

Explaining the India-China Standoff at Doklam: Causes and Implications

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In mid-June 2017, a long standoff began between India and China in the Doklam area of Bhutan, which came to an end only in late August. The crisis started when a Chinese road-building party moved into an area that was part of a dispute with Bhutan, an activity that the Indian side deemed was an attempt to change the status quo in an area uncomfortably close to the sensitive 'chicken's neck' corridor connecting mainland India with the North East. As long as the area – part of the trilateral meeting point of the borders between Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan – only saw grazers or the occasional patrol party from China and Bhutan visiting, there really was no major cause for concern. But the Indians refused to countenance permanent Chinese construction in the area and on apparent request from their Bhutanese counterparts moved to physically block the Chinese from continuing with their activity.

The Chinese were clearly surprised, not expecting the Indians to intervene so decisively on the side of the Bhutanese in a territory that after all did not belong to India and was the subject of another bilateral dispute altogether. The Chinese reactions, in turn, were a cause of much surprise for the Indians – the Chinese Foreign Ministry and state-run media began a

campaign of vociferous protests and open threats quite unlike the usual Chinese practice of either ignoring Indian reports of Chinese transgressions or giving pro forma responses.

In the Doklam case, however, there were repeated Chinese calls to India to 'immediately pull back' Indian troops to its side of the boundary. The Chinese kept stressing for a long time that this was 'the precondition for any meaningful talks between the two sides aiming at resolving the issue'.¹ The Chinese rhetoric constantly suggested that India should not doubt China's demand for Indian troop withdrawal² or that China would do what it took to have India out of 'Chinese territory',³ even suggesting that 'a military response may become inevitable'.⁴ The Indian national security advisor Ajit Doval was, for instance, targeted by name in several Global Times editorials or op-eds.⁵

In the end, the Indians stood their ground and the Chinese had to climb down, but there are important considerations for India from the entire episode and the vehement Chinese criticism of India through the incident and after.

EXPLAINING CHINESE VITUPERATION

One explanation for why the rhetoric from both Chinese official sources as well as its English-language publication, *Global Times*, was shrill and deafening is that possibly Beijing was trying to cover up for being caught

by surprise by the Indian action in confronting them in a third country. Bhutan has other disputed territory in the north that the Chinese have been nibbling away at for years, and despite the presence of an Indian military training contingent in Bhutan, Indian soldiers have never intervened in the dispute between China and Bhutan. The Chinese possibly assumed that the Indians would not respond this time either in the Sino-Bhutanese dispute and thought they could run roughshod over the weaker Bhutanese.

Two, the Chinese were certainly caught in a spiral of their own making – the reliance on nationalism to overcome the shortcomings in communist practice today in China means that there is no easy or immediate way to spin the Indian troop movement in defence of Bhutan into anything but an act of aggression against China.

Three, despite Chinese statements that India has no business interceding on behalf of Bhutan, they were no doubt aware that internationally the view was that India had merely come to the rescue of its smaller neighbour in response to China's attempt to bully Bhutan. While China has managed to portray the South China Sea issue as a case of several smaller countries ganging up against it with American backing and in the process also managed to divide ASEAN over time, there was no equivalent opportunity in the Doklam case. The Doklam standoff was perhaps seen more easily as a bilateral David versus Goliath situation, and no doubt this negative public image, too, was one of the factors that the Chinese failed to consider going into Doklam. This then adds weight to the theory that the Chinese miscalculated the potential for a coordinated Bhutanese and Indian response.

Four, there was also perhaps the need to counter what might be seen as an increasing and positive profile that India has gained in China in recent years. It is a little-noticed reality that the ordinary Chinese view India somewhat differently than they do other major global powers. The popularity of yoga and of Indian movies in China is a case in point. The Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's active promotion of yoga across the globe and of India as a sort of cultural and spiritual superpower has had some impact in China. Meanwhile, the Bollywood sports drama *Dangal*, which also showcased the relationship between a strict father and his daughters, was a big hit this year in China, with its similar problems of patriarchy and parental pressures on children.

India's influence is also evident in other, perhaps, more important ways, in China. Notably, these include its identity as the world's largest democracy and the popularity of Mahatma Gandhi among intellectuals and civil society activists. The interest in the latter's methods of non-violent struggle specifically is not surprising given the constraints on civil society and on political activity in China.

While there is a template of nationalist rivalry with Japan and another of a larger, geopolitical rivalry with the United States, neither template fits the relationship with India, and the Communist Party of China, already actively battling apparent Western influences in its politics and educational institutions, is unlikely to look at these forms of Indian influence in a positive light.

India's muscular response to China's bullying of the Bhutanese in the Doklam area was, therefore, also an opportunity to counter any positive images of India building up in Chinese society, regardless of the

fact that not many Chinese really paid much attention to Doklam compared to the goings-on in the Korean peninsula or the South China Sea.

THE LEGAL DIMENSION

The Chinese tried to sell the Doklam standoff as resulting from the Indians violating treaty agreements and international law over where exactly the trijunction between Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan lay. According to the Chinese the trijunction lay at the southern end of Doklam, in Gipmochi, which is presently under Bhutanese control and which would make the area one in which Sikkim and Tibet shared the boundary instead of Sikkim and Bhutan. According to the Indians and the Bhutanese, however, the trijunction is a point a little north of Batang La.

This approach of blaming another country for violating international law – in this case the 1890 Convention relating to Sikkim and Tibet signed by the colonial British government in India and the Qing empire in China – is a sophisticated argument for the Beijing to make but one that was nevertheless both wrong and a selective interpretation of the facts. Even if one were to see the standoff as the result of a disagreement over the terms of the convention, there are several aspects that the Chinese have wilfully ignored.

Contrary to the Chinese stress on 'Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier' as stated in the convention as the beginning of the boundary between Tibet and Sikkim, the Indian side has pointed out that the specific trijunction point should actually be the result of an adherence to the watershed as indicated in the same Article I of the convention.⁶ And as

has been underscored by the 2005 Agreement on Guiding Principles and Political Parameters between India and China on their own bilateral boundary dispute, 'the delineation of the boundary will be carried out utilising means such as modern cartographic and surveying practices and joint surveys' (Article VIII) and that '[p]ending an ultimate settlement . . . the two sides should . . . work together to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas' (Article IX).⁷

Several points then are clear from this. One, Mt. Gipmochi cannot be taken as the final trijunction point since the Indians and the Bhutanese believe the trijunction point according to the watershed lies further north, at Batang La, and therefore, this dispute will have to be settled through modern cartographic methods. Two, the Chinese cannot have been unaware that their road-building through disputed territory threatened Indian security and thereby also violated the agreement to maintain peace and tranquillity in the *border areas* – it can be no one's case that the tiny patch of disputed territory between China and Bhutan does not also have implications for 'the border areas' of India and China.

Three, the Chinese action violates a similar injunction in their agreements of 1988 and 1998 with the Bhutanese themselves as per the official statement of Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 29 June.⁸ Four, if the Sikkim-Tibet boundary was as settled as the Chinese claim, then there should have been no reason for several clashes between the armies of the two countries over the decades along the Sikkim-Tibet border, including the major confrontation in 1967. While there is agreement on the broad principle of the watershed as the basis of alignment between India and China, there are clearly differences on the alignment itself.

Five, the Chinese action and claims subsequently about Mt. Gimpochi as the settled trijunction run contrary to the 2012 understanding reached between the then special representatives Shivshankar Menon on the Indian side and Dai Bingguo on the Chinese side 'that tri-junctions will be finalised in consultation with the third country concerned'. This understanding was part of a kind of progress report on the negotiations thus far between the two sides on the eve of Dai's retirement from his post and has been revealed by no less than Menon himself.⁹

IMPACT ON INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

It is almost certain that India-China relations are entering a new phase of their relationship, marked by greater hostility and suspicion between the governments and militaries certainly but, worryingly also now, it seems, at the popular level, if the Chinese government's campaign is anything to go by. For its part, India, too, has seen repeated – and wrong-headed – calls for boycotting Chinese goods.

To their credit, many Indian analysts have been very sober in their assessment of the outcome of the Doklam standoff, refusing to crow about the apparent victory. They are well aware that China found itself in a difficult location in military terms at Doklam and that elsewhere on the long-disputed boundary between the two countries, the Chinese have both locational and logistical advantages that can put the Indian military under pressure.

Doklam will count as only part of the initial series of incidents – alongside those at Depsang in 2013 and Chumur in 2014 both along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western sector of the dispute boundary – that mark a change in the nature of engagement between the Indian and Chinese militaries and governments. This is the result of the rise in economic strengths, military capabilities, and regional and global political ambitions of the two countries. And it calls for a re-evaluation of existing bilateral agreements as well as negotiations on the boundary if bilateral ties are not to deteriorate.

Going forward, China is not without leverage for the future going by the responses of its southern neighbours. For one, it has through its brazen and provocative move in Bhutan's territory pushed the issue of their boundary dispute a little more to the forefront of attention of the Bhutanese public. There will be, without doubt, increasing debate within Bhutan on the merits of leaving the dispute unresolved until India is able to resolve its own boundary dispute with China. This then opens up the possibility of targeted Chinese political and economic efforts to increase Beijing's influence in the tiny country. China's success in becoming a force in Nepalese politics today is a case in point.

Two, India must not make the mistake of assuming that Xi's preoccupation with the domestic matters such as the 19th Party Congress or with foreign policy issues in the east – North Korea's nuclear shenanigans and the South China Sea disputes – means that he will be too distracted to focus on foreign policy and security matters related to India. Equally important, it is fruitless to speculate whether it was the case that PLA

local commanders had acted on their own in Doklam or do so along the LAC between India and China. Xi's big stress in so far as the PLA has been concerned has been on ensuring absolute supremacy of and loyalty to the party. Actions might show local variance, but they are unmistakably the result of central direction from Beijing. Any confusion on this score will muddle both analysis and response in India.

Meanwhile, one way of explaining the Doklam incident – more so than any reference to Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States or the planned Malabar Exercises in the Indian Ocean – is that the Chinese leadership wishes to convey in clear terms that it will not take the gimlet eye off national security issues whatever its domestic preoccupations. And like China's frequent incursions into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku islands – 16 times already in 2017¹⁰ – India too can expect LAC incursions to continue, even pick up pace and display a qualitatively different nature in the coming months and years.

At the same time, Indians must note that in the big picture one border incident or even several do not constitute the full picture of the bilateral relationship. Both sides must resist the temptation to take their soundings from the current heated rhetoric in the media and the Indian side especially must desist from jeremiads based on English-language columns in China's *Global Times*. If Indian observers were to look at the whole gamut of China's external preoccupations in the weeks of June and July, the Bhutan standoff was just one of the many security and foreign policy issues that China has had to deal with – Xi Jinping's visit to Russia, his participation in the G20 summit, and Chinese concerns over

the US' Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile defense system in South Korea, all took up attention.

The travel advisory that the Chinese embassy put out for its citizens to be cautious while in India is part of standard practice and not nearly as strong as it could have been or is with respect to, say, the several advisories on Pakistan.¹¹ Further, visits of Chinese political leaders to India have continued. For instance, leaders from both Guizhou and Guangxi provinces were in India in late June¹² and early July¹³, respectively, and this is an important sign of the state of the relationship.

However, it is unlikely that the cold vibes between India and China will disappear easily. This is a reality that is part of the structure of international relations – as two large and populous countries with proud self-conceptions, India and China will constantly challenge each other as a way of validation of their importance in their neighbourhood and in the global order.

China's attempts during the Doklam standoff to turn the narrative on India both within China and in the neighbourhood show that there is an ideological and political challenge that it perceives from India.

Many ordinary Chinese know India to be a democratic country but also point out that it is 'chaotic', 'dirty' and 'poor'. But if such a country can also grow faster than China, if its citizens also possess political liberties, and, to top it all, if India is also now capable of standing up militarily to it, then the consensus about India being democratic but 'ineffective' or unable to catch up with China will eventually crumble.

India, of course, cannot change its identity as a democracy, something Indians are justifiably proud of, but New Delhi must understand

the implications of Beijing's actions and work doubly hard to prevent a fraught security relationship with China from also turning into one where suspicion and prejudice dominate also at the people-to-people level.

THE BHUTAN FACTOR

As part of the geopolitical contest between India and China, all countries in South Asia are fair game for China and there is a fairly large range of situations that confront China here. There is Pakistan on the one end, with whom China has an excellent political and military relationship aimed in the main against India, and then there is Bhutan at the other end of the spectrum, which does not even maintain diplomatic relations with Beijing. However, in the standoff between Indian and Chinese troops in the Doklam area, the role and place of Bhutan have often been overlooked. It is the Bhutanese after all that are contending with the Chinese over the area, and it is they who invited the Indians to take up cudgels on their behalf against the Chinese.

Bhutan is, in many respects, probably India's only genuine ally in the region, and this too is largely the result of that country's unique political history and development. The Bhutanese monarchy has played a key role in nurturing a close and beneficial relationship with India, and India has in a large measure reciprocated. While a tiny country, Bhutan has always been favoured with fairly senior and always competent Indian ambassadors in its capital and maintains the Indian Military Training Team in support of the Bhutanese army. Also worth remembering is the fact that

it was to Bhutan that the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi made his first official foreign visit after taking office.

That said, India should simply count itself lucky that it has managed to maintain a special place for itself in Bhutan's international affairs for such a long time despite the vagaries of international politics. With China's rising regional and global ambitions, it should not be surprising that they are exerting their might to end this exceptionalism.

After 24 rounds of Sino-Bhutanese boundary negotiations, there appears to be a public perception gaining ground in Bhutan to settle the boundary dispute with China independently of India. And since settlement might involve compromises, the most likely one would be of foregoing claims in their west, that is, the Doklam area in return for claims in the north – which are more significant for the Bhutanese themselves from cultural and religious points of view. So far, however, the tacit agreement between India and Bhutan that they will settle their boundary disputes with China together has held.

Meanwhile, China has continuously exerted pressure on Thimphu to open formal diplomatic relations. Its failure thus far has often led its analysts and diplomats to derisively refer to the smaller country as a 'protectorate' of India. A *Global Times* editorial in the wake of the Doklam standoff took potshots at Bhutan's 'happiness index' and criticised its policies on its Nepalese population¹⁴ – part of a broader pattern of the Chinese state's opportunistic criticism of countries it has problems with.

Naturally, Bhutan – including both the government and the public – itself is acutely sensitive to criticism that implies it is less than completely sovereign. It is perhaps for this reason that it has also not infrequently

tried to assert its voice in international affairs independently of and differently from India. Consider, for instance, the Bhutanese parliament's stalling earlier in 2017 of the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal motor vehicles agreement that India had strongly pushed.

In this context, comparisons with Nepal are not entirely out of place. The differences between the monarchy in Nepal and the Indian government at various stages over the decades eventually culminated in its kings playing the China card frequently against India, and this practice has continued into the post-monarchy political dispensation as well. Indeed, in the space of just over a decade in Nepal, China has managed to firmly entrench itself as an influential player in Nepal and a pole in nearly all Nepalese political parties around which those opposed to India gather.

Such a situation does not yet exist in Bhutan, but it being an electoral democracy – parliamentary elections are due in 2018 – it is only a matter of time before concerns about India, valid or otherwise, will lead to the coalescing of forces that articulate them more cogently, frequently and openly.

And China is helping this process along through its public diplomacy as well as through economic means. For instance, under the Chinese government's tourism programmes – widely used as a weapon of statecraft – Chinese tourists contribute significant numbers and revenue to Bhutan.¹⁵ Chinese economic leverages are likely only to increase in Bhutan and with these, also political influence.

The Doklam standoff must be evaluated against this reality. And in many ways, it might be argued that the Chinese have achieved a more

important political objective of putting pressure on the India-Bhutan relationship.

If India sees Chinese proximity to the narrow Siliguri corridor as a military threat, it cannot but be the case that a cooling of relations between India and Bhutan, if not an accretion of Chinese influence in the smaller country, performs much the same function and perhaps even better. While India tried to pre-empt such possibilities with the renegotiation of the 1949 treaty with Bhutan in 2007, conditions have remained dynamic and India has not been able to prepare adequately for, leave alone pre-empt, China's* increasing assertiveness in South Asia.

CONCLUSION

While the Indian and Chinese governments each put out differing versions of the exact terms of the Doklam settlement, it is certain that status quo before 16 June this year was restored. The Chinese stopped their road construction in the area, which had led to the Indian action in the first place, and Indian troops have pulled back to their positions.

The Chinese government has sought to sell the deal as a case of the Indians having blinked, of having bowed to Chinese threats and coercion. It is doubtful that the line has much purchase even within China, where the netizen community might have constraints on their conversations but are not stupid and not entirely without access to information from the outside world. That said, this is unlikely to be the last of confrontations on the boundary between India and China.

Following Doklam and their climbdown, the Chinese will certainly view India in a new light. Indian observers might like to think that this might lead to a greater respect for India, but it will more likely be the case that Beijing will now want to avenge its loss of face and work harder to prevent India from challenging and resisting Chinese hegemony.

It should not surprise Indian defence planners, therefore, if the Chinese test and prod the Indian military by opening up road-building, patrolling and other forms of activity in areas along the disputed boundary that have hitherto remained dormant or not seen any such activity at all. And the most likely venue for such increased activity will be along those parts of their disputed boundary where India faces comparatively greater difficulty of access and of maintaining logistics supplies.

International relations being what they are and given India's weaker place in the international order currently, India's leaders should seek to balance their country's security interests with its other economic and political interests. And in the latter respect, it also benefits India to give the Chinese some face-saving way after Doklam by offering China incentives, particularly on the economic front – clearing the various regulatory and infrastructure hurdles to the Chinese industrial parks that were agreed to by both nations at the highest levels is one way. For India's domestic audience, it must be reiterated that this trade-off, all said and done, is mutually beneficial.

At the same time, India's basic policy of countering China's bullying behaviour must remain clear and unadulterated. It is equally important that India stand up for its own liberal and democratic values and principles in its international relations, all the more to mark the difference between itself

and China. This last is not a soft, woolly-headed approach, as many in New Delhi might think, but an extremely realist and necessary long-term approach necessary to both prevent repeats of incidents like Doklam and help build up more spine in the region to stand up to China.

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