

Doklam phase II will test India more than phase I

Doklam is back in the news. Last year, on 28 August, Indian and Chinese troops agreed to disengage, ending a 73-day standoff. While India had got China to suspend the extension of its road to the Jampheri Ridge, satellite images now show that China has considerably beefed up its military presence in the region just to the north of the standoff site. In addition to several military structures, some road construction machinery can also be spotted. This is not quite in line with the recent remarks of army chief Bipin Rawat, who claimed that the number of Chinese troops and the level of Chinese activity in the region had both decreased.

The ministry of external affairs (MEA) continues to maintain that there has been no alteration to the status quo at the face-off site. Responding to queries, the official spokesperson of the MEA added that India is keeping a “constant vigil on the developments” and that India and China “do have and have used established mechanisms to resolve any misunderstandings”. It is clear that the MEA is defining alteration to the status quo too narrowly. Even if there is no resumption of Chinese activity at the face-off site, building of military infrastructure to the immediate north may enable the alteration in status quo at quick notice when needed.

While the 28 August disengagement was carefully packaged so as not to project a winner and a loser, it would not be wrong to say that it was a retreat for China. Chinese President Xi Jinping must still be smarting from that setback. With the 19th party congress of the Chinese Communist Party behind him, Xi is no longer held back by domestic constraints. The Chinese leadership seems to have concluded that amends must be made for the shortfalls which resulted in the Doklam setback. Notably, Chinese road construction has also been reported in Shaksgam Valley in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. And in December last year, a Chinese road construction team had crossed over into India’s Arunachal Pradesh. Its march was thwarted by Indian forces, which seized the construction equipment.

If China is correcting for its shortfalls, it is time for India to look back at what worked for it last year and build on it. At the height of the Doklam standoff, when the rhetoric from China was shrill, India was pursuing a three-pronged strategy. One, it maintained restraint in its public statements and continued with behind-the-scenes diplomacy. Two, it stopped China’s road construction through the crude means of physical denial. This was quite an effective strategy because—as [explained](#) by Oriana Skylar Mastro and Arzan Tarapore—it left the onus of escalation on Beijing. This approach was replicated in Arunachal Pradesh, as mentioned earlier. Three, India also had quietly stepped up its military preparedness just in case the diplomacy and physical denial did not work. A village near the face-off site was evacuated and mountain divisions of the army were moved to the border regions. According to a [report](#) in *The Hindu*, we now also know that the Indian leadership had inquired about the readiness of *Arihant*, India’s nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine. This indicates that the leadership was preparing itself for all kinds of eventualities even though it tried to play down the seriousness of Doklam in public.

While the inquiry about *Arihant*’s readiness was private, this time around India has test-fired Agni V, India’s nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Agni V can reach all parts of China. The timing of the test—last Thursday—has got observers wondering if it was meant as a signal to China in light of the latter’s activities in Doklam.

India’s three-pronged strategy was very well crafted and had all the ingredients for success. But India may need to do still better because China is stepping up its own infrastructure in the Doklam region. India’s local terrain advantage notwithstanding, its border infrastructure is woefully short of what would be required to sustain the forces should the Chinese choose to escalate. The pace of defence modernization also leaves a lot to be desired.

China as a long-term challenge is here to stay. The advantage of terrain in a particular region, tactful diplomacy and a good strategy for a face-off or two may not be enough. A huge gulf exists between the economic and military prowess of the two nations. Even though this gulf cannot just be bridged tomorrow, India has no excuse not to begin today.

For China, the decision to escalate will not be easy. India can prove to be a hardy opponent and make Beijing bleed considerably for small gains. But more than that, a military confrontation with India will come at a huge reputational cost for Beijing. It may suddenly find a spurt in the ranks of countries uncomfortable with the idea of a China-dominated world. Countervailing alliances may begin to form to hedge against the rise of an aggressive China. However, New Delhi cannot take comfort from that thought. Its current problems are too daunting for it to find time for brooding on China's future challenges.

What should be India's response to China boosting its military presence in Doklam? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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