

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Power to Prevail: China's 'Discourse Politics' as CCP Turns 100

Shruti Pandalai

July 08, 2021

S*ummary*

The centenary celebrations of the Chinese Communist Party have invested heavily in telling “China's Story Well” by amplifying its discourse power. Within China's borders, discourse power is a potent tool of the state, but when expanded to the international system, there are grave if not long-term repercussions too. For the emphasis here is not on dialogue but on the “contestation of ideas” which have for long underwritten widely accepted universal values and norms, institutions and governance models and increasingly in terms of actions in the military domain. For India, the discourse battle over the Galwan Valley clash proved that no stone will be left unturned to show China was on the right side of history. Yet looking at Chinese efforts at discourse politics from an absolutely narrow propaganda lens would be a folly, for the stakes for India are much higher, more nuanced and across multiple domains.

Introduction

China's powers of persuasion given its aggressive turn to wolf warrior diplomacy may seem to have run its course externally, however, this is an "eternal struggle" that President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are determined to get right. The centenary celebrations of CCP have invested, according to observers, a lot of effort into telling "an overwhelmingly positive" story of its history, one linking its "glorious revolutionary past" to its present achievements. They argue that it is a history "filled with 'positive energy' drabbed in ethno-nationalism, and airbrushed of horrors", and in this story "the CPC has led the Chinese people from one victory to another on an unstoppable march towards national rejuvenation."¹

Unsurprisingly, this narrative is essential to maintain the infallibility of the party-state and is seen as central to its legitimacy. It stems from the belief that "the CCP sees itself as locked in a perpetual struggle against hostile foreign forces, and believes that material strength is key but 'discourse power' is needed to back it up."² *Discourse power* is understood as "a country's power to set agendas in the international arena by influencing the political order and realigning other countries' ethics and values."³ Observers believe that China's intellectuals and policymakers "fret a lot about what they call *huayuquan*"...which approximately translates as *discourse power*, "though literally, it means the right to speak or the power/authority to speak."⁴ In Chinese frameworks, a "country's *huayuquan* is essentially a form of power equivalent to military power and economic power, with discourse as its carrier."⁵ So the anxiety is rooted in its inability to subdue what it sees as the West's *discourse power* "despite its decline" when compared to China's gains in commensurate hard power.

On 31 May 2021, during the 30th collective study of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, Xi Jinping emphasised strengthening international communication to showcase a real, three-dimensional and comprehensive China.⁶ In simple terms, Xi was talking about levelling up Beijing's strategic communication plan externally to help China sell its message effectively. This would be understood in the framework of the struggle for discourse as warfare since Beijing's image has been marred

¹ Yun Jiang and Adam Ni, "**China Neican: Centenary Narrative, Securitisation of Research, IP Protection, Spring Festival Gala, CCP leadership**", *China Neican*, 19 February 2021.

² Nadège Rolland, "**China's Pandemic Power Play**", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2020, pp. 25-38.

³ "**Chinese Discourse Power: China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition**", *Atlantic Council*, December 2020.

⁴ Alex Lo, "**Why China Lacks Discourse Power**", *South China Morning Post*, 15 September 2020.

⁵ Nadège Rolland quotes Zhang Zhizhou, "**Guoji huayuquan jianshe zhong ji da jichu xing lilun wenti**" [Some Basic Theoretical Issues in the Building of International Discourse Power], *Study Times*, 2 February 2017, in "**China's Vision for a New World Order**", *NBR Special Report*, 83, January 2020, p. 10.

⁶ "**During the 30th Collective Study Session of the Politburo of the CPC Central Committee, Xi Jinping Emphasized Strengthening and Improving International Communication Work to Show a True, Three-Dimensional and Comprehensive China**", *Xinhua*, 1 June 2021.

by bias and understanding especially in the post-pandemic phase. This insistence on promoting a “loveable image” of China which aids agenda setting for Chinese ideas of how the world needs to be run—isn’t new. In 2016, while addressing a party symposium on public opinion work, President Xi emphasised the necessity of China’s “constructing an external discourse system” and “enhancing its *discourse power* internationally.”⁷ This would entail an active promotion of the “China model” and project its “national capability to influence global values, governance, and even day-to-day discussions on the world stage, which Beijing believes should be commensurate with its economic and military might.”⁸ A year later in 2017, the 19th party congress, often viewed as the consolidation of the *Xi Jinping Thought*, declared that China must be a “global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence.”⁹

Within China’s borders, *discourse power* is a potent tool of the state, but when expanded to the international system, there are grave if not long-term repercussions too. For the emphasis here is not on dialogue but on the “contestation of ideas”¹⁰, which have for long underwritten widely accepted universal values and norms, institutions and governance models.

Understanding “Chinese Discourse Power”

If the goal of propaganda and influence is fortifying CCP’s infallibility internally, on the external front, Beijing is advancing a narrative designed to cultivate perceptions of China as a positive force, focusing on themes of selflessness and generosity.¹¹ Implicit in the outward-facing narrative is the notion that all prior methods for solving the world’s problems have failed while China offers a better path, paved with solutions that the country has applied successfully within its own borders. So re-emphasis and prioritisation of amplifying China’s voice could be “characterized as ‘defensive’ and assertive”.¹² Hence the counter-offensive is against ideas specifically liberal democratic ideals identified with constitutional democracy, universal values, individual rights, economic liberalism, free media—which have been identified by the CCP as deadly “perils”.¹³ It has been argued that

⁷ **“Xi Jinping: Adhere to the Right Direction, Innovate Methods and Means, Improve the Guiding Force of News and Public Opinion Dissemination”**, *Peoples Daily Online*, 19 February 2016.

⁸ Elsa Kania, **“The Right to Speak: Discourse and Chinese Power”**, *Center for Advanced China Research*, 27 November 2018.

⁹ **“Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress”**, *China Daily*, 18 October 2017.

¹⁰ Hu Yuwei, Xie Wenting and Lu Yameng, **“China to Explore Innovation in Enhancing Discourse Power Amid US Hegemony”**, *Global Times*, 18 May 2021.

¹¹ **“China Selflessly Extends Helping Hand to Countries Around World in Global Battle Against COVID-19”**, *People’s Daily Online*, 25 March 2020.

¹² Elsa Kania, no. 8.

¹³ Nadège Rolland, **“China’s Counteroffensive in the War of Ideas”**, *The Lowy Institute*, 24 February 2020.

for the CCP these ideals represent an ideological struggle—which Chinese strategists describe as *xiqiang woruo* / “the West is strong, while China is weak”.¹⁴

In practice, *discourse power* internally would employ methods by various organs of the party-state to “guide public opinion” while shielding the system from internal criticism and filtering out external censure. The Great Firewall serves this purpose and additionally the party-state also seeks to remove, suppress, and downplay negative information about the CCP that could jeopardise its image.¹⁵ Increasingly online mobs often harass and silence anyone perceived as critical of China or its leadership.¹⁶ Political dissidents with Chinese citizenship face rising threats of imprisonment, even if abroad, and the party has stepped up physical surveillance and regular checks with Chinese embassy officials, the creation by the party-state of overseas Chinese friendship and students associations, and massive investment with the purchase of overseas Chinese-language media outlets, etc.¹⁷

Expanding the *discourse power* beyond the borders of China is a crucial agenda of Xi Jinping's foreign policy because it helps guarantee the perpetual rule of the CCP machine. The underlying policy principle of increasing China's *discourse power* is “Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics” or “Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics”, which experts say is a clear shift from the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”¹⁸ debuted in 1954.¹⁹ Today, China's use of *great power diplomacy* represents that the Chinese party-state is the moral leader in the international space.²⁰ The CCP leadership continues to promote its preferred concepts of a “community of shared future” and a China-centric “Silk Road” that includes cooperation in matters related to global health.²¹

Some observers have emphasised that “China is beginning to exhibit some *discourse power* abroad in the ‘Global South’, where China has invested heavily through the Belt and Road Initiative and the China Development Bank.”²² For example, after China curbed political freedom in Hong Kong, a United Kingdom-drafted declaration of concern was backed by

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Atlantic Council*, no. 3.

¹⁶ Patrick Barta, “**How Xi Jinping is Reshaping China and What It Means for the West: Key Findings from The Wall Street Journal's Coverage of the Chinese President**”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 February 2021.

¹⁷ Nadège Rolland, no. 13.

¹⁸ “The ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ included foreign policy principles of non-interventionism; mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, which assumed a reciprocal desire; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence.” See “**Chinese Discourse Power: China's Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition**”, *Atlantic Council*, December 2020.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nadège Rolland, no. 2.

²² Connor Fiddler, “**Xinjiang and Discourse Power**”, *International Policy Digest*, 2 October 2020.

27 countries, but another commending Beijing, and issued by Cuba, won 53 supporters.²³ In 2019, when the issue of human rights abuses in Xinjiang was taken up among members of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), 22 democratic countries condemned China for its policies in Xinjiang; 50 countries, including many from the Islamic world, defended Beijing's crackdown.²⁴ Identified as "Like-Minded Group of Developing Countries" or simply the "Like-Minded Group", this loose coalition of developing states is said to be authoritarian or semi-authoritarian in nature and has been cultivated by China to align with its own diplomatic interests in the UN and other fora—especially to deflect criticism "and to promote a view of human rights as centred in state sovereignty and economic development".²⁵

These instances line up with assessments that attempt to describe the Chinese vision of a new global order. Herein the CCP's vision is described as one where "China enjoys only partial or loose hegemony" and is at the core of a "dual centred system" which is not "traced along precise geographic or ideological lines but be defined by the degree of deference that those within China's sphere of influence are willing to offer Beijing" and ideally in spaces "free from Western influence and purged of liberal ideals."²⁶

CCP@100: Glorifying the "China Voice"

In the run-up to the centenary celebrations, especially in the aftermath of criticism mounted on China on the origins of the COVID-19 virus and its assertive actions across multiple domains of territory, technology, trade and military, China's strategic experts are unanimous in their assessment that "regardless of whether China's relative lack of international *discourse power* is attributed to the dominance of Western *discourse power* or to China's failure to win international influence, China should be explained on China's terms".²⁷

The CCP's effort to amplify "the China voice" certainly reflects this strategic thinking. Xi's recent speech resonated this message again: "It is important to strengthen the propaganda and interpretation of the CPC, and to help foreign peoples realise that the CPC is truly fighting for the happiness of the Chinese people, and understand why the CPC is capable

²³ Dave Lawler, "**The 53 Countries Supporting China's Crackdown on Hong Kong**", *Axios*, 3 July 2020.

²⁴ Roie Yellinek and Elizabeth Chen, "**The '22 vs. 50' Diplomatic Split Between the West and China Over Xinjiang and Human Rights**", China Brief, *The Jamestown Foundation*, Vol. 19, Issue 22, 31 December 2019.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Nadège Rolland, "**China's Vision for a New World Order**", *NBR Special Report*, 83, January 2020, p. 2.

²⁷ Johan van de Ven, "**China Trends #6: Searching for China's International Discourse Power**", *Institut Montaigne*, 5 August 2020.

[of success], why Marxism works, and why socialism with Chinese characteristics is good".²⁸

The party-state's propaganda system has been in overdrive and the rhetoric has been self-glorifying. The three-part message being echoed across different mediums and via diverse tools has been interpreted as: (i) the Party's successes were part of a historical process that was inevitable; (ii) the 100-year history of the Party is a glorious one characterised by high-minded idealism and moral rectitude; and (iii) under the CCP's leadership, the Chinese nation will again become powerful and respected.²⁹

There has been an effort to double down on patriotic education campaign that includes changes to textbooks and slick pro-China videos targeting young people through social media.³⁰ According to the *China Media Project*, one of the most commonly seen phrases in Chinese schools in recent months has been "transmitting red genes, telling China's story well".³¹ School programmes have revolved around "themes of the nation's past, celebrating revolutionary stories and figures, and sharing Xi Jinping's remarks on the importance of drawing lessons from history".³² Termed as "red education", this effort was pushed by the Ministry of Education to follow Xi Jinping's directive to "begin education in revolutionary traditions from childhood" and outlined resources like short historical videos produced by the *People's Daily* on topics like "peaceful co-existence" and the "peaceful liberation of Tibet".³³

Xi has repeatedly declared that "history is the best textbook". So, in order to shape historical understanding, the Party has emphasised the importance of learning what it calls the "four histories", that is, the histories of the CCP, "New China", reform and opening up, and development of socialism. It has been argued that "for the CCP, aligning historical understanding within the party is important for ideological belief, cohesion, and political support for Xi's current agenda."³⁴ This is imperative to ensure that the CCP's version of history is accepted and informs Chinese society while deflecting or erasing past policy failures. It is also seen as an existential issue because "indoctrinating a correct and progressive view of history that presents the CCP as the successful and legitimate leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Xi Jinping Thought as primary guiding force" will bolster not just domestic support for the party, but also anchor its efforts while battling ideological competitiveness in an era of enhanced great power competition.³⁵

²⁸ *Xinhua*, no. 6.

²⁹ Adam Ni, "**China Neican: Xi Jinping on External Propaganda and Discursive Power**", *China Neican*, 4 June 2021.

³⁰ Patrick Barta, no. 16.

³¹ "**Our Colour Must Not Fade**", *China Media Project*, 25 June 2021.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Yun Jiang and Adam Ni, no. 1.

³⁵ Elizabeth Chen, "**The 2021 Party History Study Campaign Stresses Revolution and Sacrifice**", *China Brief*, *The Jamestown Foundation*, 18 June 2021.

It is not surprising that the party-state has clamped down on media like Hong Kong's pro-democracy tabloid *Apple Daily*.³⁶ In a widely advertised episode, the tabloid was forced to shut down since it published articles that were critical of the authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing. Under CCP's enforced Hong Kong National Security Law, the paper's founder, top editor and multiple executives were arrested and their assets were frozen.³⁷ The resounding message from the CCP was intolerance and crackdown on political dissent and a clear agenda to drown out voices that threaten its political stability. Despite widespread condemnation across the liberal world³⁸, the party-state was able to project its power to prevail.

Lessons for India from Galwan Experience

Chinese discourse politics has manifested itself in the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) tactics of information warfare across the spectrum—from the Sino-US split to provocative actions along the South and East China seas—including now “the fog of war rhetoric” on Taiwan and deflection over the COVID-19 crises.

For India, it has especially been visible *vis-à-vis* the contentious border dispute, given the breakdown in the bilateral relationship after the bloody clash in Galwan Valley in 2020.

PLA observers have often written about the dichotomy in Chinese thinking towards India.³⁹ There is heightened sensitivity over Indian military modernisation and attention to Chinese abilities to deter any Indian advantage, yet at the same time public dismissals of India's military capability, citing poor quality and time lags, are also regular. This anxiety is par for the course with China, for whom parity with India is unimaginable. As Doklam proved, China's forays into South Asia, including adventurism in the Indian Ocean Region or on the disputed borders, are often aimed at imposing reputational costs on India. Beijing's framing of the Sino-Indian relationship, increasingly seen through the lens of the Sino-US fallout, while tuning out Indian concerns, speaks clearly of this anxiety and reflects in the discourse politics it wages against India.

The duality of formal rapprochement attempted by high-profile interaction of senior leaders and calls for peace and trust-building at the official level while engaging in

³⁶ Tony Cheung, “**Final Edition of Hong Kong's Apple Daily Could Come on Saturday**”, *South China Morning Post*, 21 June 2021.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Owen Churchill, “**‘Repression by Beijing’ Killed Hong Kong's Apple Daily, Joe Biden Says**”, *South China Morning Post*, 25 June 2021.

³⁹ Lora Saalman, “**Divergence, Similarity and Symmetry in Sino-Indian Threat Perceptions**”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2, Sino-Indian Relations, Spring/Summer 2011, pp. 169–194.

psychological operations and using India's open media space to sow dissent and doubt about the Indian government's competency has become routine.⁴⁰

In a webinar held in July 2020, when asked if China would confirm the number of casualties on its side from the 15 June clash in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed, the Chinese envoy to India, Sun Weidong, said, "What we are now doing is to make joint efforts to de-escalate the situation and ease the tension along border areas. We hope India can understand the goodwill from the Chinese side to not make contradictions even more higher."⁴¹

It was only on 19 February 2021 that China declared that it had lost four soldiers in the 15 June 2020 clash in the Galwan Valley, breaking its silence for the first time, eight months after the incident. The announcement triggered an outpouring of national sentiment in China, coupled with an onslaught of versions on the clash from the state-run media and resultant populist anti-India sentiment surging in China.⁴² Given its initial denial of any casualties and consistent portrayal of India as an aggressor, this attempt by China to rewrite the narrative on the border crisis left many unanswered questions—one, the timing given the announcement came after the beginning of the disengagement process, and two, the motivations given that there was dissatisfaction among some sections with China on the terms of the agreement and if China has given away too much.⁴³

This was also followed by actions by the party-state to protect its narrative by punishing those who questioned it. Among those penalised was Qiu Ziming, an investigative journalist formerly with *The Economic Observer*, who has now been jailed under the new law banning "defaming of martyrs".⁴⁴ In messages to his 2.5 million followers on Weibo, the Twitter-equivalent used in China, he suggested the fatalities would have been higher than four and questioned why the announcement took eight months, while India had, in contrast, promptly recognised the 20 Indian soldiers who died.⁴⁵

As far as the Galwan clash is concerned, New Delhi has understood that no stone will be left unturned to show China was on the right side of history—given the emphasis the CCP's centenary celebrations have placed on "correct" versions of its deemed successes.

⁴⁰ Shruti Pandalai, "**Lessons for India After the Galwan Valley Clash**", *The Diplomat*, 31 July 2020.

⁴¹ Ananth Krishnan, "**Clarifying LAC Could Create New Disputes: Chinese Envoy**", *The Hindu*, 30 July 2020.

⁴² Liu Xin, Guoyuandan and Zhang Hui, "**China Unveils Details of 4 PLA Martyrs at Galwan Valley Border Clash for First Time, Reaffirming Responsibility Falls on India**", *Global Times*, 19 February 2021.

⁴³ Ananth Krishnan, "**How China's Media is Covering the Border Crisis: The Hindu in Focus Podcast**", *The Hindu*, 24 February 2021.

⁴⁴ Ananth Krishnan, "**China Jails Blogger for Galwan Comments**", *The Hindu*, 1 June 2021.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Beyond the Propaganda Lens: Implications for India

Yet looking at Chinese efforts at discourse politics from an absolutely narrow propaganda lens would be a folly, for the stakes for India are much higher, more nuanced and across multiple domains.

First, India is an open society where Chinese officials have always had the opportunity to push their narrative in a vibrant and noisy media environment. Think back to the controversy around the *Press Trust of India's* three-question interview with the Chinese envoy, who blamed India solely for provoking the Galwan Valley clash and resulting casualties.⁴⁶ The lack of pushback or probing questions was lambasted by Indian commentators and eventually the government stepped in with *Prasar Bharti*, India's public broadcaster, sending a letter threatening to end its "relationship" over the alleged "anti-national" reportage by the news agency.⁴⁷ The entire episode put into focus the lack of a level playing field, where the Chinese side leverages India's information openness to its advantage but wields an iron fist regarding its state-controlled information flow. This awareness is yet to be internalised in India and requires constant calling out.

Two, unlike previous perceptions that India does not occupy mind-space in China, Galwan reiterated that the discussion within China on Beijing's India policy is not monolithic and this has implications. Drawing from the assessments of Chinese perceptions of the five volumes of the Blue Book series from 2013–18, scholars have highlighted a trend of growing antagonism in Chinese perceptions towards India in general and a pessimistic outlook regarding the future contours of India–China bilateral dynamics in particular.⁴⁸ In his article published in October 2020, Hu Shisheng, Director of Institute for South Asian Studies at China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), argued that the Galwan Valley clash was "not incidental", but the "inevitable" result of the "high risk, high yield" policy followed by India under Prime Minister Modi. Describing India's motivation as "a desire to seek revenge" triggered by "India's long-term pursuit of absolute security and dominance in the regional order" and New Delhi's ambition to "overtake China by taking advantages of India's favorable external strategic environment", the assessment often repeatedly paints the logic of "an obstructionist India" and an inevitable rivalry since "one (i.e., China) newly-born state is a denier of the colonial order, while the other one is its successor (i.e., India)" and dwells on how China has begrudged "the century of humiliation" unlike India who "had accepted colonial rule and benefitted" from it.⁴⁹ In fact, this frame of reference is used to describe "India's Monroe-ist doctrine towards South Asia", opposition to the BRI, growing relationship with the West and of course the Indo-

⁴⁶ Taran Deol, "**Misinformation & Propaganda Tool: PTI Gets Slammed for Interview with China's Sun Weidong**", *The Print*, 26 June 2020.

⁴⁷ "**Prasar Bharti Warns News Agency PTI over Interview of Chinese Ambassador, Calls it 'Anti-National' Reporting**", *National Herald*, 27 June 2020.

⁴⁸ Abhay K. Singh, *India China Rivalry: Asymmetric No Longer*, KW Publishers, New Delhi, p. 165 (forthcoming in 2021). Manuscript draft shared with the author.

⁴⁹ Hu Shisheng and Wang Jue, "**The Behavioral Logic Behind India's Tough Foreign Policy Toward China**", *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 5, September/October 2020.

Pacific strategy. This enduring perception and portrayal of India as an inferior civilisation, not a peer but a rival and a larger ideational challenge has taken root. CICIR—one of China's most influential institutes, directly under the Ministry of State Security (MoSS)/ Chinese intelligence, is an important marker of Chinese framing.

Three, when the Chinese speak of dominating the information domain, it encompasses a combination of not just psychological warfare, but also supremacy over the electronic and cyber domain. Last year, news broke in India about *Zhenhua Data Information Technology Company* targeting individuals and institutions in politics, government, business, technology, media, and civil society.⁵⁰ Reportedly working with Chinese intelligence, military and security agencies in “hybrid warfare”, *Zhenhua* specialised in collecting data and weaving in public or sentiment analysis around these targets, and offering “threat intelligence services”. Simply put, massive datasets openly available in India were targeted for “deliberate tactical manoeuvring” in the absence of a concrete Data Protection Law.⁵¹ Also, in the public eye were reports of repeated cyber-attacks on India's critical infrastructure including in the banking, defence, the financial sector and the most high-profile targeting of the Maharashtra electricity grid amidst the ongoing boundary crisis.⁵² Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Bipin Rawat sounded a fair warning earlier this year on India's lack of defences—“While we're trying to create firewalls against cyber attacks, we're quite sure that they [Chinese hackers] will break through these firewalls.”⁵³

Four, despite India maintaining that it can no longer delink peace and tranquillity on the border from other aspects of the relationship, China's insistence on compartmentalising the relationship as the only way forward in its repeated official pronouncements⁵⁴ make the search for a new equilibrium after Galwan even more elusive. China's assertion that clarification of the Line of Actual Control will create more disputes than solve problems, often dismissing India's longstanding demands while keeping multiple fronts on the Line of Actual Control alive exemplifies its coercive tactics. The upping of propaganda claims over the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China calls “Southern Tibet”, has seen no respite. Even though India and China's agreement on the boundary question has written in assurances of “safeguarding interests of settled populations”, Chinese discourse amplifies its claims on the Tawang tract as a core issue citing its theological linkages to Tibet. Comparing India's slow pace of infrastructure development and connectivity on one

⁵⁰ Jay Mazoomdaar and P. Vaidyanathan Iyer, **“China is Watching — Hybrid Warfare: What Data they Collect, Why it's Cause for Concern”**, *The Indian Express*, 16 September 2020.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Faisal Malik, **“Maharashtra Cyber Police Suspects Cyber Attack behind Mumbai Power Outage”**,

Hindustan Times, 2 March 2021.

⁵³ Prabhjote Gill, **“The Chinese Cyber Threat is Real — and India's Best Defence Right Now is to Keep its Outage Time Limited”**, *Business Insider*, 9 April 2021.

⁵⁴ **“Keynote Address by External Affairs Minister at the 13th All India Conference of China Studies”**, *Ministry of External Affairs*, Government of India, 28 January 2021. Also see **“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on January 29, 2021”**, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 29 January 2021.

hand, while publicising the Chinese parliament's decision⁵⁵ to adopt as part of its 14th five-year plan a controversial hydropower dam on the Brahmaputra River in Tibet, close to the Arunachal Pradesh border—drowning out worries of lower riparian states like India and Bangladesh—are all par for the course.

Finally for India, while managing the China relationship will be guided by its policy of building its internal capacity, diversifying and leveraging external partnerships and keeping channels of dialogue open—the CCP's show of strength is also a reminder of the sage advice offered by many Indian practitioners of investing in and equipping Indian capabilities to understand China better.⁵⁶ Under President Xi Jinping, the role of what the CCP's central committee calls its “magic weapon”—the United Front Work Department (UFWD) to expand China's influence activities abroad has been reenergised, with reportedly \$6.6 billion allocated for an international propaganda offensive.⁵⁷ China's move to post UFWD officials to ambassadorial positions in South Asia has been reported widely and indicates the seriousness with which China is pushing its influence in the region, especially around the BRI.⁵⁸ Experts also argue that there is enough reason to believe that the UFWD not only conducts influence operations that promote CPC's political goals in countries that have large numbers of ethnically Chinese citizens but even in those with significant Buddhist populations— in order to create common cultural narratives.⁵⁹

With multiple fault-lines that China's discourse politics targets in India, New Delhi will have to continue to create awareness and shore up its defences to push back against the renewed Chinese ambition to dominate mind games and project its power to prevail at all costs and across multiple domains.

⁵⁵ **“China Gives Nod to Build Dam on Brahmaputra, Near Arunachal Pradesh Border”**, *Livemint*, 11 March 2021.

⁵⁶ Vijay Gokhale, **“India's Superficial Understanding of China Will No Longer Do”**, *The Indian Express*, 1 July 2021.

⁵⁷ For more, see **“Regulations on the United Front Work of the Communist Party of China”**, *Xinhua*, 5 January 2021; and Jayadev Ranade, **“Beware of Xi's Secret Army”**, *Rediff*, 22 January 2021.

⁵⁸ Shishir Gupta, **“China Sends Hardcore Ambassadors to South Asia to Push BRI and Undermine India”**, *Hindustan Times*, 14 September 2020.

⁵⁹ For more, see Vijay Gokhale, no. 56 and Phunchok Stobdan, **“China's Buddhism Card”**, *The Tribune*, 26 May 2021. Some of my field notes are also available in Shruti Pandalai, **“Post Doklam, India Needs to Watch China's Bullish Economics led Cultural Embrace of South Asia”**, *MP-IDS Issue Brief*, 1 January 2018.

About the Authors



Shruti Pandalai is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2021