

## Assessing EU's Silence during the Doklam Crisis: Towards the End of the 'Convenient Consensus' in India-China Relations?

Siegfried O. Wolf

Siegfried O. Wolf is the Director of Research at the South Asia Democratic Forum and Senior Researcher (Member) at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University..

On a small plateau called Doklam, a trijunction where the India-China border meets the landlocked Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, two of the largest armies in the world faced each other. So far, tensions between the two Asian powers have been limited to their immediate boundary disputes lying mainly at the eastern sector in Arunachal Pradesh and western sector in Aksai China (part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir). However, this time, 'Doklam' turned into one of the most severe flashpoints between Beijing and New Delhi since their border war of 1962. The conflict unravelled after Chinese soldiers entered the Doklam plateau in order to build a road, insisting that this area is part of China's territory. New Delhi refused to accept the claim and in response sent armed forces to the area. India's main rationale was its support for Bhutan's recognition of Doklam as its own national territory and consequent objection to the Chinese road construction at the high plain. However, due to the tremendous asymmetries in economic and military capabilities between Thimphu and Beijing, Doklam came under China's de facto control. Subsequently, on June the 18<sup>th</sup>, New Delhi deployed its troops at the Doklam plateau in order to stop the Chinese construction workers and bring the area again under Bhutan's jurisdictional control. In the following ten weeks, several unsuccessful attempts were conducted to solve the issue and it appeared that 'neither government seemed to know how to back down' so as to avoid further armed escalation. However, on Monday, August the 28<sup>th</sup>, after a summer full of extraordinary emotional and heated debates which crossed 'all the limits of sanity' and were marked with the sharpest rhetoric and most out-spoken warmongering since decades, it seems that Chinese and Indian officials were able to 'crack the Doklam puzzle'.

South  
Asia  
Democratic  
Forum



Avenue des Arts 19  
1210 Brussels

[info@sadf.eu](mailto:info@sadf.eu)  
[www.sadf.eu](http://www.sadf.eu)

And yet, apart from the agreement leading both sides to remove their troops, there is nothing concrete such as a joint statement or specific regulations regarding critical issues, for example a ban on Chinese road constructions (or other infrastructure projects) or the potential future presence of Chinese soldiers at Doklam. As such, it remains to be seen if this conflict is to be resolved peacefully in the long-term perspective. One wonders, in the light of the Doklam incident, what are to become the future trajectories in the relationship between the two Asian powers.

### **Doklam: The End of the 'Convenient Consensus'?**

What happened this summer in Doklam is nothing new or an unfamiliar phenomenon in the South Asian region, especially not in the India-China border area. Actually, most of the border conflicts and territorial disputes in the region can be traced back to the colonial area and are originating from confused and/or contradictory boundary agreements. However, despite having remarkably divergent views on several issues regarding the demarcation of their frontiers, Beijing and New Delhi were until now able to maintain a kind of mutually agreed status quo which one could describe as a 'state of guided neglecting' or 'intentional ignorance'—effectively forming a 'convenient consensus'. The very simple but effective mechanism to avoid an escalation of aggressiveness has so far been to leave tenuous issues for future disquisitions and considerations. This approach was not the key to unlock the complex border disputes, yet it did function as a successful mechanism in enabling both countries to promote economic cooperation and conduct some confidence-building measures necessary for their bilateral relations to work.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to note that border conflicts and territorial disputes were mostly a discussion between political elites (especially in the context of identity construction), from time to time picked up by academic research and debates. They were definitely never in the centre of general, nationwide public debates or caused any concern for the common people either in China or in India. This phenomenon changed, especially during the last couple of months, and one must observe that the territorial dispute was not only widely discussed across public opinion but also marked by a new and aggressive, harsh rhetoric, especially from the Chinese side. This is all the more notable when one considers that the Chinese were known in the past for their rather un-emotional if hard-nosed statements. Thus a new environment is created which is much less conducive for the future success of the equipoised 'approach of convenient consensus'. Furthermore, it makes it difficult to continue the path of working out issues peacefully, with a mutual face-saving solution for both sides.

Having this in mind, the latest military standoff stands in stark contrast to the traditional ‘convenient consensus’ regarding the necessity of avoiding the escalation of conflict. As such, the ‘Doklam situation’ was not only a military standoff at the trijunction of Bhutan, India, and China but also a political-diplomatic stalemate which apparently marks a departure from the former ‘consensual approach’ between New Delhi and Beijing. Here, one must state that the ‘Doklam incident’ is not a single episode which unfortunately had a turn for the worse, marking rather the exception than the norm in bilateral interaction. It is also not this ‘critical juncture’ breaking the path of mostly workable, sometimes even cordial relations (not taken account here the Tibet issue or the 1962 border war), and turning them into hostile ties with a dangerous tendency towards armed escalation. Rather it must be seen as another incident in a simmering, longer-term downward trend which began already a few years ago. The tectonic shifts in Asia’s bilateral and multilateral relations were initiated by China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) and the subsequent tremendous increase of Beijing’s cooperation with New Delhi’s arch-enemy Pakistan in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). More concretely, China’s diplomatic backing of Pakistan in international institutions regarding critical issues (f. ex. cross-border terrorism) and siding in with it during territorial disputes (especially Kashmir) determines a severe burden for China-India relations. Additionally, the tremendous efforts of China so as to transform its economic success into military strength, accompanied with an increase of its visibility in the Indian Ocean, are matters of serious concerns for New Delhi. All the above-mentioned flashpoints are working towards the entrenchment of new, deconstructive patterns in Sino-India interactions. Doubtless, India’s categorical refusal to cooperate in BRI as well as the Washington-New Delhi rapprochement and the emerging US-India-Japan cooperation are sensitive issues which are getting beady-eyed recognized in China’s security circles. As such, the ability of Beijing and New Delhi to solve the standoff should be seen as a positive landmark in the general ‘downward spiral’ of their bilateral ties.

Against this backdrop, one must state that the ‘Doklam situation’ had and perhaps still has a high potential for dangerous armed confrontation. Furthermore, if confrontation is to occur, it is most likely to be much different from the 1962 border war, for both countries will not be able to keep the conflict a second-rate contention geographically limited to the Himalayan region anymore. Therefore, one must hope that the notion of ‘peaceful co-existence’ and not ‘brinkmanship’ will be the mantra for future bilateral relations.

## **International Silence**

A retrospective look on the happenings at Doklam reveals, among numerous other facets of this crisis, much elaboration regarding potential and actual power projections and involved motives of both India and China, as well as potential escalations and their impacts on the region and beyond. And yet there lacked reports about the stance of the larger international community on the Doklam issue. This was neither an intended policy nor a slackness or carelessness by the media or by experts and other observers. In fact, there was not much to report because government officials from both within and outside the South Asian region (besides Indian and Chinese) remained surprisingly quiet. Apart from Japan and to a certain degree (indirectly) the US, none of the great powers, especially no European one, expressed any explicit position about the conflict between New Delhi and Beijing. This is surprising when one thinks that the world witnessed a severe military standoff not only between the two major players in Asia but also between nuclear powers whose conflict could lead to a full-scale war. Nevertheless, major western actors, especially the European Union (EU), chose to remain quiet; indeed there are even reports that EU officials refused to comment on the latest tensions between New Delhi and Beijing over Doklam. This is especially puzzling if one takes into account the enormous economic interaction between the West (North America and Europe) and Asia, above all China and increasingly India too. Against this backdrop, one should raise the question: why did the EU dodge stating its stance on the latest India-China stalemate?

## **EU and the India-China Standoff**

The EU is interested in maintaining good relations with India as well as China and therefore tries to avoid any situation in which it might get forced to take a position alienating one side or the other. Another potential rationale which one should take into account is that there are different perceptions by different member states and even within individual regions within the EU regarding India and especially China. Regarding India one can state that the recognition of its growing economic and military capacities is a rather recent phenomenon; so much so that there apparently is still a need to work out which significance and role India should play in the foreign policy of the EU. Many decision-makers and institutions within the EU still need to further develop their opinions on India in order to formulate suitable policy approaches. It is interesting to note that this phenomenon is partly reflected in the public domain, foremost the mass media where India enjoys a rather limited attention compared to other major powers.

In the case of China the situation regarding awareness and recognition within the EU looks different. Due to the tremendous engagement of European companies (especially German) in

mainland China over several decades, now combined with Beijing's large scale investments and use of 'soft-power' strategies such as the promotion of academic and cultural interaction, there is a remarkable level of perception of China in Europe. Therefore, it does not come by surprise that China not only reached many levels and spheres of EU's institutional structure but is also much present in Europe's general public, academia, and media. There is no doubt that the BRI functions as a catalyst of attention towards China. Yet the BRI is not only creating interests but also concerns over questions regarding Beijing's motives, feasibility of the whole project, political and economic ramifications and how to deal with it in diplomatic practical terms. Nevertheless, the decision-makers are aware of the extraordinary dimensions of the BRI and what this means for the Eurasian region. Against this backdrop, it seems that the EU continues to prefer a 'wait and watch approach' before it takes a clearer, more determined position.

### **Final thoughts**

Overall, one of the most crucial puzzles remain: How would the EU would react if the situation between China and India would again turn for the worse? Generally speaking one can state that the EU is hampered by a remarkable uneasiness to conceive a unified position regarding international conflicts outside the union in general and between EU partners in particular. It is emphasized here that the vast array of confusing and partly mutually impeding institutional structures and bureaucratic entities is only a part of the EU's problem to define interests and objectives, formulate respective positions and implement clear strategies towards external challenges. It is pointed out here that the lack of political will, not any concrete gaps in decision-making capacities, is most responsible for the EU silence in the latest Doklam crisis. However, after evaluating EU diplomatic moves and respective rhetoric in former crisis situations such as the Russian occupation of Crimea or Moscow's interventions in the eastern Ukraine, one can make following general statements regarding a EU's potential behaviour in future tensions in India-China relations:

First of all, the EU will react carefully and with a moderate voice. Most likely we will see an appeal to stop any acts of violence immediately. Furthermore, observers should expect that the EU will call upon the opponents (in a worst-case scenario combatants) to turn back to the negotiation table to find a political, peaceful solution for the conflict at hand. One might witness the EU offering to serve as a 'kind of mediator' for the following reasons: A) the EU has tremendous economic interests in India and in China. Any armed confrontation between both countries is a severe threat to these interests. B) furthermore, the US is too entrenched through its deepening ties with India and its special relations with China. The latest unrevealing of US

President Trump's revised vision for an Afghanistan strategy can be seen as a severe indication that this trend will continue. C) A stronger role of the EU in political conflict solutions would match the current US administration's foreign policy line, which seems to focus more on military approaches within its global counter-terrorism framework.

As such, despite the continuation of its commitment towards Afghanistan and subsequently the South Asian region, Washington can't and also might not want to take on the task of a negotiator. The fact that President Trump barely acknowledged the potentially dangerous engagement between the two Asian giants can be seen as a clear indication of this fact. Against this backdrop, there could emerge the view among European politicians that the EU must step in to avoid creating a diplomatic vacuum capitalized by Russian diplomacy (Russian success being created by a lack of 'neutral' third parties, able and accepted as a mediator). Intensified Russian activity in the extended South Asian region would not only make the situation more complex but could also create a momentum forcing the EU to become more active, above a leverage which is neither envisaged nor desired in Brussels. Of course, much depends on the 'geography of the escalation'. Whether a potential India-China armed confrontation will be limited to the Himalayan region or get extended to other areas such as the South China Sea, adding an extremely sensitive maritime dimension to the conflict, it will be difficult for the EU to continue its policy of 'turning an officially blind eye' on severe tensions between New Delhi and Beijing. However, if the US get directly involved and the whole confrontation becomes an issue for NATO (in case of a potential attack on Guam), then the EU is coerced to a much clearer position.

In sum, given the EU experience in bridging normative foundations with realpolitik, one can note that Brussels could contribute much to maintain and strengthen the traditional 'convenient consensus' between both countries by helping to (re-)build trust and confidence and encourage further trade and economic cooperation. But at the moment it seems that the EU has neither an overall strategy nor an action plan containing concrete measures on what to do in a situation when two of her major partners are in conflict, especially when they are on the verge of war. This is gaining significance since the global political and economic architecture is undergoing fundamental transformation processes and it appears that the EU is not prepared to address most of the upcoming challenges.

This time a solution to calm the situation seems to have been found by the conflict parties themselves. Yet the Hong Kong agreement regarding Doklam 'stands on the clay feet' and is far from being a sustainable arrangement. In consequence, the EU must reassess its abilities and

capacities to react to international crises, especially in the Eurasian region. Being increasingly drawn into Chinese connectivity networks through the BRI, Brussel can't afford just to 'watch and wait', putting itself in the backseat of developments driven by Beijing and New Delhi which could seriously affect its own interests. By deciding to be a 'clueless bystander' in the Doklam issue as well as in numerous other South Asian affairs, the EU is missing the opportunity to gain leverage in the most populated and fastest growing region in the world.