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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Jash, A. (2017). Doklam Stand-off: A Test of Resolve between China and India. *IndraStra Global*, 3(9), 1-2. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53947-1>

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Doklam Stand-off: A Test of Resolve between China and India

indrastra.com/2017/09/Doklam-Standoff-Test-of-Resolve-between-China-and-India-003-09-2017-0018.html

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Image Attribute: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Chinese President Xi Jinping meets on the sidelines of the 9th BRICS Summit in Xiamen on September 5, 2017. / Source: PTI

On August 28, 2017, India's Ministry of External Affairs officially **announced**: “expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam has been agreed to and is ongoing”. While Beijing responded by **stating** that it “will continue to exercise its sovereign rights and preserve its territorial sovereignty in accordance with historical border agreements”. This agreed peace brought in a sudden thaw to the two months long impasse.

It remains indisputable that the Doklam crisis hit China-India relations to the lowest ever since the 1962 war. This territorial, as well as military fall-out, has added a new dimension to the protracted boundary conflict. However, what caused a difference is that this time the contestation played out in an area beyond the scope of the China-India disputed boundary. To say so, as the Doklam plateau essentially remains disputed between China and Bhutan. To which, India's involvement was triggered by China's growing proximity to India's periphery thus, raising the security stakes.

Given the heightened security dilemma, a way forward caused the circumstantial deadlock- calling for no easier pass. Here, it is interesting to note, that this military stand-off made a decisive departure from the past incidents. To say so, as the frictions in Daulat Beg Oldie, Depsang, Chumar, Trig Heights, Pangong Tso Lake and others in the western sector, to that of Asaphila, Samdurongchu, Changtze and others in Arunachal Pradesh- did not result into such military offensive between China and India. Hence, the Doklam issue makes a significant difference and thereby, calls for a pertinent query: What caused such a departure?

Such unwarranted fall out at Doklam between China and India since the 1962 War can be attributed to three factors: first, Beijing's miscalculations against its strategic unilateral move; second, New Delhi's proactive counter defense to neutralise Beijing's calculated move; and third, Bhutan's firm opposition to China equated with assistance to India. What further augments this is the fact that China and India have so far maintained the status quo, however, this incident brought in a change in the matrix. As a result, the action-reaction between China, India, and Bhutan has ratcheted the warning alarms of an imminent war in the making.

To note, although the war option was outlawed, what appeared to be more evident is that Doklam stand-off became the test case wherein each party aptly tested the other's resolve. Both flexed their muscles to checkmate the other. Furthermore, this was the first time that China and India became military loggerheads in a terrain that falls beyond their disputed boundary and also involves a third party, that is, Bhutan. The involvement of Bhutan significantly acted as a deterrent to outlaw the war option.

In assessing the scenario at the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction, two key phenomena can be pointed that came at play. That is, first, the scenario exemplified China's salami slicing tactic to secure its border claims. That is, incrementally expanding its claims by cutting off pieces, and in this case, it was the Doklam plateau that remains contested with Bhutan. China's such a strategy has been commonly witnessed in the South China Sea to secure its claims along the "nine-dashed line". Secondly, the scenario also highlighted India's "Chicken-neck" dilemma which has not been so pronounced in the international perspective. New Delhi perceives the Siliguri Corridor that connects India's northeastern states to rest of India to be the vulnerable Chicken's neck that if choked can paralyze India. And in this case, India's such a dilemma was invoked by China's road build-up activity making New Delhi paranoid over safeguarding its territorial security.

Furthermore, the test of resolve was also catalyzed by the clash of aspirations between China and India, both as regional as well as global powers. The tension has much to do with their quest for regional supremacy. Doklam got staged at a critical juncture wherein Beijing's great power ambitions in Asian region clashed with New Delhi's regional supremacy in South Asia. However, the very fact to act 'responsible' has made China and India more cautious of its actions. This consciousness further outlawed the war option.

Given the complexities, a way forward became highly questionable. As both China and India are strong players, a step down called for huge reputation costs- thus, putting both Beijing and New Delhi in a fix. With heightened stakes, the certainty remained that only a diplomatic consensus can result in a compromise. There remains no doubt that the diplomatic exchanges between the two countries played a significant role in bridging the perceptual gap and hence, calling for peace. This mature handling of the issue saved the face on either side. However, it remains indisputable that Doklam acted as a litmus test for China and India.

About the Author:

Amrita Jash is the Editor-in-Chief at IndraStra Global, New York. She pursued her Ph.D. in Chinese Studies at Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She can be reached at [@amritajash](https://twitter.com/amritajash).

Cite this Article:

Jash, A. "Doklam Standoff: A Test of Resolve between China and India", IndraStra Global Vol. 003, Issue No: 09 (2017) 0018, <http://www.indrastra.com/2017/09/Doklam-Standoff-Test-of-Resolve-between-China-and-India-003-09-2017-0018.html> | ISSN 2381-3652

