

Doklam Stand-Off 2017: A Geopolitical Rivalry between India, China and Bhutan

Maharshi Dayanand University
Research Journal ARTS
2020, Vol. 19 (1) pp.95-108
ISSN 0972-706X
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<http://www.mdu.ac.in/Journals/about.html>

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Abstract

India and China, rising almost simultaneously as significant powers, share a disputed border. The recent stand-off between India and China on the Doklam plateau was the most recent in an inexorably long history of contention and unease along the about 2,500-mile fringe which has stressed relations. In spite of the fact that the most up to date invasion by Chinese powers happened in the Doklam region along Bhutan's border with China, and not the Sino-Indian outskirt, Indian personnel reacted in kind to back up their Bhutanese neighbours.

The Doklam stand-off among India and China seems to have revealed another time of India's China approach. Despite the fact that the contention probably won't have been completely settled and the likelihood of repeat in a matter of seconds stays high, a mix of decided stance and clever strategy can prevail with regards to ensuring India's interests versus China's forceful stances in South Asia and the neighbourhood. The Doklam crises have been a watershed moment of sorts. The main objective of this article is that both nuclear rival countries should take steps to stabilize their relationship and reduce the chances of a conflict.

Keywords: Doklam, India-China relations, Tri-junction, Border Dispute, Geopolitical. Bhutan

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"Borders are scratched across the hearts of men
 By strangers with a calm judicial pen
 And when the borders bleed we watch with dread
 The lines of ink across the map turn red"

'Murya Manues'

Introduction

There is a geographical and geopolitical scenario ongoing on Sino-Indian stand-off in the Doklam region. Geographically, Bhutan is on a sensitive area of the Himalayan belt. Its history, small size has made it an element in the geopolitical contest between India and China. Since the conflict at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967, this border has been generally tranquil for quite a while as the arrangement of the Sino-Indian fringe in Sikkim is, to an enormous degree, acknowledged by the two sides. However, there has consistently been an issue over the China-India-Bhutan tri-junction. In 2007, India rushed her forces to the region following the destruction by China of several Indian posts in the Batang La area. China laid claim to the 2.1-sq km "Finger Area" in north Sikkim and protruded into the Sora Funnel and demaged some cairns marking the border in the area. This story was repeated in 2012 (Bhattacharjee, 2017).

The ongoing crisis has highlighted the question-mark where actually that trijunction lies. Indian and Bhutanese maps show some 200 metres south-east of Batang La, while the Chinese claim the place as Gipmochi which is confused for Gyemochen (or Gamochen), As of August 2, the Chinese say that the name of the mountain is Ji Mu Ma Zhen. India does not 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 (Das, 2007). Chinese vehicles would come to this point and after that their personnel would go on foot and patrol the region south of this hill to the Jampheri or Zompelri ridge, where a Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) post is located. On June 16 this year, the Chinese brought heavy road-building machines to the area and began construction of a road from the point below Doka La to the Bhutanese post of Jampheri ridge. This provoked the Indian administration on June 18 to block the road construction and this lead to beginning of the current crisis (Basha, 2017).

Historical Background and Claims

I. Doklam: Gateway of Geopolitics for India and China and its Security implications on India

Doklam in Bhutan, also known as Doka La in India and Donglang in China. It is the small

area of 90 square kilometres becoming a crux point of geopolitics for India and China and a new Eurasian War theatre. Doklam plateau located in Bhutan to the North of India (Sikkim), Bhutan and China (Tibet) tri junction, juxtapose to Narrow Chumbi valley. The ongoing intense military standoff between Indian border guards (Indian Army and ITBP- Indo Tibetan Border Police) and China's PLA (People's Liberation Army) forces at Doklam was reportedly instigated by China's PLA forces attempts to construct a class 5 motorable road, which is supposed to connect Doka La (Doklam plateau) and Jampheri ridge in Bhutan, which facilitates smooth transit for China's military logistics and may overlooks India's topographic strategic advantage in Doklam (Asthana, 2017). Doklam plateau is a disputed territory between Bhutan and China, both did tried to resolve the dispute, but failed to turn out to a mutually agreeable outcome. Pertaining to disputed Doklam, China and Bhutan had two agreements in 1988 and 1998, which permits them to maintain status quo as before 1959 case. While India and Bhutan accorded a treaty, by which India may control the defence and foreign affairs of Bhutan i.e. upholding the sovereignty of Bhutan is India's concern. When china transgressed into Doklam, India stepped in on behalf of Bhutan and stopped the Chinese attempts of road construction, in retaliation china destroyed the bunkers of Indian army and prevented the Indian Kailash Mansarovar pilgrims to pass through Nathu La pass (Chansoria, 2017). We shall further look into the matter, for why India and China were studiously competing for this tiny territory. Doklam, though a tiny land mass embracing a huge geopolitical and strategic advantage for the contesting parties as follows.

II. India's Geopolitical strategies in Doklam

India starting at now is solid in Doklam level, as far as holding authority over key mountain edges over the Indo - Bhutan - China tri intersection, by which India can without much of a stretch flush out China's hostility in Chumbi valley, which is a narrow channel like valley which may trap china's military during key war confrontations (Deepak, 2017).

India decisively won the two encounters in 1967 at Nathu La and Cho La against china, owing to its strategic topographic upper hand over china at key ridge positions.

India's control of Doklam will facilitates easy transport of its military supplies to its different north eastern army camps.

India can further its diplomatic relations with Bhutan, and check's Chinese presence in Bhutan (Dutta, 2017).

On top of it, Siliguri corridor also known as Chicken's neck - a narrow stretch of land located in North West Bengal, which connects North eastern India to rest of India,

which is a sensitive and high secure zone of India. The same shall be safeguarded against Chinese aggression by strong Indian presence in Doklam.

India by curbing china at Doklam can send a strong signal across the globe, particularly to South East Asian countries, in how to defend china's aggressive unilateralism by a holistic military and strategic policy (Ganguly, 2017).

III. China's Geopolitical strategies in Doklam

For China, which is aiming to build a road through Doklam to Jampheri will neglect the Indian vital favorable position of holding edge lines and key mountains in the area.

China's connects to Jampheri will permit them gain admittance to Jaldhara hydroelectric venture, which is the scaffold associating India and Bhutan, along these lines checking India's presence in Bhutan (Joshi, 2017).

China's stronghold in Doklam will put pressure on India's Chicken's neck (Siliguri passageway). China may likewise check Indian military and protection supplies to its North eastern Indian armed force camps.

Doklam under China's influence will improves china's haggling power with India at key worldwide engagements, which may compromise India's security and key interests.

China - Bhutan may open conciliatory channel throughout time, which may influence India - Bhutan relations over the long haul.

China intensely putting resources into the Chumbi valley, in the method for up degree of rail and road foundation extends consequently, controlling Doklam is basic to shield the china's speculations (Lahiri, 2017).

The current Doklam standoff can be viewed as China's warning to growing India - U.S. relations which were at best, as it was occurred during Indian P.M. Narendra Modi's visit to U.S. India cautiously dealing the current Doklam crisis by placing its soldiers in a non-combative mode (Nozzle of the gun directing downwards), but any misadventure and miscalculation by China may escalates the tense standoff to a full scale war (Saran, 2017).

India, China and the 2017 "Doklam 1.0" Crisis

China uses its power and pursues an aggressive approach to retain a strategic advantage over its neighbours in the arena of border diplomacy. A clear guiding principle in this behaviour is China's evaluation of its national interest. In the case of the Burma border, China wished to secure its flank to focus on India in the Himalayas. In the case of Bhutan, China wished to cajole a minor power that India seemed intent on using as a buffer state. Evidently, by securing the first-mover advantage, China intends to keep India on the back foot and focussed on the apparent vulnerability of its northern border, preventing India

from pursuing closer ties with Japan and the USA, or, for example, exploiting the Tibet issue (Stobdan, 2017).

Why Doklam?

This brings up the question: why Doklam? The answer should be evident in the below image.



Figure 1. A view from the Doklam Plateau looking South Assam and the Siliguri corridor are easily visible as would be any military mobilisation. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kanisetti

The Jampheri Ridge is the only major geographical obstacle to China having a direct vantage point to the Siliguri Corridor, as evidenced by the illustration above. The Ridge has a permanent force of the Royal Bhutanese Army deployed on it. However, it is doubtful whether they would pose any impediment in the event China mobilises its considerable forces built up in the area (The Economic Times, 2018). An easier route of access to the Siliguri Corridor that the area provides is through eastern Doklam, past the Mochu/Torsa junction and down the Mochu River through Western Bhutan. Another route is Yatung-Sinchulung-Damthang-Paro, and from there to Phuntsholing on the India border (Mitra, 2018).

What seems clear from the image is that the road networks and defences that China has built up to give the area some strategic significance. Were there no such infrastructure, it is apparent that India would hold much of the higher ground around the plateau, including deployments on the Eastern Sikkim watershed and a post on Batang La (Shang, 2017).

With the new disposition of Chinese forces, however, the psychological balance is tilted in their favour, with China outflanking India's forces along the Sikkim border and pointed directly towards its critical strategic vulnerability - the Siliguri Corridor.

Geographically, the Siliguri Corridor is vulnerable to a Chinese threat. While the question of whether China can overcome India's forces in Sikkim, outflank them, or mount an air assault may be conjectural, the so-called "Chicken's Neck" at Siliguri is a threat in being. Some military leaders in India have downplayed the potential of the Chinese threat because of the strength of India's defensive posture. This is a tactical viewpoint and discounts the permanency of the strategic advantage (Kapila, 2017).

The genuine risk that the corridor could be severed, potentially cutting lines of communication to India's North-East, is a constant political threat that gives China a significant pressure point on India's leadership. The question of which India's neighbour is in Doklam, and whether this neighbour is hostile or friendly is, therefore, key to India's national interest.

Doklam 1.0

China's presence in Doklam is not a recent development. Incursions by Chinese patrols into the disputed territory have been core to its Himalayan strategy for decades. Incursions in Doklam have been reported since 1966, ranging from cattle herders to foot patrols. Track construction activities in the northern part of the plateau continued throughout, and foot patrols became increasingly common from 2007 onwards when China dismantled two Indian bunkers that were constructed ahead of the ridgeline. No public complaint was raised about this issue by the Indian government than even though the territory, as now, was disputed at the time. As the images below show, Chinese presence in Doklam has steadily increased over the years. Before the 2017 crisis, some sources indicate that China had conveyed to the Indian military that they would be upgrading the existing jeep track at Doklam. Presumably, this had been conveyed to New Delhi, but it is not known what decision had been taken. This jeep track was being increasingly used by China for its patrols to reconnoitre the area and walk up to the TorsaNalla and return. The point to note is that there was no permanent deployment in the Doklam Plateau (Madan, 2017).

On the 16th of June, 2017, Chinese troops attempted to construct a permanent road towards the Doka La and moved in heavy equipment. On the 18th, Indian forces moved in to bring a physical halt to the construction. China immediately escalated, turning the issue into a public relations bonanza and ramping up the pressure on India. In a press conference on the 28th of June, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang claimed that:

"Doklam has been a part of China since ancient times. It does not belong to Bhutan, still

less India. That is an indisputable fact supported by historical and jurisprudential evidence and the ground situation. It is utterly unjustifiable if the Indian side wants to make an issue of it. China's construction of the road in Doklam is an act of sovereignty on its territory. It is completely justified and lawful, and others have no right to interfere" (Nanda, 2018).

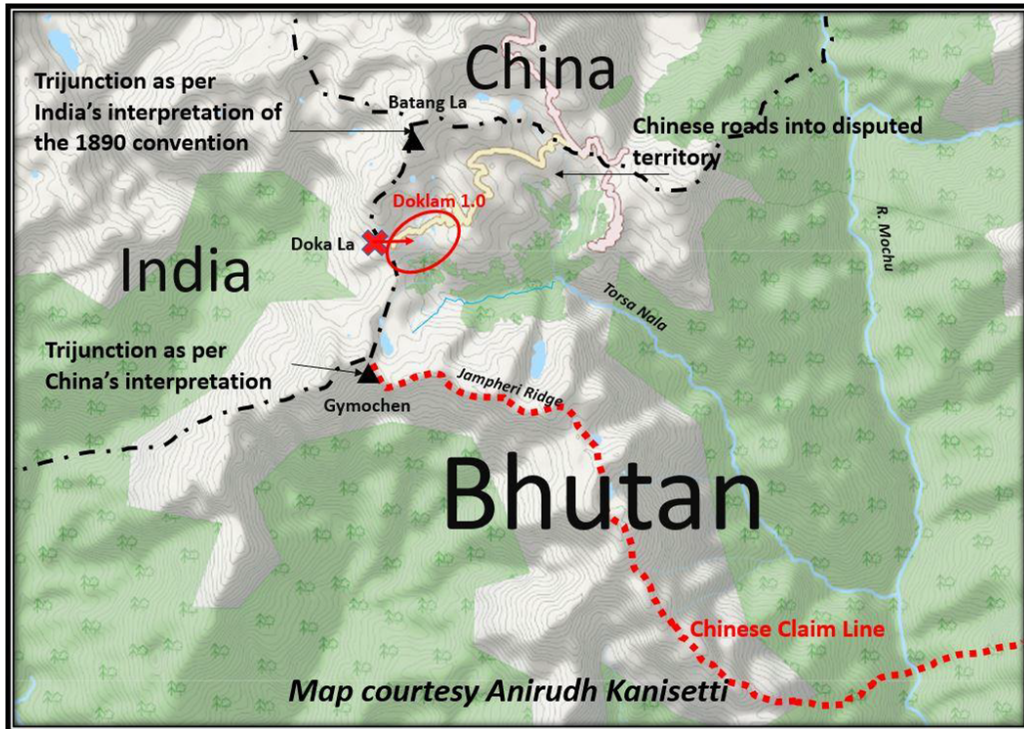


Figure 2. Map of the disputed area, with China's claim line highlighted in red.

Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kanisetti

The emphasis on the 1890 Convention and China's sudden absolute claims to the region appear even more absurd given that they agreed in 2012 that the trijunction would be settled in consultation with third countries. Furthermore, an agreement based on alignment was not the same as a final settlement on the trijunction. When asked about this, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Chinese embassy in New Delhi provided a facetious explanation of the understanding and reiterated that the issue was about the 1890 convention, while also stating that India should immediately withdraw from Doklam, describing the move as "undisciplined", and warning that there could be severe consequences. China was not done with its provocative behaviour. Perhaps with an eye to the domestic audience, it announced that "India's regional hegemony has been shaken" (Panda, 2018), released visuals of live-fire drills in Tibet, and released the now-infamous "Seven Sins" video, featuring a Chinese person in racist garb meant to cast them as a Sikh.

India, on the other hand, retained a relatively subdued official profile in the public domain despite the Indian media's reasonably extensive coverage. The political narrative projected was that of India standing up to China's military aggression. Much can be gleaned, however, from recently submitted testimonies, part of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs on Sino-Indian relations. Former Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar claimed that de-escalation had begun with a conversation between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi at the G-20 Hamburg Summit on July 7th. He testified that multiple rounds of backchannel talks -to be precise - continued while Indian forces at the face-off site remained at their positions. The September 4th BRICS meeting was a self-imposed deadline, continued Jaishankar, as "neither side wished to see their leaders meeting in Xiamen under a cloud of Doklam incident..." "This can be seen as the view of the Indian side, but questions remain about the motivations of the Chinese side, given that their public rhetoric continued as before. The result was a "compromise" put out on the 28th of August.

Nevertheless, this "compromise" was marketed as a massive victory for the Indian government, with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) claiming that both sides had agreed to the disengagement, whereas it seems from China's official statement that they had agreed to no such thing'. Indeed, it would seem that India had successfully "resolved" the situation by capitulating to all demands made by China from the very onset of the crisis (Panda, 2017).

Doklam 2.0

"De-escalation" since August 28th, 2017 seems only to apply to India's deployments and statements made by its officials. At Doklam, China has indeed halted further construction towards Doka La via the earlier alignment. Construction a few hundred meters to the rear and few kilometers to the east, directed towards the Torsa Nala, seems to have sped up and tended towards permanent deployments. Yet, in the testimony before the Parliamentary Standing Committee, Secretary Jaishankar explained that due to "line of sight" on "good days and bad days" he could not confirm the level of Chinese activity or the number of troops deployed but admitted that "it is possible that there are Chinese troops in northern Doklam". This is true but conceals the intelligence that would have been available through satellites, and what is already available in the public domain. Also, the Bhutanese troops would have seen some of the activities from the Jampheri Ridge and would have notified the Indian side. The Indian government, it seems, was not interested in the military build-up by a hostile power in an area often declared to be of critical strategic significance by the military establishment. Bhutan has been left to deal with Chinese aggression on its terms - China's Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou visited Thimphu on July 16 (Pant, 2018).

The primary reason for India's entry into the Doklam area was the issue of Chinese military aggression in a disputed territory of strategic importance. Despite major concessions having been made by the Indian side, no tangible benefits have accrued from China on other fronts as well (Parthasarathy, 2019). We find, a year on, that the center issue has not yet been settled. Consequently, the inquiry to be posed is: what are the implications of India's quiet?

How India and China relation is affected by it?

China blamed Indian border guards for crossing into its domain to stop the development of the road.

Chinese are utilizing it to send different political messages.

India boycotted the Belt and Road Initiative initiative in Shanghai in May.

It's indistinct if its \$50-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will be reasonable if India doesn't join.

China's provoked at India's developing US tilt in what Beijing sees as an enemy of China partnership that incorporates Japan and Australia.

Chinese likewise needs to signal that China has consolidated its situation on the worldwide stage (Saran, 2017).

World response on Doklam

The Paper expands its discussion on the World reaction on Doklam, to imply the Magnanimity and Gravity of the present standoff. World acutely viewing the Doklam standoff between the two Asian mammoths, just few took various stands, while majority part of countries pushed to settle the debate calmly through strategic channels. Beginning with the U.S., which supported settling the Doklam border through dialogue. Australia advised both India and China to resolve the dispute peacefully, without further escalation. U.K. maintains complete Neutrality by restricting the conflict as a bilateral dispute. Nepal advocated diplomatic based dispute settlement, even the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader advised that India and China cannot overpower each other, and has to continue as peaceful neighbours. But Japan and Pakistan took different stands; Japanese ambassador to India publicly supported India and criticized Chinese violation of status quo at Doklam, which amounts to china's ire leading to furious response from China on Japan. Unsurprisingly, Pakistan supported China on its every stand, from Tibet to Doklam, Pakistan high commissioner to India even sought diplomatic contact with the Chinese counterpart to extend Pakistan's support to China. On top of it, ASEAN countries who were the victims of China's assertive unilateralism, maintained neutrality as of now, but expecting strong India to check China for peaceful regional dispute settlement. On the whole, we could

decipher that world leaders expecting the Doklam crisis to settle peacefully by matured diplomacy, but it all depends on how china respects the international laws and bilateral agreements.

National interest implications

With China's occupation of the Doklam plateau, it has unilaterally occupied territory based on its claim that the disputed India-China-Bhutan trijunction is at Gymochen. China's military constructions and deployment (Doklam 2.0) have also enhanced its potential to utilise the Paro approach to gain access to the Siliguri Corridor.

The strategic question to ask is: why has China chosen Doklam to change the status quo? The obvious answer is that the Doklam area offers China the potential to put Bhutan under pressure and test India's ability to protect Bhutan. What could be China's political objectives? It could be to weaken Indo-Bhutan political ties in order to facilitate their entry into Bhutan. The entry can be expected to follow, in due course, a pattern similar to Nepal and other countries in the neighbourhood.

As explored in previous sections, India has officially refrained from acknowledging that China has militarily altered realities on the ground. However, there are severe implications to such a stance, which are best understood in the context of Sino- India, Indo-Bhutan and Sino-Bhutan relations, as well as by examining the impact on India's neighbourhood and the interplay between domestic actors in July 2017.

The Way forward

The Indian government's stance on Doklam must urgently be clarified, ideally through a White Paper exploring the complexities of this critical issue. The attempts made to sidestep discussion on the broader question of Chinese occupation of the disputed territory, not least at Doklam, are baffling. This is especially so when any informed citizen, let alone foreign governments, can easily access satellite imagery that decisively proves a Chinese presence there and leaves the Indian government opens to questions about its credibility in the region.

Rational consideration of the issue reveals three key points:

- I. China's bellicosity and aggressive rhetoric has closed off many of its negotiating options and made many of its neighbours wary and open to the idea of counterbalancing. While the issue of Doklam can no longer to be resolved by coercive means, the principle at stake in China's unilateral occupation of disputed territory should be raised through diplomatic channels.
- II. India's neighbours are indeed pursuing a strategy of balancing between India and

China, pointing to the fact that their relationships with China must be managed with a subtle and considerate hand, rather than ignored complacently or seen as hostile and dealt with heavy-handedly.

III. In order to defend its national interests, India must step up its power projection capabilities both in an economic and military sense, or risk having to compromise them due to the inability to challenge effectively on China's on critical issues.

China has shown a keen understanding of Indian politics and understood how to extract concessions: India must show that it can play the game just as well, or risk losing an opportunity to even the dishonest scales. India is one of the few powers in the region with the ability to do so. The Doklam flashpoint is not just about Doklam but about India's status as a regional power able to defend its interests and those of its allies. The government's policy on it must be clarified, scrutinised, and held to account.

Conclusion

History is unlikely to be kind to the political attitude adopted by the Indian government on Doklam. It is good to understand that the build-up in Doklam 2.0 could not have been contested militarily and should be dealt with diplomatically. However, it is also an issue that should not be concealed from the public and prevaricated upon in Parliament, unless there are compelling reasons of national interest to do so.

One possible explanation is that India's new attitude merely reflects an understanding of ground realities, not merely in Doklam but also in the broader sense that China is far more powerful in economic and military terms. While China is undoubtedly ahead in absolute terms, in contextual and relative terms, they do not have an upper edge over India.

The old Indian strategic vocabulary, in Kautilyan terms, the current policy adopted seems to be *samshraya*, which is advisable when one's rival's strategic advantages are overwhelming. This policy involves submitting and seeking refuge. However, given the relatively balanced strategic scales overall, India should be following the policy of *asana*, or remaining stationary while building up its strategic advantages to regain parity. It should include counter-balancing through seeking allies - which is to say, building up credibility in the neighbourhood, building counter-coalitions against China, and augmenting economic and military resources while simultaneously continuing with dialogue and discussion.

The adopted strategy of absolute silence in the face of military aggression in the disputed territory where Indian national security interests are at stake is short-sighted in the extreme. It betrays several of India's long-term interests in the name of buying peace and receiving unreliable assurances from China. A stance of "anticipatory compliance" where India toes China's line on all matters in the hope of border tranquillity serves only to

weaken its negotiating power on other critical issues. Despite China's claims of seeking cooperation and closer economic ties with India - which, at a politico-strategic level, maybe pure - it should also be recognised that China is and will remain a strategic competitor in India's neighbourhood.

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