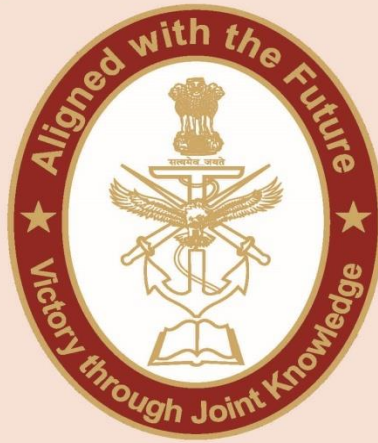


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**CHINA'S
NATIONALISM:
COULD CHINA BE
DEFEATING ITSELF**



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The geo-political landscape has been changing since 9/11 but this has accelerated since COVID 19. We are part of a multi-polar world with USA still donning the mantle of 'first amongst equals'. Many nations are trying to carve their own pathways within the regional sphere, but China has broken out and has announced its intent to become and be acknowledged as a global power. By 2017, the US in its National Security Strategy has already acknowledged China as a peer competitor, and along with Russia proclaimed them as adversaries.

The International Geo-Political Environment. A glimpse of global events from the changed socio-politico-economic dynamics in USA, a hundred mutinies (conflicts) in Africa, EU and NATO in flux along with rising tide of right-wing sentiments, irreconcilable Middle East, emergence of Asia and Indo-Pacific as economic hubs, coupled with the rise of the Middle Kingdom China with resurgent Russia, multi-domain competition, are changing the very concept of security, and challenged the traditional ways of protecting sovereignty and integrity of nations, and the methodology, space and time paradigms of prosecuting military operations. In addition, diminishing

comprehensive national power (CNP) and power projection capabilities of USA starting the slide to a multi polar world; authoritarian Governments like Philippines, North Korea, Syria, Turkmenistan; emerging powers with regional aspirations like Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Nigeria, Turkey, India; rise of religious Islamic fundamentalism with a twist of occupying territory and establishing a caliphate like the IS; global warming and climate change indicators; demographic and economic disparities; transnational MNCs, drug cartels and international crime syndicates sans borders with their own self-serving agendas, rapid urbanisation of the world with its unique challenges, have changed the world scape.

New Aggressive Demonstrative China. State controlled narratives leading to signs of ultra-nationalism is one of the fallouts of the emerging geo-political landscape', however, China was always a restrained player, following Deng Xiaopeng's dictum of "hide your strength, bide your time". That restraint is a thing of the past as under President Xi Jinping, China has launched an aggressive political, ideological, economic and military competition and confrontations globally which is already becoming a major driver of instability and conflict in Asia and around the world. In the months since the global COVID-19 pandemic began in Wuhan, China's leaders have turned increasingly nationalistic. They have boasted to both domestic and foreign audiences about the superiority of China's system when it comes to combating the disease. They have peddled conspiracy theories about the U.S. origins of the novel coronavirus. They have embraced "wolf warrior" diplomacy, brashly attacking foreign critics and using social media and other platforms to highlight foreign shortcomings. They are demanding action from global institutions like UN, WHO to suit Chinese interests; they are resorting to arm twisting and threatening to use extreme measures even against prosperous Western nations like USA, UK, Australia (Huawei, trade restrictions), if their actions directly impact China in any domain. In the military and security sphere a surge of confrontationist manoeuvres has been set in motion in the South and East China Sea, Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and military standoff along the LAC with India in East Ladakh.

Chinese Nationalism Unleashed. Most economic experts and security analysts perceive that many of the actions are meant to assuage/divert the attention of the domestic audience from the rather fragile economic condition and its fallout, as also the poor handling of the COVID crisis, and simultaneously drum up support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). US-China relations have hit a historic low, and being election time both the Republican and Democratic parties will want to showcase their toughness against US Adversary No 1 'China'. Trump after his initial coziness with Xi Jinping has pulled out all the stops against China, and Biden does not have alternate options at least till elections. Each side has tried to outdo the other in shifting blame and avoiding accountability for its handling of COVID-19. The tit-for-tat rhetoric has already accelerated a race to the bottom in US-Chinese relations and hindered cooperation in fighting the pandemic. But over the long term, it is bound to hurt China more than any other nationⁱⁱ. While India-China have their own bilateral dimension including a long outstanding boundary dispute (apart from being two contiguous powers sharing the same strategic space), in geo-political terms China's focus remains its adversarial relationship with USA, and it has started viewing most developments relating to Asia and Indo-Pacific region through the US prism with a focus on security. The US factor is currently intrinsic to India-China relations as China views US actions as opportunistic to try and align India towards it to balance rising China. China does not view US as neutral in the LAC standoffs, and Trumps offer to mediate has been rejected by China. Fact is, many in China till now, did not view India as a challenge to its security interests, but coupled with USA, especially in the security realm, they see India as a potential geo-strategic concern/threat. China knows that India has so far maintained 'strategic autonomy', but if situation worsens it could catalyse India towards US alignment. CCP is watching Indian manoeuvres closely for any sign of a strategic alliance, and the public too are being suitably primed accordingly. The behaviour of Chinese media and spokespersons pre and post Galwan makes for interesting analysis.

Chinese Media and East Ladakh. **Chinese diplomats, junior leaders and media have been unusually aggressive post COVID on all issues concerning China in the international geo-political domain, a la ‘wolf diplomacy’.** However, when it came to the East Ladakh standoff at the LAC, it has been observed that the Chinese media did not report in one voice, which is usually the case. *Global Times* which is published by the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of China’s ruling Communist Party has been extra aggressive before the Galwan incident of 15 Jun 20, but moderated/mellowed its stand post that. **Some of the statements from *Global Times* are bulleted below:-**

- One editorial said that the “arrogance and recklessness” of India is the main reason for the consistent tensions along China-India border.
- New Delhi, has adopted a tough stance on border issues in recent years and it has resulted from two misjudgments. “It believes that China does not want to sour ties with India because of increasing strategic pressure from the US, therefore China lacks the will to hit back provocations from the Indian side. In addition, some Indian people mistakenly believe their country’s military is more powerful than China’s. These misperceptions affect the rationality of Indian opinion and add pressure to India’s China policy.”
- China does not want to clash with India and hopes to peacefully deal with bilateral border disputes. “This is China’s goodwill, not weakness. How could China sacrifice its sovereignty in exchange for peace and bow to threats from New Delhi?”
- Chinese side did not disclose the number of casualties of the Chinese military, a move that “aims to avoid comparing and preventing confrontational sentiments from escalating”. This was reiterated by Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief on *Global Times*.

- Clash happened after Indian troops “crossed the border to conduct illegal activities and launched provocative attacks against Chinese personnel”. This led to physical self-defence measures from Chinese troops, it added, which reportedly caused the deaths of one Indian Army colonel and two soldiers (initial report).
- Quoting Chinese expertsthe paper said“aggression is an intentionally staged, enhanced military action aimed at capturing Chinese territories that India has long sought, and is an egoistic move by India to shift away enormous domestic pressure caused by social problems including Covid-19.”

However, the **state-run media** as per the consensus of international and national China experts and watchers **has generally buried the India-China standoffs including the Galwan incident** which was the worst clash on the India China border in 50+ years. State-run news agency *Xinhua* only seemed to have one straight news story on the Chinese military spokesperson’s statement. It quoted Zhang Shuili, spokesperson for the Western Theater Command of the PLA, as saying that the “Indian side should strictly restrain their frontline troops and return to the correct track of dialogue and negotiations to resolve the differences”. CGTN carried a similar copy, which said that China’s military voiced strong dissatisfaction and opposition to India’s “provocative actions” on Monday in the Galwan Valley. The military, it said, urged India to go back to the “right track” in properly managing disputes. State broadcaster CCTV’s daily *XinwenLianbo* evening news broadcast made no mention of the border confrontation on Tuesday, according to AFP. *People’s Daily* and *PLA Daily*, the official papers of the Party and PLA respectively, has not mentioned news of the deadly clashes. **The foreign ministry’s official transcripts of its Tuesday press briefing redacted remarks from its spokesperson about the clashes.** Kewalramani, who is a Fellow, China Studies at The Takshashila Institution has pointed out that since the standoff began there has been no mention of it in any Chinese publication, except for *The Global Times*. He further observed that the “*People’s Daily* has not covered the standoff at all since last April-early May, whenever the first reports came and they continue to

not cover it. This is unlike what they did during Doklam. There was a lot of rancour then". From the above it appears that Chinese perception of Indian polity and Armed Forces has undergone a shift, and it appears that they acknowledge the stiffening of posture, intent and action on the part of India. This is directly related to shifting posturing in nationalism which CCP has the ability to control/switch on and off. CCP does not want nationalistic fervor against India to be ramped up for numerous reasons; their game plan probably is not to escalate beyond a point; difficult to retract/negotiate specially when it comes to LAC issues which may show CCP and PLA in poor light; vulnerabilities/incidents which show PLA in bad light like casualties, withdrawal from ground positions once known, may provoke public opinion and force unwilling reactions from CCP.

Indian Nationalism and East Ladakh Standoffs. It was business as usual with the Indian media and social media as it should be, in a liberal democracy where people and media are free. While this is not the focus of this paper, undoubtedly there was a spate of anti-China sentiment in social media and PM Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh did make expected nationalistic statements about 'no compromise on India's sovereignty and integrity' and 'status quo will be restored', which is expected of the executive head and Defence Minister. Indian media while holding innumerable heated debates on Chinese intentions, Indian response as also glorifying Indian Army's response specially at Galwan, acted fairly responsibly and maturely, and did not carry out unnecessary war mongering/chest thumping or deliberately arouse national anger against China. In fact, a fair amount of coverage of Indian nationalism is by China Global Times in a negative manner, and a couple of international media/newspapers in a positive light. Some headings/views are listed below:-

- Rising Indian nationalism will harm business ties, Global Times on 18 Jun 20; Indian nationalism may sink trade with China over 30% by Global Times on 29 Jun 20.
- 'China's PLA has provoked Indian nationalist tiger', "Beating 20 Indian soldiers to death Monday evening, China's People's

Liberation Army has provoked the Indian nationalist tiger," Journalist Tom Rogan wrote in an opinion piece in *Washington Examiner*.

- BBC article also said the incident is likely to “trigger a fresh wave of anti-China sentiments in India”.

Nationalism will prove even more of a hindrance to Beijing’s ambitions, since it undermines Chinese efforts to attract international support and show global leadership. Wolf warrior diplomacy might appease Chinese nationalists at home, but it will limit China’s appeal abroad. And xenophobia and repression in the name of national stability, whether toward African migrants in Guangzhou, Central Asian minorities in Xinjiang, or ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong, have given the lie to Chinese efforts to project a benevolent and magnanimous image. Ironically, Beijing may well have shot itself in the foot, because now if it wants to temper/moderate its actions, it will prove costly, although not impossible for the Chinese leadership to constrain the nationalism it has unleashed.

Nationalism sets a Chain Reaction in motion. The CCP has projected two images to its public; one of a confident resurgent Middle Kingdom which is superior to all other nations, including its decisive handling of the COVID crisis and now is a guide, mentor and help to the rest of the World, despite its critics internally, and whose time has come to grasp the moment to ascend to its destined pre-eminent position in the World; and concurrently, the hurdles and challenges thrown by its adversaries mainly USA and its allies to stop its rise at any cost, by carrying out hostile actions close to mainland China and its maritime boundaries, as also prevent its growth and trade, and collectively shackle/stall its rise. The more an issue resonates with nationalist sensitivities and fervour among the Chinese public and elites, the more likely foreign threats and actions will provoke rather than deter. The CCP enjoys substantial leeway to shape public opinion through its propaganda and education system, allowing it to reduce the costs of compromise and restraint. But popular nationalism often provides the spark for international confrontation as Chinese netizens go global in their efforts to defend China, like the mass protests against

Japan after collisions between Chinese fishing trawlers and Japanese coast guard vessels, and when NBA Houston Rockets general manager tweeted support to Hongkong protestors in 2019 (the coach had to apologise after fierce criticism from Chinese fans, sponsors and commercial partners, showcasing Chinese economic and viewership power to the US and the world). Once mobilized, nationalism creates pressure for the government to talk tough and placate domestic audiences, increasing the costs of restraint. CCP ironically may find itself riding a nationalistic tiger which it may find difficult to let go without harming itself (some alarmists even call this ride existential).

CCP Controls/Tempers Nationalism. To some extent, Beijing has already tempered its most aggressive nationalist rhetoric in the face of domestic and international pushback in recent weeks. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian has denied that China is trying to export its coronavirus response model. Leading military hawks have cautioned Chinese nationalists against using force to reunify with Taiwan. Censors have shuttered social media accounts promoting “fabricated and misleading” claims about India, Kazakhstan, and Vietnam. But despite this modest tamping down of nationalist rhetoric, even China’s internal reporting suggests that global anti-Chinese sentiment is at its highest point since the 1989 crackdown at Tiananmen Square. However, more assertive nationalism is likely to remain a feature of Beijing’s rhetoric and diplomacy, with significant implications for the rest of the World especially India which is directly impacted economically and militarily. The more the CCP prioritises nationalism and public stability relative to economic growth as sources of domestic legitimacy, the less leverage other outside powers have, particularly on issues of central importance to China’s leaders, such as territorial integrity. Take Hong Kong, where Beijing has feared both democratic contagion and a separatist threat to national sovereignty. Threats of economic sanctions have been ineffective at deterring Beijing from pushing through new national security legislation that effectively ends Hong Kong’s autonomy. India must understand this dynamic inside China and parse the often mixed messages coming from Beijing. In some instances, the Chinese government’s aggressive rhetoric has outpaced its actual behavior. When tensions escalated with Japan in 2013, Beijing used

fiery words and demanded that foreign aircraft identify themselves and comply with Chinese instructions when flying over the East China Sea, yet it avoided any real show of force; but in contrast it encouraged nationwide street protests after a NATO airstrike hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Nationalism inevitably raises the costs of restraint, which even India should acknowledge. Another example is when the US restarted and increased the frequency of naval freedom-of-navigation patrols in the South China in 2019, statistical inputs confirm that the days following the patrols, there was substantial public disapproval (in terms of social media outpourings) of the Chinese government, which did not use force to intercede or harass U.S. patrols. These results suggest that although the Chinese government chose to exercise restraint in the moment, it did so at some domestic cost. China has managed to control public opinion and costs of inaction through bluster, including rhetorical denunciations and pronouncements but this tactic may give Beijing short-term flexibility, it also risks tying the CCP's hands in the long run, as repeatedly invoking historical grievances may bolster the public's desire for future vindication.

Riding the Nationalism Tiger has its own Perils. When the people of a nation have been aroused with nationalistic fervour, moves to force/persuade restraint may actually backfire and harden public opinion. Sometimes Chinese leadership's calculus may be driven more by domestic insecurity. As such, India and specially USA should beware of counterproductive forms of international pressure. In crafting strategies to deter or punish Beijing, policymakers may end up increasing domestic Chinese demands for tough retaliation, including multi-domain countermeasures. This is by far more applicable to nations which China and its public perceives as weaker. Currently by all indications, China does not consider itself weaker to any nation including USA in its own strategic backyard in South and East China Sea, South and East Asia and South Asia.

Conclusion. Currently, the CCP seeks security, regional dominance, and a global order that makes room for and reflects Chinese values and interests. However, USA and allies, and India fear it will not stop there, and China aspires for global hegemony with Chinese characteristics, which the USA

wants to prevent an ALL and ANY cost. The more the CCP leans on nationalism, the less worried the world and India should be about China becoming a global hegemon anytime soon. While retaining strategic autonomy, India is playing its cards well with maturity, statesmanship, firmness and flexibility. She has tremendous goodwill and support from the international community which will influence Chinese future manoeuvres against India. **India must be prepared to tackle China and its collusive partners alone, take it as a challenge and turn it on its head into an opportunity to emerge as a 'pivotal balancing power' of the World.**

About the Author: Lt Gen PR Kumar (Retd) served in the Indian Army for 39 years, He was the DG Army Aviation, before superannuating from the appointment of Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) in end 2015. He continues to write and talk on international and regional geo-political, security and strategic issues. He can be contacted at prkumarsecurity.wordpress.com and perumo9@gmail.com

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ⁱ There is lot of online material on the subject with renewed focus on this trend including in China. Have drawn ideas from numerous sources. The important ones are listed. 'Nationalism' in Wikipedia; 'Is Nationalism on the Rise? Assessing Global Trends', by Florian Bieber, Link - <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449057.2018.1532633>; 'You Can't Defeat Nationalism, So Stop Trying' by Stephen M Walt, 04 Jun 2019, Foreign Policy, Link - <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/04/you-cant-defeat-nationalism-so-stop-trying/>; 'The Problem of Nationalism' by Kim R Holmes, PhD, 13 Dec 2019, Link - <https://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/the-problem-nationalism>
ⁱⁱ 'China's Self-Defeating Nationalism, Brazen Diplomacy and Rhetorical Bluster Undercut Beijing's Influence', by Jessica Chen Weiss, 16 Jul 2020, Foreign Affairs