

Doklam: The Game of Shadows

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Doklam is turning out to be a classic game of shadows, making it often difficult to tell apart the symbolic from the substantive. This has made for a highly surreal debate with India and China mistaking Doklam to be yet another episode in their geopolitical contest. It has left lurking in the shadows the larger normative contest between India and China for regional leadership. What lends it a touch of drama is that it is a contest between an increasingly impatient China that wants to get on with the job and a reluctant India which would much rather get out of the way.

Part of the reason it has ended up with a bad bargain with China is that India's crisis diplomacy has often worked without a credible notion of what the endgame is. This could well be a problem of not knowing what the problem is. For instance, the confidence-building measures India has negotiated with China have by and large aimed at conflict prevention, content with only "managing" differences. This explains why the 1993 and 1996 agreements and confidence-building measures have not segued into a higher order goal of conflict transformation. By setting the bar of peace low by design, is it any wonder that India has ended up hitting lower?

Doklam could just be what Indian diplomacy needs to step out of the shadows and begin to reset the terms of its engagement with China as well as the large regional order. And while it is at it, could India turn this crisis into an opportunity for leverage? The answer to that will depend on what sort of a bargainer India is likely to be. If its pre-bargaining communication skills are anything to go by, the record is not a very promising one. But with a little more political imagination than it has displayed so far, India could strike some very interesting bargains and gain a measure of normative advantage in the process. As a possible exit strategy from the stand-off, could India signal some sort of a qualified engagement in the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative? This is neither a far-fetched nor implausible notion given that India is already a participant in the Bangladesh China India Myanmar Economic Corridor and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, two initiatives that are closely associated with the OBOR. This could be an attractive incentive, given that it is impossible to overestimate the stakes China has in a climate of regional peace and stability. It could also be a credible threat for the same reasons, since continued escalation of tensions by China could potentially close the diplomatic window in India for such a trade-off. At the end of the day, the game of shadows is a leveler of sorts, distributing both risks and opportunities in equal measure to its players.