

China's Himalayan advantage

With little resistance from India, China is slowly altering the strategic environment

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The first anniversary of the Doklam standoff calls for reflection on China's strategy of territorial revisionism and India's response. The Doklam Plateau, like the South China Sea, illustrates how China operates in the threshold between peace and war. Just as China has made creeping but transformative encroachments in the South China Sea without firing a single shot, it has incrementally but fundamentally changed the status quo in Doklam in its favour since ending the 73-day troop standoff with India.

Doklam exemplifies China's broader recidivism in the Himalayas. China is still working to redraw Himalayan boundaries nearly seven decades after it gobbled up Tibet, an action that led to its occupation of the Switzerland-size Aksai Chin plateau. Aksai Chin fell to what has since become Beijing's favoured frontier-expansion strategy — "salami slicing". This involves a steady progression of actions short of war that camouflage offense as defence and help change facts on the ground.

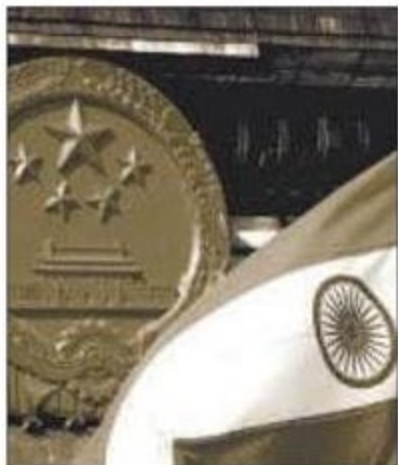
The latest victim of China's "salami slic-

ing" is one of the world's smallest countries, Bhutan, which has just 7,500 military personnel. In the past nine months, China — by steadily expanding its troop deployments through new permanent military structures — has gained effective control of much of Doklam, which Bhutan regards as its own territory. Previously, there were no permanent military structures or force deployments on this uninhabited but disputed plateau, which was visited by nomadic shepherds and Bhutanese and Chinese mobile patrols other than in the harsh winter.

Satellite images since last autumn show how rapidly China has expanded its military footprint in Doklam, wreaking environmental degradation in a once-unspoiled place. China's new control there precludes India intervening again at Bhutan's behest.

So, just as "China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the US", to quote the admiral in charge of America's Indo-Pacific naval forces, Beijing today is in a position to call the shots across the Doklam Plateau other than the site where the standoff with India occurred. But right next to the standoff site, located at the plateau's southwestern corner, China has built military fortifications and facilities overlooking Indian positions.

Yet there is no debate in India on how Doklam was lost. Although the defence minister in March grudgingly admitted China's construction of helipads and other military structures in Doklam so as to "maintain"



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troop deployments even in the severe winter. New Delhi has tried to obfuscate the increasing Chinese control of the remote plateau so as not to dilute the "victory" it had sold to the world last summer.

To be sure, India has no territorial claim to any part of Doklam. Also, with Thimphu and New Delhi revising their 1949 treaty in 2007, India has ceded its right to guide Bhutan's foreign policy. But, as underscored by the Indian Army's presence in Bhutan, India still has an implicit obligation to defend Bhutan's territorial integrity. Last summer, it intervened as Bhutan's de facto security guarantor, driven by the threat to its own security from the Chinese attempt to

construct a military road to the strategic Jampheri Ridge, overlooking India's most vulnerable point — the "Chicken Neck".

But, a year later, it is apparent that an India increasingly mired in domestic politics has failed both to defend Bhutan's territorial sovereignty and to thwart the Chinese threat to its "Chicken Neck". Satellite images show China is building an alternative road from eastern Doklam toward the Jampheri Ridge. So, despite blocking a road construction last summer in Doklam's southwest, India finds its "Chicken Neck" looking vulnerable again. China, with its extensive new all-weather military infrastructure and forward-deployments in Doklam, is now capable of executing deep incursions into India's Siliguri Corridor.

Against this backdrop, the silence in India on a fundamentally changed scenario is troubling. The silence indeed is reminiscent of the way Beijing captured Aksai Chin in the mid-1950s while India was chanting the Hindi-Chini bhai bhai mantra. Today, in the absence of an effective strategy against China's stealth aggression in the Himalayas and its growing inroads in India's maritime backyard, an increasingly defensive New Delhi has sought to make peace with Beijing.

Make no mistake: the main Doklam lesson is that India's perennial preoccupation with domestic political issues, coupled with its reactive mode due to absence of strategic thinking, allows China to seize the initiative in the Himalayas. More fundamentally, Doklam illustrates that while India may be content with a tactical win, China has the tenacity and guile to outfox its rival and win at the strategic level.

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The views expressed are personal