

Time for clarity: on Doklam stand-off

Five months after the government claimed the victory of “quiet diplomacy” to bring the 73-day [stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops at Doklam to an end](#), the contours of the actual agreement and events that have followed remain a mystery. On August 28, the Centre had issued a statement on a mutual decision for Indian and Chinese troops to disengage and withdraw from the part of the Doklam plateau disputed between China and Bhutan that had been the scene of the stand-off. A second statement from the Ministry of External Affairs the same day said the verification of the disengagement by both sides from the “face-off” point, which included the withdrawal of troops, road construction equipment and tents, was “almost complete”. However, last week the [Army chief, General Bipin Rawat](#), said Chinese troops are in parts of Doklam they had hitherto not manned, and while the People’s Liberation Army infrastructure development was “temporary” in nature, “tents remain, observation posts remain” in the disputed area. The MEA, which had maintained that there was “no change” in the status quo, also appeared to shift position, saying that New Delhi was using “established mechanisms” to resolve misunderstandings over the Doklam issue. While discretion and quiet negotiations are useful, especially when sensitive matters along the India-China Line of Actual Control are being discussed, such divergence in public statements also fuels speculation that something deeper and more troubling exists on the ground. The government must verify if satellite photographs showing much more permanent infrastructure in north Doklam, not far from Indian posts, that are the subject of reports in the media, are accurate and whether they pose a new threat to India.

Roiling matters further are the broader statements made in New Delhi last week. Speaking at the MEA’s annual Raisina Dialogue, Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar put China’s rise first on a list of “major disruptors” in the region. General Rawat said that the “time has come” for India to “shift focus” from its western border with Pakistan to its northern border with China. This is bound to raise eyebrows given that the boundary with Pakistan has seen heavy shelling and rising military and civilian casualties in the past year. Similarly, Beijing’s latest belligerent statements that all of Doklam belongs to China and is under its “effective jurisdiction” could be indicators that the agreement announced in August is unravelling. If so, a Doklam-style troop build-up in the future must be avoided at all costs. It is imperative that the government proceed with caution in step and consistency in statement, and drop the ambiguity it has embraced since the Doklam stand-off began in June.

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