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'CHINA APPEARS TO HAVE INITIATED A PHASE OF DECEPTION ALONG THE LAC'

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Though China's statecraft and diplomacy have evolved after establishment of the People's Republic of China, camouflage, psywar, deception and deceit remain integral to the Chinese communist regime's diplomatic practice.

2. Recent developments along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China show that despite the meetings in Moscow recently between the Defence and Foreign Ministers of India and China there has been no easing of tension. There are adequate indicators that the imminence of war has not receded. On the contrary, the Chinese have initiated a phase of deception where uncertainty and tensions remain high and which is likely to last as Chinese President Xi Jinping weighs his options.

3. Indicators of this phase of deception include: the announcement by the Lhasa City authorities on September 14 evening of an Air Raid alert practice on September 19; China's state-owned official media continuing to report the induction of military hardware and aircraft into the Tibetan Plateau; reports of high-altitude para-jump training in the Tibetan Plateau by People's Liberation Army (PLA) Paratroop Brigades for operations behind enemy lines on two occasions so far and training by PLA Reccee Battalions; the Chinese not having given a date and time till September 18, for the next meeting of border Commanders; the differences in the joint press statement issued at Moscow and that issued by the Chinese Foreign Ministry almost simultaneously; some markedly opaque comments and an article by the otherwise 'hawkish' Hu Xijin, Editor-in-Chief of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-owned Global Times and supporter of Xi Jinping; and the continued silence on the subject from the top echelons of the CCP.

4. China's plans for conflict are known to envisage a localised war where they bring in heavy firepower and secure a swift decisive victory. It is presently clear, however, that any conflict with India will neither be swift nor decisive, but bloody and protracted with damage to both sides. Xi Jinping needs to decide whether damage to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and him personally will be greater if his forces disengage and withdraw, or if the PLA suffers a bloody nose in battle. There will, in any case, be no decisive victory. As Xi Jinping ponders his decision, China will use this phase to try and put India's armed forces and political leadership

under strain. They will test them to assess whether there is any weakening of resolve and Beijing can extract major concessions. While negotiating the latter, China's objective will be to humiliate the current political leadership.

5. An article in the South China Morning Post (September 9) observed that in the weekend (September 5-6) edition of the Global Times, the latter's Editor-in-Chief Hu Xijin had asked that as China faces mounting criticism, including over its aggressive diplomacy and initial handling of the Coronavirus outbreak, as its rift with the US worsens: "How come the whole world is China's enemy? Why is China so isolated?" At the same time, Hu Xijin dismissed the widespread criticism as misperceptions and Western bias against China, but did admit that Beijing had a "public opinion dilemma" in many parts of the world over the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet and the border row with India. He then stated: "China must decide whether to try to get its way as an unencumbered major power, prevailing by dint of its sheer weight and economic strength – but at the risk of strong pushback," or "Alternatively, China could ... accept that the world now has higher expectations of it." The statement appeared to indicate that China's options were still open.

6. The article by Hu Xijin in the Global Times of September 11, is especially curious. His comment that "Chinese society must therefore have real courage to engage calmly in a war that aims to protect core interests, and be prepared to bear the cost", suggests that China is preparing militarily and morally on all fronts to defend China's sovereign territory. At the same time it suggests an apparent unwillingness to engage in war and says "As long as the outside world can feel such true will from China, it might in turn help us avoid a war". It additionally introduces a so-called "moral" perspective by saying "Of course, after all, wars cannot be fought casually, and we must win if we are to fight. Such winning has two meanings: First, it means defeating the opponent on the battlefield; second, it must be morally justified. This is particularly true for China, because China is not the strongest power in the world". In reality this means that China should not appear to have initiated the conflict. A subsequent comment hints at Taiwan and India as potential targets. It says "We are confident to win on the battlefield if conflicts are fought with neighbouring forces that have territorial disputes with China. Similarly, if there is a war with the US near China's coastal waters, we also have a good chance of victory".

7. In the backdrop of the situation at the LAC, however, the article seemingly lays the ground rules for conflict with India and stipulates:

"Before engaging in war with a neighbouring force, China needs to do the following:

First, we must make it clear that the other side, not China, is the one that breaks the status quo.

Second, we also need to make it clear that the other side is the provocateur in a complex situation.

Third, we must make the international community see that China has made hard diplomatic or political efforts to resolve tensions before the war.

Fourth, the first shot is fired by the other side, not China. The international community should be fully aware of this.

Fifth, only in extreme situations, if we need to fire the first shots, we must deliver an ultimatum in advance so that a just war can be started in an upright manner.

If we can satisfy these conditions, I believe China can be free to engage in a war if it has to. This means that even if the US then tries to smear China, the international community will understand: China is not a country that bullies the small, but instead it had no option but to go to war”.

8. Hu Xijin underscores that “China must not fight an impulsive war. We must be fully prepared militarily and morally”.

9. Finally, retired Indian Army Generals invariably refer to Sun Tzu while talking of the tactics and likely battle plans of the PLA. It will, however, be prudent to remember that PLA officers are not wedded to this classical text, but have invested considerable time, money and effort in studying the latest methods of warfare. It will be especially prudent to remember that the PLA has very intensely studied the US campaigns during the two Gulf Wars in 1991 and 2003 and the operations of UK's Royal Air Force against Libya where cyber capabilities were effectively used to disable the Libyan command's communications. Relevant in this context is that the Chinese leadership in the middle of last year deployed a squadron of its latest J-20 aircraft to the Western Theatre Command and has moved units of the PLA Rocket Force up to the Tibetan Plateau. While the comment in the Global Times article that "if the Indian army fires the first shot at the PLA, the consequence must be the annihilation of the Indian army on the spot", hints at the possibility of conflict being confined to a specific area, that may not be the case.

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