

Associate Paper

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South China Sea Incremental Encroachment Tactics Replicated on Doklam Plateau

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Key Points

- China's international behaviour is changing.
- The change is perceptible in its approaches to its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and, now, in the Doklam Plateau.
- China is attempting to employ the same tactics that it has used in the South China Sea in the Doklam Plateau.
- The steps that India has taken to counter China's activities in the Doklam Plateau are an obstacle to Beijing's overall strategic goals in South Asia and the western Pacific Ocean.
- Conflict will benefit neither side, so diplomatic efforts to resolve the issues should continue simultaneously alongside commercial engagements.

Summary

As China's Comprehensive National Power (CNP) grows, its strategy to impose its national will (as perceived by its key leaders), to exercise its power and its international behaviour is undergoing noticeable change. Its technological advancement, a consequence of its unprecedented economic growth over the last few decades, significantly boosted its soft- and hard-power. As the People's Liberation Army (PLA) celebrated its ninetieth anniversary on 1 August 2017, demonstrating its strengths through parades, provocative statements, military posturing and exercises, psychological warfare and propaganda, the question must be asked: does it have sufficient confidence to be able to meet the goals set for it, as laid out

in China's Military Strategy document released in early 2015? Is its ambition moving much faster than its capability development (considering that the US defence budget is many times greater than China's)? Has China started giving teeth to its "Active Defence Strategy" by "Incremental Encroachment", by extending its sovereignty claims based on a one-sided historical perspective, the South and East China Seas and the Doklam Plateau Standoff being cases in point?

Analysis

Active Defence Strategy turning into Incremental Encroachments

The standoff at Doklam appears to be the most recent iteration of the strategy China has employed in the South and East China Seas for a few years now. What is significant is that China is increasing its claims based on its own perception of history as it suits it, defining the territory that it seeks to usurp as sovereign, encroaching upon it slowly, stopping just short of war, and continuing to hold it thereafter, which results in the expansion of its territory. Recently, after increasing its CNP, China has begun referring to its global role. Its latest military strategy and "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) documents, which were published in 2015, provide adequate indicators of its expansionist design and the PLA's expeditionary role. China has carried out its restructuring plans accordingly. China is crafting its strategic design for a "China-centric Asia", with its assertive behaviour. It is using that strategy in the South China Sea (SCS), attempting to convert maritime features into islands in such a manner that the SCS becomes a "Chinese Lake", despite international legal opposition. China adopted the same strategy on the Doklam Plateau and expected that it would work there, too. It, however, ran into a road block called India.

Why Choose the Doklam Plateau?

The events leading to the Doklam Plateau standoff and the differences between India and China prior to that have been covered by numerous authors, but some possible reasons why China chose the plateau as the location to test India could be:

- India and Bhutan boycotted Beijing's Belt and Road Forum (BRF); the Doklam ingress could have been meant to embarrass both those countries simultaneously.
- Harping on the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of 1890 takes away the logic of Tibet as an independent actor that could legitimately deal with India; that would also send a message to the Dalai Lama that he is not a stakeholder in modern day Tibet.
- To test the depth of the Indo-Bhutanese security relationship.
- The area being very close to the Siliguri Corridor (the so-called "Chicken's Neck"), India had to be concerned and was placed in the awkward situation of having to decide whether to intervene in China's activity there or not. This could possibly have been a message to India not to challenge Beijing in the future.

- As the construction activity took place in territory disputed by Bhutan and China, a strong Indian reaction was not expected.
- In the event that India did take action, China could claim to be an innocent victim and India the aggressor.

China was, however, surprised by the unexpectedly strong Indian reaction before realising that the plateau posed strategic and tactical disadvantages for Beijing if it chose to escalate the situation. China was also surprised that, in a multi-party democracy like India, all political parties stood together on the country's sovereignty and the Doklam standoff. China grew extremely disturbed about it, as a consequence, issuing provocative statements almost on a daily basis, launching what is tantamount to a psychological and propaganda war and resorting to every possible means short of war to pressure India into withdrawing its troops. The continuation of the standoff is exerting domestic pressure and rattling the Chinese Government, which has painted an image of its own power designed to make its domestic audience follow its dictates. India, on the other hand, has been relatively balanced but firm in its stance, and has issued very few statements.



Defining the Line of Actual Control is Essential

Of the fourteen countries with which China has a border, it has resolved its border issues with twelve except India and Bhutan. China has delayed settling the India-China border issue on one pretext or another and shifted its claim lines with Bhutan many times. Even if resolving the Sino-Indian border is a complex matter, the demarcation, delineation and definition of the Line of actual Control (LAC) – which is still not fully demarcated – is an inescapable necessity. The fact that India will remain China's neighbour is a geographical fact that Beijing cannot change. It needs to be understood that an un-demarcated LAC will permit troops from both sides to patrol the border according to their own perceptions of

where the LAC is; some areas will be perceived by both sides as their territory and will patrol those accordingly. Such patrols will be viewed as intrusions by the other side, resulting in such face-offs until the border is demarcated and the location made known to the troops manning the border.

Ongoing Power Play vis-à-vis the Doklam Issue

Although China appears to have taken the famed strategist Sun Tzu's principle of "winning without fighting" or, in this case, coercing India into withdrawing its troops without fighting, India, with a strong leader and experienced military, which has studied the ancient Indian strategist, Kautilya's, works along with Sun Tzu, is well placed to resist any action, without having to match Chinese rhetoric and while maintaining its equilibrium. Military threats and provocative statements cannot solve the current standoff. History can be interpreted by both sides to suit their claims, threats to revise policies can be made by both sides; if China threatens to re-think its Sikkim/Kashmir policy or to intervene in Nepal, India could threaten to rethink its Tibet and One China policies or to establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Equally, the militaries of both countries have become powerful, and the escalation dynamics of conflict will block the growth and economic agendas of both countries. The reality is that neither can really deter the other. The mistrust between India and China, fuelled mainly by an irresponsible media (some Chinese media articles allege that a "Countdown to a Clash with India is on"), without apparently understanding escalation dynamics (although the Chinese establishment is distancing itself from such statements), think-tanks and so called specialists, has made a resolution of the Doklam Plateau standoff difficult. Chinese efforts to establish bilateral talks with Bhutan have not materialised and efforts to involve Nepal have resulted in the Nepalese Deputy Prime Minister expressing his country's unwillingness to take sides. Despite the fact that neither country wants a war, neither do they wish to appear weak domestically in attempting to find a resolution to the situation.

Doklam: The Way Ahead

When India's National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, went to China to attend the BRICS NSAs meeting on 27 and 28 July 2017, any expectations of the commencement of meaningful diplomatic engagement were, at best, unrealistic. Most strategic models of conflict between Chinese and Indian forces, when conducted by professionals, conclude that a land border conflict will end in stalemate. Conflict between the two sides, therefore, would be disastrous for President Xi's image, especially in an election year, besides being economically damaging for both countries. In a border standoff of this kind, neither side wants to appear weak, so the two countries must find a peaceful manner and face-saving actions to ease tensions and maintain domestic stability. To resolve the current face-off:

- Diplomatic engagement without preconditions will have to commence immediately, setting aside predetermined points of view, the war of words, and unhelpful rhetoric. To prevent either side from the appearance of being weak in the perception of its people, informal Track 2 talks can begin as a face-saving measure, followed by formal talks. Any precondition laid down by either side is likely to be resented and may prolong the standoff.

- China should stop its construction activity immediately, honouring the sovereignty of Bhutan and the Trilateral Agreement of 2012.
- Once the status quo of the pre-standoff period is achieved, the militaries of both sides should pull back to their pre-standoff positions simultaneously.
- As a long-term measure, both China and India should expedite the demarcation of the LAC on the ground and disseminate that understanding to the troops who man the borders to prevent future face-offs.

The South China Sea: Precursor to Doklam?

An analysis of the similarity in Chinese strategy in the SCS and Doklam Plateau is relevant to India, as it has stakes in both areas. The Chinese strategy as described above in the case of Doklam Plateau has also been adopted in the SCS, with some differences. This is evident from the fact that China, on the pretext of sovereignty claims based on its perspective of historical maritime boundaries, has carried out incremental encroachment into the South China Sea, as part of its “Active Defence Policy”, which is worrisome for other claimant countries, as well as troublesome for other users of the South China Sea following UNCLOS. The Chinese Foreign Minister claimed that ‘The islands in the South China Sea have been China’s territory since ancient times, and China has the right to safeguard its territorial sovereignty.’ This claim implies that the world must accept as Chinese any territory that China claims based on Qing dynasty maps or those of any other historical period as suits its convenience. By this flawed logic, all of Pakistan belongs to India, which could claim to reunite Pakistan with India by 2047, which is absurd and irresponsible. India, along with other users of the SCS, has a stake in the SCS issue to prevent future Chinese interference in international freedom of navigation in those waters and freedom of flight through SCS air space, restrictions on offshore drilling deals for oil with Vietnam and to uphold the use of other global commons in international waters.

Differences between the Two Situations

The SCS is a global issue that involves the US and other states. China’s strategic competition with the US in Asia leads it to increasingly encroach into US strategic space and influence. Washington’s military posturing, tough statements and other actions have not helped and it continues to lose ground to Beijing. While China’s infrastructure development in the SCS progresses, it is viewed as strategic encroachment by the US, regional claimants and other users of the SCS. China, on the other hand, perceives the strategic and military posturing and occasional hard statements on “Freedom of Navigation” by the US as a ‘disturbance to regional peace’.

China’s assertive actions in the SCS has created international fears that China’s sovereignty claims could trump the freedom of navigation provided for by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, thus affecting the free flow of global trade. Although China has not obstructed any trade shipping so far, should the SCS become its lake in the future, Beijing could dictate rules of business that prove inconvenient to other users of the SCS. Should China demand that SCS aviation and maritime traffic identify themselves in

future, the freedom of flights over what are legally international waters would be adversely affected. By making the claim that the US is destabilising and militarising the SCS, China could make it appear to be a China-US issue, but this matter affects those countries, including India, whose trade passes through this sea. China, ironically, claims the right of freedom of navigation globally, but refuses to accept the right of others to traverse the SCS. Its construction of airstrips and deployment of missiles, radar and other logistical facilities are an attempt to convert a “natural feature” in the SCS into an “island”, thereby converting the SCS into “China’s Lake” by using the provisions of UNCLOS, which it ignores elsewhere. These are not happy signs for other regional and global users of the SCS, like India, Japan and many others.

Refusal to Accept the International Court of Arbitration Verdict

While China does not accept or heed the verdict of the International Court of Arbitration at The Hague in the case brought against it by the Philippines and has continued to build infrastructure on features to convert them into islands, the verdict has, nevertheless, conveyed the global message that the SCS cannot be treated as a Chinese or US lake, but remains an international maritime trade route. It conveyed that the Chinese claim of territorial sovereignty is invalid. It also conveyed the message that similar claims to global chokepoints would invite a similar verdict. It certainly divides ASEAN, with each country trying to get the best out of the existing situation and from both of the big powers. China’s attempts to get claimant countries to bilaterally resolve the SCS dispute is unlikely to work. The regional Declaration of Conduct (DoC) and Code of Conduct (CoC) will not be able to check China’s unilateralism. The use of the global commons, however, will continue to be contested by regional and other affected countries, including global powers.

A notable observation is that each contender reads history as it suits its agenda, thus obviating historical claims as the overarching basis of territorial resolutions. China is neither the first nor last country not to implement international arbitration verdicts (in the absence of any enforcement mechanism), but The Hague verdict brought international pressure to bear on the Chinese hierarchy. India, on the other hand, acted maturely by accepting a similar verdict, also passed by the same Court of Arbitration, to resolve a maritime territorial dispute with Bangladesh last year.

The status quo is likely to prevail in regard to China’s occupation of islands, reefs and other features in the SCS. No major change in actual ground position can be expected, unless a concrete stand is taken by the global community.

Increased military movements and exercises in the SCS by China, as well as the US and its allies, are indicative of military posturing and a war of words. While the US, India and Japan may claim that the annual *Malabar* exercise is not directed at any specific country, it nevertheless projects a tacit message; the future participation of Australia in the exercise would clarify that message. According to its Defence Update of 22 July 2017, the US is looking to assist with the capacity building of regional forces like India, Japan and Australia to check China’s expeditionary and expansionist moves.

For the time being, no recognisable change in the South China Sea situation is envisaged. The military posturing and shows of force by the US and China will continue, along with Washington's diplomatic efforts to pull other stakeholders into its strategic orbit. As a result, the other claimant countries may find themselves well-placed to extract concessions from Washington and Beijing. Vietnam, for instance, was visited by President Obama, who lifted the longstanding arms embargo against Hanoi. US Defence Secretary James Mattis found common ground against China when he hosted his Vietnamese counterpart, Ngo Xuan Lich, on 8 August 2017. The news that China tried to negotiate directly with Bhutan on the Doklam issue, or tried to involve Nepal in it, also points towards an attempt by Beijing to follow a similar strategy.

Unfortunately, all the other actors watched while China progressed its constructions on those maritime features. Even the regional claimant countries have grown softer on this issue. The strategic and military posturing, occasional threatening statements and resentments will not assist in deterring China. The Doklam issue and its resolution must be viewed, therefore, as a test case in checking Chinese hegemony. The resolution of the Doklam issue could highlight some lessons for the SCS, too. A peaceful India-China border and South China Sea are essential for Indian, Chinese and regional growth in the Indo-Pacific.

Common Steps for a Way Ahead in Doklam and the South China Sea

- China must stop further construction efforts in both instances.
- China should amend its sovereignty claims that are based on one-sided historical claims. It needs to respect the sovereignty and core national interests of other countries or risk those countries adopting a harder stance against it in the future.
- China must begin diplomatic engagements without preconditions and cast aside hard stands, wars of words and unhelpful rhetoric.
- The theory of deterrence to mould strategic choices will not work in all cases. If Vietnam could stand up to China and the US, and both are encountering problems in dealing with North Korea, then deterring India with only words is an unrealistic expectation.
- Military posturing must be controlled by the contesting sides.
- International laws, conventions, treaties and agreements need to be respected by all.
- Diplomatic efforts to resolve these issues should continue simultaneously alongside commercial engagements.

About the Author: Major-General Asthana has 36 years of defence experience at the national and international levels. During his military carrier, he held various key appointments in the Army and the United Nations and was awarded twice by the President of India and twice by the UN. He retired from active Army service in 2014 and is presently the Chief Instructor of all courses for military officers in the United Service Institute of India. Major-General Asthana is a life member of various think-tanks, including the Institute of Defence and Strategic Analysis, USI of India and the Centre for Land Warfare Studies. He has been interviewed by various Indian and international media channels and has written for the *Economic Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian* and *South China Morning Post*. He researches international issues, mainly pertaining to China, and has authored over 30 publications and 60 blogs. In addition to delivering talks on strategic issues in various universities, he is an external examiner for the MPhil degree at Panjab University. Major-General Asthana is a doctoral researcher at Jawaharlal Nehru University, holds two MPhil degrees, a Post-Graduate Diploma in Human Resource Management and various management degrees.

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