

A possible link between Pyongyang and Doklam

“I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful secretary of state, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man...Save your energy Rex, we’ll do what has to be done!” tweeted US President Donald Trump about his secretary of state’s claims that the US has direct communication channels with North Korea.

With North Korean leader Kim Jong-un having previously referred to Trump as a “dotard”, not only is the level of conversation at a new low, but the prospect of a war is a little too close for comfort. Can we expect some damage control from China?

As mentioned in a previous column, it is against China’s interest to have an unstable nuclear power in its backyard, especially one that is consciously adopting a belligerent attitude towards its large western neighbour. Kim’s uncle and cousin, both considered close to China, have been assassinated. Kim’s missile tests have given the US a pretext to set up the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile defence system in South Korea, giving it an asymmetric advantage over China. With North Korea averaging two missile tests a month since February, it is no longer in China’s interest to play cat-and-mouse while North Korea does its dirty work with respect to the US.

The Chinese dream sold by President Xi Jinping envisages the rise of China to the high table of nations. In this context, North Korea is not merely a threat. It also represents China’s “Pearl Harbour moment”— an opportunity to solve a pressing world problem and receive the widespread appreciation that would establish it as a moral force for good, complementing the material bases of its power. Everything points to the fact that getting rid of Kim without eliminating North Korea as a buffer state against the US is in China’s highest interest. Why then, despite calls in the mainstream Chinese press to reconsider the equation with North Korea, is China seemingly paralysed?

The main reason is that it is powerless to take on a nuclear-armed state possessed of the will to use its arsenal to protect itself. It is also hampered by the high-octane rhetoric from the US president that makes it an open question as to which is the rogue state in this face-off.

Some observers ask if Trump’s seemingly uncontrolled responses are part of a well thought strategy to create unpredictability and fear. To be fair, we must extend the same benefit of doubt to Kim’s actions as well. Trump’s no-holds-barred communication may strengthen his hold in his core base of supporters, but a growing section of the Republican caucus is beginning to ascribe his actions to a lingering childishness. Kim’s belligerence too may seem like a logical response to US’ long history of attempting to attack, assassinate, or otherwise emasculate its enemies—episodes in Cuba and Iraq come to mind. Yet one cannot ignore the psychological instability that is as much a part of Kim’s actions as his calculated chutzpah. We seem to be hostage to the idiosyncrasies of two leaders whose personalities are feeding off each other to bring the world to the nuclear precipice. As if this problem were not enough, Xi has opened a new front with respect to India in Doklam, and, with no apparent cause, Trump has refused to certify the Iran nuclear deal. Again, we ask, is there some method to this madness?

Xi’s stranglehold on power in a country facing stressful economic transformations is based on drumming up nationalistic fervour along with a war on corruption. With limited possibilities in North Korea, the face-saving strategy in the run-up to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, where Xi is expected to consolidate power by waiving the rule which limits the term of office of a Chinese president, is expansionist action on other fronts. Once we understand China’s limitations vis-à-vis North Korea, the diversionary role of Doklam (and other such

missions) in Xi's strategy becomes clear. Trump's actions on Iran may well stem from the same desire to deflect interest from his lack of options in North Korea.

While India's swift response to China's Doklam incursion deserves plaudits, given the underlying incentives, one should assume the provocations will continue. As two neighbouring great powers, India and China can expect to remain in a relationship of simultaneous conflict and cooperation. Both sides should not let historical disputes come in the way of exploring win-win possibilities in other avenues. Ideally, India should leave most of the political and economic costs of containing China to the US and its immediate allies (as indicated by Trump's recent about-face on Pakistan, getting too close to the US would allow it to play India and Pakistan against each other). Hence, the recent renewal of disputes is an undesirable irritation. India would do well to aggressively negotiate with China using its importance as a source of demand for Chinese goods (India has a \$51 billion trade deficit with China) to minimize border skirmishes.

And yet, one wonders if the Indian government's need to demonstrate its newly discovered "strength" since 2014 prevents it from taking steps that would defuse tensions. The refusal to speak to the Hurriyat in Kashmir, the chest-thumping on "surgical strikes", the non-participation in the meeting on China's "One Belt One Road" project over objections to the passage of the economic corridor through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir indicate, in my view, an unnecessary intransigence. With little to show on the economy, in India as in the world, the primacy of domestic power struggles over international relations constitutes a new and deadly prisoners' dilemma.

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With inputs from Nikash Pandey, student at MDI Gurgaon.

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