

India-China Relations: An Analysis of the Doklam Dispute

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Abstract

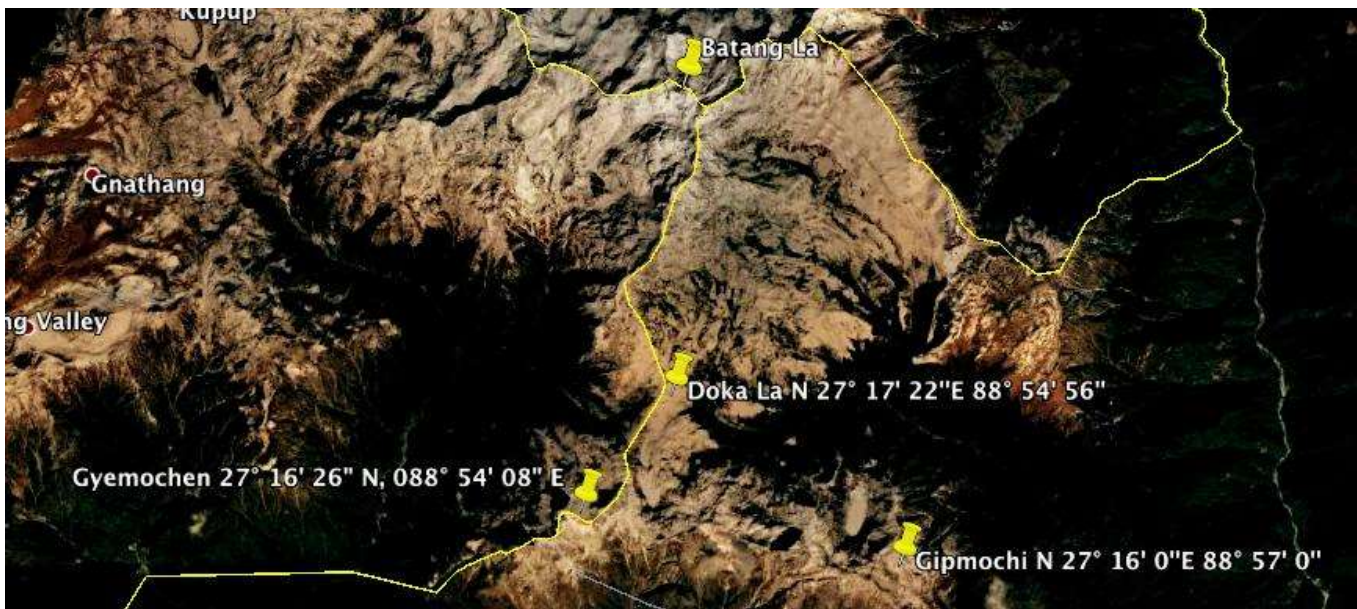
The Doklam standoff, the most recent crisis between the two neighbours, withstood aggressive rhetoric of several weeks before the eventual mutual decision to disengage. A plateau located on the strategic tri-junction of Bhutan, the Chumbi Valley in China and the state of Sikkim in India and overlooking the Siliguri corridor in the Indian state of West Bengal is of security concern for India. China's infrastructure-building activities in the region consequently disquieted the Indian side. However, the pragmatism of both leaderships de-escalated tensions as is evident from the quick dissipation of hostilities. It is interesting to note that notwithstanding the crisis, Chinese and Indian leaders were ready to engage with each other right after the resolution of Doklam, communicating to the international community the salience of dialogue and pragmatism in managing the crises. It has apparently settled in Doklam, where the two Asian giants India and China were involved in a longest standoff in three decades. Amid media reports of continued Chinese activities, the India that there has been no new development in Doklam since the "expeditious disengagement" of border personnel in Dolam, part of Doklam region in August 2017. The "Game of chicken" in international relations provides a useful framework to analyse such standoffs and their outcome. The dispute in Doklam which began with the Chinese road building project drew both countries into a tense face off in a third country signifying a larger competition for regional and global influence. China's decision to refrain from executing its road building project helped end the six weeks-long standoff in the Himalayas.

Key words: Role of Bhutan, International Icon, Geographical Location

Introduction

This paper would focus geographical and geopolitical aspect to the ongoing Sino-Indian standoff in the Doklam region. Geography locates Bhutan is a buffer state a sensitive part of the Himalayan belt. Its history, small size and state capacity have made it an element in the geopolitical contest between India and China. The Doklam issue came to the fore between June and July last year almost without preamble. Since the clashes at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967, this border had been relatively quiet as the alignment of the Sino-Indian border in Sikkim

is, to a large extent, accepted by both sides. However, there has always been a problem with the China-India-Bhutan trijunction. In 2007, India rushed the deployment of forces to the region following the destruction by China of a number of Indian bunkers in the Batang La area. China also laid claim to the 2.1 sq. km “Finger Area” in north Sikkim that protrudes into the Sora Funnel and dismantled some cairns marking the border in the region. The ongoing crisis has amplified the question-mark over where that trijunction lies. Indian and Bhutanese maps put it some 200 metres south-east of Batang La, while the Chinese say it is at a place called Gipmochi which is also confused for Gyemochen (or Gamochen). As of August 2, the Chinese say that the name of the mountain is Ji Mu Ma Zhen.



Source: www.wikipedia.com

India has no claim on the territory south of Batang La which it believes to be Bhutan's, but China has insistently contested the Bhutanese claim; as far back as 2005, they had built a road in the area that terminated at a point below the Indian posts at Doka La. Chinese vehicles would come to this point and thereafter their personnel would go on foot and patrol the region south of this till the Jampheri or Zompelri ridge, where a Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) post is located. On June 16, 2017 however, the Chinese brought heavy road-building equipment to the area and began constructing a road from the point below Doka La to the Bhutanese post on Jampheri ridge. This provoked the Indian intervention on June 18 to block the road construction, and thus beginning the current crisis. There were expectations that the visit of India's National Security Adviser at a BRICS meeting at the end of July would aid in tempering the crisis and restoring the status quo ante. Whether or not this is happening is not clear at this point. China issued a lengthy document outlining their case. Separately, the Chinese spokesperson Geng Shuang said in an official briefing that the Indian action posed a “grave challenge to the peace and stability and normal international order,” and that China would not tolerate it.

Nevertheless, the August 2 document noted a reduction in the Indian troops in the area, and indicating that the Chinese too have cut back on their personnel. The Doklam crisis will play out is difficult to hazard. The best way to deal with the immediate issue is to achieve status quo ante June 16. Those issues relate not only to the finalisation of the Bhutan-China border which must be situated in the Bhutan-India relationship, if not the Indian border settlement with China but also the larger geopolitical moves being made by China in the South Asian and Indian Ocean Region.

International Icon

The international relations for decades, the emerging international system, post-Cold War have been dubbed post-hegemonic. The system necessitates cooperation and partnership among countries with a focus on meaningful diplomacy and collaboration. Such diplomacy is conspicuous in contemporary Asia a region widely acknowledged as the new theatre of power play in the 21st century with its robust economies, rising powers and significant geo-strategic location. Both the Asian juggernauts China and India ancient civilizations with rich histories suffering from post-imperial ideologies are struggling for more strategic space while securing economic development for their people. While the former is critical for cementing their great power status on the global arena, economics is the key to sustaining the success. Naturally, providing for their people has been the dominant national discourse in China and India with both leaderships prioritising economic wellbeing.

The Cold War witnessed the Sino-Indian conflict over Tibet in 1962 and was marked by a protracted contest with assertiveness prevailing over peace and harmony. While diplomatic communication did exist during the time as noted from exchanges of several high-level bilateral visits, it wasn't the preferred option for safeguarding security and national interests. However as alluded to earlier, the post-hegemonic international system has produced different priorities forcing rising powers like China and India to adapt and adjust for the greater good. With the international system drifting further away from the old system of power play, the regional order has also readjusted with countries reorienting foreign policies for addressing new challenges. China and India have also been reorienting their behaviours towards each other. Effective communication has become critical for the leadership of both countries in mutual interactions. Reorientation of foreign policies and interactive approaches have led to both viewing each other as strategic and foreign policy priorities, notwithstanding tensions over unresolved border issues, and ensuring differences don't escalate into full-scale cross-border conflicts.

The Doklam standoff, the most recent crisis between the two neighbours, withstood belligerent rhetoric of several weeks before the eventual mutual decision to disengage. A plateau located on the strategic tri-junction of Bhutan, the Chumbi Valley in China and the state of Sikkim in India and overlooking the Siliguri corridor in

the Indian state of West Bengal is of security concern for India. China's infrastructure-building activities in the region consequently disquieted the Indian side. However, the pragmatism of both leaderships de-escalated tensions as is evident from the quick dissipation of hostilities. It is interesting to note that notwithstanding the crisis, Chinese and Indian leaders were ready to engage with each other right after the resolution of Doklam, communicating to the international community the salience of dialogue and pragmatism in managing the crises. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Beijing for the BRICS summit soon after in early September 2017 highlighting the seriousness of the current leaderships to interact successfully with each other.

Doklam though is not the first instance of China and India resorting to effective communication for preventing escalation of hostilities into regional bilateral conflicts. Pragmatism and maturity on the part of both leaderships in this regard was demonstrated earlier in Ladakh in April 2013, when a telephone conversation between India's National Security Advisor and his counterpart in Beijing helped to resolve a three-week long border impasse. Confrontation was similarly avoided during President Xi Jinping's visit to India a year later in 2014, when there were reports of alleged incursions by Chinese troops into Indian Territory. Enabling mechanisms like establishing 'hotline' connections between the heads of states and Army headquarters for use during difficult situations have been instrumental in minimising the possibility of conflict between the two neighbours. While standoffs dominate headlines, economic exchanges have been rapidly growing between the two countries. Growth in trade has been marked by an increase in cross-border investments. Non-state actors have been active in influencing perceptions of neighbours. However, the two and a half months of standoff at Doklam are a harsh reminder that in spite of greater engagement, fundamental differences remain, particularly since both countries are locked into competition over greater strategic influence in the region and world. While wars are no more the default option and communication is primary in bilateral ties, geo-strategic competition greatly enhances the challenge for effective communication and meaningful diplomacy.

Bhutan role in Doklam Crisis

The Sikkim-Tibet border was defined in 1890 through the Anglo-Chinese Convention that was signed in Kolkata on 17 March 1890. Article I of the Convention said that the boundary of Sikkim and Tibet would be "the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta...from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu." The beginning point of the boundary line would be "Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier...." However, there does not seem to have been any map attached to the Convention. Bhutan was not party to this agreement, nor was Sikkim or Tibet; the agreement was solely between two empires the British and the Qing. The Tibetans refused to implement the convention and for this, they were punished when Francis Young husband, using the Jelep La route, went through the Chumbi Valley to storm Lhasa in his 1903-

1904 expedition. The hapless Dalai Lama sought the aid of the Chinese emperor and later, another convention was signed between Great Britain and China in Peking in 1906, to confirm China's "suzerainty" over Tibet in exchange for a number of rights for the British.

In the wake of this development the British encouraged the creation of Bhutan under a hereditary king in 1907, recognised it through a 1910 treaty, and brought it under its own "suzerainty." Bhutan was seen as a buffer between India and Chinese-controlled Tibet. It was in 1954 that China first published a map claiming large areas of Bhutan. Following the Tibetan revolt, China seized a number of enclaves held by Bhutan in Tibet. Bhutan, as noted earlier, was not party to the 1890 convention and has not ratified it at any point. However, the original survey of the Bhutan boundary and the first official map of Bhutan were made with the help of the Survey of India in 1961-1963. Subsequently, the Bhutanese organised their own surveys and prepared a map of Bhutan in the mid-1980s that was approved by the 68th session of the National Assembly in 1989. Simultaneously, they engaged India and China in border talks to resolve outstanding issues. The Bhutan-India boundary was demarcated in 1963 and 1971, the demarcation and the boundary pillar work was completed.



The Chumbi Valley region has historical echoes in the geopolitics of the Himalayas. The Valley offers the shortest and most convenient route between Lhasa and the sea port of Kolkata. It was through Jelep La that Sir Francis Younghusband invaded Tibet. When Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan in September 1958 to persuade it to come out of its isolation, he travelled through the Valley, and was seen off and received by

Chinese officials at his crossing points. When the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1950, the Dalai Lama took up residence in Yadong, in the Chumbi Valley, close to the Indian border and later upon India's urging returned to Lhasa to try to make peace with the Chinese.

The Current Crisis

As has been noted earlier in this report, China had built a dirt track to the area near Doka La in 2005. They used to park their vehicles there and conduct foot patrols to the Jampheri ridge where the RBA maintained an outpost. The PLA construction party began road construction, and the RBA personnel sought to stop them on the basis of the Chinese commitment to maintain status quo in disputed areas. The Chinese say that as a goodwill gesture they had informed the Indian side, once in May and then again in early June, that they were planning the construction. Two days later, Indian Army personnel came down from Doka La to dissuade the Chinese as well and blocked their movement forward. Subsequently, the matter was taken up at the diplomatic level and also discussed at a Border Personnel Meeting at Nathu La. The China had abruptly closed the Nathu La to pilgrims traveling to Kailash Mansarovar. The reports cited the Indian official spokesperson confirming this development, saying that "the matter is being discussed with the Chinese side." According to the reports, the Chinese side claimed that there were landslides in the mountain route on their side.

However, the real story became apparent soon enough when the Chinese official spokesperson Geng Shuang acknowledged that the yatra was indeed barred from the Nathu La due to "security concerns". The official said: "Recently, the Indian border troops crossed the China-India boundary at the Sikkim section and entered the Chinese territory, obstructing Chinese border troops' normal activities in Doklam. The Chinese side has taken proportionate measures in response." He pointed out that the Sikkim part of the Sino-Indian boundary had been defined by the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 which had "repeatedly" been confirmed by India.

The Bhutanese Ambassador in New Delhi that appeared in the road construction was in an area which is disputed between China and Bhutan and was, in fact moving towards a camp of the RBA at Zompelri (Jampheri) ridge. Bhutan has conveyed that the road construction by the PLA is not in keeping with the agreements between China and Bhutan. We have asked them to stop and refrain from changing the status quo. The Bhutanese government issued a press release, reaffirming Namgyel's remarks. It provided a backdrop to the events. The Chinese Army started constructing a motor able road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri... Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic channel, that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before June 2017.

The India-China Relations

India issued a press statement noting China's attempts to alter the status quo in a disputed area near Doka La. According to the statement, in coordination with the Royal Government of Bhutan, Indian personnel who were in Doka La also approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo." The statement made it clear that the events that had transpired were not only about Bhutan, but "would represent a significant change of status quo with security implications for India." In that context, New Delhi did the unexpected and added a new angle to the Sino-Indian border issue. The statement affirmed that there was an agreement between China and India in 2012 that "trijunction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries." Since no public declaration has been made of the agreement, it can be assumed that this was, in fact, an understanding arrived at by the Special Representatives of the two countries.

The statement also made another startling revelation that India was no longer basing its claim in Sikkim on the basis of the 1890 Convention, but on the belief that it only signified a "mutual agreement on the 'basis of alignment', which had also been reconfirmed in 2012. In fact, the statement said, "Further discussions would have to take place to actually finalise the boundary." This fact was remarked on by the Chinese spokesperson, when he complained "As to the statement issued by India's Ministry of External Affairs have noted that this statement completely left out the Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet the Chinese Territory". A translated version was issued by the Chinese embassy in New Delhi. The document recounted the events and restated the point that the Indian side had violated a border that had been settled by the 1890 Convention, accepted by Prime Minister Nehru and reconfirmed by the Indian Special Representative in 2006. "The incident occurred in an area where there is a clear and delimited boundary," it declared, rejecting India's contention that the Chinese road building had security implications for India. It referred to a 1974 resolution by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), declaring that no consideration whatsoever can justify "the invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another state." It also spoke of the importance of stability and inviolability of boundaries in international law.

As for Bhutan, the Chinese note said that the China-Bhutan boundary issue has "nothing to do with India" and that India's intrusion not only violated Chinese territorial sovereignty, "but also challenged Bhutan's sovereignty and independence." China ignored India's point on the 2012 agreements between the two SRs on the final settlement of the trijunction and the contention that all that existed with regard to the 1890 Convention was "a basis for alignment", not a fixed border. Indeed, the use of the term 'delimited' in the August 2 Chinese note suggested that notwithstanding references to demarcation in Nehru's letters, the border does need to be actually demarcated on the ground through boundary pillars and other markers. In fact, given that the term

'delimited' refers to a line being drawn on a map, it is not even clear whether the border was ever even delimited, since there was no map attached to the 1890 Convention. For their part, the Chinese revealed their own take of the SR's discussions when they included a phrase from a May 2006 non-paper given by the Indians which noted, "Both sides agree on the border alignment in the Sikkim sector." This is consistent with the Indian view that, as of now, the agreement is only on the "basis of alignment" and not a delimited and demarcated border. Srinath Raghavan has pointed out that a month later, China replied in their non-paper that based on the 1890 Convention, both sides may "verify and determine the specific alignment of the Sikkim sector and produce a common record.

Moreover, the discrepancy on the location of the trijunction suggests that there are differences about the location of the boundary line, possibly an outcome of the faulty cartography of the past. Indeed, the Chinese document itself suggests that "China and India ought to sign a new boundary convention in their own names to replace the 1890 Convention," though, they say it would not alter the delimited boundary. This is strange, since there are always minor differences in the delimitation of a boundary and its demarcation.

Geographical Location

To begin with, just how the boundary was delimited is not clear. There do not appear to be any maps accompanying the 1890 Convention. Therefore, using the strict construction of the 1890 Convention is fraught with problems. China insists, for one, that the trijunction is at Mount Gipmochi or Mount Ji Mu Ma Zhen. The 1890 convention stipulates that the Sikkim section of the China-India boundary commences at Mount Gipmochi. The biggest problem, of course, is that Bhutan was not party to that treaty and cannot be bound by the wording of that Convention which says that the trijunction must be at Mount Gipmochi. Bhutan and India, on the other hand, place it at a point near Batang La (N27°19'24.83" N & 88°55'2.04"E) based on actual surveys which show that that it the true water-parting point between the Teesta and the Amo Chhu. A record of the 68th session of the Bhutanese National Assembly in 1989 was told that "our proposal was to demarcate Bhutan's boundary with China from Batangla to Merugla upto Sinchela along the ridge" and then down to Amo Chhu river.

But the bigger problem arises from trying to locate Mount Gipmochi. Many old maps show the beginning of the border from a place called Gyemochen. Indeed, the Bhutanese themselves noted, as revealed in the records of the 82nd session of their National Assembly, that "the Chinese had been going from Gyemochen and Chela to Amo Chhu." Gyemochen, with coordinates, is mentioned in a 1937 Survey of India map and a 1955 US military map. A British map of 1923 mentions the same feature of 14,518 ft as Gipmochi. And a 1910 map also mentions a place called Giaomochi but shows the trijunction around Batang La. The conclusion could well be that Gipmochi and Gyemochen are the same place. But that does not seem to be the case. An authoritative

database, one created and maintained by the US Geospatial Intelligence Agency is showing Gipmochi/Gyemochen at two locations. One is at $27^{\circ}16'26.00''\text{N}$ $88^{\circ}54'21.02''\text{E}$ at the Indian border as per the Google maps, and the other some 5 km to its east as the crow flies to its east within Bhutan ($27^{\circ}16'00''\text{N}$ $88^{\circ}54'08''\text{E}$), adjacent to a distinct feature called Elephant Lake.

Clearly, what emerges is the difficulty of relying on an 1890 convention, based on possibly flawed surveys for modern-day boundaries that may have taken place in the early part of the 20th century in a mountainous and inhospitable region. India and China have clearly indicated their intention of following the watershed principle for following their border. But to do it by relying on maps alone would be an imperfect process. It has to be done on the ground. In other words, not only does it have to be delimited, but actually demarcated on the ground.

Looking to the Future

The future of India-China relations might appear bleak. After all, since the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement of 1993, the two countries have maintained stable, even predictable, relations, keeping border issues in check and creating confidence-building measures in the process. Yet the fact remains that India and China have failed to come to a resolution to their border dispute. There have been two distinct cycles over the years. The first was between 1993 and 2003 when the Joint Working Groups sought to stabilise the LAC, as per the agreement of 1993, as a prelude to resolving the dispute itself. Since 2003, they decided that a political dimension needed to be added and appointed Special Representatives to deal with the issue. The SRs have seen 19 rounds of talks in 2005 the two countries signed what was hoped to be a far-reaching agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles of a Border Settlement. More than a decade since, a deal is nowhere in sight. In 2012, Dai Bingguo, the Chinese Special Representative, and his Indian counterpart Shivshankar Menon, drew up an 18 point consensus document on the eve of the former's retirement, summing up the work they had done. The use of this document in the current standoff by both sides could well be a signal that the Special Representative process has run out of steam. Parallel to this, China and Bhutan have had 24 rounds of border talks. As has been shown in this report, those, too, have run their course without successfully leading to a settlement.

The present crisis has shown that today, any resolution of Bhutan's boundary issue must be embedded in the bigger picture of a Sino-Indian border settlement. With the Sino-Indian and the China-Bhutan processes facing a dead-end, the time has come for the countries to explore new institutional mechanisms of resolving their border dispute and maintaining peace and tranquillity on their border. Further, there is the larger view of both China and India emerging as global powers. The root of the problem lies in the rise of China from 1949 till today.

What is the issue?

1. Indian troops intervened to block the path of Chinese soldiers engaged in building road-works on the Doklam plateau of Bhutan's territory that Beijing laid claim.
2. Beijing responded by closing access to Indian pilgrims seeking to proceed through the Nathu La pass on to Kailash-Mansarovar.

What is the source of the conflict?

1. Doklam plateau is a 269sq km plateau in Bhutan, which overlooks the strategic Chumbi Valley.
2. The plateau is claimed by China.
3. Bhutan has a written agreement with China that pending the final resolution of the boundary issue, peace and tranquility should be maintained.





Why China is interested in the region?

The road, which passes through Bhutan's territory, has significantly enhanced China's military logistics in the region.

1. China aims to promote the development of the Yadong region, which is connected to Lhasa with a highway.
2. China is also aiming to establish formal ties with Bhutan.
3. It was reported to have Pressured Bhutan by saying it would not agree to a border deal until Bhutan allowed it to open a diplomatic mission in that country.
4. It would also like to adopt a military posture in the area to ensure that it can defeat India in any military contest.
5. At the same time it is seeking to check India's efforts to help Bhutan.

What are India's interests?

- Indian Army regards the Doklam plain as strategically crucial because it opens a path to the Siliguri Corridor which links the northeast to the rest of India.
- India also can't afford to abandon its diplomatic ties with Bhutan

Conclusion

The international forums and the consistent efforts of nations have solved several issues in a call standoff will no doubt inspire introspection and review in both India and China of how each assesses the other's interests and objectives. The outstanding border delimitations between them are now but details minutiae in the grand scheme of things. The Doklam standoff ultimately is but another chapter in the still-ongoing story of how Asia's two rising powers despite their mutual mistrust manage their differences in the 21st century. What both countries might have bargained outside the books could be mused and talked upon but not known for certainty. But, it is not the India or China who emerged as victor of this Doklam-Standoff but its peace who wins it. It is an absolute win-win situation for all the concerning countries. India wins as it has shown that the tiger has become strong enough to nullify the dragon's moves. It also showed that India is capable of standing ground not just for itself but for its allies too. China wins as it has shown maturity befitting a superpower and not escalating into war, which could've been catastrophic for the entire world. Bhutan wins as its territory is safe and the disputed area can be resolved through discussions now. The neighbouring both countries would be looking to better-off their relations and prosper trade in future.

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