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## The Doklam Standoff: A template for countering Chinese belligerence and expansionism

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### Introduction

For 73 days from 16 June to 28 August 2017 Asia's two giant powerhouses, China and India, which together account for a third of the world's total population, stood on the brink of a potentially destructive war that threatened the stability and economies of both countries. Ironically, it was illegal construction of a mere few kilometers of road by China through territory disputed with a third country, Bhutan, in southern Doklam near the tri-junction between China, Bhutan and India that bred such high stakes between two nuclear armed States. The road would have changed the status quo that China had agreed through separate agreements with Bhutan and India to maintain. The crisis was eventually amicably settled after an unblinking demonstration of resolve by India and through adept diplomacy, but the coercive strategies employed by China throughout the period of the standoff and the finesse with which these diabolical designs were stymied by India offer valuable lessons to the several nations in South-East and East Asia that confront China's machinations aimed at expanding its control and influence at their expense.

The coercive strategy used by China in Doklam was not incongruent to that applied by it in its other territorial disputes, whether along its border with India or in the South China Sea. Raising physical infrastructure in disputed areas, as was attempted through construction of the road in Doklam, is invariably aimed at bolstering otherwise vacuous Chinese claims on the area. This is accompanied by threats of war and annihilation of the adversary, fabricated or fictitious legal assertions, and a loud, orchestrated, and often crude propaganda campaign by the Chinese government-controlled media to highlight the Chinese narrative and intimidate the opposition. Despite employing all these elements of this strategy, China came off worse for wear in the standoff as it did not factor in the steely resolve India displayed in physically matching the Chinese presence troop for troop in Doklam throughout the period of the standoff. India also bolstered its military presence in the region, thereby conveying that it would not be bullied into backing off in the face of unprecedented intimidation and that it was prepared to exploit its local military advantage in the event of the standoff degenerating into actual armed combat. It also wisely chose to disregard the threats and highly vitriolic propaganda unleashed by China and thereby neutralized it effectively. Above all, India assessed the Chinese psyche and planning fairly accurately at each stage and despite being under severe pressure throughout the period did not budge from its chosen approach of seeking a peaceful, negotiated and fair solution. This assessment was aided by the experience of similar past confrontations with China that India could draw from.

Since the 1962 war between China and India, several instances of Chinese incursion into territory claimed and held by India have taken place. The first such occurrence was in 1967 in

the Nathu La region of Sikkim that is very close to the site of the 2017 standoff in Doklam. Fed up with repeated Chinese incursions and the resultant recurrent wrangling with Chinese troops over where the border lay, Indian troops decided to fence the border near Nathu La. The Chinese troops attempted to prevent this, and the war of words that ensued soon escalated into an armed conflict on 11 September 1967. In the four days of hostilities that followed Indian troops killed over 400 Chinese soldiers but lost 70 of their own troops. A second round of clashes erupted at nearby Cho La on 1 October 1967 in which the Indian troops forced the Chinese soldiers to withdraw. Since then, no major skirmishes have taken place in Sikkim. China, even during these early hostilities in 1967, was already honing the psychological warfare apparatus that it now uses as a potent instrument. It used highly provocative language even as the hostilities raged. It termed Indian leaders as “reactionaries” and “component parts of the worldwide anti-Chinese chorus currently struck up by US imperialism and Soviet Revisionism in league with the reactionaries of various countries”.

In 1986-87, Chinese troops intruded into the Thandrong pasture on the banks of the Somdurong river in Tawang district of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Indian requests that they withdraw fell on deaf ears, forcing India to undertake urgent military mobilization. A Brigade of India’s 5 Mountain Division was rushed to the area, and it occupied the ridges dominating the Somdurong river. This infuriated the then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, who threatened to ‘teach India a lesson’ and moved 20,000 troops of the Chinese 53 Group Army and 13 Group Army along with guns and helicopters close to the area. India responded by moving 3 divisions of its Army into positions around Somdurong. Another ten divisions were mobilized to the Eastern sector. These were backed by substantial assets from the Indian Air Force. Simultaneously, the Indian Army conducted two massive exercises – ‘Chequerboard’ that commenced in October 1986 and continued till March 1987 and ‘Brasstacks’ on India’s western borders. These exercises were meant to convey India’s determination and ability to fight a war on both its eastern and western fronts. Throughout this military build-up, India kept the diplomatic channels with China open. Eventually, in August 1987 the field commanders of both countries met on the ground and agreed to pull back. China’s attempt to change the status quo was abandoned in the face of a robust Indian response.

India successfully rebuffed another two attempts by China to alter the status quo in Daulat Beg Oldi in 2013 and Chumar in 2014.

There was, therefore, little that was novel or ingenious about the Chinese plans and actions in Doklam. As the frequency and spread of confrontations along the 4057 kilometer Line of Actual Control (LAC), the effective border between China and India, would indicate, several sections of it are disputed between the two countries, as are sections of China’s border with Bhutan. The colonial British regime that held sway over India till 1947 was responsible in no small measure for this state of affairs. A British bureaucrat’s disclosure in 1963 brought out that the British regime’s “basic policy towards India’s northern frontier was primarily one of convenience. It suited us best that the border should not be clearly defined: changed circumstances might make some adjustment desirable. This explains in large part the

*inconsistencies of the maps of the time and the absence in many of them of any defined border*". China and India have held ten rounds of border talks since their commencement in 1985 to resolve this imbroglio, but the process has petered out over the last decade. This is not surprising as exacting reliance on centuries-old maps and documents to offer solutions in the present-day ground situation and realities was bound to render the process tedious and contentious. No leader thus far has ventured to brave swimming against the tide of nationalistic sentiment to seriously consider a pragmatic solution based on prevailing realities.

Much has been made of the Doklam saga being the first instance of India standing up to China to honour a treaty-mandated obligation to a friendly country, Bhutan. The reality is that even this has a precedent – at the time of the aforementioned clashes in 1967, Sikkim was a protectorate of India, not its integral part. It was only in 1975 that Sikkim became a part of India.

India had the foresight to realize as early as in 1959, even before the limited China-India hostilities of 1962, that full-scale war between the two countries would have far-reaching implications. The then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru stated in the Indian parliament in 1959 that *"if two giant countries, the biggest countries of Asia, are involved in conflict, it will shake Asia and shake the world. It is not just a little border issue, of course. But the issues surrounding it are so huge, vague, deep-seated and far-reaching, inter-twined even, that one has to think about this with all the clarity and strength at one's command, and not be swept away by passion into action which may harm us instead of doing us good"*. Nehru's words ring even truer today.

Both China and India realize that each country has much to lose in the event of a war. The economies of the two countries are not only closely intertwined but also crucial to the wider world-wide economic stability. Despite this realization, India and China reacted differently to the Doklam crisis. Every belligerent word spewed by the Chinese propaganda machine was calmly met with frosty silence by India, which set quiet diplomacy into action with remarkable success.

The last few weeks, however, have witnessed attempts by China to mend ties with India. Both the damaging trade-war launched by US President Donald Trump against China and the realization in the Chinese government of the dent to its international reputation, credibility and image that was caused by its Doklam misadventure have contributed to this. On 11 October the Chinese government proposed that *"China and India deepen their cooperation to fight trade protectionism"* and *"join efforts to build a more just and reasonable international order"*. Subsequently, in a 15 October article titled *"China-India Military Relations Improve Markedly"* that appeared in the *'PLA Daily'*, the official newspaper of the Chinese military, Zhao Xiaozhuo and Wang Yu from the War Studies College of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) Academy of Military Sciences and the Joint Service Academy of the Chinese PLA National Defence University respectively, suggested that the Chinese and Indian armies expand engagement between front-line units in order to *'resolutely'* ensure that Doklam-like standoffs do not recur. It added that *"the relationship between the two militaries had improved markedly in 2018 along with the rapid recovery of China-India relations"*. In a

rare gesture the article acknowledged that *“India was one of the first countries to recognize the new China and to propose restoring China’s legitimate seat in the United Nations (UN). China, India and Myanmar jointly advocated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and achieved a pioneering work in the history of international relations”*.

India has had enough experience in dealing with China to recognize that these overtures are a direct consequence of the difficult position China finds itself in. While India would welcome and embrace any opportunity to improve ties with China, such improvement would not be at the cost of India’s blossoming strategic relationship with the US. India also understands China well enough to be wary of letting its guard down in response to these recent Chinese advances.

### Existing bilateral irritants

The Doklam standoff occurred at a time when bilateral relations between China and India had already been strained due to several factors. China is the only major power that does not support India’s claim for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. China also opposes India’s membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. India is also peeved at China’s repeated blocking of a UN resolution to declare Azhar Masood, the Pakistan-backed leader of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), as a global terrorist. China’s deepening ties with Pakistan; its ambitious China Pakistan Economic Corridor project, the flagship venture of its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative that passes through territory claimed by India; its growing economic and military penetration into the Subcontinent and the Indian Ocean; and China’s reluctance to address Indian concerns on its massive trade deficit vis-à-vis China that stood at over a massive \$51 billion in 2017 have all irked and troubled India.

China, meanwhile, has not taken kindly to India’s backing of the Dalai Lama, and had reacted strongly to the Tibetan spiritual leader’s visit to Tawang in April 2017 that had been sponsored by the Indian government. China considers Tawang to be part of what it terms as *“southern Tibet”*. India’s rejection of the OBOR has also irked China. Most of all, India’s growing strategic ties with the US and Japan have made China nervous. Participation of the navies of these three countries in the Malabar Exercise off the coast of India was viewed by China as being directed against it.

Along the boundary between China and India, meanwhile, the last two decades have witnessed an up-gradation of infrastructure and logistics by both the countries. This has been accompanied by an incremental modernization of the weaponry deployed along the boundary. China’s strategy has been to develop roads and transport infrastructure right up to the border accompanied by aggressive posturing and periodic incursions. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA), earlier divided into seven military regions with the Lanzhou and Chengdu regions responsible for the India border, is undergoing a major reorganization. Since 2015, the seven military regions are being reorganized into five joint service *‘theater commands’*. The Lanzhou and Chengdu military regions have now been placed under the command of a new single Western Theater Command facing India, which controls the Seventy-Sixth (formerly Twenty-First) and Seventy-Seventh (formerly Thirteenth) Group

Armies, numbering between 45,000 and 60,000 personnel each. Moreover, due to the ongoing domestic political unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, two special Military Districts (MD) have been created for these regions that report to the central army headquarters in Beijing rather than the Western Theater Command. Estimates of January 2018 indicate that the overall deployment of Chinese army personnel in the region is about 40,000 for the Tibet MD, 70,000 for the Xinjiang MD, and between 90,000 to 120,000 for the Western Theater Command. A 2016 article in the *'PLA Daily'* described the desired impact of the changes thus: *"In terms of strategic planning, the five Theater Commands is no longer positioned for regional defense, but head-on and proactive defense . . . The new Theater Commands will attack proactively once a war broke out instead of passively waiting for defending the enemy at home"*. China's ability to mobilize forces quickly and at short notice is of further concern to India.

India, meanwhile, is also enhancing its ground and air capabilities along the China border. Since the mid-2000s it has revised its policy of not developing the border infrastructure in the belief that the poor state of the roads would slow down a Chinese advance in the event of war and thereby provide India more time to react. This thinking changed in the face of rapid improvement of facilities on the Chinese side, and in 2006 India's Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) approved the construction of 73 new border roads. The number of Indian troops committed to the Chinese border has also undergone a major transformation. The 56 and 71 Mountain Divisions, two units raised for the state of Arunachal Pradesh in 2009-2010 that comprise about 35,000 troops, are being bolstered through the setting up of the China-specific 17 Mountain Strike Corps comprising another 35,000 troops. These new formations would enable India to deploy about 221,000 forces in all the three Army Commands – the Western, Central, and Eastern – involved in guarding its border with China. Moreover, most of the Indian army units are located much closer to the border than Chinese troops are. India's air power is simultaneously being boosted by the induction of Su-30MKI and Dassault Rafale fighter aircraft. A number of additional airfields and runways are being operationalized along the border.

India perceives its military expansion and modernization along the border as being a response to the Chinese initiatives in the same direction, which pose a serious security challenge to India. It views its efforts as being limited to establishing a credible defensive deterrent against Chinese misadventures. The *raison d'être* of India's nuclear weapons program is also the same. However, the view among a growing section of Chinese security experts and analysts is that India's military upgradation is being undertaken in furtherance of aggressive military posturing by it. They point to the relatively small number of PLA troops dedicated to the Tibet MD, the only Chinese forces permanently stationed close to the border with India, but disregard the huge number of troops of the Western Theater Command that can be inducted and put into action within a relatively short period due to China's well-developed military logistical network.

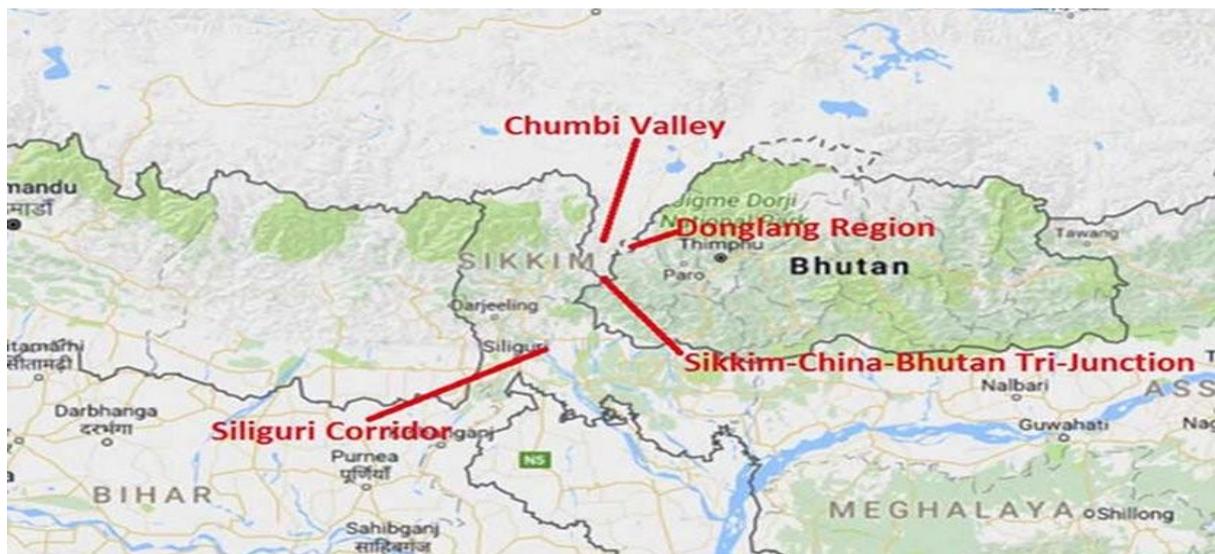
The real issue that Chinese strategic thinkers are opposed to is India's aim of achieving the status of a world power as that would bring it in direct competition with China. This would negate the Chinese strategy of limiting India's power and influence to the South Asian region.

The Chinese policy of promoting Pakistan through provision of military and nuclear technology and equipment to it is primarily geared towards achieving this. Additionally, the deepening China-Pakistan nexus presents India with a two-front theatre in the event of a war with either country.

It was in this backdrop that the events in Doklam unfolded in the summer of 2017.

### What happened in Doklam

The Doklam plateau comprises an 89 sq km of territory in western Bhutan, perched at an altitude of 4,000-4,500 meters, which is also claimed by China. The plateau is in the possession of Bhutan, which loosely secures its possession with just one post at Zompleri that is manned only during the summer months. The plateau juts north into the Chumbi Valley of Tibet, with the state of Sikkim in India to the north-west, west and south-west and Tibet to the north, east and south-east. India and Bhutan concur that the tri-junction of India, Bhutan and Tibet is on the north-western edge of the Doklam plateau, where the Batang La post of India is located. China, however, lays claim to the entire Doklam plateau and as per its version the tri-junction is at Mount Gipmochi (Gyemo Chen), whose precise location is disputed but the Chinese claim is seven-eight km to the south-east of the de facto present position.



On 8 June 2017, a platoon-sized unit of Chinese border guards moved into territory claimed by both China and Bhutan and destroyed two stone bunkers built by Indian troops that were used sporadically by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA). A Chinese army team comprising 70-80 personnel with about a dozen bulldozers was subsequently noticed by Bhutanese troops posted at their Zompelri post on 16 June 2017 trying to construct a motorable road from Doka La to Zompelri. The efforts of the Bhutanese troops to stop the Chinese construction and turn back the Chinese army team were in vain. A 2007 agreement between India and Bhutan provides for mutual assistance in the event of threats to each other's security. This prompted the Indian troops posted at the Doka La post on the Sikkim-China border to intervene. The Indian troops physically blocked the movement of the Chinese soldiers and human chains were formed by both sides. No shots were fired and the face-off did not degenerate into

anything more serious than the occasional pushing and shoving. Both sides held onto their positions for 73 days.

Bhutan officially lodged a protest against the road-construction activity with China on 20 June 2017 through its diplomatic mission in New Delhi. China responded through coordinated statements of its foreign and defense ministries on 26 June in which it accused Indian troops of crossing into Chinese territory to stop the road construction. It claimed that the Sikkim section of the Sino-Indian boundary had been defined by the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 that had *'repeatedly'* been confirmed by India.

The Bhutanese Ambassador to India Major General (retd) V Namgyel in an interview on 28 June stressed that the Chinese road construction was in an area that is disputed between China and Bhutan. He disclosed that *"Bhutan has conveyed that the road construction by the PLA is not in keeping with the agreements between China and Bhutan. We have asked them to stop and refrain from changing the status quo"*. This was followed up by a statement of the Bhutanese foreign ministry on 29 June that accused China of violating bilateral agreements of 1988 and 1998 that the two sides would maintain status quo, peace and tranquility in their border areas pending final settlement of the boundary, for which 24 rounds of talks have been held since the 1980s. It stated, *"Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic channel, that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements [on maintaining the status quo pending a settlement] and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16 June 2017"*.

On 30 June the Indian External Affairs Ministry stated that Chinese actions in the Doklam area *"represent significant change in status quo with serious security implications for India"*. As per a formal agreement, the *'India-China Agreement on the Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs'* signed in 2012 between China and India, the borders at tri-junctions would be decided upon in consultation with the third country involved. Furthermore, the claim by China that the boundary in the Sikkim sector is settled and well-defined was spurious and deceitful. China had till recently been urging India to agree on the boundary in the Sikkim sector as an *'early harvest'* in the boundary talks, but in a complete U-turn it claimed during the Doklam crisis that the boundary had already officially been delimited and settled. The *'basis of alignment'*, which is the highest watershed, is what India and China have agreed upon in this sector and China is well aware that delineating the alignment of the boundary on maps and demarcating it on the ground is yet to be done. Differences on interpreting the watershed boundary between India and China also persist. The maps of India, China and Bhutan therefore show clear and significant differences with regard to the tri-junction point.

China was, therefore, acting contrary to its understandings with both Bhutan and India and by attempting to construct a road inside Bhutanese territory was attempting to change the status quo on the ground as a means to further its claims on the strategically important region. It has earlier adopted the same sneaky strategy elsewhere along the border with India as well as in the South China Sea. In conjunction with Bhutan, India only stepped in to

persuade China not to do so. Bhutan and India were clear that they could not allow China to unilaterally change the tri-junction point, especially as it had committed in writing to discuss and finalize it with India and Bhutan.

Any forced change in the status quo in Doklam would have had serious security implications for India. The Indian government told a parliamentary panel after the Doklam stand-off ended that it had intervened to thwart China's road-building exercise in southern Doklam due to the danger of the tri-junction being pushed further south and directly threatening the Siliguri corridor or the 'Chicken's Neck', a narrow strip of land just over 17 km wide at certain stretches, that connects India's seven north-eastern states with the rest of the country. From India's perspective the entry of Chinese troops at Zompelri would allow them higher ground over the Siliguri corridor and also represent a Chinese attempt to move the tri-junction point further south.

The Batang La tri-junction is located at the narrow end of the Chumbi Valley, which is wedged between east Sikkim and west Bhutan. This affords China very little depth or width to deploy its forces. The border, as it stands today, provides India a tactical advantage since its forces based in north and north-east Sikkim can intercept Chinese troops in the narrow Chumbi Valley in the event of hostilities. The Chinese forces in the Chumbi Valley are also currently in the line of sight and fire of Indian forces hovering on the ridges along the Sikkim-Tibet border. Aware of this vulnerability, the Chinese covet the Doklam plateau since any troops stationed there would be away from visible observation and beyond artillery range of Indian forces based in north or north-east Sikkim. Moreover, Chinese control over the plateau would enable its troops to potentially roll down the Zompelri ridge and cut off India's seven north-eastern states at the Siliguri Corridor that is barely 60 km away.

During the 73 day standoff in Doklam, China orchestrated a deliberate, carefully calibrated and bellicose propaganda campaign. India's then Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar opined that *"none of us at least in recent memory have seen this kind of ratcheting up of political tensions that we saw during those 72 days"*. The State-owned English language Chinese media such as the 'Global Times' threatened India with war if its troops did not get out of the way of the Chinese soldiers. A 5 July 2017 report in the 'Global Times' warned that *"we firmly believe that the face-off in the Donglang (Doklam) area will end up with the Indian troops in retreat. The Indian military can choose to return to its territory with dignity or be kicked out of the area by Chinese soldiers. This time we must teach New Delhi a bitter lesson"*. The PLA's English-language website, 'China Military Online', threatened that *"if a solution isn't reached through diplomatic or military communication or the issue isn't handled properly, another armed conflict ... is not completely out of the question"*. The Chinese media ridiculed India's military, accused India of manipulating Bhutan, threatened to interfere in the Jammu & Kashmir issue and to promote insurgencies in India. The Chinese Communist Party's mouthpiece 'People's Daily' warned that India was flirting with disaster and *"playing with fire"*. The 'China Daily' averred to the risk of *"dangerous miscalculation"*. State news agency 'Xinhua' stooped to the level of releasing a racist video of what it felt were the 'Seven Sins' of India.

The Chinese Foreign Office and Ministry of National Defense joined the chorus and issued several harsh messages to India and Bhutan. The Chinese defense ministry, for example, advised India to learn the *'historical lessons'* from the major military reversals it suffered in 1962. The Chinese foreign ministry insisted that the *"precondition for any meaningful dialogue"* would be for Indian troops to *"unconditionally"* pull back from Doklam. It alleged that India had *"violated the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and trampled on international law and the norms governing international relations"*. It termed India's actions as *"illegal"* and *"flagrant"*, that demonstrated its *"irresponsibility and recklessness"* and its disregard for both China's sovereignty and the UN Charter.

China even took recourse to blatant lies in its propaganda campaign. Wang Wenli, China's top diplomat on the boundary issue, lied to a visiting Indian media delegation in August 2017 by claiming that Bhutan had conveyed to Beijing through diplomatic channels that the area of the standoff belonged to China and was not Bhutan's territory. A day later the Government of Bhutan categorically refuted the Chinese foreign ministry's bluff.

Caught out as the shifty aggressor against tiny Bhutan, China resorted to its frequently used concept of strategic deception by trying to portray itself as the victim and India as the aggressor. The aim of the Chinese propaganda blitz was also to disconcert India into taking a rash step that China could capitalize upon, especially as the realization dawned upon the Chinese leadership that the Doklam crisis would not end well for it. This Chinese aim was negated by India and Bhutan, both of which chose not to oblige by responding in kind to the threats and slights emanating from Beijing. Thimphu maintained a stoic silence other than its aforementioned official statements while India's official response to China's tirades was invariably measured and calm. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar, in contrast to the Chinese warmongering and attempts at intimidation, consistently prioritized diplomacy and negotiations as their preferred route to resolving the crisis even as the Indian troops stood firm and unrelenting at the Doklam human chain. The Indian government sensitized the mainstream Indian media against going into an emotional, nationalistic overdrive of the type that the Chinese government encouraged. India thus took the winds out of the sails of the Chinese propaganda machine. The crude handling of psychological warfare by China not only proved to be ineffective but also hardened India's resolve.

China was essentially taken by surprise and unnerved at India's unyielding response in Doklam, as also its dismissive lack of interest in escalating the situation both on the ground and in the information sphere. It became increasingly apparent that China had not formulated an alternate strategy to deal with such a response. As the standoff meandered along only to arrive at a stalemate in which neither side wanted an escalation into war, and with India having called China's propaganda bluff, the only way out for China was to agree to what India was proposing all along – a mutual disengagement through diplomatic negotiation. Analysts believe that Indian forces held the upper hand ever since they surprised the Chinese troops by confronting them on behalf of Bhutan and stuck to their position despite unprecedented aggression and threats from Beijing. Further, Beijing overplayed its hand by heating up the rhetoric. An Indian General was quoted by the media as saying during the crisis that *"however*

*this plays out, China is going to lose face, since it has made its threats publicly. And India is going to come out looking like a credible and reliable partner for Bhutan”.*

The lack of a well thought out Chinese strategy to deal with the Indian resistance in Doklam is brought out clearly by the deadline of 19 August 2017 that China had set for Indian troops to withdraw. India expectedly, ignored the deadline, thereby putting China under the tremendous pressure of being branded a weak “*paper tiger*”. Both the options China was presented with as a consequence were not to its liking – either to implement its deadline by forcibly evicting the Indian troops, which would escalate the situation, or agree to India’s terms to break the impasse. The former option proved to be a bridge too far in view of the tactical advantages that India enjoyed at Doklam, the economic price China would have to pay for such escalation, and the pounding that China’s image would take internationally. It therefore opted for the latter despite its chagrin at being out-maneuvered by a country it views as being inferior to it economically and militarily, and one that had the temerity to question the justness of the Chinese actions in Doklam.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s brief conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hamburg on 7 July 2017 spurred Indian diplomats to start negotiations with their Chinese counterparts to find a solution. Thirteen rounds of diplomatic talks, led by the Indian ambassador in Beijing, were held. In addition to stressing its position, India reasoned that persisting with the standoff would not benefit either country and would lead to mistrust and friction while providing an opening for others to exploit. Following six weeks of persistent communication, and with the BRICS Summit to be hosted by the Chinese President in Xiamen on 4-5 September fast approaching, India and China reached an agreement to resolve the crisis through the disengagement of the troops at the face-off site in Doklam on 28 August 2017. India, tellingly, did not back down in the face of Beijing’s orchestrated anger. Contrary to China’s repeated assertion that the only solution acceptable to it envisaged Indian troops withdrawing unilaterally, thereby allowing the Chinese construction team a free run of the area, India stood firm on the need for simultaneous withdrawal by both sides and pulled its troops out only after China agreed to cease the road construction activities that had led India to intervene in the first place.

At the end of the standoff, the Indian External Affairs Ministry announced in a matter of fact manner that *“in recent weeks, India and China maintained diplomatic communication in respect of incidents at Doklam. We were able to express our views and convey our concerns and interests. On this basis, expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam has been agreed to and is on-going”*. This contrasted sharply with the Chinese statement that India had *“pulled back all the trespassing personnel and equipment”*. The Chinese statement did not even mention the cessation of the Chinese road-building activity that China had agreed to. China needed a face saver that India wisely gave it.

## Conclusion

The maturity, determination, resilience, and even-headedness demonstrated by India in the face of the aggressive, expansionist designs of its stronger adversary meant that it emerged

geopolitically stronger from the Doklam stand-off. China's image in the international arena, on the other hand, was dented by it. Countries like the US, Japan, Australia and Vietnam would have taken favourable note of India's disposition and conduct during the standoff as well as its ability to withstand the considerable Chinese psychological pressure exerted on it. That an unblinking India managed to prise out of China the diplomatic solution of its choice would also have instilled a sense of confidence in its allies. This found reflection in the game-changing agreements that India has signed with its major defense partner, the US, in recent months. Media reports suggest that India will sign a base sharing pact, the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with Japan during a bilateral summit meeting between Prime Minister Modi and his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, later this month. This would allow the Indian military and the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) to use each other's bases for logistical support.

While initiating the Doklam standoff, China failed to anticipate that such unwarranted and uncalled for aggression would drive New Delhi to deepen its defense ties with the US as a defense mechanism. This failure was surprising as China had already experienced this with Japan, South Korea and most countries of South East Asia. India's increased cooperation with the US, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, and its aligning with the US and Japanese navies through the Malabar exercises in the Indian Ocean have underlined its strategic choices. India recognizes the imperative of balancing China's power in Asia. Its interest in a quadrilateral arrangement with the US, Japan and Australia is also aimed at achieving such balance.

For China's other neighbours, especially ASEAN members that are aggrieved and threatened by China's display of dominance and expansionism, the Doklam standoff showed that a resolute state could actually withstand the three-warfare — media, cyber and legal — strategy that China employs and that China is not the unstoppable force that it seeks to project. Steadfastness on the ground accompanied by the patient and unassuming nature of India's diplomatic engagement driven by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar could have provided a new template for handling Chinese coercion.

What motivates China to repeatedly provoke India along the disputed border is a question that analysts have often pondered over. China's growth has been dependent on the sea lines of communication from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean. It conducts its trade and acquires the energy it needs through the sea. The Chinese strategy of acquiring naval facilities at ports and harbours across this region is aimed at securing these sea lines of communication. Compelling India to focus its gaze along its long land border with China would serve the wider Chinese purpose of thwarting India from according the due priority to its naval forces. India's preoccupation with its land borders will only impede its emergence as an influential regional power. India, therefore, will do well to guard against getting drawn into this Chinese design by according the required attention and resources to building its capabilities in the Indian Ocean region.

Although the Doklam standoff was resolved without a shot being fired, there is a strong likelihood of future similar flare ups erupting along the China-India boundary. Reports in media that based their analysis on satellite imagery suggested that both China and India have built up capabilities near Doklam since the standoff ended, but the scale of the Chinese build-

up was more substantial than the Indian. Chinese troops have fortified their positions with the declared intent of resuming the road construction activity at an appropriate time. ‘Stratfor’, in an assessment earlier this year of recent satellite imagery of two Chinese and two Indian airbases, revealed that a *“strategic build-up has accelerated”* especially on the Chinese side since the Doklam standoff was resolved. ‘Stratfor’ concluded that *“it is only a question of time until a new flashpoint along the LAC emerges”*. This echoes the views of India’s Chief of Army Staff General Bipin Rawat: *“The recent stand-off in the Doklam plateau by the Chinese side attempting to change the status quo are issues which we need to be wary about, and I think such kind of incidents are likely to increase in the future”*.

China and India are both acutely aware that a military confrontation between them would be calamitous to the economic prosperity that both these Asian powerhouses aspire to. At the moment China appears to be exercising strategic patience. The country’s trade war with the US has shaken it up, with its economy under severe strain. As ‘Reuters’ reported in September this year, *“It’s barely six months into a broadening Sino-US trade war, and the fallout has already driven China’s stock markets into the same league as debilitated emerging markets such as Turkey, Argentina and Venezuela. With around a 20 percent loss so far in 2018, Shanghai’s stock market has joined the crisis-hit trio among the world’s four worst performers”*.

India cannot, however, afford to be lulled into complacency in this period of relative absence of belligerent Chinese actions. The lesson from Doklam was that it was firm resolve on the ground backed by potent and demonstrated military capabilities that forced China to negotiate. This should motivate India to further develop and modernize such capabilities with the active assistance of allies such as the US and Japan.



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