

Chinese Media on Pokhran II Diatribe

Dr Sheo Nandan Pandey*

Introduction

Chinese media joined India's Pokhran II diatribe immediately after Dr K Santhanam and his ilk called May 1998 Operation Shakti as "fizzle" and lent voice to express concern about India's minimum nuclear deterrence potentials against plausible adversaries.¹ As a mouthpiece of the Communist Party China (CPC) and by implication, an instrument of the Chinese government, the media reports reflect the mind, if not the stand and postures of the Chinese leadership. Nonetheless, the tone and tenor of the wordings apart from the form, shape and prominence of reporting, hold clues to China's plausible approach, be it treating an outright adversary or otherwise. While the trail of events in time series could be just few and far between and hence, quite limited in scope to lead to a generalisation, it could very well be an instance, if not a benchmark for reckoning which way the wind of bilateral relations was to blow.

While the Chinese media tinkered as and when there was slightest opportunity in the past; the frequency of Chinese strategic experts, bloggers, retired diplomats, and even official websites and PLA linked think-tank blowing hot and cold, is increasing. Worst, there is a trend to hold on-line poll and show the dark side of India. In late June 2009, Global Times (Huanqiu Ribao) projected 90 per cent of Chinese respondents believing India a threat to China's security. Earlier in July 2008, Pew Global Attitude Project had put 24 per cent Chinese respondents ranking India as enemy. There have been some think-tanks who high ground international propriety and quote here and there Indian authors or Indian agency reports to attack Indian position on the issue.² Notwithstanding the Chinese media, in particular, China Daily has been publishing write ups of Pakistani authors such as Zaheerul Hussein who spits fire against India. In a latest paper (Campaign against Pakistan, <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/viewhrtreat.php?gid=2&tid=652801>), he has charged New Delhi to have colluded with Tel Aviv to hire media to smear black face of its adversaries.

In methodological perspectives, the study of the kind transcends both the boundary of media monitoring and content analyses. It touches upon the frontiers of diplomacy studies with windows on conflict management in the context of the two turning new leaf towards thaw from being adversaries for a long time. This does not obviate the continuum relationship of rivals, competing for political, diplomatic and economic space as a competitor. For covering the hiatus in equating the media perception and wordings to the perception and wordings of the leadership, much less the government, the methodological options weighing statements against the standard policy, the extent of congruence and / or variability of material facts in the reported story, and a broad matrix summary and/ or reasoned acceptance or rejection of the thesis, promise a reasonable framework for getting to the truth. The dynamics of change in Chinese stand normally carry cultural propinquity of its own kind, which included flair to cultivate bond of friendship and manipulate feelings of goodwill, guilt and obligation to its advantage in hours of need.

Notwithstanding, positive disposition, if any, the Chinese response has to be a function of what Zhao Quansheng says change in "micro-macro linkage".³ It can be a little different when there is negative disposition. By micro level, Zhao meant investigating the role of individual or group decision makers, and macro level analysis referred to the influence of the domestic society and institutions as well as the international system and structures in the formulation of China's foreign policy. Akihiko Tanaka credits "domestic development" for Chinese hard lines or otherwise in its disposition to the outside world.⁴ Taking historical perspective, Tanaka says China presented a hardliner face to the outside world when it was caught up in revolutionary campaign and, when the emphasis was upon economic development, Chinese foreign relations stressed the business like advancement of foreign trade. Wang Guangwu and Zheng Yongnian nearly conform to Tanaka's thesis with a difference. They say that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has learnt from the Soviet Union that it cannot afford to try to build a China-centric world order in the era of reforms and open up policy. In order to get to understand and interpret China's positive or otherwise disposition in bilateral relations, Carol Hamlin calls for looking into both "international situation to which China must respond" and the "attitude towards the outside world prevailing within the Chinese leadership".

The paper is aimed at discerning China's disposition in bilateral relations on strategic issues. The study design juxtaposes an array of Chinese media reports against the material facts in the controversy. It looks for congruence. It also looks for the penchant to accept and/ or decry the truth as it is, anyway. It examines changes in stance in time sequel, if any. Reproductions of the Indian media story in the Chinese media constitute independent variable while the elements of interpolations in one form or the other constitute dependent variables. The same literally held good even where the Chinese media story stemmed as independent work of Chinese media. Validity of generalisations stand conditioned to the given time frame and the issue in vogue. This frame work could, of course, acquire a measure of legitimacy when seen against an array of reportage in time series over a period of time. Organised in analytical format, the paper thus focuses on: Pokhran II and the Controversy; Congruence and Variability in Chinese Media Depiction; and, the Media Candour and Misstate

Pokhran II and the Controversy

India's low yield and 'contained' five underground nuclear tests, code named Operation Shakti, in popular

parlance referred as Pokhran II, witnessed unusual flurry of intellectual bashing on the issue of actual as against designed test values after 11 years of the event.⁶ Dr K Santhanam, then Director, Test Site Preparations, kicked off the dust, first, in a statement on 26 August 2009, then in an article, contributed to The Hindu of 17 September 2009 and subsequently in an Indian TV channel appearance.⁷ Dr K Santhanam called the test Shakti - I, a two stage thermonuclear device a failure as the yield was only 25 kilotons, nearly half of what the scientists had then claimed.⁸ He said that a meeting of scientists discussed the failure soon after the test and decided to hide it. He also pointed out that the failure meant that India now did not possess a credible nuclear deterrent, indicating that warheads on India's long-range missile could have far less punch than expected.

Former President of India, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, who had then led the team in his capacity of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) Chief and Scientific Adviser to the Prime Minister, disputed his assertion. R Chidambaram, former Chairman of Atomic Energy Commission and the architect of the nuke tests and Anil Kakodkar, then Director of Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, likewise, reasoned out the official position. They held that the device operated according to its design specifications and the yield was 45 kilotons. Dr APJ Abdul Kalam defended India's deterrence capability as well, which assumed centre stage by default.

In the row, three former colleagues of Dr K Santhanam in the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Dr Homi Sethna, Dr PK Iyengar and Dr MR Srinivasan and former Director of Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) Dr AN Prasad questioned the validity of Pokhran II, though with varying emphasis and reasons. Dr Homi Sethna disagreed with Dr APJ Kalam for disputing the veracity of Dr K Santhanam's assertion. He laid charge of political interference in Pokhran-II and imputed political motives on the part of Dr APJ Kalam justifying the official stand on the issue.⁹ Dr PK Iyengar did not lag behind. He alleged that the 1998 tests were carried out in haste at the bidding of the government.¹⁰ Dr MR Srinivasan and Dr AN Prasad called for peer review in the face of the controversy.

Interestingly, these Indian nuclear scientists held centre stage, in vehemently opposing the Indo-US civil nuclear power deal.¹¹ There is thus an ideological angle in their diatribes. The nuclear scientists were expected to discuss merits of various on site and off site yield estimation methods.¹² They got instead engaged in vituperations, which smacked of immature peer group grievances and tussles.

Congruence and Variability in Chinese Media Depictions

The Chinese print media lent its ears to the wrangle in Indian electronic and print media in a measured way. Chinese language People's Daily led the hype, where it picked up a story from the Indian media and stated what an adversary could say while remaining neutral in public posture. It was just a day after the Indian Scientist Dr K Santhanam sought to spill the beans for reasons best known to him. Of several stories then making headlines in the Indian media, the People's Daily (Renmin Ribao) picked up the riposte of the Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta (Box-I).¹³

In this Chinese media story, the narratives carry incontrovertible facts as they have appeared in the Indian media. It says what the Indian Navy Chief did say. It also says why the Indian Navy Chief chooses to say so. The contents in the Chinese media story, thus do not betray an iota of extrapolation. It does extol. It does not beacon aversion either. In such a backdrop, the Chinese media story as such can be classed 'disposition neutral' in form. However, there is subtle but reckonable problem with the spirit. The narrative squarely qualifies the veracity of the refutation by the Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta as it adds an aura to the assertion of the Indian nuclear scientist Dr K Santhanam for having stemmed from the mouth of 'one of the country's top atomic scientists'. It then scoffs at Indian achievements and quotes past debate over the success of the Indian nuclear tests, in particular foreign media. The Chinese media story thus, transcends the fair limit of 'disposition neutral' stand.

Just three days later on 30 August 2009, the People's Daily carried riposte of Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh on the issue (Box-2).¹⁴

This piece of the Chinese media story is again aging 'disposition neutral'. It is well scribed to depict the two sides of the coin. It tells what the Indian Prime Minister said. It also tells why the Indian Prime minister chose to say so. Even the sequencing of argument is faultless. The scribe has shown inscrutable skill in managing the slant, too. However, though in a stride, it conveys doubts about Indian nuclear weapon capabilities. As the Chinese print media is far short of autonomous, it goes to suggest a considered official decision to stay clear from getting unduly engaged in India bashing.

China Daily (Zhongguo Ribao) subsequently carried an analytical piece under the caption, "Indian Armed Forces Confident about Nuclear Arsenal" (Box 3).¹⁵ This story has purportedly been authored by a junior member of the CPC. In its composition, whether it is headline or posers such as 'second strike' capabilities, in particular as India's nuclear policy breathed commitment to 'no first use' (NFU), or Pakistan factor, in particular the rationale for keeping its first strike option open, and the like, the Chinese media acquits well to the tests of "disposition neutral". This is despite an oblique stance on India's real as against perceived capabilities in the context of Dr K Santhanam's doubts.

However, as the headline does not fully correspond, much less corroborate the central piece of the argument, this Chinese media story qualifies the test of "disposition critical". It has skilfully projected Chinese superiority over India, both in straight and surrogate comparisons, such as with Pakistan. The Chinese media story thus touches the fringe of "disposition sinister". Disinformation is an effective weapon in the armoury of Information Warfare in which the Chinese are adept for quite some time.

China Daily thereafter published a paper by a Pakistan think-tank Maulana Zaheer ul Hassan, which carries a full critique of the Indian nuclear programme, and its outlook (Box-4).

This is a classic case of media exploit, where the Chinese Information Warfare mandarins stand to get mileage without expending an iota of energy. It uses the author as an agent provocateur and puts a damning question mark on Indian capability for safe nuclear programme. Nonetheless, it goes to sound and petition all stakeholders against India’s credibility as responsible nuclear power. When all said and done, the Chinese media story of the kind thus fares adequate as “disposition sinister”

Media Candour and Misstate

As an instrument of the Chinese state craft, the Chinese media was not expected to act any better.¹⁷ The Chinese media reports focussed on the point of controversy as it stemmed from the counter view of Dr K Santhanam. They sought to contrast the Indian official stand with a caveat, where the standing of Dr K Santhanam as a scientist in the field stood as a touch point of authenticity and validity. The Chinese media has been candid in carrying riposte. They can not be faulted for not invoking rational and logical counter points to Dr K Santhanam’s thesis. This was yet a need to depict a correct view. The Chinese media story missed the bus in the case of two analytical stories, one by the party functionary and the other by a friendly foreign patron. None of the two papers dwelt, much less reflect upon different onsite and offsite methods of estimation of nuclear test yield and their respective estimate errors to add objectivity in the stories.

***Dr Sheo Nandan Pandey** is a Sinologist. He served in the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Human Resource Development and retired as an Officer on Special Duty with the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO).

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