

Understanding the Chinese mind

Just when the [stand-off between India and China over the Doklam plateau](#) threatened to go the way of the 1986-1987 Sumdorong Chu incident (Arunachal Pradesh), the two sides agreed to step back and disengage, thus avoiding a confrontation. The Indian side has pulled back its personnel and equipment to the Indian side of the boundary, while China has agreed to make 'necessary adjustments and deployment' on its part. It is unclear, however, whether China will patrol the region, which it claims to have been doing earlier. Road construction will not continue for the present.

Behind the scenes, quiet diplomacy by the two sides, no doubt, led to the defusing of what could have been a serious crisis. China's interest in Doklam is not of recent origin and has a long history. Those on either side of the divide currently claiming victory must, hence, pause to think what the future holds. Jumping to conclusions at this point could amount to 'missing the wood for the trees'.

India's actions in Doklam are easy to discern, viz. going to the help of a treaty partner in its time of need, a decision which incidentally has security ramifications for India. China's reasons are more complex and labyrinthine but, nevertheless, cannot be easily wished away.

Agreeing to disagree: ending the Doklam stand-off

To savour victory without understanding the factors at work would be a serious mistake. Going into the entire gamut of Sino-Indian relations to try to decipher what prompted China to moderate its stand after weeks of high decibel propaganda may not provide all the answers we seek.

To begin with, China and India have a kind of competitive coexistence. While professing friendship, both sides nurse a mutual suspicion of each other — at times prompting several degrees of alienation. Both countries remain wary of each other's intentions and actions. Yet, and despite the long-time rivalry between the two countries, we may need to look elsewhere for an explanation.

Understanding the way the Chinese mind works is, hence, important. The Chinese mind tends to be relational, i.e. dictated by context and relationship, and its methodology tends to be obtuse. When the Chinese state that they have halted road building in the disputed Doklam area, while adding that they may reconsider the decision after taking into account 'different factors', what China means is that it is willing to wait to implement its decision, but at a time of its choosing when an opportunity exists for a settlement suited to its plans. Little finality can, therefore, be attached to any of China's actions.

Any belief, hence, that China has been deterred by India's firm riposte at Doklam could be misplaced. Since the China-Vietnam conflict in 1980, China has avoided getting into any outright conflict. It has preferred attrition — a protracted campaign to secure a relative advantage — to forceful intervention.

By stepping back from a confrontation with India over a minor issue at this time, what it had in mind were two significant events, viz. the BRICS summit in China in September and the forthcoming 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Also, it possibly believes that this would help China dilute global perceptions about its aggressive designs.

Lessons from Doklam

This may not be as far-fetched as it may seem. China is playing for higher stakes in a globalised world. For instance, on the South China Sea, it has preferred to employ confidence-building measures to deal with the U.S. while awaiting a more opportune moment to assert its claims.

China is even seeking more opportunities for cooperation, rather than confrontation, with the U.S. on trade matters. In the case of the U.S., China believes that relations between the two are adequately multilayered, providing scope for mitigating areas of mutual benefit.

The BRICS summit and the 19th Party Congress both have high priority for China today. Nothing will be permitted to disrupt either event. Extraneous factors would not be allowed to affect this situation. For President Xi Jinping, presiding over the BRICS Summit at this juncture will help consolidate his informal leadership of the group. As the undisputed leader of BRICS, China believes it can take a signal step towards global leadership.

China is currently seeking to reshape the regional and international order, and is keen to fine-tune its 'Great Power diplomacy'. It, hence, needs to be seen as preferring peace over conflict. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a potent instrument in this direction, but needs a peaceful environment to succeed. Limited wars or conflicts, even with the possibility of successful outcomes, would damage China's peaceful image globally. Active power projection could at best provide a pyrrhic victory when the goal China has set is much higher.

The 19th Party Congress is even more important from President Xi's point of view. It is intended to sustain his legacy and leave his stamp on the Party in the mould of Chairman Mao. To achieve comprehensive success, he needs peace to achieve his target. Till then everything else will need to wait.

This is again a delicate moment for China on the economic planes. It needs to redress the economic imbalance between its coastal regions and the hinterland States. One stated objective of the BRI is linking these regions with China's land neighbours. China's growth rate is actually declining, debt levels are dangerously high, and labour is getting more expensive. At this moment, hence, it is more than ever dependent on international trade and global production chains to sustain higher levels of GDP growth. It can ill-afford to be seen as a disruptor rather than a pillar of the existing economic global order. For the present, development, therefore, is the cardinal objective.

The Achilles' heel of the Chinese economy is the lack of resources, specially oil. Oil from the Gulf region is critical for China's growth. Peace in Asia is thus vital to ensure uninterrupted supplies of oil. Uncertainties and disruptions across the Asian region would hamper China's economic progress.

Apart from this, China also faces several cross-border security challenges, in addition to unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang. Embarking on military engagement outside the country's borders could aggravate China's problems. At a time when China is intent on sustained economic growth at one level, and aspiring to be a Great Power at another level, this could prove to be a dampener.

For all the above reasons, China currently leans towards the pragmatic when it comes to relations with countries other than those in its immediate periphery in East Asia. It is not keen to follow a policy adopted by its new-found strategic ally viz. Russia which has paid a high cost for its 'interventionist' policies. China tends to take a longer term view of its future and, despite the rising crescendo of nationalism in China today, is anxious not to upset the international political or economic order. For this reason alone, it would shun a conflict with India in the Doklam area.

China is not a status quoist power, and aspires to be a Great Power. It is well-positioned to

achieve this if it maintains its present course. Any interruption, by indulging in a conflict with nations small or big, would not only damage but derail the levels of progress that are essential to achieve this objective. President Xi's China dream seems predicated on this belief. It implies support for a rule-based international system, linked to 'Tianxia', in the belief that this would help China overtake the U.S. as the dominant world power. When China talks of a 'new type of Great Power relations' it already envisages itself as Great Power in the making. It is unlikely to do anything to deviate from this goal.

While this attitude cannot be taken for granted for all time, the current Chinese leadership seems comfortable in following this prescription. It appears to believe in the aphorism that 'the longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward'.

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