

Lessons from Doklam

by Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal

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Introduction

At the heart of China’s power play over Doklam is an anxiety among Chinese political elites that India’s slow but steady rise, which China has largely underplayed or dismissed thus far, could actually come to pose a strategic challenge. This is particularly so in the light of growing strategic convergence between India on the one hand and the US and Japan on the other. Based on China’s perception of itself as Asia’s preeminent economic, political and military power, China now envisions a possible, deep-rooted, clash of interests with India, the more so given their distinct history, value systems, strategic culture and geopolitical orientation.

“Missing entirely in this calculus is introspection on China’s own recent record of unilateral assertions impacting India’s interests ...”

Several factors drive this thinking. These include India’s geopolitical realignment under the Modi government, public signals of a more nuanced Indian policy towards Tibet and greater purpose on the part of the Indian military on holding its ground along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Missing entirely in this calculus is introspection on China’s own recent record of unilateral assertions impacting India’s interests, and those of others across wider Asia.

China’s power elites are realising that as India’s comprehensive national power rises, it is likely to play a greater regional role by expanding its strategic and economic space, presenting a challenge to China’s unquestioned regional dominance. They are also wary of an Indian attempt to use “*Shi*”, or the strategic configuration of power, to create an alternative nexus in Asia that could become a countervailing influence to constrain China’s power and core interests.

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For a country which has risen rapidly to great power status without any significant external challenge, that cannot be a comforting prospect. China's carefully nurtured narrative of itself as Asia's gravitational centre with a natural historic entitlement to pre-eminence assumes that others, including India, must endorse that view.



Armored vehicles attached to a combined brigade of the PLA Xizang Military Command (MC) exercising in Tibet, June 23, 2017. Source: Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China

Analysis of Chinese statements undertaken by the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, under the project "India in the Chinese Media", highlights that despite the peaceful resolution of the Doklam standoff, there is a strong undercurrent in China that "it was all India's fault" and that "an errant India needs to come back on track." As has been the case with China's major standoffs with Japan in 2010 and again from 2012-14, there is little recognition of China's own miscalculations and culpability in triggering the Doklam crisis.

"...the default policy option for China remains strategic coercion as the primary tool for the politico-military domination of India."

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Why Doklam?

The lingering boundary dispute and periodic border tensions are an intrinsic part of China's coercion strategy, a virtual sword of Damocles hanging over India. Not surprisingly, Doklam was the third in a recent series of major border incidents, the preceding

ones being Depsang in April-May, 2013 and Chumar in September, 2014. The aims of these incursions have been consistent, i.e. to raise tensions, up the political ante and pressurize the Indian leadership to accept a compromise on terms favourable to China, thereby keeping India on the defensive while sending out a message of China's regional supremacy.

The second goal behind the Doklam incident appears to have been to improve on China's tactical and operational limitations in the strategically important Chumbi Valley, using territory under dispute with Bhutan as the point of provocation. Road construction activity to dominate the high ground above India's sensitive Siliguri corridor and establish new facts on the ground, if carried out successfully, would have created leverage against India and strengthened China's bargaining position for settling the India-Bhutan-China boundary tri-junction on China's terms.

Issues became complicated for China when the Indian military, alerted by improved technological surveillance, responded swiftly by moving into the Doklam plateau (in Bhutanese territory) and halting Chinese road building activity. Surprised at being upended, the Chinese reacted with characteristic bluster and attempts to intimidate India through vitriolic propaganda.

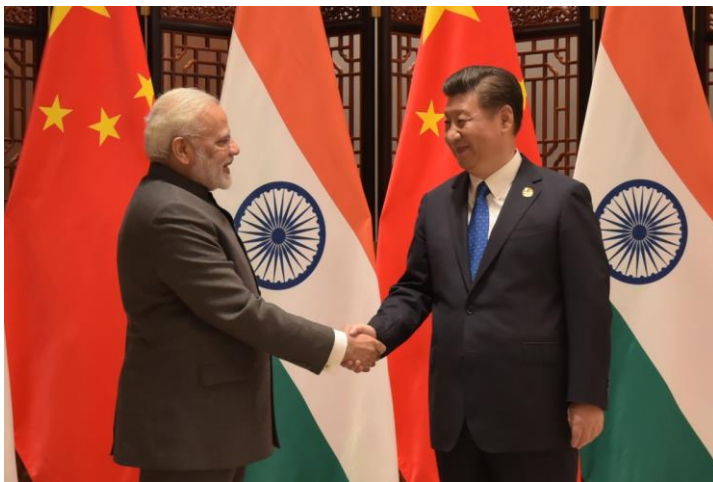
"The third implication of the Doklam standoff is that China remains a territorially unsatiated and expansionist regional power..."

The third implication of the Doklam standoff is that China remains a territorially unsatiated and expansionist regional power, attempting to incrementally integrate India's strategic periphery into the Chinese sphere of influence. CPEC and BCIM, both elements of the BRI, are part of this broader strategic objective. The Doklam

incident was thus a calculated attempt to browbeat Bhutan, seek concessions from it through a boundary quid-pro-quo, and undermine India's special status in Bhutan, something which China has been attempting in Nepal, Sri Lanka and to some extent Bangladesh. An underlying narrative was igniting Bhutanese fears of an India-China war leading to China's annexation of Bhutan, akin to that of Tibet in 1951.

“Overall, China's aim appears to be to keep the boundary issue on a low boil, undermine the role of Special Representatives and keep India embroiled in sovereignty claims...”

Another significant aspect of the Doklam incident has been China's questioning of previous understandings arrived at during meetings of Special Representatives for the resolution of boundary disputes, be it in Sikkim or the Central Sector (Bara Hoti Tri-Junction in Uttarakhand). Overall, China's aim appears to be to keep the boundary issue on a low boil, undermine the role of Special Representatives and keep India embroiled in sovereignty claims, as China has done with other neighbours like Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, as also with some of its Central Asian neighbours.



President Xi Jinping greets Prime Minister Narendra Modi before their bilateral meeting in Xiamen on the sidelines of BRICS – 2017, September 05, 2017. Source: Flickr MEA

Last but not least, the Doklam standoff triggered unrestrained and unprecedented “information, legal and psychological warfare” by China, using all elements of the state’s official apparatus, including print and social media, the academic community and think tanks. This was followed by a military buildup, leaks of military deployments and live-fire exercises. The public campaign of ridicule and sarcasm directed at India was intended to send a strong message to the Indian leadership that all options, including military, were on the table if China’s “core interests” and national pride were compromised. The military element was designed to build a fear psychosis to undermine India’s political resolve and demoralise the Indian military.

It is important for India to internalise these realities and understand that despite the resolution of Doklam, this pattern is likely to continue, with tensions being raised periodically depending upon China’s perception of the state of geopolitical

power play and India’s own strategic leverages vis-a-vis Chinese interests. That Beijing’s unilateral territorial assertion in Doklam has been successfully defied by India will rankle in the minds of Chinese leaders as this could encourage similar actions by other regional states. In effect, India reminded China that its “historical claims” of sovereignty over disputed areas cannot be imposed unilaterally by military force, and are subject to peaceful and negotiated settlement under international law.

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power play and India’s own strategic leverages vis-a-vis Chinese interests. That Beijing’s unilateral territorial assertion in Doklam has been successfully defied by India will rankle in the minds of Chinese leaders as this could encourage similar actions by other regional states. In effect, India reminded China that its “historical claims” of sovereignty over disputed areas cannot be imposed unilaterally by military force, and are subject to peaceful and negotiated settlement under international law. This “insult” of speaking truth to China’s power makes further Chinese provocations inevitable.

The Indian Response

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Chinese strategic calculations in raising the stakes on Doklam, which eventually misfired, appear to have been based on underestimating the political resolve of India's nationalist leadership. China’s leaders see India as a struggling, inchoate democracy and overrated economic power. This has led to miscalculations on earlier occasions as well, as was the case during President Xi Jinping’s September, 2014 visit to India, when Chinese troops intruded and pitched tents in the Chumar Sector of Ladakh.

Such misperceived thinking is triggered both by domestic political interests and the PLA’s overconfidence about asymmetric power equations. Thus, while not a single shot may have been fired across the India-China borders over the past forty years, simmering tensions and attempts at creeping encroachment continue unabated. There has been a marked increase in border intrusions or transgressions by China in the last few years.²

There are two key factors that can deliver favourable outcomes in India's troubled relations with China: the efficacy of India's crisis management strategy and the overall policy approach towards China in the medium term.

The manner of handling the Doklam standoff has thrown up a refreshingly new perspective of India's national security framework and crisis management capability.

As for China policy, there have been two dominant themes shaping the Modi government's approach. The first is the centrality of mutual respect for each other's core concerns. Reticence and ambivalence of Indian policy on this score in the past had signalled weakness, giving the Chinese the upper hand. The message that India has sought to convey during many a Modi-Xi Summit is that if China expects India to respect its core concerns, it must in turn show similar consideration for India's core concerns; acceptance of the "one China" principle by India requires reciprocal respect for "one India" by China. The second and equally important message to China has been "not to allow differences to become disputes," through strengthened dialogue and greater mutual understanding.

The attempt to embarrass India at Doklam, and subsequent Chinese bellicosity, highlight that either these twin messages have not gone home, or that China's leadership still believes that India will simply succumb to sustained pressures and offensive posturing.

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It is in the above context that India's mature and robust management of the Doklam crisis, and success in securing a peaceful denouement without compromising on the core demand of halting all Chinese construction activity followed by a mutual withdrawal, deserves high recognition. The Indian response displayed in ample measure strong political resolve, military restraint and diplomatic perseverance, all woven into a well-coordinated strategy.

In the final analysis, the following factors contributed towards resolving the Doklam standoff:

- a. A strong but non-provocative military posture, even as India prepared to mobilise and build up military capabilities. The idea was not to seek a confrontation, but to be prepared for any escalation which China might attempt owing to strategic miscalculation.
- b. Diplomatic activism, ignoring the cacophony of China's virulent anti-India campaign and demands for withdrawal before any talks can take place. Back channel communications were established, including outreach by senior functionaries like the National Security Adviser and the Foreign Secretary. All through the crisis, India maintained a conciliatory but firm stand.
- c. Confidence Building Measures and border mechanisms entered into since 1993 provided the backdrop for discussion and helped in narrowing differences.
- d. India's tactical military advantage in Doklam worked in favour of inducing dialogue. In a situation involving the marginal application of military force, asymmetry between India and China on comprehensive national power mattered less.
- e. Leveraging the prevailing environment, in particular the BRICS Summit hosted by China from September 3-5, 2017. President Xi had invested a fair amount of political capital to showcase this event as an alternative model of the global economic order and counter to G-7.
- f. The North Korean crisis and looming US-China economic issues helped in making the Chinese leadership realize that it could not open too many fronts at the same time at a critical juncture ahead of the 19th Party Congress.
- g. A highly successful Modi visit to the US, expressions of Japanese support and growing India-Japan-US trilateral convergences were other factors which restrained the Chinese leadership and provided an impetus for dispute settlement.

- h. Finally, the restraint shown by the Indian media during the standoff stood out in stark contrast to Chinese belligerence, presenting a good model for balanced handling of crisis situations in the future.

Policy Options

This brings up the question of important takeaways from Doklam and their impact on India's policy options in relation to China.

“This methodology needs to be institutionalized for dealing with similar crisis scenarios in the future.”

As mentioned earlier, India's crisis management strategy, which entailed politico-military decisiveness backed by determined diplomacy, proved effective in bringing about a favourable outcome.

Essentially, this was an outcome of integrated and synergistic crisis management at the political, NSC, foreign office and service headquarters levels. Strategic communications and signaling also played an important role. This methodology needs to be institutionalized for dealing with similar crisis scenarios in the future.

A more crucial long-term issue, however, is how India should shape its China policy, based on the realities of a disputed boundary, strategic distrust and China's manifest reluctance to accommodate India's rise.

To begin with, India must continue its present policy of engaging China to prevent bilateral issues or tensions from emerging. The positive outcome of the Modi-Xi bilateral meeting at the BRICS summit on September 5, 2017 marks a good start to a “forward looking conversation”, centred around maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the border and efforts to strengthen mutual trust. India should also seek to reset its trade and economic relations with China based on greater mutual benefit. An imbalanced trading relationship where China supplies 15.94% of India's imports but receives just 3.69% of India's exports is not sustainable.³

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Mending ties with China cannot come at the expense of India's major strategic partnerships. India must continue to prioritise closer political, security, military and economic ties with the US

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and Japan. The US is by far India's largest export market (15.3% of total exports in 2016-17)⁴, while Japan is India's pre-eminent economic partner for connectivity infrastructure and investment. Both are leading sources of high technology, and the US is also a major supplier of

high-end military hardware. These are true strategic partnerships in terms of their impact on the regional balance of power.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping hold their bilateral meeting in Xiamen on the sidelines of BRICS – 2017, September 05, 2017. Source: Flickr MEA

India must also continue to invest more comprehensively in building strategic, economic and security relations with ASEAN. Support for ASEAN-led regional security architecture that upholds a balanced, equitable and rules-based regional order must continue. There is considerable untapped potential for India-ASEAN trade, which is largely balanced (10.56% of India's imports, 11.22% of exports).⁵ The historic opportunity of all ASEAN HOS/HOGs attending India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2018 must be fully utilised.

Enhancing India's economic and political influence over its strategic periphery through sub-regional initiatives (BBIN and BIMSTEC) and connectivity corridors (Myanmar) is another priority area.

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Beyond these external policy options, it goes without saying that India has to pursue sustained economic growth as well as military modernization, which together can provide the leverage necessary to shape the regional narrative in a favourable direction.

An important lesson emerging from Doklam is that similar incidents will continue to be perpetuated along the LAC, as long as the Chinese perceive a highly favourable military balance. India must take urgent steps to address increasing military asymmetry with China. Re-evaluation of India’s overall military capability and border infrastructure must take into account the growing prospect of Sino-Pak collusion.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the Doklam standoff and draw important lessons for shaping India’s policy towards China. The standoff needs to be seen as a timely warning

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on how China can suddenly raise the ante on the border and create bilateral tensions and regional uncertainty. While progress has since been made to restart a positive bilateral engagement, China is more than likely to persist with its attempts to constrain India’s rise to the global high table. The possibility of further Chinese incursions on the border also remains high. Only the combination of a well-defined China policy and credible military capability can deliver a posture of dissuasive deterrence for the medium to long-term future.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Hemant Krishan Singh and Arun Sahgal, *China’s Himalayan “Mission Creep”*, DPG Policy Note, Vol.II, Issue 6, July 12, 2017
- ² Number of intrusions in Indian territory has increased, www.inkhabar.com, July 5, 2017
- ³ Data source: Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, 2016-2017 statistics
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Ibid

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