

Doklam, Demochok and DBO

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Developments along India-China-Bhutan border seem to be continuing. Though there has not been a military escalation in Doklam between the Indian and Chinese troops at the border level, there has also been no political rapprochement either between the two countries at the highest level. Not so far.

Though there have been warning at the official levels from China, and the Chinese media issuing threats, India has not officially responded. Nor has it backed down at the border. How will China respond to India's tough military and political posture? Will it stop with just issuing threats? Will it intensify its military posture in Doklam? Or, will it look beyond and explore poking India at other places along the India-China border?

Especially in J&K, will Demochok and DBO flare-up again? Worse, will China move beyond the border and poke in other parts of J&K, across the Line of Control as well?

Looking into Doklam: China's Motivations

Chinese presence in Doklam and its surrounding areas has not been new. Neither was it a sudden development. There has been a slow build up to what has finally happened in July 2017. What is new has been the Indian response.

There were Chinese incursions earlier along the Line of Actual Control, especially in the Ladakh sector. For example, in April 2013, there was a military standoff near Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) lasting almost for a month. Both sides built bunkers, with more supplies joining the frontline. There were two more standoffs in 2014 and 2016, again in the Ladakh sector, but this time in Demchok. However, the above standoffs were kept at local military levels and focussing only on the border. Subsequently, they got addressed and resolved. There were no threats of escalation from the Chinese side during those standoffs.

In this context, Doklam seems to be different. China seems to be more anxious than India. While the media in India has gone berserk about Doklam, the official response either from the Ministry of External Affairs or the Prime Minister's Office has been measured and at times even absent. On the other hand, read the official statements from Chinese side on Doklam.

There has been an increased confidence in India's response towards its borders in the recent years, cutting across BJP and Congress governments. Until the 1990s, subsequent Indian governments were hesitant and inward looking about our border regions. There was a fear – from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh that the Chinese would use our infrastructure and move in. Provisions such as the inner line permits ensured that the border regions remain cut off from the main land; failure of governance further helped that these regions and the border communities remained under developed as well.

The above negative approach changed during the last ten years. There has been a relook into inner line permits and related self imposed restrictions, helping popular movement closer to the border. Funds were allocated specifically to improve border regions and enhance connectivity. From Kargil in Ladakh to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, one could see the process. Though the process is slow, one could see it nevertheless in the ground.

Also, the Indian troops – military and para-military are confident during the recent years, than they were earlier. The Indian military responses to Chinese incursions as one could see in DBO and Demochok, were no more soft. Gone are the days with our troops marching with a banner reading bhai-bhai. Perhaps, there has been a communication from the leadership at the top to respond to border developments at the local level.

For China, the above developments along the border during the last ten years – India building infrastructure, allowing popular movement to the border regions and willing to resist militarily should have come as a surprise.

Further, at the geo-strategic level India getting closer to the US should have really troubled Beijing. True, India-China relations also grew dramatically in the last ten years, for example in communication, business and trade sectors. Also, during the same period, Indo-US relations grew exponentially as well. Starting from the strategic partnership to the nuclear deal, the relationship between India and the US during the last ten years also has been in a different plane. Equally important has been the growing bonhomie between the leaders – Bush, Obama, Manmohan Singh, Narendra Modi and Trump.

Perhaps China views Indo-US relations as essentially anti-Beijing. While India has been anxious to find a place at the global table, and pursued Indo-US relations as a strategy to achieve it, the South Block perhaps did not expect the fallouts.

Outside the growing Indo-US ties, China is also taken aback with India's position on the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. India has been the only country (along with Bhutan) not to take part in the OBOR summit that Beijing held in May 2017. Immediately after the bold refusal of taking part in the OBOR summit, Modi visited Moscow resulting in a strong declaration at St Petersburg exploring deepening the relations with Russia further. Modi's visit to the US followed his Moscow trip.

China moved into Doklam, undermining all the earlier agreements and understandings at the border level. All the above cannot be individual developments and just coincidence.

Looking beyond Doklam: China's Next Moves

Now the Doklam standoff is continuing, what are likely to be China's next moves? There has been enough warning already from China at the highest levels about the consequences. What could be those likely consequences?

First, China could expand further in Doklam to test India's resolve. If China decides to move further into Bhutanese territory, what will be India's response? Will the Indian troops follow them into Bhutan?

Second, will China revisit Sikkim? The Nathu La has been already closed and the regular Kailash Mansarovar Yatra has been called off. Certainly, China is likely to expand its political questioning of the annexation of the State.

Third, China will certainly revisit its earlier military strategies in Ladakh – from DBO to Demchok. This is a long territory geographically and also extremely harsh in terms of weather. In terms of Infrastructure, China has an advantage over India; being a later investor, India's infrastructural network in Ladakh is almost a generation behind. China has made a strategic decision earlier, and has well developed its side of the border. Anyone who has travelled along the border north and south of Leh would vouch for this.

China has a natural advantage because of the above factors, and it would not be an easy task for India's military and para-military to man the borders in this part of the world.

Fourth and more importantly, what will China do across the LoC? There are adequate reports and literature in the public about the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), especially in Pakistan administered Kashmir. Even pre-CPEC, Chinese have been building the Karakoram Highway linking Khunjerab Pass in Gilgit Baltistan with rest of Pakistan, now extending all the way to Karachi and Gwadar. They have also been investing in other projects – for example power in GB. CPEC has now expanded the above scope.

One should not underestimate the possibility of CPEC changing the political nature of GB across the LoC. A section within GB today is openly demanding that the region is given a provincial status within, thus becoming Pakistan's fifth province. China could support this indirectly; already, China has been supporting institutions and individuals in Pakistan (a section would claim that Beijing is doing the same in India as well!) to provide public support to its activities.

Thanks to the CPEC, the Chinese presence in Pakistan has increased manifold. They are no more present only in Islamabad and Karachi, as the recent kidnapping of Chinese in June 2017 from Quetta would hint. There are also reports about Chinese troops being present across the LoC (some would even suspect wearing Pakistani uniforms!); while the intelligence agencies would know about this better, one should not totally rubbish such reports.

While the above presence may be to protect Chinese investments within Pakistan and PaK, India will have to be prepared to face the likely fallouts. And also have to ensure, that our investments in infrastructure in the border regions have to be on a war footing.