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Sino-Indian De-escalation of the Doklam Crisis: Nuances of the Geopolitical Context

The latest military standoff between China and India at the Doklam plateau in the harsh Himalayan environment has ended through an “understanding” between these two Asian neighbours on 28 August 2017. However, the manner in which the two sides have portrayed the outcome shows that they have not yet fully normalised their relations despite a series of bilateral confidence-building measures (CBMs) agreed upon since 1993. Publicly unstated by both countries now, but going forward, it is time for them to begin addressing the real meaning of the doctrine of “mutual and equal security” embedded in these CBMs.

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China and India have announced the peaceful resolution of their nearly two-and-a-half-month-long military standoff at the Doklam plateau (also known as Dong Lang) in the inhospitable Himalayan mountain range. However, the separate announcements by the two big Asian neighbours on 28 August 2017 smacked of a battle of words over the conclusion of a war that was not fought. Both sides have portrayed the rollback of the crisis as their respective gain and

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not as a mutual win-win outcome. Significantly, there was no exchange of fire throughout the confrontational deployment of Indian and Chinese troops near a mountain pass on the plateau.

The Chinese authorities continue to assert that the entire plateau is their historical and sovereign possession – an integral part of the Tibet Autonomous Region,² which India fully recognised in 2003 as a part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China.³ Bhutan, which nestles between the geographies of China and India, has, in fact, affirmed its claim to the Doklam plateau. However, Thimphu did so only once during the latest Sino-Indian standoff.⁴ In fact, Bhutan, despite its security-related treaty with India,⁵ stayed clear of the entire face-off, which began either on 16 June 2017 (according to the Indian side) or on 18 June 2017 (in the Chinese version).

The Centrality of Bhutan

The Bhutanese attitude remained central to this Sino-Indian crisis, strengthening the Chinese narrative while not devaluing India’s arguments about its “concerns and interests”.⁶ The perceptible sense of Bhutanese fairness, bordering perhaps on neutrality, was evident after the meeting between Bhutan’s Foreign Minister Lyonpo Damcho Dorji and India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in Kathmandu on 12 August 2017. Without dwelling on the

² Ministry of National Defence, People’s Republic of China (PRC), *China confirms India’s withdrawal of border personnel at face-off site at Doklam*, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-08/28/content_4790106.htm, Accessed on 29 August 2017.

³ The author, a former journalist, had covered the Sino-Indian summit in Beijing in June 2003 when India fully conceded the status of the Tibet Autonomous Region as an integral part of the PRC. Also, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, *Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of India, 23 June 2003*, available at www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_66335... (Accessed on 11 December 2014).

⁴ China was the first to disclose the Doklam standoff on 26 June 2017 when Beijing also asserted that the entire plateau “is Chinese territory”. See Ministry of National Defence, PRC, *China slams Indian troops’ provocation on border*, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-06/27/content_4783803.htm. Accessed on 28 June 2017. During this Sino-Indian crisis, Bhutan affirmed on 29 June 2017 that Doklam was indeed “Bhutanese territory”. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Royal Government of Bhutan, Press Release, 29 June 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/press-releases/press-release-272.html>. Accessed on 24 July 2017.

⁵ The Indo-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship was signed in New Delhi in February 2007 as a follow-up on their original bilateral treaty of 1949. See Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <http://www.mea.gov.in>.

⁶ India’s statement on 28 August 2017 on the Sino-Indian “disengagement” at Doklam, http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28893/Press_Statement_on_Doklam_disengagement_understanding. Accessed on 29 August 2017.

issues at stake, Dorji merely expressed the hope, in a public remark, that the situation could be settled through peaceful and amicable means.⁷

On 29 August 2017, Thimphu expressed the hope this time that the latest Doklam disengagement “contributes to the maintenance of peace and tranquillity and status quo along the borders of Bhutan, China and India in keeping with the existing agreements between the respective countries.”⁸ The perceptible sense of Bhutan’s desire for good relations with both India and China is unexceptionable, given Thimphu’s geopolitical reality of being a relatively weak neighbour of both China and India. However, Thimphu’s public diplomacy of steering clear of the Doklam crisis, as evident in the lack of an open endorsement of India’s narrative of “coordination” with Bhutan, cannot be discounted as a factor that helped defuse the triangular diplomatic situation.

A Unique Standoff

Both China and India have now disclosed that their normative *bilateral* “diplomatic means” and “diplomatic communication” helped to resolve the latest confrontation, indeed the first conflict of its kind.⁹ At various times since the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, both sides have traded accusations of violations of the un-demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC). On the latest occasion, however, New Delhi, acting in “coordination” with Bhutan, confronted China in an area never claimed by the Indian authorities as their own territory. Unsurprisingly, therefore, neither India nor China has now disclosed any recourse to their institutionalised Working Mechanism for resolving their latest crisis.

⁷ The Bhutanese Foreign Minister’s televised soundbite after his meeting with India’s External Affairs Minister in Kathmandu on 12 August 2017 is available on the internet.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, Press Statement on Doklam Disengagement, <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/?p=4948>. Accessed on 30 August 2017.

⁹ The Chinese version of the de-escalation in Doklam is derived from the statements by Wu Qian, Spokesman of China’s Ministry of National Defence, on 28 August 2017, and from the statements by Spokeswoman Hua Chunying of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 28 and 29 August 2017. See (1) http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-08/28/content_4790134.htm. Accessed on 29 August 2017; (2) http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1487932.shtml. Accessed on 29 August 2017; (3) http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1488261.shtml. Accessed on 29 August 2017. The Indian version of this de-escalation is derived from the statements by India’s Ministry of External Affairs on 28 August 2017, See (1) http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28893/Press_Statement_on_Doklam_disengagement_understanding. Accessed on 29 August 2017; (2) http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/28895_Doklam_new.pdf. Accessed on 29 August 2017. Unless otherwise stated, all nuances of the Chinese and Indian versions of the latest de-escalation in Doklam, as analysed in this paper, are the author’s interpretations based on the above citations.

Obviously, the Working Mechanism, set up in 2012 and utilised in the following two years, pertains only to the alleged incursions across the LAC and not India's "illegal trespass" into an area outside of the LAC as in the present case. Besides this novelty, a few nuanced differences mark the latest Chinese and Indian announcements on the de-escalation at Doklam, an area which (many feared) could become a new Sino-Indian flash point.

India categorically announced that it reached an "understanding" with China on an "expeditious disengagement of border personnel of India and China at the face-off site at Doklam". It requires no clairvoyance to argue that such an "understanding" does not amount to an explicit Sino-Indian agreement *per se*. Moreover, New Delhi's initial statement did not explicitly mention the border personnel of both India and China – an omission which was rectified in an amplificatory follow-up Indian statement. In such a situation, New Delhi's original statement on this subject had lent itself to an interpretation of a unilateral disengagement by the Indian "border personnel" alone.

Steadfast Assertions

While this aspect could perhaps be viewed as a significant index of India's less-than-perfect public diplomacy, the Chinese side was found to be much more steadfast in its assertions. The Chinese Spokeswoman Hua Chunying's initial statement was that, "At about 2:30 p.m. of August 28, the Indian side withdrew all its border personnel and equipment that were illegally [present] on the Chinese territory to the Indian side. The Chinese personnel onsite have verified this situation."¹⁰ She did not speak of a parallel or simultaneous withdrawal or disengagement by the on-site Chinese troops.

Amplifying her initial statement, in response to questions at a press conference, the Spokeswoman further confirmed that "the Chinese border troops continue with their patrols and stationing in the Dong Lang [Doklam] area"¹¹ even after the Indian soldiers' pull-out from there (as in China's narrative). This assertion, too, implied that there was, or indeed there would be, no reciprocal withdrawal by the Chinese soldiers from the Dong Lang area. More

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

significantly, however, she disclosed in a follow-up that, “In light of the changes on the ground, China will accordingly make necessary adjustments and deployment.”¹² Her follow-up statement seems to indicate a possibility of re-positioning the Chinese troops at or away from the recent face-off point at Doklam. Asked about the number of Chinese troops left in the Doklam area following the Indian pull-out, she said on 29 August 2017 that, “China will adjust and deploy its military resources in accordance with the need of guarding the border and the [future] situation on the ground.”¹³ This signals China’s suspicion that India might yet again try to send its troops to the Dong Lang area – a logical interpretation of the Chinese stand, not a normative value-judgment.

Another point made by China sheds further light on the geopolitical context of the latest de-escalated Sino-Indian crisis. Hua said on 29 August 2017 that, “China has long been carrying out infrastructure building, including roads, in the Dong Lang area to meet the needs of guarding the border and to improve the living and working conditions of the [Chinese] troops stationed there and people living there. Taking into account various factors like the weather, we will make proper [infrastructure] building plans in light of the actual situation [in the future].”¹⁴ This assertion is emblematic of China’s possessiveness over the Dong Lang area. Beijing has repeatedly emphasised that the 1890 Convention between Britain and the-then Qing rulers of China had, without a shadow of doubt, given the Chinese sovereign rights over the Doklam area.

Above all, signalling that China has not given up its entitlement to the Dong Lang area, Chinese National Defence Ministry Spokesman Wu Qian said on 28 August 2017 that, “we remind India to draw lessons from the [de-escalated Dong Lang] standoff, abide by established treaties and the basic principles of international law.”¹⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ministry of National Defence, PRC, *op. cit.*

Mutual Security Concerns

The genesis of the latest crisis, now de-escalated, can be traced to India's objections to the construction of a road by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) personnel at Doklam. New Delhi said that its objections flowed from its concerns about the PLA's palpable strategic intent of moving towards the un-demarcated India-China-Bhutan tri-junction point and unilaterally altering it and creating a *fait accompli* to suit the Chinese strategic interests in that theatre. New Delhi also viewed with serious concern the Chinese move as a potential threat to India's north-east strategic artery, the narrow Siliguri Corridor. The Doklam plateau, where the PLA personnel were intercepted by Indian soldiers, towers over this corridor.¹⁶ India also maintained that it was coordinating with its treaty ally, Bhutan, from the time the Chinese started building a strategically important road at Doklam in June 2017, although Bhutan did not publicly echo India's version of their "coordination". India's action, unilateral or consultative, could be interpreted as a move to protect Bhutan's interests in the Doklam area. However, given the absence of Bhutan's public endorsement of India's action, China and the wider international community in general viewed New Delhi's "illegal trespass" into Doklam differently. Indeed, India was seen to have signalled that it would act pre-emptively to protect its border areas to the south of Bhutan.¹⁷

Throughout the Doklam crisis, China's top officials took the line that there was "no room for compromise" over "Chinese territory" and India's pre-emptive security concerns could not be countenanced.¹⁸ Indeed, China saw India as trying to extend its security perimeter into Chinese territory.¹⁹

Now, the peaceful resolution of the face-off on 28 August 2017 – barely a week ahead of the BRICS summit hosted by China among the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China itself and

¹⁶ For the logic of India's Doklam strategy, see the website of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, (1) Statement by External Affairs Minister in Rajya Sabha on Doklam Issue (Uncorrected transcript), 3 August 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28810/Statement_by_External_Affairs_Minister_in_Rajya_Sabha-on_Doklam_issue_Uncorrected_transcript. Accessed on 4 August 2017; (2) <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28732/>. Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by Official Spokesperson July 20 2017. Accessed on 1 August 2017.

¹⁷ For a more detailed account and analysis of the onset of the Doklam crisis, see P S Suryanarayana, *A High-Altitude Tussle: The Strategic Stakes of Bhutan, China and India*, ISAS Insights No. 449- 8 August 2017, <http://www.isas.edu.sg>.

¹⁸ The author's conversations with top Chinese officials in Beijing and New Delhi in July and August 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid.

South Africa – does not address the basic issues at stake. These issues are (1) China’s ‘sovereignty’ over Dong Lang under an 1890 Convention and other ‘historical’ records; (2) Bhutan’s claims on Doklam; and (3) New Delhi’s publicly-unstated but real emphasis on “mutual and equal security” – a doctrine that figures in various Sino-Indian confidence-building agreements from 1993 to 2013. India’s interception of the PLA personnel at Doklam in mid-June 2017 can be directly traced to this doctrine of “mutual and equal security” in the Sino-Indian context. This principle, undefined so far, requires a proper elucidation by both sides through dialogue, going forward. This is so, because China is categorical that India had “illegally trespassed” into Chinese territory, while India appeared to have sought to extend its security perimeter by moving into Doklam.

Conclusion

While it is good for stability in Asia that China and India have now resolved their confrontation at Doklam, the basic issues remain unresolved. Therefore, the latest denouement – the unilateral Indian withdrawal from Doklam as portrayed by China, or a mutual disengagement there as portrayed by India – can, at best, be viewed as a de-escalation of a non-lethal but stalemated Sino-Indian crisis. With both China and India having tapped their military resources²⁰ as deemed fit, the crisis could have spun out of control. Both countries have, therefore, displayed statesmanship, besides resorting to behind-the-scenes diplomacy, to achieve the de-escalation agreement on 28 August 2017. At the same time, there is a message in the fact that the two neighbours did not issue a joint statement on de-escalation. The Sino-Indian relations are still far from being completely normal despite a number of confidence-building measures and a more-than-a-decade-old China-India Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity.

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²⁰ While China’s Ministries of National Defence and Foreign Affairs repeatedly emphasised the mobilisation of the country’s military resources in the limited Dong Lang context, the preparedness of India was reflected in the prolongation of this standoff until 28 August 2017.