

Agreeing to disagree: ending the Doklam stand-off

The separate announcements by [India and China that the Doklam military stand-off](#) has ended are a welcome sign that diplomacy has prevailed over the harsh rhetoric of the past 10 weeks. The measured tone of the statement from New Delhi, referring to the “expeditious disengagement of border personnel” as part of the understanding between the two countries, shows that the government’s policy of pursuing diplomatic measures in the face of China’s angry rhetoric was wise. In turn, China’s statement, which said that Indian troops had withdrawn from the disputed Doklam plateau while Chinese troops continue to patrol the area, gives Beijing the latitude it requires to end the stand-off peacefully. The differing versions and the lack of further information leave several questions unanswered about the terms of the disengagement. But the very fact that both countries have been able to issue statements — even if they were designed to satisfy their domestic audiences — suggests that in diplomatic negotiations, each took into account the other’s constraints. In issuing statements that were inconsistent with each other, both sides seem to have agreed to disagree. To that end, the importance lies less in the detail but in the détente itself, in the decision by the leaderships of both countries to pull back from what some feared could escalate into a full-blown conflict. In this, it must be noted that New Delhi and Beijing have respected the wishes of the Bhutanese government, which wanted an early end to the crisis before the bitter winter set in.

Timeline: the story of the Doklam stand-off

One hopes the decision on Doklam, which comes a week before Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to go to China, will guide the bilateral spirit beyond the September 3-5 BRICS summit to be held in Xiamen. Once Mr. Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met, diplomats must begin the heavy lifting required to repair the rupture in ties over the past few months, beginning with the cancellation of the Nathu La route for Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrims. Statements from China during the stand-off indicate that it no longer recognises the gains made in the Special Representative talks in 2012. Nor does it regard the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction near Batang-La to have been settled. India has made it clear that it does not consider the Sikkim boundary settled either, and both sides will have to walk swiftly to come back to some semblance of an accord on such basic issues before they can move further. India and China must revert to the spirit of the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement of 2013, which laid down specific guidelines on tackling future developments along the 3,488-km boundary the two countries share. The past two and a half months are also a lesson that India cannot be unprepared for “another Doklam”, as Chief of the Army Staff Bipin Rawat said on Sunday. India must necessarily “hope for the best, and prepare for the worst”, when it comes to tensions with its northern neighbour.

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