

Making the Doklam standoff useful for India

The India-China standoff in Doklam, an area contested between China and Bhutan, came to an end on Monday after more than two months. The contours of the disengagement are now much clearer: The Indian side has withdrawn from Doklam and China has ceased its road construction activities, which had triggered the standoff in the first place.

While it is clear that it was Beijing that had to blink in the face of India's firmness, China has saved face by portraying the endgame as India's unilateral withdrawal to its domestic audience. The spokesperson for the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs has said that their forces will continue to patrol the Doklam area—this was never the reason for the standoff and Chinese and Bhutanese soldiers have indeed been patrolling the region earlier as well—and the road building plan will now take into account various factors, including weather. The meaning is clear: The Indian withdrawal has come in exchange for the Chinese concession of not going ahead with the road construction. If Beijing goes back on its part of the bargain, India has the option of doing the same.

What made Beijing budge from its position, especially after unleashing a barrage of India-bashing rhetoric through its state-controlled media? The most probable reason is India's military advantage in the Sikkim sector that would have made any escalation costly for China. Chinese concerns regarding the overhang of Doklam during the forthcoming Brics (involving Brazil, Russia, South Africa along with India and China) summit, which they will be hosting in Xiamen, must have also played a part. And not least, President Xi Jinping would also have wanted to ward off even a remote chance of an embarrassment before the 19th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party, to be held later this year.

While the Doklam denouement may have vindicated India's position, there are important lessons to be learnt from this protracted standoff. First, the fact that China has made a tactical retreat should not lull India into a belief that the former will stop deploying its time-tested technique of using incursions into disputed or others' territories as a means of embarrassing its opponents. As one has seen in the South China Sea, China is now increasingly adept at changing the facts on disputed territories and waters to present rival claimants with a *fait accompli*. But this trick did not work in Doklam—as Oriana Skylar Mastro and Arzan Tarapore have brilliantly [explained](#)—because India used denial tactics to physically prevent China from altering the facts on the ground. This meant that the onus of military escalation was left on Beijing. In contrast, a strategy—like the US' in the South China Sea—which threatens to retaliate after Beijing has created new facts would leave the onus of escalation on China's rival. However, rather than resting on its laurels, India should be prepared with its diplomatic and military apparatus should China try Doklam-type unilateral adventurism again.

Second, China's rise presents a daunting challenge to India's primacy in South Asia. The Doklam foray was not so much to intimidate India—Beijing is well aware of its disadvantages in Chumbi Valley—but more to create a rift between New Delhi and Thimphu. This standoff was the gravest threat ever to the special and unique Indo-Bhutanese relationship. And thanks to Thimphu's resilience, the relationship has come out with flying colours. While Beijing's rhetorical fury was on full display, Thimphu maintained its calm and stated its position in two crisp statements released on 29 June and 29 August. In both, Thimphu endorsed India's position by calling for a return to the status quo ante.

But India's relations with other South Asian neighbours are not as strong as with Bhutan. Forget India entering their territories to stave off an intrusion by the People's Liberation Army, most of them are busy pocketing Chinese money to build infrastructure in their own countries. India's methods there will have to be different. New Delhi has met with some limited success due to the

presence currently of friendly regimes in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. But India should also exploit its advantages of geography and cultural affinities to present its economic growth as a veritable opportunity for neighbours through higher volumes of trade, greater investment flows and better connectivity.

Third, the China challenge is much bigger than episodes of border standoffs. In Pakistan, China has facilitated the creation of a nuclear-armed state which deploys terrorists against India to achieve its territorially revisionist goals. Another challenge is headed India's way through the activities of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean. Sea denial, as Abhijit Singh has [argued](#) in this newspaper, is not really a credible option. India will need the ability to project power in the Western Pacific.

Perhaps it is also time—in light of the changed circumstances that China's rise presents—to discuss an even closer military partnership with the US and Japan. Such a move may have its downsides but it is important to weigh them against the benefits rather than continue debating the utility of concepts as outdated as non-alignment and as mythical as strategic autonomy. If such a debate ensues, the Doklam standoff would have done some real good.

What are the lessons India should learn from the prolonged standoff in Doklam? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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