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The India-China Stand-off over a Sino-Bhutanese Disagreement

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The efforts by Chinese troops to construct a road in the Doklam plateau region in Bhutan in mid-June 2017 resulted in a confrontation with the Royal Bhutan Army. Soon after, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs reported that, in coordination with the Bhutanese government, it approached and urged the Chinese troops to desist from changing the status quo. While China claims ownership of the region and has asserted that it has the right to carry out the construction, India has countered that the action is in violation of agreements with Bhutan on the boundary. Both China and India have refused to budge from their positions and they have remained in a stand-off since then. In the interest of the long-term stability of India-China ties, both sides have a shared interest in striving to find a diplomatic solution to the Doklam crisis. The impending visit of Mr Ajit Doval, India's National Security Advisor, to Beijing for a BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) meeting has deep significance in this critical juncture.

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On 16 June 2017, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops began constructing a road in the Doklam plateau in Bhutan. They were immediately confronted by personnel from the Royal Bhutan Army.

According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), "On 16 June, a PLA construction party entered the Doklam area and attempted to construct a road. It is our understanding that a Royal Bhutan Army patrol attempted to dissuade them from this unilateral activity. The Ambassador of the Royal Government of Bhutan has publicly stated that it lodged a protest with the Chinese Government through their Embassy in New Delhi on 20 June...Yesterday [29 June 2017], the Foreign Ministry of Bhutan has also issued a statement underlining that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the 1988 and 1998 agreements between Bhutan and China and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between these two countries. They have urged a return to the status quo as before 16 June 2017."²

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, however, argued that, "As to the boundary negotiation between China and Bhutan, we have repeatedly stated that Doklam has always been part of China's territory and under China's effective jurisdiction without disputes."³ Both the Chinese and Indian armies have been locked in a tense stand-off.

Bhutan and China had agreed to maintain the status quo on their disputed border until a settlement could be reached through talks. Hence, Bhutan was taken aback and a press release by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on 29 June 2017 stated, "[O]n 16 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. Bhutan has

² Ministry of External Affairs, India, Recent Developments in Doklam Area, 30 June 2017, http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28572/Recent_Developments_in_Doklam_Area.

³ Chinese Foreign Ministry, Regular Press Conference, 5 July 2017, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cesg/eng/fyrth/t1475680.htm>.

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 16 June 2017.”⁴

Possible Rationale behind the Chinese Action

The relations between China and India appear to have hit a rough patch, of late, brought about by a series of events. The most recent of these was India’s non-participation in Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road forum in Beijing in mid-May this year, owing to concerns over its sovereignty being violated (since the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [CPEC] passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir) and over a perceived lack of transparency in Beijing’s motives for the Belt and Road Initiative.

Just before the forum, the Indian External Affairs Ministry noted, in a statement, that, “We are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs; and skill and technology transfer to help long term running and maintenance of the assets created by local communities. Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity.”⁵

On its part, China has reiterated “the five principle of peaceful co-existence – as the template for addressing India’s concerns over the CPEC and the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)”, and

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bhutan, Press Release, 29 June 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/press-releases/press-release-272.html>.

⁵ Ministry of External Affairs(India), Official Spokesperson’s response to a query on participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum, 13 May 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_a_query_on_participation_of_India_in_OBORBRI_Forum.

has also indicated that the doors will remain open for India to join the BRI.⁶ The intrusion in Doklam could perhaps be China's attempt to get back at India for its non-participation in the BRF and non-support for the BRI (earlier termed as the One Belt One Road).⁷

Second, it could be Beijing's attempt to test the age-old relationship between India and Bhutan. The little Himalayan kingdom does not have formal diplomatic ties with Beijing, and this is something which Beijing is keen to change. In the past, Beijing had tried to make some overtures to Thimphu but these efforts have not borne much fruit. As Former Secretary (West) in India's MEA, R S Kalha notes, "The main motive of the Chinese seems to be to drive a wedge between India and Bhutan, with whom we have excellent bilateral relations. Do recall Bhutan was the only South Asian country that stood by India when we decided to boycott the BRI summit in Beijing."⁸ The intrusion by China in Doklam could also be an effort to assess India's support for Bhutan in times of crises. On its part, New Delhi cannot afford to abandon Bhutan as it would send a negative signal to India's friends in the region and beyond. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian government launched the "Neighbourhood First" policy, and for his inauguration, he invited the heads of state or government from all the South Asian countries.

Third, this kind of road construction is part of China's strategy to strengthen its hold in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It is constructing a motorable road from Lhasa to Yadong in the Chumbi Valley which lies at the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan. It had also taken umbrage at the visit of the Dalai Lama to Tawang in the Indian border state of Arunachal Pradesh in April this year. However, India refused to buckle under its pressure. During his visit to some parts of Arunachal Pradesh, the Dalai Lama was accompanied by India's Minister of State for Home, Kiren Rijiju. During this visit, the Dalai Lama also took part in the *Namami Brahmaputra* festival in India's Assam state.

⁶ The Hindu, China re-invokes Panchsheel to address India's concerns on CPEC, 18 May 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-re-invokes-panchsheel-to-address-indias-concerns-on-cpec/article18486328.ece>

⁷ Times of India, India should shed 'strategic anxiety', join Belt and Road Initiative: Chinese media, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-should-shed-strategic-anxiety-join-belt-and-road-initiative-chinese-media/articleshow/59410745.cms>.

⁸ The Wire, Six Expert Views on How India Should Look at the Latest Border Stand-Off With China, 5 July, <https://thewire.in/154449/expert-gyan-india-china-bhutan/>.

Fourth, the Chinese incursion started in the days leading to Modi's visit to the United States (US) from 25 to 26 June 2017. One plausible explanation for the timing of the Chinese road-building activity could have been to test the response(s) from Modi and US President Donald Trump. The India-US joint statement following the meeting between Modi and Trump referred to "support (for) bolstering regional economic connectivity through the transparent development of infrastructure and the use of responsible debt financing practices", in a not-so-veiled reference to the BRI.⁹ The US has also agreed to the supply of 22 Guardian drones to India.¹⁰

Fifth, the narrow 'chicken's neck' or the Siliguri corridor, which connects Northeast India to the rest of the country, lies at only a short distance from the Doklam plateau region. If China were to construct a road through the Doklam plateau region in Bhutan, it would bring the Chinese troops within striking distance of the Siliguri corridor, thereby putting India's critical security interests in the region at some risk. China has already claimed the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as its "southern Tibet".

The Bhutan Factor

India's ties with Bhutan go back a long way, although formal diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1968. The relations between the two neighbours were initially governed by the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1949, which was later updated during the visit by His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck to India in February 2007.¹¹

Bhutan was the first country that Modi visited after he took office in 2014. The two countries are cooperating in a big way in the hydro-electric sector, and Bhutan exports electricity to India. The

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs(India), Joint Statement - United States and India: Prosperity Through Partnership <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28560/Joint+Statement++United+States+and+India+Prosperity+Through+Partnership>

¹⁰ Reuters, 23 June 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-usa-drones-idUSKBN19D2T4>.

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, India-Bhutan Relations, July 2015, http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bhutan_2015_07_20.pdf.

Indian government has also been helping Bhutan in its five-year plan. New Delhi has pledged nearly 45 billion rupees (S\$958 million) to Bhutan's 11th Five-year Plan.¹²

Although, Bhutan and China do not have diplomatic ties, they have, according to the Bhutan MFA, "held 24 rounds of boundary talks since it began in 1984. Two broad areas in the central northern sector and the western sector have been the subject of talks as there are differences in claims in these areas. The disputed area in Pasamlung in the central north total 496 square kilometres. The disputed areas in the western section are Dramana, Charithang, Sinchulung and Doklam, in the dzongkhags of Haa and Paro."¹³

Conclusion

The stand-off continues, with both China and India refusing to step back from their current positions. How can they resolve the current impasse?

The relations between India and China seem to have hit a rough patch after an initial period of bonhomie when Xi visited India in September 2014. Thereafter, Modi paid a successful visit to China in May 2015 and secured contracts worth US\$22 billion (S\$30.1 billion) with Chinese firms.¹⁴ India has also been troubled by a burgeoning trade-deficit with China and issues like the lack of a clear backing for India's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council.

Moreover, China's increasing forays into the Indian Ocean region have also troubled New Delhi which has always seen the Indian Ocean region as vital to its interests. Beijing has also been trying to increase its profile in Sri Lanka with investments in Hambantota and several other projects.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kuensel, Bhutan, Road construction inside Bhutanese territory violates agreements: MFA, 10 July 2017, <http://www.kuenselonline.com/road-construction-inside-bhutanese-territory-violates-agreements-mfa/>.

¹⁴ BBC News, India and China sign deals worth \$22bn as Modi ends visit, 16 May 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-32762930>

Earlier, Beijing had blocked India's bid for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group as well as put a dampener on its bid to get the wanted terrorist, Maulana Masood Azhar, included in a UN's terror-watch list.

However, at the same time, there have been areas of collaboration as in India's membership of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and in India (and Pakistan) becoming full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China and India are also cooperating in areas such as climate change and in organisations such as the BRICS forum which consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Both India and China need to resolve the Doklam plateau region issue diplomatically. However, India must be prepared for more such moves from China in the future. This is not the first time that such an incident has happened. The Chinese troops intruded almost 19 kilometres into Indian territory in the Depsang Bulge sector in Ladakh in India's border state of Jammu and Kashmir in April 2013.¹⁵ The Chinese troops also intruded into the Chumar sector in 2014 before pulling back. Earlier, in 1986, the Chinese and Indian troops were locked in a long stand-off in the Sumdorong Cho sector near Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, which finally ended on a peaceful note. Thereafter, India's then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi paid a landmark visit to China in December 1988.

New Delhi also needs to strengthen its ties with other countries in the region and beyond, in order to tackle the growing assertiveness on the part of Beijing. Recently, it took part in the Malabar naval exercises, along with Japan and the US, in the Bay of Bengal. In this latest edition, India fielded its aircraft carrier, *INS Vikramaditya*, while the US fielded its nuclear-powered supercarrier, *USS Nimitz*, and Japan fielded its biggest warship in the post-World War II-era, the *JS Izumo*. In addition, India has been reaching out to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations members as it celebrates 25 years of its formal ties with this organisation. These are important initiatives for India.

¹⁵ Times of India, Chinese troops 19km inside Indian territory, govt admits, 27 Apr 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Chinese-troops-19km-inside-Indian-territory-govt-admits/articleshow/19747508.cms>.

Upholding India's close economic, cultural and civilisational ties with Bhutan should be central to policy-framing in New Delhi on the Doklam stand-off. At the same time, Bhutan has done well by not responding to Chinese overtures and threats.¹⁶ Former Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao notes that, "China waited in the wings and Bhutan's northern borders were a constant reminder of future uncertainties in determining how to deal with an increasingly powerful and giant country. By 1984, negotiations on the unsettled border between the two countries had commenced. The Chinese goal was to see them end in the establishment of diplomatic relations with Bhutan and not just a border settlement."¹⁷ Thimphu should learn from the experience of some countries in South Asia and Africa, which have discovered, to their dismay, that trade with China can become asymmetric whereby they end up importing far more than they export, thus, rapidly building up an economically unhealthy imbalance, which holds possible negative consequences for their economic growth and room to manoeuvre in terms of international diplomacy.

India's Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar recently noted in an address in Singapore, "(a) At a time of global uncertainty, India-China relations are a factor of stability; and (b) in their relationship, India and China must not allow differences to become disputes. This consensus underlines the strategic maturity with which the two countries must continue to approach each other."¹⁸ The key point in this situation would be for both India and Bhutan to coordinate their responses to China in a negotiated and non-provocative way, as they have done in the past.

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¹⁶ Times of India, Bhutan doesn't have diplomatic ties with any of the 5 UNSC permanent members, 15 July 2017, http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/59601903.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=ext&utm_campaign=cppst.

¹⁷ Indian Express, A Tangled Web in the Himalayas, 8 July 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/a-tangled-web-in-the-himalayas-china-india-bhutan-4741135/>.

¹⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, India, Speech by Dr S Jaishankar, 11 July 2017, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28609/Speech+by+Dr+S+Jaishankar+Foreign+Secretary+to+mark+25+years+of+India+Singapore+Partnership+at+Shangri-La+Hotel+Singapore+July+11+2017>.