

## Lessons from Doklam

Soldiers seen at | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

The resolution of the [Sino-Indian military stand-off at Doklam](#), that lasted close to two and a half months, is a much-awaited and welcome development where patient statecraft and deft diplomacy seem to have paid off. Even as several significant questions remain unanswered about the terms and conditions of the resolution, it provides New Delhi and Beijing an opportunity to reflect over what went wrong and rejig this important bilateral relationship. The upcoming visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China to attend the BRICS summit will provide the two sides such an opportunity.

“War is the continuation of politics by other means,” observed the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his classic work, *On War*. In other words, military strategy should flow from carefully considered political thinking. Now that we have arrived at a peaceful resolution at Doklam, we need to examine the political strategy guiding India’s military deployment at Doklam. Moreover, are there any lessons we can learn from this military stand-off with China?

### Agreeing to disagree: ending the Doklam stand-off

The most self-evident lesson from the Doklam stand-off is that we inhabit a ‘self-help’ world wherein China is a world power — India is on its own and would have to fend for itself in case of a clash with China, a country with which every major state in the international system has a robust economic relationship. It is important to note that none of the major powers unambiguously and unreservedly supported India’s position on Doklam. In fact, even Bhutan kept a studied silence through the latter part of the stand-off. New Delhi, therefore, must carefully review the scenarios and consider its options before upping the ante. Moreover, regarding Doklam, instead of inviting military attention to itself and trapping itself in a conflict with Beijing, New Delhi could have convinced Thimphu to be more vocal about Bhutan’s territorial rights.

The second lesson from the Doklam stand-off is that China is unlikely to respect India’s ‘special relationships’ with its neighbours. India has long enjoyed a special status in the South Asian region and often treated it as its exclusive backyard. With China expanding its influence in the region and competing for status and influence, the ‘middle kingdom’ considers South Asia, with India in it, as its periphery. China uses economic incentives and military pressure to do so. Nepal is an example of the former, and Bhutan of the latter. Recall Bhutan, besides India, is the only country from the region that did not attend China’s recent Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. India’s traditional policy towards South Asia, of limited economic assistance topped with a big brother attitude, will need to undergo fundamental transformation to retain its influence.

Midway through the stand-off there had been concerns in New Delhi about how the Doklam stand-off would eventually pan out. It is pertinent to ask whether Doklam is so fundamental to Indian interests that we were willing to risk a possible military skirmish with China based on the sketchy clauses of the India-Bhutan friendship treaty. The lesson for us is clear: we should consider all odds and evaluate the merit of the cause before making military commitments.

### China sidesteps issue of road construction in Doklam

Four, hyper-nationalism does not pay when it comes to dealing with China. China, simply put, is not Pakistan, and Indian political parties cannot make any domestic gains by whipping up nationalist passions against China. India needs to engage China diplomatically to resolve outstanding conflicts rather than engage in a war of words, or worse, threaten to use force. For

sure, it is not 1962, and that's true for both parties.

Five, the Doklam stand-off is a direct fallout of the Indian and Bhutanese refusal to be part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While this round may have concluded without any of the three sides getting hurt, this is unlikely to be the last of Chinese designs against India or Bhutan. Surely India cannot, and should not, acquiesce to the BRI just because of Chinese pressure. And yet, at the end of the day, Indian abstention would only frustrate BRI, it will not derail it. Moreover, down the road, Indian unwillingness to be part of this mega-project will hurt its own long-term economic interests. Therefore, it needs to realise the importance of cooperating with China on the BRI while getting China to do so on various India-led regional projects. It cannot be a zero-sum game.

What is also becoming abundantly clear is that the snail-paced 'Special Representatives' talks on the India-China boundary question have not yielded much so far, and it is perhaps the appropriate occasion to revamp the dialogue process. The 19 rounds of talks held till last year have hardly anything substantive to show for them in terms of the resolution of the boundary dispute. Indeed, the focus is increasingly shifting from conflict resolution to conflict management. It is high time, therefore, that the two countries appointed dedicated high-ranking officials to discuss the boundary issues in a more sustained and result-oriented manner.

Let's briefly revisit the Doklam facts for the sake of clarity and future policy direction. The Indian Army was deployed on the soil of another country against a third country without proper treaty mandate or unambiguous official invitation to intervene on behalf of the Bhutanese government. The 2007 India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty states that the two countries "shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests." And that: "Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other." Notwithstanding the special security relationship that India and Bhutan have shared over the past several decades, nothing in the 2007 treaty binds India to send troops to help Bhutan. Nor did Bhutan explicitly request military assistance from India during the stand-off even though the MEA statement of June 30, 2017 refers to 'coordination between the two countries' during the stand-off.

The argument here is not that India does not have legitimate security and strategic interests in Bhutan which would be undermined by the Chinese territorial aggression, but that there is a need to engage in careful scenario-building before India decides to take China on militarily.

But finally, it all comes down to devising a strategy to engage a resurgent China, also a significant neighbour, in the days ahead. While Doklam may now be a thing of the past, Sino-Indian ties are never likely to be the same again – there will be skirmishes, war of words and attempts to outmanoeuvre each other in the neighbourhood and beyond. While New Delhi needs to constantly look over its shoulders for potential Chinese surprises, there is also an urgent need to adopt a multi-pronged strategy to deal with Beijing, for, after all, statecraft is not as black and white as some would like it to be. India, for one, needs to engage China a lot more at several levels: diplomatically, politically, multilaterally and economically. The upcoming BRICS summit in the Chinese city of Xiamen is a good occasion to initiate a dedicated backchannel with Beijing given the high potential for future disagreements. The two sides also need to conduct bilateral consultations on various issues – ranging from Afghan reconciliation to regional economic development. The more diplomacy the better.

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