

Echoes at Doklam

In his address to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), Chinese President [Xi Jinping unveiled his vision to make China](#) a great power so that it “leads the world in terms of the composite national strength and international influence.”

The days to the run-up of the much awaited, once-in-a-five-year event saw some symbolic posturing along the India-China border, especially at Doklam. After a lull following the disengagement, the continued presence of Chinese troops in the vicinity of the stand-off site came to light and a wait and watch game ensued. Recently, the Indian Air Force chief, Air Chief Marshal B.S. Dhanoa, expressed hope that Chinese troops who were in the Chumbi valley for their annual summer exercises would move back at the onset of winter. The Army believes that there could be increased transgressions by China at other vulnerable points along the over 4,000km long Line of Actual Control (LAC). This is possible, if Mr. Xi’s address is any indication.

While Mr. Xi stressed that China did not “pose a threat to any other country”, he reiterated the centrality of China’s territorial integrity and called on the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to go hi-tech, saying that technology is at the core of combat strength.

How this transition unfolds domestically could have a fallout on the border given the tussle between the PLA and Mr. Xi. In the last couple of years, the PLA has been systematically stripped of its power by Mr. Xi, first through the formation of the theatre commands and later in a series of changes in the top leadership. In 2015, Mr. Xi announced reorganisation of the seven military regions into five theatre commands with all three services effectively integrated, which reduced the clout of the PLA generals by bringing the military under stronger grip of the Central Military Commission chaired by him. He has also managed to project the end to the Doklam stand-off to the domestic audience as his victory. As Mr. Xi looks toward consolidating his grip on the Party and the crucial Politburo Standing Committee, it is in his interest to project himself as being firm and decisive in preserving core Chinese national interests.

The life of Xi

However, based on past instances, Beijing has used local disputes to establish a permanent presence, it can be argued that the PLA may stay put in the Chumbi valley using Doklam as a ruse. The 2012 stand-off with the Philippines over the Scarborough Shoal is an example. Therefore, will there be a repeat of the SCS sort of situation on Indian borders? In fact this is exactly what India has attempted to prevent.

The Indian Army’s unusual assertiveness in stopping PLA personnel from extending a road from their side into the Doklam tri-junction was as much out of necessity as other considerations. India had no option but to prevent the change of status quo by preventing the PLA from drastically altering the balance at the strategic location.

As events in the SCS show, the cost of non-intervention is extremely high. With China’s rapid land reclamation and subsequent militarisation, there are now new facts on the ground for Beijing to enforce its claims. In fact, in his Beijing speech, Mr. Xi took credit for the reclamations by saying that “construction on islands and reefs in the South China Sea has seen steady progress” and added a note of caution that while China did not seek global hegemony, “no one should expect China to swallow anything that undermines its interests”. Through a process of normalisation, it is only a matter of time before it is accepted as a fact.

In that context, even given the bilateral tensions that came with the Doklam stand-off, not

responding was never an option. Standing its ground was, in fact, the least escalatory move that New Delhi could have made, given that the cost of intervention at a later stage is disproportionately higher and the risk of confrontation even so.

Adding to this are other issues of disagreement such as India's refusal to be a part of Beijing's grand plans with the Belt and Road Initiative, citing sovereignty issues apart from deepening engagement with the U.S., and a jostling for space in the Indian Ocean Region. The stalemate has been generally viewed as a victory for India and China would not want to be perceived to be weak by other countries in the region.

So, it is highly likely that China will test India in other areas. But one thing is certain. The ground status along the LAC has changed forever. How this will affect the contours of future boundary talks is still not clear. As Mr. Xi rolls out his grand vision, the ramifications could be much wider and far beyond the borders.

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The new U.S. Fed Chairman is unlikely to opt for policies that might upset the President's plan

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