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## India-China Border Tensions: The Lessons not Learnt

*The latest outbreak of tensions in the Sikkim area of the India-China border can be viewed as a sign of China's hedging against India's increasing closeness to the United States. The tensions also seem to indicate that India's conventional deterrence against China may be eroding. The important lesson from the current tension is that India's strategy of controlling the smaller Himalayan states like Bhutan, as a part of its broader security strategy, no longer appears to be effective. Regardless of the repercussions of these tensions on India's broader security strategy, the real victim of the current border standoff between India and China is, arguably, Bhutan.*

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Another instance of boundary tensions between China and India is unfolding, and, as usual, there are different narratives on its eruption. The current tensions, which started in 18 June 2017, are the result of a road construction by the Chinese troops in the Doklam area of the disputed boundary between Bhutan and China. New Delhi considers China's construction activities in this area as a threat to the Siliguri corridor, a narrow stretch of land which separates

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India's north-eastern territories from its other parts. It has, therefore, not only objected to the construction of the road, but also tried to prevent it.

## **Differing Narratives**

According to the Chinese official narrative, Indian troops crossed into the Doklam area of the Sikkim section along the India-China border and obstructed the road construction activities of the Chinese military on China's own territory. The Doklam area is administrated by Beijing, but it is also claimed by Bhutan, which makes it a territory of dispute between China and Bhutan.

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, "China's construction of [the] road in Doklam is an act of sovereignty on its own territory. It is completely justified and lawful."<sup>2</sup> He further emphasised that the Indian and Chinese governments recognise that the India-China boundary in the Sikkim section has been delimited. He called on the Indian government to "take swift and correct measures to [take] those who crossed into China back to the Indian side of the boundary."<sup>3</sup> The Chinese government's spokesperson also indirectly alluded to the perceived Indian interference in a matter concerning Bhutan's sovereignty by stating that, "We hope that all countries can respect Bhutan's sovereignty. Although the boundary between China and Bhutan is yet to be demarcated, the two sides have been working on that through peaceful negotiation. Any third party must not and does not have the right to interfere, still less make irresponsible moves or remarks that violate the fact."<sup>4</sup>

Only a few days after the initial reports of the latest India-China boundary tensions broke out, the Indian government officially responded to the Chinese allegations of the boundary transgressions by its soldiers. In its official response, India conceded that Indian personnel, in coordination with the Bhutanese government, tried to prevent the Chinese from constructing roads in the Doklam area. According to the Indian official narrative, the governments of India and China had "in 2012, reached [an] agreement that the tri-junction boundary points between

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<sup>2</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference, 28 June 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1475054.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1475054.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference, 27 June 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1475054.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1475054.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference, 28 June 2017.

India, China and third countries will be finalized in consultation with the concerned countries. Any attempt, therefore, to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, from the Indian government’s perspective, its efforts to stop China’s unilateral attempts to change the status quo in the Doklam tri-junction area are a legitimate action. India is concerned about the strategic advantage that China may gain from constructing the road in the Doklam area because of its proximity to the Siliguri corridor. Based on this concern, India’s official response also states that the road construction in the Doklam area by China “would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India.”<sup>6</sup>

In its narrative, Bhutan states that, “On 16<sup>th</sup> June 2017, the Chinese Army started constructing a motorable road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri. Boundary talks are ongoing between Bhutan and China and we have written agreements of 1988 and 1998 stating that the two sides agree to maintain peace and tranquillity in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959. The agreements also state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary.”<sup>7</sup> Bhutan contends that China has violated their written agreements related to the boundary issue.

Among the three narratives, the Indian version appears to be the weakest. The Indian official statement indirectly concedes the Chinese allegations that the Indian troops crossed the delineated boundary which was agreed upon by the two countries. However, the Chinese official narrative does not refer to any kind of agreement with India to maintain the status quo in the tri-junction areas between India, China and a third country. Bhutan’s claim to the territory is a known one, and it reiterated its claim. Though the Chinese government officially does not accept that the Doklam area is in dispute between China and Bhutan, the officially-supported Chinese media refers to this area as a disputed territory.

The most important point that emerges from these three narratives is that China rules out any role for India in the Doklam area, and China controls and administers the place, which makes

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<sup>5</sup> “Recent Developments in Doklam Area,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 30 June 2017, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28572/Recent+Developments+in+Doklam+Area>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan*, Press Release, 29 June 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/press-releases/press-release-272.html>.

its narrative the strongest among the three put forth. The Bhutanese official narrative also did not mention any role for India in the Doklam area.

## **Is it really about the Border?**

The current boundary stand-off has some distinctive characteristics. The first is that it coincided with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recently-concluded visit to the United States (US) and the announcement of new arms deals between India and the US. Though the tension started on 18 June 2017, it was not immediately publicised by the Chinese government. It was only disclosed and given extensive coverage by the Chinese government and media at the time of Modi's visit to Washington.<sup>8</sup> The second is that the scene of Chinese road construction is not in dispute between India and China. Instead, the Doklam area is disputed by China and Bhutan. The third is that, this time, China is accusing India of a boundary transgression. In earlier instances, it was normally India which accused China of transgressions along the Line of Actual Control in the disputed Sino-Indian border areas. However, the most distinctive characteristic of the current border crisis is that the Chinese government and the Chinese media are framing the issue in such a way that China is projected as a victim of India's unlawful aggression. Ironically, the border crisis also coincides with the anniversary of Panchasheel,<sup>9</sup> pointing to the fragility of the written agreements in the absence of trust between India and China.

The Chinese media's narrative on the current India-China border tensions closely resembles the 1962 war narrative of China, which also then depicted China as a victim of India's aggression. China depicts the current tension as the result of the US' and Japanese support for India. This narrative seems to indicate that India is thinking of joining the US and Japan to contain China so that it can have its way on the border issue, and, as a result, China will have no option but to observe forbearance.<sup>10</sup> It resonates with the Chinese accusation in 1962 that India was being misguided and supported by the imperialist powers. The 1962 war was also

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<sup>8</sup> For a brief discussion on the geopolitics of the Chinese announcement on 26 June 2017, coinciding with Modi's visit to the US, read P S Suryanarayana, *ISAS Insights No. 428 – 30 June 2017, Trump-Modi Summit: Keeping United States-India Ties on Course*, available at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg>.

<sup>9</sup> Great events compilation Steering Committee of the Peoples Republic of China, 28 June 2017, [http://www.chinadadian.gov.cn/news\\_view.asp?id=10450](http://www.chinadadian.gov.cn/news_view.asp?id=10450).

<sup>10</sup> India is inviting humiliation by provoking China in the wrong location: China should not spoil India any more (印军在错误地点挑衅只会自取其辱 不能再“惯”了), *Military.China.com*, 27 June 2017, [http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20170627/30847979\\_all.html#page\\_2](http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20170627/30847979_all.html#page_2).

depicted as a symbolic fight against the Western and Soviet imperialists, not essentially against India. Therefore, the current border tensions can also be interpreted as China's signalling to the US that India cannot be an effective partner to contain China.

The India-China border tension in the Sikkim area is also viewed from different perspectives by different groups in China. For the Chinese government, it is an excellent tool for internal mobilisation against an external enemy. For the Chinese liberals, it shows the Chinese government as a mature authority that observes restraint and does not give in to the provocations of an aggressive India. However, for the Chinese nationalists, arguably the most important group, the border tension shows that the Chinese government is incapable of protecting its own territory, and that China is a victim of Indian aggression supported by the West and Japan. The reactions of Chinese netizens to news coverage on the border tension are a broad representation of the Chinese nationalist sentiments. For instance, one Chinese netizen, concerned about the Chinese government's weakness, wrote, "Look at this world, who dares to grab an ounce of Russia's land! Who dares to move towards American territory with crooked brains! Because they are all countries with principle and courage, backwardness doesn't mean suffer beating, but..."<sup>11</sup> The common perception expressed by these nationalists is that China lacks the courage to confront "bullies" like India.<sup>12</sup> The reaction of the Chinese nationalists is putting more pressure on the Chinese government to act decisively against the perceived aggression by India. The nationalist media also continually reminds India of its inferior position in comparison to China's economy and military capabilities, and calls on the Chinese government not to spoil India by its forbearance.

## **The Peculiar Case of Bhutan**

China views Bhutan as the most peculiar country in its neighbourhood. The reason is that Bhutan, apart from India, is the only country in China's neighbourhood yet to have its border with China delineated and demarcated. It is also the only country in China's neighbourhood

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<sup>11</sup> Chinese netizen with name "china\_6503apoy" from Hubei province reacting to the article "India is inviting humiliation by provoking China in the wrong location: China should not spoil India any more (印军在错误地点挑衅只会自取其辱 不能再"惯"了)," Military.China.com, 27 June 2017, [http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20170627/30847979\\_all.html#page\\_2](http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20170627/30847979_all.html#page_2).

<sup>12</sup> India must not underestimate the determination of the Chinese military to protect its territorial sovereignty (印度千万不要低估中国军队维护领土主权的决心), 163.com, 5 July 2017, <http://news.163.com/17/0705/19/COJTQO2L000187VE.html>.

which does not yet have diplomatic relations with China. However, Bhutan has always supported China in international forums. It supported China's efforts to regain its legitimate position in the United Nations (UN). Thimphu helped Beijing in the UN human rights conferences and the World Health Assembly to defeat anti-China motions. Pertaining to China's core interests, Bhutan has supported China's position on the Taiwan issue in global forums, while on the Tibet issue, Bhutan always maintained the "One China" policy.<sup>13</sup> Since 1984, China and Bhutan have had regular talks in order to establish diplomatic relations and delineate the boundary. However, after 24 rounds of talks and 32 years, Bhutan and China have yet to find a solution to the boundary issue or have diplomatic relations. China believes that it is India's control over Bhutan which prevents it from having normal diplomatic relations with China and having its border with China demarcated.<sup>14</sup> The border tensions can also be seen as China putting pressure on Bhutan to resolve its border issue with China.

## Conclusion

Like in the previous boundary stand-offs between India and China, the current border tension is also expected to be resolved through diplomatic channels. However, it is difficult to make any predictions, and both countries do not want to be seen as losers in the current stand-off.

The latest boundary issue can be viewed as an attempt by China to make it a normal practice to continue a process of creating occasional boundary crises and transforming them as a signalling tool. It also shows India's eroding conventional deterrence against China. The increasing hard-power disparity between India and China is emboldening China to take decisive actions in the border areas. China is also hedging against the foreseeable increase in India's defence capabilities by securing and solidifying its own strategic strengths. As such, when viewed from these perspectives, the current boundary tension is an act of hedging against the increasing closeness between India and the US.

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<sup>13</sup> The only neighbouring country that has not established diplomatic relations with China, and the Boundary Dispute is under negotiation (这个唯一未和中国建交的邻国 边界争议正谈判中), Military.China.com, 17 August 2016, [http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20160817/23313530\\_all.html#page\\_2](http://military.china.com/important/11132797/20160817/23313530_all.html#page_2).

<sup>14</sup> Force Bhutan to become a protectorate, obstruct establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Bhutan, is this India's Model? (胁迫不丹做“保护国”，阻挠中不建交，这就是印度所谓“典范”？), Reference News, 8 July 2017, [http://column.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2017/0708/2174735.shtml?ulu-rcmd=0\\_026fp\\_flow\\_3\\_becc69b6c2ec45bd8c34af16c163cf7a](http://column.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2017/0708/2174735.shtml?ulu-rcmd=0_026fp_flow_3_becc69b6c2ec45bd8c34af16c163cf7a).

The real victim of the current boundary tensions and the larger geopolitical struggle in the Himalayas is Bhutan. For Bhutan, the balancing act between the two big neighbouring powers is proving to be a tough task. A more balanced relationship between India and China requires Bhutan to have normal diplomatic relations with China and a delineated and demarcated boundary with China. It also shows that Bhutan cannot totally rely on India's support to ensure its security. India also cannot ensure its own border security by controlling the Himalayan states of Bhutan or Nepal. Only a credible and strong conventional and nuclear military deterrent against China can ensure India's border security. The current move by China is also a sign of the failure of India's deterrence. It also disproves the theory that closer relations in the economic sphere will bring peace and goodwill between the two countries. The unsettled boundary is causing an increase in the threat perceptions on both sides. If one takes the current boundary tension as an indicator, then it shows that China does not take the special representative talks between India and China seriously. For China, these talks are more a ritual than anything with substance.

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