

India, China pull back from clash over Himalayan ridge

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India and China moved yesterday to defuse their ten-week-old dispute over control of the Doklam or Donglang Plateau—a dispute that brought the nuclear-armed rivals and world’s two most populous countries closer to a military clash than any time since they fought a month-long border war in 1962.

In choreographed steps, India’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement at midday yesterday announcing that an “expeditious disengagement of border personnel ... at Doklam has been agreed to and is ongoing.” Approximately ninety minutes later, a Chinese government spokeswoman said Beijing had confirmed “trespassing Indian personnel have all pulled backed to the Indian side of the boundary.” “In accordance” with “the changes of the situation on the ground,” China “will make necessary adjustments” in its deployments, added Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying.

For the preceding two-and-a-half months, hundreds of Indian and Chinese troops had faced off “eye-ball to eye-ball,” separated by little more than a hundred meters, on the Doklam, a remote Himalayan ridge at the tri-junction of the borders of India, China and Bhutan.

Even more ominously, New Delhi and Beijing traded bellicose threats and taunts, poured thousands of troops into the eastern sector of their almost 3500-kilometer disputed border, and otherwise took steps to prepare, and demonstrate their readiness, for armed conflict.

What India is terming the “Doklam Disengagement Understanding” was reached one week before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is slated to travel to China for the September 3-5 BRICS heads of government summit in Xiamen.

No text of this “Understanding” has been released by either government, nor is any expected to be.

Underscoring that none of the underlying issues that led to the tense military standoff has been resolved, India and China are each suggesting that it was the other that ultimately gave way.

Beijing is emphasizing the withdrawal of all Indian troops from the Doklam to nearby positions in the Indian state of Sikkim. Throughout the stand-off, Beijing demanded an unconditional withdrawal of the Indian forces. It insisted that India’s intervention was unprecedentedly provocative, since New Delhi makes no claim to ownership over the remote ridge, but rather intervened in the name of Bhutan, a small Himalayan state that for decades New Delhi has treated like a protectorate.

At yesterday’s press conference, Hua said China will continue to exercise its “territorial sovereignty” over the Doklam, including through patrols by Chinese border troops.

For its part, New Delhi has emphasized the sequential character of the de-escalation, with China indicating it will reduce its deployments in the disputed area.

Nothing has been said about the issue that prompted India to send troops onto the Doklam on June 18: China’s plans to expand a road on the ridge which it currently controls but Bhutan also claims. India charges Beijing’s road-building violated an agreement with Bhutan to maintain the status quo in all disputed areas pending final delineation of the Bhutan-China border.

For weeks, both the Indian and Chinese press have been full of discussion about the possibility that the Doklam dispute could spark an armed clash.

Various Chinese analysts, cited in that country’s state-owned press, expressed confidence such a conflict could be confined to a short, border war. Indian commentators frequently begged to differ.

As the impasse continued, both the US and Japan

intervened to demonstrate their support for India, which they view as a pivotal ally in thwarting China's "rise."

Indeed, the principal factor in the deterioration of Indo-Chinese relations of which the Doklam conflict has been both an expression and an accelerant is India's integration into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

Under Modi's three-year-old government, India has been transformed into a veritable frontline state of American imperialism's war drive against China. The Modi government has parroted the provocative US positions on the South China Sea and North Korea disputes, thrown open India's airbases and ports to routine use by US warplanes and warships, and dramatically expanded strategic cooperation with Washington's principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

In response, China has deepened its decades-long alliance with India's arch-rival, Pakistan. China's support for Pakistan, including its plans to make it a pivot of its Belt and Road Eurasian infrastructure building scheme, has further exacerbated tensions with New Delhi.

Earlier this month Japan explicitly endorsed India's stance on the Doklam dispute and compared it to its own territorial disputes with China. Tokyo also let it be known that increased military-security ties with India will be at the top of the agenda when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visits New Delhi next month

Publicly the Trump administration maintained a position of neutrality on the Doklam dispute, but it took a whole series of actions in recent weeks aimed at highlighting the strength of the Indo-US "global strategic partnership." In an Indian Independence Day phone call, Trump and Modi agreed to establish a new strategic dialogue involving their countries' respective foreign and defence ministers. And in his address last week outlining US plans to intensify the Afghan War, Trump supported Indian ambitions to play a greater role in Afghanistan while putting Pakistan on notice that if it doesn't do America's bidding it will be punished with cuts in arms sales and military aid.

The US is above all anxious to expand military cooperation with New Delhi in the Indian Ocean, whose sea lanes serve as the conduit for 80 percent of the oil that fuels China's economy, as well as much of its export trade to Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

In mid-August, in remarks touting America's eagerness to assist in the modernization of India's military, the head of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral Harry Harris, repeated his call for India to join the Pentagon in joint naval patrols in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

While India has not yet agreed to that step, it has initiated plans, according to *India Today*, to "spread its influence and further strengthen its grip" in the Indian Ocean in response to the Doklam war crisis. These include reviving the dormant Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and using it as a platform to develop military cooperation with "friendly" countries, beginning with a major naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal, and expanding naval training for officers from other South Asian and Indian Ocean states.

Most significantly, the Indian Navy will henceforth permanently deploy Indian warships at the western entrance to the Malacca Straits, the most important potential Indian/Pacific Ocean chokepoint and long a key focus of US plans to impose an economic blockade on China in the event of a war or war crisis.

Whilst India and China appear to have stepped back from the brink over the Doklam, the recent crisis has only served to highlight the extent to which South Asia and the Indian Ocean region have been swept into the maelstrom of great power and imperialist conflict.

Significantly and no doubt with the foreknowledge that an agreement to defuse the Doklam crisis was imminent, the head of India's army, General Bipin Rawat, warned in a public lecture last Saturday that there will be further military crises with China. "Let us say this standoff is resolved," said Rawat, "our troops should not feel it cannot happen again ... So my message to troops is do not let your guard down."



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