

The Multipolar World and its Contradictions: Understanding the Power Dynamics in International Politics through a Study of the Doklam Crisis

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Abstract: The Doklam crisis was not a mere regional conflict between India and China. Internationally, it demonstrated the tensions and fault lines and indicated the emerging patterns of state behaviours. This paper analyses several issues which were flagged by this crisis. Firstly, how Doklam brought the questions about the identity of China to the forefront – the contrast between its record of unyieldingly and aggressively pursuing its territorial and economic interests and what it projects as its image – the ‘peaceful rise of China’. Secondly, the issue became a prestige issue for India and had implications for its claim as being a regional superpower and an aspiring global superpower. And lastly, the international response to Doklam showed the working of power configurations in the present day multipolar world: it carried the reverberations of the threat that Chinese economic expansion has caused to South East Asia or to the economic dominance of the US or Japan. However, the temporary settlement of the crisis also showed that though the economic rivalry between India and China might result in muscle flexing, yet both the neighbours are unwilling to sacrifice the idea of BRICS as the flagship of a multi-polar world order.

Keywords: Polarity, superpower, trade, BRICS, conflict.

I. INTRODUCTION

“The global system is in the midst of a great transformation. The distribution of power is shifting. Great Powers are rising and declining. For almost a century, the United States dominated world politics. But today, China and other rising non-Western states, such as India and Brazil, are growing in wealth, power, influence, and ambition.” (Ikenberry 2014:1) [1]

This paper attempts to understand the power configurations and geo-politics in the contemporary world through a study of the Doklam crisis between India and China. It became very clear at the outset that the crisis at Doklam was not about mere territory. It was closely observed by scholars and statesmen across the world for its underlying message for the international system. Doklam brought to the fore the underlying cleavages in international politics. It also raised speculations about the nascent or existent alliances and questions about the coming world order. This was so as the crisis happened between two rising and assertive powers in the world – India and China, and showed that any conflagration between the two would not be a mere regional clash but would snowball into a global crisis. This paper begins by briefly discussing the crisis and goes on to discuss the broader global context in which it took place and finally tries to show how Doklam was a microcosm of power balances in the world. The paper finally concludes by commenting on how economics is driving politics and is the key to understanding power rivalries and power reconfigurations in international politics.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The basic research question which the paper tries to address is about the implications of the Doklam Crisis between India and China for international relations. The study focuses on the various debates on the significance of the crisis for India and China and how it became a crisis with enormous implications for the way politics is organized in the world. Therefore, the research is based on an extensive analysis of the media reports for understanding the perceptions arising from the conflict. The paper also studies the reports and analysis of various research institutes and think-tanks for understanding the domestic and international debate that ensued as a result of the standoff. Finally, the research also studies various primary sources for understanding the official positions of the three states involved in the crisis, thus studying the various media briefings and press statements released by governments on all the sides. This analysis of the various issues that emerged from the crisis has been buttressed with the help of an extensive review of literature on Sino-India relations. The paper tries to view the Doklam crisis in retrospective as it was a crisis that not only shed enormous light on the power configurations in the present times but also had signals for understanding the future of international politics.

III. THE BACKGROUND OF THE CRISIS

India and China, the two most populous states of the world are also seen as emerging economies which are challenging the unipolar world order which appeared after the end of the cold war. The two neighbouring states share a history of border conflicts and a war whose scars are still alive in India. While the long border is still disputed, the two states have moved ahead and have intensified trade relations, with China becoming a very important trading partner for India. But the power asymmetries remain which are a cause of concern in India. Though trade is set to touch \$100 billion mark, there is an increasing trade deficit in favour of China (The Economic Times, 2019) [2]. The relations between the two countries are hence quite difficult to define in terms of friendship or hostility. Alka Acharya hence comments, “The yin and yang of India-China relations may be stated in terms of a paradox: on the one hand, there is a visibly expanding and deepening multi-level engagement, and the remarkable increase of trade, and on the other hand the low levels of mutual trust and confidence.” (Acharya 2015: 363) [3]. The Doklam standoff has to be understood in this context of this rising and receding relationship between the two countries.

Doklam stands at the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan and is disputed between China and Bhutan. In June 2017, the Indian forces entered Doklam to stop Chinese construction work for building a road in that area (Migliani & Bukhari 2017) [4]. According to India and Bhutan this construction activity was in violation of agreements of 1988 and 1998 wherein both China and Bhutan agreed not to unilaterally change the status quo in the area before a final settlement was reached (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2017 [5]; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan 2017[6]). India and Bhutan have a Treaty of Friendship in which they agree to cooperate closely on matters of national interest, and India assumed responsibilities under this treaty to protect its neighbour. China claimed that it was carrying out the work in its own territory and India had no business to interfere in this matter (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2017 [7]). India, however, had its security concerns as the area is dangerously close to the Siliguri corridor (or the narrow chicken-neck connecting India’s mainland to its seven north eastern states) and could have grave strategic implications if China were to gain access to it. Thus started the prolonged “eyeball to eye ball” standoff between the two neighbours which was resolved only when the fear of the arrival of harsh winter necessitated a hurried withdrawal. Both the sides, enmeshed in a game of chicken were unwilling to swerve first. There were speculations as to who blinked first in the conflict. Finally, when the road construction was halted by China and Indian forces were withdrawn, both sides claimed victory before their domestic constituencies.

IV. THE BASIC ISSUES

This standoff signalled the changing configurations and balances in international politics as it shed more light on the capabilities and ambitions of the two most prominent emerging powers in the world. A number of issues were involved in the conflict which can be discussed to understand the nature of power rivalries in the world.

A. The Importance of Perceptions

At stake in the Doklam crisis was the issue of influence and prestige – how the two powers would be perceived and wanted to be perceived in the world. As J.D. Schmidt writes, “India and China are assumed by conventional thinking to be locked in a struggle not only for global hegemony, but in the first instance for pan-Asian leadership.” (Schmidt 2014:

251) [8]. While China acted to strengthen and extend its influence further in South Asia through infrastructure building, India acted to protect its sphere of influence in South Asia. As Johan Blank comments, for India this was also about retaining its image of a power capable of providing security to the nations of South Asia like Maldives and Bhutan as well as in South East Asia to nations like Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam [9]. India on the other hand could take some consolation in being successfully able to resist the Chinese muscle flexing and so maintain its credibility as a power to which the countries with history of disputes with China could look up to, especially in South East Asia. Thus, Sajjanhar (2017) commented on the resistance given by India, "This episode will give strength and reassurance to other countries in China's neighbourhood like South Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia, Philippines and others who have caved in or capitulated in the face of Chinese threats." [10] For China, the standoff at Doklam was as much about its superiority vis-a-vis India as about its own perception of an emerging superpower.

The issue of prestige also leads, as it did during the Doklam crisis as well, to a media war (Lahiri 2017) [11]. As militaristic sentiments are whipped up in states during conflicts, the analysts hardly take cognizance of the lesson from history that the scramble to be a great power ultimately leads to tragic and destructive wars. Furthermore, in the current scenario this can only lead to Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Therefore, howsoever might the media whip up war sentiments in any country, the possibility of MAD has brought the possibility of total wars to a halt, and while the tensions and faultlines in the world seem to increase with a squeezing market in a world ridden with economic downturn, the states are finding ways other than wars to outsmart their rivals, to overpower weaker countries and to increase their power and influence. It is in this context that it can be understood, why both India and China looked for ways to end the deadlock, without losing their face when the problem remained unresolved.

B. Balance of Power

Doklam also brought to the fore questions about the shifting balances and alignments, not only in South Asia, but the world. After the 2008 recession, the US seemed like a power in decline. Its closest contestant was China, vying for global hegemony and threatening the American predominance in a determined manner. The rivalry for markets has turned into a trade war with both the sides raising tariff and non-tariff barriers to hurt each other's economy. It has been observed that the American backing for the rise of India as a superpower is a strategy for hedging in China (see for instance Acharya 2015: 367, Tellis 2015: 493 [12]). India's growing relations with Japan also reflects the logic that common rivals make good friends. This language of balances and alliances resonated through the Indian media. Praveen Swami commented on how Doklam was not merely a dispute over the construction of a road, but a response of China over the growing closeness between India and the rivals of China, particularly the US. (Swami 2017) [13]. C. Raja Mohan also pointed out that India would look up to balancing China "internally and externally" if pushed too far. (Raja Mohan 2017)[14]

Globally the balances are being subtly built and rebuilt. While the importance of Pakistan for the US has declined after the end of cold war, as it no longer needs it for containing the Soviet Union, China is astutely using Pakistan to check Indian predominance in the subcontinent. At the same time Russia, while maintaining the rhetoric of traditional friendship with India, seems to be tilting towards China as again, they find the common ground in being opposed to the US. In this game of chess between different powers in the world, India has also entered as a major player. While India knows that its interests lie in a close cooperation with the US, and this is a very important factor in its power calculus, yet it regards its strategic autonomy as too dear to be subdued entirely to the US interests. So, it is using the international situation diplomatically for carving out its own niche in the world. The transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar world was made only too clear with this standoff. Today, there is a growing acceptance among scholars that the US, China, India, Russia, Japan and Europe are the diverse poles in the multipolar world and the US signalled its cognizance of the power dynamics by taking a very diplomatic stand of refusing to interfere in the crisis and encouraging the two states to settle the dispute through negotiation and not by unilaterally altering the status quo.

Scholars attribute the difference in attitude of the US towards the rise of China and India to different reasons. India's rise has been seen as a "gradual rise" which has not resulted in a fear of a challenge to the status quo, "The growing convergence of ideas and interests with the peer group of great powers has promoted India's gradual rise by a process of co-optation and co-operation into institutions of global governance and great power status" (Wagner 2010) [15]. China's rise on the other hand has been brisk and challenging. It has so far tried to portray its rise as "the peaceful rise of China" but the threat perception remains that it might challenge the current rules of the world. This has been brilliantly put forward by Ashley Tellis (2015: 491) in a language which strips the power politics to its bare bones as he discusses that

while the rise of China threatens the American security and economic interests in Asia, for India the question is that of maintaining its pre-eminence in South Asia. The clash has been understood by scholars in terms of the power transitions theory which explains how the emergence of a revisionist state, dissatisfied with its place in the international system, threatens the status quo (Lai 2016) [16]. While the revisionist state attempts to change the rules of the game which are not in its interests, the states which benefit by this established order resist this, resulting in conflicts with the status quo powers.

The power rivalry between India and China has started manifesting itself not only on land but also across oceans. This change shows how India's trade interests have spread far and wide and she is vying with other powers for control of resources and markets in these areas, from the Middle East to Africa and South East Asia. For this the primacy over Indian Ocean is indispensable. While during the cold war, India was wary of a super-power rivalry in the Indian Ocean, now the prime concern for India is maintaining its influence vis-a-vis China. India clearly spelt out its strategy in a press release by the Ministry of Defence which quoted Defence Minister A. K. Anthony as saying, "India's strategic location in the Indian Ocean... bestows upon us a natural ability to play a leading role in ensuring peace and stability in the Indian Ocean Region" (Ministry of Defence, Government of India 2012) [17].

C. Political Economy of the Rise and Diffusion of Tensions

In order to realize its super-power ambition, China has concentrated on expanding its economic activities to all parts of the world. The new vehicle for this imperialism is the infrastructural diplomacy of China, often called the "debt-trap" diplomacy (Chellaney 2017 [18], Parker and Chefitz 2018 [19], Pomfret 2018[20]). China has been flayed for lending support to countries for building their infrastructure and then driving them into a debt trap. The oft-quoted instance is that of the leasing of Hambantota Port by Sri Lanka to a Chinese company for ninety-nine years as a result of debt burden. Scholars have pointed out how the Belt and Road Initiative, which is projected as a win-win deal to countries, intends to provide to China unhindered access to the markets of connected countries, and is a silent strategy to extend its reach and influence in the world (Chellaney 2017). India is also concerned about China's encroachment through this infrastructure imperialism in territory which it considers to be its area of influence.

However, Doklam clearly signalled that China is first and foremost into business, and it knows that India as a trading partner is too valuable for it to lose. Even India realises the value of China as a trade partner. Thus, post-Doklam, the *modus vivendi* was talks on trade and confidence building rather than on disputed territories, as it reflected in the informal summit between India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Wuhan. This shows the strategy of China as it astutely manages its rivals so as to prepare the way for as smooth a rise as possible. Thus, Tellis remarks, "What complicates matters further is that China today, unlike the rising powers of the past, is deeply entwined with both its global and regional rivals – including the United States and India – by unprecedented bonds of economic interdependence, thus making security competition between these entities a 'mixed sum' game of enormous intricacy." (Tellis 2015: 491)

D. The Pullback and the Idea of a Multi-Polar World

China knows that to challenge the US hegemony successfully and to replace it, what it needs is an important quality: a hegemon rules not only by coercion but also through consent. To gain legitimacy for its actions, it is treading carefully, picturing its rise as peaceful rise, mutually beneficial to the countries with which it has ties, and capable of providing positive leadership to the world. Thus, President Xi Jinping in a speech said that Beijing is dedicated to safeguarding peace: "China will act as a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development and an upholder of the international order." (cited in Arpi 2018) [21]. Another analyst commented on similar lines, observing how the decision of China to blink from its position was a step in the direction of creating this image of "a benevolent power and future global leader, with BRICS as a key vehicle." (Pethiyagoda 2017) [22]. However, this idea of a multipolar world has to be further analysed to understand its implications. Is this the idea about democratization of world politics, for a just, equitable and peaceful world as it claims to be; or is it a temporary "vehicle" to demolish the supremacy of the existing super-power and the aspiration by other powers for assuming that role in future? The rise of BRICS signals this contest in world politics for altering the economic balances in the world, but would that lead to a democratization of international relations is something which still defies answers.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper tries to study Doklam conflict in order to understand the underlying currents and patterns in world politics. In international politics the lexicon which dominates is composed of elements, all of which echoed in Doklam crisis – national interest, balance of power, revisionist states, status quo powers, sphere of influence, superpower, great powers, hegemon, strategic partnership and so on. It notes how the major global powers watched the standoff closely, and how the crisis said a lot about the power dynamics not only between India and China, but also China and the US. It encompassed debates on the initiatives by China to strengthen the grip of its economy over the world, and how these steps were being resisted by the powers which have clashing economic interests with China. The political crisis was very much a reflection of the contest over the control over economic resources and markets in the world between some of the major powers in the world. The paper reads Doklam crisis as another chapter in the rise and decline of great powers, signalling more power contestations in future.

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