
AFTER NEARLY LOSING BHUTAN...

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There has been a distinct change in tone at South Block these days. The over-the-top serenading of visitors continues unabated; the naav pe charcha with the French President is the latest in the series. But the Governments security managers have turned remarkably reticent — and, realistic — on Indias military capabilities in dealing with China.

The governments usually pugnacious instincts have been tempered by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharamans sobering admission about a change in the balance of power on the Doklam plateau. The Chinese Peoples Liberation Army, she told Parliament, has set up a permanent military base in Doklam where in the past it would periodically whip-up a road building scare but rolled up its plans for another day.

The Defence Ministers acknowledgement puts in doubt the Governments brave spin on the 73-day faceoff at Doklam. The standoff did end in an honourable draw, as the Government claimed. But the contestation did not end on August 28, 2017, when New Delhi claimed soldiers from both sides relocated to their original positions.

In hindsight, China called off the military confrontation to ensure PM Modis presence at the BRICS summit at Xiamen. Once the heads of government emplaned from Xiamen, China unfolded the second act of the Doklam episode by pushing in heavy construction material. Soon tents and roads came up. India this time did not send its soldiers marching in. The Ministry of External Affairs deflected queries about the authenticity of freely available satellite photos, indicating a continuing Chinese military buildup.

On the border with Pakistan and in the Kashmir Valley, the wisdom of fruitless application of military force is under question after the Indian armys death toll touched a record high for two successive years. Things are still not panning out well in Nepal either despite an icebreaking visit by Sushma Swaraj. Sensing the possibility of forming a front in SAARC where it often bats alone against India, Pakistan Prime Minister also landed in Kathmandu to meet the new Government believed to be still cut up with New Delhi.

But Nepal and Pakistan are mere pinpricks compared to the ground India has lost in Doklam. Strategic experts batting for the Government had projected the end of the standoff as an event from which countries with territorial disputes with China will draw the right lessons. They should now be asked what lessons these countries, especially Bhutan, should draw from the Chinese upper hand in Doklam?

And poor Bhutan, on whose behalf India had claimed to have interceded, has come off the worst. Except for patrols and occasional threats to build a road, China used to stay clear of Doklam. In border talks with Thimphu, it would offer the disputed areas in the northern sector in exchange for ownership rights over the disputed areas in the north-western sector. Chinas occupation over half of Doklam means its next offer for settlement of the land dispute with Bhutan may not be too

generous. In an election year, the chatter in the bazaars of Thimphu may well blame an Indian miscalculation for the weakened bargaining power.

On paper, it looks deceptively simple to turn the clock back on acrimony. India needs to accept the reality of Chinese control over Aksai Chin in return for minor adjustments to the existing positions in Arunachal Pradesh. Once this framework is in place, both sides can thrash out their differences on overlapping claims in 16 locations where confrontations take place between patrols. This simplistic formulation overlooks the negativity that has since continued to accumulate. India has also waded into the big power game, joining forces with a US-led effort to gain dominance on islands scattered in a chain across the Indian Ocean. The intention is to prepare for a future when a rising superpower may ignore or try to change international rules in its favour. That superpower by logic of deduction can only be China. Under pressure from US and friends in the maritime domain, China is bound to undertake theatre switching by occasionally putting India on notice on the line of actual control.

For the moment, however, an opportunity beckons. China is once again putting its friendly face forward in preparation for another major regional summit – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

But there is more to it than ensuring a major summit passes off uneventfully. Xi Jinpings permanent power grab and the slowing down of the Chinese economy may be forcing him to narrow differences with neighbours. That is why after rejecting multilateral negotiations, Beijing has now held talks on a code of conduct on South China Sea with the 11-nation ASEAN grouping. That best explains the Chinese Foreign Ministers suddenly magnanimous offer to take forward our traditional friendship and be a friend and partner of the Indian people.

The Modi Government has sensed that opening and sought to avoid being provocative to China by asking its senior leaders and officials not to attend Dalai Lamas events.

The easing of tensions could not have come at a better time for India and China. Their trade surplus with the US is facing close scrutiny and both need each other at a time of impending economic squeeze. Along with Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman going to Beijing this month end, her predecessor in the Commerce Ministry Suresh Prabhu too needs to engage with his counterparts to put the derailed India-China economic relationship back on track.

Sitharaman, meanwhile, can test whether the Chinese Foreign Ministers conciliatory words are to ensure the smooth conduct of the SCO summit or do they have a larger bearing. The BJP had claimed the military hotline with China was a done deal till Doklam happened. In case China demurs on activating the hotline, the Modi government needs to revive the previous governments proposal for a mountain corps that it has strangely consigned to the back burner.

While keeping its defences up, India needs to strike a conversation on integrating the rival trade routes. The economic success of stand-alone Chinese Belt and Road corridors and India-promoted transport arteries is doubtful. Nihilistic competition could sink both countries into bitter rivalries that could draw in other regional countries. The beginning of a dialogue would encourage both sides to take a relook at the past investment proposals. The securitisation of the foreign policy due to nationalist impulses in both countries is leading to undesirable competition. It is time to put some cooperation in the mix as well.

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