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Sadaf Sultana



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India-China Border Standoff: An Assessment

By: Maryam Raashed

Border standoff between the Peoples' Republic of China and the Republic of India began on June 16, 2017. With India's urge to protect the rights of a disputed territory, the standoff erupted when India sent 270 Indian troops with weapons and two bulldozers in the territory of Doklam. This action by India was driven by the fact that the Peoples Liberation Army attempted to construct a road in Doklam. Doklam, a disputed territory between China and Bhutan, is geo-strategically a significant point for both. And the two countries have been conducting various rounds of border negotiations for the past few decades. Likewise, the Doklam Plateau happens to be an important area for India as well. This area serves as a connector between India's North-Eastern provinces and the rest of the country and therefore the entire land-based military and commercial traffic travels through the Siliguri Corridor, rendering it as India's Chicken Neck.

All the three actors of the conflict i.e. India, China and Bhutan are on the same page with regards to the cause of the conflict being the construction of a road in Doklam but the positions are different. The Bhutanese Foreign Ministry contends that the PLA was constructing a road on a disputed territory which was subject to an agreement on 'no changes in its status quo' as per the 1988 and 1998 agreements between Bhutan and China. On the other hand, China, referring to the 1890 Convention (signed between the Great Britain and China stating Doklam as a Chinese territory) stands that the construction was being

carried out on a Chinese territory and no other country holds the merit to abrogate her sovereignty. While the third actor i.e. India maintains that her intervention in the Doklam territory was in coordination with the Bhutanese authorities and was meant to protect Bhutanese and Indian national and security interest.



Map showing the Doklam Region and Siliguri Corridor

Source: http://creative.sulekha.com/china-s-road-to-sikkim-flashpoint-with-india_632387_blog

Both India and China are currently locked in an eyeball to eyeball situation and are preparing for a military confrontation in case of a failure in the efforts of peaceful resolution. On Friday, August 11, 2017 Arun Jaitley, the Indian Defence Minister asserted that the country's armed forces were 'prepared to take on any eventuality'. Whereas, China also seeks to deploy strategic missiles and aircrafts to paralyzed Indian Mountain divisions in Himalayas. The Chinese Foreign Ministry says that "China would not give up on any territory" and "If the Narendra Modi Government continues ignoring the warning coming from a situation spiraling out of control, countermeasures from China will be unavoidable"

The initial phase of the standoff was steered by the idea that diplomacy would play an effective role to cater the crisis and would eventually tap down the crisis. The Indian Foreign Ministry left no stone unturned to ensure a decisive role of diplomacy. However, the Indian diplomatic efforts came to a standstill on August 8, 2017 when China refused a bi-lateral withdrawal of troops demanding India's unilateral withdrawal from a territory that is contested by her and Bhutan. As per China, the state sees no chance of making her sovereignty a means of exchange.

Be the construction of a road in a disputed territory immoral or not, the dynamics of the current faceoff are being shaped by the fact that India, as a state, holds no grounds to intervene in the bi-lateral affairs of China and Bhutan. The absence of any treaty promising India's military assistance to Bhutan in times of trouble is further putting India's intervention and confrontation with Chinese Armed Forces into question. Also, India's forceful occupation and rule over the disputed territory of Kashmir is a factor that undermines India's stand in the conflict.



India's and China's relative preparedness for war is also an important factor in the crisis. Where China is fully aware and confident about her plan of actions, the vibes emanating from the state of India

depict a state of being at a loss. Civil-military gap can easily be seen and there is an internal rift and lack of co-ordination between the Indian Foreign Ministry and the Indian Armed Forces. On August 13, 2017, the Indian Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj said, “We will keep engaging with China to resolve the dispute. War cannot solve problems”. Whereas the Indian Armed Forces pose to be fully prepared for a full-scale war with China. On August 10, 2017, The Diplomat, published an article named “Is India’s Military Actually Ready for War with China”, mentioning India’s relative unpreparedness for a war. Such circumstances are seriously undermining India’s stand. Not only is India’s intervention in the Doklam region unjustified, but its chances to stand the conflict for long are also not probable.

To many this situation of zero compromise seems to be a logjam which must be catered appropriately to ensure a safe and sound strategic environment in the South Asian Region. Unrest in the South Asian and a war between two regional power contenders is highly discouraged. Therefore, a soft approach by India and her unilateral withdrawal from the Doklam territory might be a better strategy for India ensuring peace and tranquility not only for the region, but for India herself as well.

Indo-US-Japan Joint Naval Exercises: The Geostrategic Dimensions

By: Sadaf Sultana

The recent Malabar exercises was held in the Bay of Bengal from 10-17 July, 2017. This is the 21st edition of the Malabar series, which involves India, U.S and Japan. It primarily aimed at promoting compatibility among the navies of the three states and to promote all round maritime cooperation among them. The Indian Navy maintained at the initiation of the exercise claimed that the thrust of exercises at sea this year would be on Aircraft Carrier Operations, Air Defense, Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), Surface Warfare, Visit Board Search and Seizure (VBSS), Search and Rescue, Joint Maneuvers and Tactical procedures. These exercises have been taking place since 1992 as a bilateral exercises between U.S and India, but in 2015 Japan also became a permanent member of these exercises. Therefore, it was

the first time that the Japanese warships JS Izumo and JS Sazanami participated in an exercise with foreign navies, which marks the beginning of a new phase in Japan's maritime power projection.



After the collapse of Soviet Union, United States initiated these exercises at the western coast of India while exploring its regional relationships as a global hegemon. Following the nuclear test by India, these bilateral exercises were postponed from 1998 to 2000, but it restarted after U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan, when Indian Navy accompanied U.S. commercial ships through the Strait of Malacca. In 2002, both states started a small scale passage drill and refurbishment at sea. Cooperation increased when large scale anti-submarine exercises in 2003 and deployment of aircraft carriers in 2005 was commenced by U.S. and India. After that, a significant shift was observed when ships of U.S. Japan, Australia and India coordinated on humanitarian assistance during 2004 Tsunami, which indicated their motive to shape the maritime order in the region. In 2007, for the first time, exercise was held in the Bay of Bengal and Western Pacific, joined by the navies of Japan, Australia and Singapore. During the Indo-U.S. summit in 2015, both states formally invited Japan to join the exercise which was then held in the Bay of Bengal.

The recent exercises, conducted onshore and offshore, had 17 ships participating along with a U.S. nuclear powered submarine. Also, professional exchanges and coordinated operations were part of this exercise that are associated with submarine and anti-submarine warfare, air defence, search and rescue, helicopter cross-deck evolutions, communications, carrier strike group operations, maritime patrol as well as scouting and surface warfare. Due to incompatibility restraints in equipment, there was no landing and takeoff system from each other's aircraft carrier. But the latest aircraft fielded, the Mig-29k, from India and the U.S. carried out simulated combat drills. United States Pacific Command (PACOM) conducted this joint naval exercise within its area of accountability. This edition of exercise covered the Pacific Ocean across India, up to the line extending from the coastal border of India and Pakistan. Consecutively, these annual exercises also took place in Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific area, which is closer to Japan and the South China Sea.



Naval assistance among U.S. Japan and India after the bilateral summit level statements is mounting a new stature against the backdrop of intensified relation with China. Although the ongoing China-India stand-off at Doklam Plateau remains non-violent due to the obligation of agreed Confidence

Building Measures but the military forces of both the countries are reported to be preparing for the possibility of an armed conflict, if they could not found a peaceful solution. Moreover, Japan-china standoff over the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea takes the form of regular naval and air force confrontation. Therefore, in 2015, Japan reviewed its military engagement rules to enable more actively in both East and South China Seas, by teaming up with United States and India.

Besides the East and South China Seas, tension level escalated especially for India, when China deployed a submarine in Indian Ocean region and India claimed that Chinese intelligence-gathering ships are scanning the Indian Ocean to track the Malabar. China has stepped up activities in the Indian Ocean and building a series of ports and other infrastructure in key littoral states while expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean Region by conducting naval exercises with Pakistan, Iran and other countries. Indian Ocean figures prominently in President Xi Jinping's ambitious One-Belt, One-Road initiative to construct an innovative Silk Route.

Although official statements were made to tone-down the indication that the exercises were meant to send a message to China. India stated that the exercise has nothing to do with Doklam military standoff while U.S. mentioned that the exercises were meant to send the same strategic message to China as to any other country. But there is no doubt that Malabar exercises represented closer cooperation to balance the growing Chinese naval and military power as well as China-Pakistan engagements in the region. It is creating a challenging strategic environment for the Chinese Navy to operate in the Indian Ocean Region. The growing naval relationship of India with the littoral states of South China Sea along with Japan and United States placed it in somewhat advantageous position. It enables India to gain access to the Chinese mainland similar to the position that Japan and U.S. find for themselves in the Bay of Bengal.

Responding to Malabar 2017, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang argued that “we have no objection to the development of normal relations and cooperation between the countries.

We hope such relations and cooperation are not targeted at a third country.” But, China is anxious about the Malabar exercises because of the growing link of navies of three democratic states with whom it shares testy relationships, therefore, these exercises were particularly analyzed diligently due to the increasingly worsening China-India border situation. Cementing professional ties, Japan, U.S. and India, are aiming to enhance cooperation to maintain a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Such compatibility and collaboration of these three states indicated a certain convergence of strategic interest in the shaping of the geostrategic order in these regions, while helping India to put pressure on China in a situation of extreme volatility.



On the other hand, United States openly supports India while blaming Pakistan to provide safe shelter for terrorist by saying that America would no longer tolerate Pakistan’s policy of harboring terrorists. Completely ignoring the role of Pakistan in War against terrorism and maintaining its optimistic policy towards India, Trump said

that America’s strategic partnership with India will deepen in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. China defend Pakistan by saying that Pakistan is at the frontline of fighting terrorism, has made sacrifices in fighting terrorism, making an important contribution to upholding peace and stability. These hardline strategies of U.S. makes it clear that Pakistan would be left with no option but to seek even deeper and enhanced cooperation with China and Russia. In the current strategic environment, the Malabar exercises and U.S. attitude towards Pakistan is a symbolic reassurance that the United States is committed to working with India to continue shaping the Asian security environment.