

Doklam standoff: The takeaways for India

There are still many unknowns about the Doklam standoff, what led to it and its de-escalation—some of which will stay unknowns. There also remain questions, including its broader implications and longer-term impact. More immediately, its diplomatic resolution has been rightfully greeted with a sense of relief. Some have suggested that this outcome was inevitable since China and India have dialogue mechanisms, experience dealing with such incidents, and more to lose than gain by conflict. But the risk of escalation is always present in such standoffs. For example, the kind of miscalculation that led to the apparent Chinese belief that India wouldn't respond to its road construction could have also led to a belief that a limited operation was feasible and desirable.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi said that he hoped India would learn some lessons. It will, though perhaps not the ones he has in mind. Some lessons won't become clear for a while, but here are a few:

Resolve: It was crucial for India to stand its ground. For one, demonstrating resolve is effective—even essential—in getting Beijing to back down. As my colleague Ryan Hass indicated (goo.gl/KY4g3H), there's a pattern to Chinese behaviour: "Push until (they) hit steel, escalate public rhetoric, quietly look for off-ramp." Second, it sends a message to Beijing that New Delhi will not accept unilateral attempts to change the status quo. Third, it signals the same to governments in the neighbourhood, region and world—and shows that New Delhi is willing to walk the talk.

Restraint: Even as resolve was crucial, so was restraint. It wasn't lost on officials or observers that in other cases, China has used construction to consolidate or extend its territorial claims, and has been cherry-picking which agreements and understandings it will respect. The broader stakes also aren't hidden—even in May 1962, a US state department assessment noted, "At issue is not merely a boundary line...but the relationship of the two most populous and potentially most powerful states in Asia to each other and to other Asian states." But New Delhi was careful to keep it local, and not allude publicly to Chinese regional behaviour. It also refrained from retaliatory rhetoric which would have escalated the situation, made the off-ramp harder for Beijing to take, and complicated the dynamics between India and Bhutan. Opposition leaders also showed restraint, demonstrating the importance of keeping politics out and them in the loop. Contrary to critics' claims, such restraint doesn't make India look weak; it made India look mature enough not to take Beijing's bait.

Capabilities: Resolve requires diplomatic, military and other capabilities. Chinese actions during this standoff showed that it was willing to use a number of instruments—diplomatic, military, economic, legal, infrastructure, communications—in its toolbox to pressure India. New Delhi, in turn, needs to ensure that it keeps its own toolbox well stocked. China won't pressure India at a time or place of New Delhi's choosing, so there's no room for complacency. India needs to enhance its capabilities comprehensively and with a greater sense of urgency. Moreover, India's China strategy will have to involve multiple stakeholders within and outside government, an assessment of India's vulnerability to Chinese leverage, and expansion of India's leverage with China.

Partnerships: Partners shaped the environment, India's options and, arguably, Chinese behaviour. One partner, Bhutan, was involved as a key actor. We might not know the extent to which Thimphu and New Delhi coordinated, but it's clear that they did. What is also evident is that Beijing has sought to put pressure on this relationship. India will have to continue to handle this partnership with care, acknowledging that preferences won't always match, assessing the changes that are taking place within Bhutan, understanding Bhutanese interests and constraints,

seeing where India can be flexible, and developing and nurturing constituencies beyond the government. In terms of other partners, including Japan and the US, the focus was on what they did or did not say publicly—few asked if the Indian government wanted them to say much lest it escalate the situation—but observers shouldn't assume lack of private communication. Having chosen to stay out of alliances, India has not asked for and cannot expect a security commitment from these partners. What India can do is work with these partners and others to develop its capabilities, to signal China, and to shape the regional environment in which Beijing is operating.

Learning: The standoff highlighted the importance of knowing more about China and its complexities, India's own history of engagement with it, and how others have dealt with China. For example, Indian policymakers would have known—because of their experience with China and an understanding of President Xi Jinping's domestic imperatives ahead of the 19th party congress—that the Chinese desire for a successful BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit provided a point of leverage and opportunity for resolution.

Finally, even as the standoff reflected the competitive and potentially conflictual dimensions of the China-India relationship, it also showed the importance of continued engagement. Not only does this keep the channels for resolving such situations open, it gives the Chinese some incentive to want to resolve them. The terms of engagement, of course, might need to be reassessed.

Tanvi Madan is a fellow and director of The India Project at the Brookings Institution.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com