags far behind China in terms of national strength” and “the so-called strategic support for it from the US is superficial”.

Although tension between Indian and Chinese forces on the Sikkim-Bhutan-Tibet border had been mounting for a while owing to Indian concerns that China wants to cut off India’s access to its Northeast via the “Chicken’s Neck”, it was Mr Modi’s successful visit to the US which broadened the stakes of the Doklam standoff and sharpened Beijing’s belligerence.

The jingoistic Chinese state-owned publication, Global Times, went down memory lane to narrate how India “isn’t able to balance China” and that whenever the US or the Soviet Union “played the India card to check China”, it boomeranged on India. In typical condescending tone, China advised India to “learn from historical lessons” and “correct its errors”, alluding to the defeat in the 1962 war when neither the US nor the USSR came to New Delhi’s rescue.

An unflattering cartoon showing the Indian elephant being moved by an American hand as a pawn on a chessboard and references to New Delhi being snared into a “geopolitical trap” by Washington rounded off China’s overall verdict of the Modi-Trump summit and its linkage to the “jostling” between the two armies in Doklam.

Beijing always views New Delhi’s willingness to behave proactively on the land border or in the vast maritime waters of the Indian Ocean and the West Pacific Ocean in terms of some extra-regional actor instigating or encouraging it. If India stands up for its small, unprotected neighbour, Bhutan, which has firmly objected to the road building in Doklam by the

PLA in disputed territory, it is interpreted in Beijing as bravado by New Delhi boosted by America's strategic embrace. If the Indian Navy engages in military exercises with Vietnam, Japan or Australia, again the perception in China is that there is an American hand behind such manoeuvres.

Obsessed with the notion of India serving American designs to contain it, China magnifies incidents like the Doklam dispute into bigger proportion. What has also riled China in this particular flashpoint is that the Indian Army is bolstering the cause of tiny Bhutan, which has been facing tremendous Chinese pressure to concede territory in Doklam. Thimphu has protested the PLA's "unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary" in Doklam, enraging Beijing because puny Bhutan is resisting mighty China by relying on Indian security assurances and troop backup.

The Chinese foreign ministry's criticism of India as a "third party", which is interfering and "disrespecting the sovereignty of Bhutan", demonstrates how peeved Beijing is at New Delhi's assertiveness to defend the rights of its small, lightly-armed neighbour sandwiched between China and India. And lurking behind this anger is Beijing's belief that Mr Modi is challenging China with a swagger due to his successful meeting with Mr Trump.

While all bets are off whether the American President, who is a master of flip-flops, would continue Barack Obama's policy of attempting to contain China, Beijing is apprehensive of the headway Mr Modi has made in striking new defence deals with the US. The agreement for India to acquire 22 aerial surveillance Guardian drones worth \$2 billion from the US is aimed at improving India's naval monitoring capabilities in the Indian Ocean and beyond where the PLA Navy has been prowling with submarines and aircraft carriers.

Specific mention in the Modi-Trump joint statement of India and the US expanding "engagements on shared maritime objectives" and reiteration of their joint call for "respecting freedom of navigation" in the Indo-Pacific have not gone down well in China since these moves impinge on Chinese military objectives.

Until recently, Beijing seemed to have won over Mr Trump by dangling the carrot of cooperation to curb North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes. The distinct lack of American pushback on the PLA Navy's lording over the South China Sea, Mr Trump's inward-looking isolationist instincts, and his open praise for China had suggested that Beijing would have a freer rein in Asia than before.

All that is now muddled by Mr Modi's breakthrough with the Trump administration. The designation of Pakistan-sheltered Syed Salahuddin of the Hizbul Mujahideen as a "global terrorist" by the US, and Mr Modi and Mr Trump's explicit demand that Pakistan should "ensure that its territory is not used to launch terrorist attacks on other countries" are further indirect blows to Beijing. China prefers that Pakistan remain active and unfettered to pin down India in Kashmir and thereby prevent India from attaining the status of what the Modi government terms as a "leading power" in world affairs.

China's lame defence of Pakistan's record on terrorism after the Modi-Trump joint statement indicates that the old pattern of anxiety in Beijing over India-US bonhomie has not gone away despite Mr Trump's iffiness. China's military mobilisation and posturing over the Doklam row must be read in this global backdrop. Beijing rarely goes public with a bullhorn over Indian troops' incursions into its side of the LAC. This time is different as the dragon is enraged at India's rise and the plethora of global partnerships being strengthened by Mr Modi.

Undeterred by Chinese bellicosity, India must keep developing its border infrastructure, speeding up deployment of its Mountain Strike Corps, and doing more for imperiled neighbours like Bhutan, while guarding against Chinese retaliation in the Ladakh or Arunachal sectors of the LAC. India must prove that the "history" China crows about does not necessarily repeat itself but can be rewritten.

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