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India-China Standoff Sets Precedents in Regional Security

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A month-long India-China standoff in the tangled mountains of the Himalayas threatens to snowball into conflict. The circumstances are enveloped in thick fog endemic to those remote mountains at 10000 feet above sea level – and to the complicated India-China relationship.

An analogy could be that China's People's Liberation Army units come down to the Siachen area, which is under India's control, to advance Pakistan's territorial claim, which Beijing also considers to be of strategic significance due to its proximity to Karakorum Highway and Xinjiang region. This needs some explanation.

For a start, the location of the standoff is Doklam Plateau, which has been in China's control on which Bhutan made a territorial claim only in 2000. (India drew Bhutan's maps in the sixties, including the portion showing Doklam as Bhutanese territory.)

The PLA has been undertaking infrastructure development in Doklam but Indian military has chosen to contest the latest phase of road-building activity. Notionally, Delhi is acting at the request of Bhutan. (Bhutan says very little on the entire affair.)

The Indian-establishment commentators have claimed that the road under construction in Doklam may improve PLA's access to the 'tri-junction' that separates India's state of Sikkim, Bhutan and China – in turn, bringing China's military presence closer to the so-called Siliguri Corridor that connects India's restive north-eastern states with the Indian 'mainland'.

There are sub-plots. The delimited border (demarcated with boundary pillars) between the Indian state of Sikkim and Tibet is the only settled segment of the 4000-kilometre long India-China border. Both countries accept the border defined under the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890.

At this point, the fog thickens. The 1890 convention accurately depicts the 'tri-junction' between India (Sikkim), Bhutan and China, in terms of which the current arena of standoff (Doklam) comes under China. But then, Bhutan was not party to the 1890 convention.

In sum, there is a China-Bhutan border dispute with regard to Doklam (on the basis of maps prepared in Delhi), and India has now intervened in the dispute physically to stop Chinese road construction activity in the region, apparently at Bhutan's request.

But India and Bhutan do not have a military pact. Their so-called Friendship Treaty (2007) no longer empowers India to guide Bhutan's foreign policy and merely commits the two countries «to coordinate on issues relating to national interests».

Suffice to say, India has militarily intervened in the China-Bhutan border dispute over Doklam.

Unsurprisingly, China alleges that by doing so, India has violated the 1890 convention. This is a can of worms, because if the 1890 convention is revisited, Sikkim's settled border with Tibet may also get re-opened – and, alongside, India's annexation of Sikkim in 1975 too (something

which Beijing accepted grudgingly only in 2003 in the context of an improvement in the overall Sino-Indian ties at that time.)

Beijing insists that any discussions to resolve the current standoff can take place only if India withdrew forces from the Chinese territory (Doklam). It contends that this standoff is fundamentally different because India has violated a key principle by violating an international border (between China and Sikkim under the 1890 agreement), which is not under dispute.

Delhi, which typically resorts to megaphone diplomacy apropos India-China border tensions, is maintaining exemplary reticence. As the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said once, those in Delhi who know do not speak, while those who speak either do not know or are dissimulating.

There could be a range of motivations behind the Indian and Chinese calculus. Delhi could be calculating that:

- Sikkim is the only segment of the border with China where India enjoys military superiority, and PLA should not be allowed to neutralize it, no matter what it takes.
- A road link today and a railway line tomorrow – this could be ‘mission creep’ aimed at PLA gaining proximity to Siliguri Corridor.
- In political terms, Bhutan should remain anchored in Indian orbit. By inserting itself into the China-Bhutan border dispute, India becomes the elephant in the room.
- Bhutan has been the only South Asian country (other than India, of course), which has resisted the invidious charms of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and it must remain so.
- China will blink in the face of India’s ‘muscular diplomacy’, since PLA cannot afford a military confrontation in Sikkim region where India enjoys decisive advantage geographically and militarily.
- China must reckon with new realities – ‘India today is not the India of 1962... Indian Army is prepared for a two and a half front war.’
- The standoff would have resonance within Tibet where security situation remains fragile. (Interestingly, last weekend, Indian authorities allowed the government-in-exile mentored by the Dalai Lama to defiantly post a Tibetan flag of independence in Ladakh region on Chinese border.)
- Strident nationalism works fine in India’s domestic politics. (The opposition parties anticipate a snap poll in 2018.)

As regards Beijing’s motivations, apart from any ‘mission creep’ vis-à-vis Siliguri Corridor, the following leitmotifs may be discerned:

First and foremost, the relations with India have perceptibly deteriorated in the past 2-3 years due to Delhi's perceived pro-US 'tilt'. Second, China has a sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis the security situation in Tibet. Doklam forms part of Chumbi Valley, which leads to Lhasa.

Intrinsically, China focuses on the development of the Yadong region of Tibet, which is connected to Lhasa already via a highway and soon with a branch line of the China-Tibet railway. China consistently believed that Tibet's (or Xinjiang's) stabilization is best tackled through rapid economic development.

Again, China is surely monitoring the delicate India-Bhutan diplomatic tango and is not willing to believe that there is no daylight possible between Delhi and Thimpu – even if Delhi projects it as an all-weather friendship.

To be sure, if the India-China standoff in Doklam continues, how it would begin to impact Bhutanese national sensitivities remains to be seen. Finally, China factors in that India finds itself in an untenable position with regard to the Anglo-Chinese accord of 1890.

All in all, the important thing today is to manage the narrative in a way that does not lead to war. India has an option to withdraw the troops in Doklam and begin discussions. This need not necessarily mean loss of face, because Beijing remains open to discussing India's concerns.

But the catch is that, quintessentially, India has to leave it to China and Bhutan to resolve their differences and disputes. India can leverage Bhutan's stance but cannot assume a 'hands-on' role for all time, since the optics of Bhutan being a sovereign country come into play.

China's Belt and Road Initiative gives an added dimension, if Bhutan at some point chooses to follow Nepal's footfalls. (Even a 'regime change' in Kathmandu failed to dissipate the Nepali elites' fascination for the 'Belt and Road'.)

India's best bet is that China will need time to build up forces in Doklam area. China can open other fronts where it may have vast superiority, but then, China's preoccupations elsewhere may not allow that – North Korea, Japan, South Korea, South China Sea and the volatility in the China-US relations.

However, India may be setting a precedent in regional security if it intervenes militarily in a dispute between two of its neighbours – on whatever pretext. In a longer term perspective, India-China relations have been severely damaged.

The Modi government mishandled India's relations with China. There have been a lot of missteps – such as hyping up public campaigns over contentious issues, prioritising inconsequential themes as centre piece of discourse, making Sino-Pakistan ties a litmus test of China's intentions, trespassing on disputes in South China Sea, flaunting the 'Dalai Lama' card, and consorting with Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia'.

A potential window of opportunity for the two strong leaderships in Delhi and Beijing to accelerate a border settlement has been slammed shut. And a relationship that was finely poised between competition and cooperation has turned adversarial.