

## ARGUMENT

# Is India Starting to Flex Its Military Muscles?

A new willingness to use force beyond its borders suggests that a sleeping giant may be awakening.

BY SUMIT GANGULY, S. PAUL KAPUR | OCTOBER 17, 2017, 4:26 PM

Indian military recruits during a parade near Srinagar, India, on March 4, 2015. (Rouf Bhat/AFP/Getty Images) INDIA-KASHMIR-POLITICS-DEFENCE

This summer, India deployed troops to prevent China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) from constructing a road on the Doklam plateau near the contested Bhutan-China-India border. Indian forces stood in the path of the construction crews, blocking their work and at times even tussling with Chinese troops. Despite increasingly harsh warnings from Beijing, including the threat of "all-out confrontation," the Indians held fast. After a nearly two-month standoff, both sides disengaged and the PLA stopped its road-building activity, though China made clear that it would "continue fulfilling its sovereign rights" by stationing troops and patrolling in the area.

It is tempting to dismiss Doklam as yet another inconsequential Sino-Indian spat in a long-disputed border region. But that would be a mistake. The standoff suggests that changes may be afoot in India — changes that could significantly alter India's strategic character.

India, in its 70-year history, has rarely sought to employ force beyond its borders. When it has done so, it has generally faced relatively weak adversaries, such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka during the late 1980s, and potential coup-makers in the Maldives in 1988. In the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, India confronted an able adversary, and it attacked well into enemy territory, nearly reaching the border city of Lahore. But India did not seek this conflict, which began when Pakistan attempted to seize Kashmir with irregular and

conventional forces. India's most ambitious military operation occurred in 1971, when it launched a large-scale armored thrust into East Pakistan, severing Pakistan's Eastern and Western wings and helping to create the new state of Bangladesh. India acted only after an influx into West Bengal of refugees fleeing Pakistan's civil war had forced its hand, however. Unable to absorb the flow of new arrivals, it had little choice but to attack East Pakistan and put an end to the crisis.

The modesty of this martial record has helped to create the impression of a strategically passive India, which despite its considerable economic and military heft is hesitant to use force in anything more than domestic policing and counterinsurgency operations. The accuracy of this characterization is of more than academic interest. India has emerged as a central partner in U.S. efforts to balance rising Chinese power in the Indian Ocean/Asia-Pacific region, and Washington has **invested heavily** in helping to build Indian strategic capacity through arms sales, technology sharing, joint military exercises, and deepening diplomatic engagement. An India unwilling to use force beyond its borders would be of limited utility to regional balancing efforts and a poor choice for a close partnership with the United States.

It is easy to exaggerate the likelihood that India will prove to be a passive behemoth. Its strategic track record is more complicated than initial appearances suggest. India has engaged potent adversaries in the past, including numerically superior Chinese forces in 1962, a qualitatively better-armed Pakistan in 1965, and a nuclear-armed Pakistan in 1999. Although India did not launch these conflicts, and not all of them crossed international borders, they did involve protracted combat that entailed significant cost and risk.

But now India may be evincing an increased willingness to employ force beyond the confines of its own territory. The Doklam standoff, in which India deployed troops to Bhutan in response to Chinese provocations, was particularly notable in this regard. What prompted India to adopt such a confrontational policy?

The answers to this question are manifold. First, India is treaty-bound to cooperate closely with Bhutan on strategic matters. This cooperation is broadly understood to imply an Indian obligation to ensure Bhutanese security. The Bhutanese government opposed China's road-building, labeling it a "direct violation" of existing boundary agreements and **calling** for a return to the status quo.

Second, even though China was not building its road on Indian soil, the project threatened India's security. Doklam is not only perilously close to the Indian border but also near the Siliguri Corridor (often called the "chicken's neck"), which links India's heartland with its northeastern region. At its narrowest point, this corridor is only about 17 miles wide. In the event of a war, a PLA pincer movement could cut off India's northeast from the rest of the country — a fear has long plagued military planners in New Delhi.

Third, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration appears to believe more than many previous Indian governments in the utility of force in addressing security concerns. For example, in June 2015, Indian troops crossed the border into Myanmar and attacked the camps of anti-Indian insurgents. Just over a year later, Indian commandos crossed the Line of Control dividing India from Pakistani territory in the disputed territory of Kashmir, and attacked a number of Pakistan-supported terrorist training camps. Although previous governments had conducted similar operations, they had carefully avoided discussing them publicly. In this case, however, Indian officials then provided detailed **public briefings** about the raids. Indeed, Modi, in a **public address** in New York, went so far as to say that, "When India conducted surgical strikes, the world experienced our power and realized that India practices restraint but can show her power when needed." The current government's willingness to not only acknowledge these operations, but actually to highlight them, marks a distinct policy shift.

In the case of China, despite initial friendly overtures following Modi's election, India has adopted a more assertive stance. It made clear to China's President Xi Jinping during his state visit to India in 2014 that Delhi would stand firm in the Ladakh region of Kashmir, where the PLA had made a number of limited probes. Then, when confronted with China's road-building activities at Doklam, India moved quickly to aid Bhutan, deploying troops to block further Chinese progress. (In 2013, under the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India had downplayed protracted Chinese incursions into Indian territory in Ladakh.)

Finally, India's understanding of its self-interest appears to be expanding. By stopping China's road-building project, it protected not only itself but also a smaller neighbor from coercion by a powerful third country. In doing so, India not only demonstrated that it would resist Chinese bullying, but also showed that India would, at least in some cases, seek to prevent China from bullying others.

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This suggests a more muscular approach not just to defending India's own interests, but also to preserving the existing regional order, and may hint at the emergence of a more robust Indian leadership role in the region. In private conversations, Indian strategists acknowledge that such leadership implications were an important part of their calculus in dealing with the crisis.

The question now is whether this more assertive Indian approach will endure. India was in a particularly favorable legal and geographical position to intervene in Doklam, and the characteristics of future crises could differ considerably. The Indian government shows no signs of adopting a more conciliatory stance, however. A **post-crisis statement**, though measured, made clear that India would not accept forceful attempts to alter the status quo. Border agreements, it said, must be "scrupulously respected."

Moreover, the winds favor New Delhi: The Doklam episode was generally interpreted as a victory within India, garnering largely favorable press coverage and commentary from the strategic community. This will create domestic political incentives to continue to pursue forward-leaning policies. Finally, general strategic momentum is pushing India in an increasingly competitive direction. India has become one of the world's largest arms importers, while also emphasizing indigenous defense production through its "Make in India" campaign. Its projects include raising a **mountain corps**, modernizing its fleet of **combat aircraft**, expanding its , and improving its **nuclear capabilities**. In addition, India is working closely with partners such as Japan, Vietnam, and the United States to hedge against regional security challenges through efforts such as joint exercises, training, and military sales. The U.S.-India relationship is especially important; Indian leaders have described it as "**indispensable**," and the two countries are cooperating on a number of significant projects, including the joint development of jet engines and aircraft-carrier technology.

All of these developments suggest that Doklam was not a wholly unique event, but rather part of a broader trend toward increased Indian strategic activism. And the standoff's favorable outcome may encourage the Modi government to adopt even more activist policies in the future. If this proves true, India will face an increased risk of regional confrontation, including more Doklam-like standoffs along the contested Sino-Indian border. But India may also begin to shed its reputation for passivity, emerging as less of a strategic bystander than as a stakeholder in and defender of the existing regional order.

*The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Department of Defense.*

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