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A High-Altitude Tussle: The Strategic Stakes of Bhutan, China and India

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The prolonged military stand-off between India and China, with no exchange of fire to-date, on the Doklam plateau in the Himalayan range, which Bhutan has portrayed as its territory, has strategic implications for each of these three neighbours. China is bracing to expand its strategic space in the high Himalayas by seeking to build roads in Doklam (also known as Dong Lang) which Beijing considers to be its historical sovereign territory. China says that India was notified in advance about the road construction, meant for “improving local transportation”, “grazing by livestock” and “border troops’ patrolling”.² However, New Delhi views the Chinese activities and statements as a matter of “serious security implications for India”, particularly for “the determination of the tri-junction boundary point between

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² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China. The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops’ Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory, 2 August 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/P020170802542676636134.pdf. Accessed on 2 August 2017. Also, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Remarks on the Indian Border Troops’ Illegal Crossing of the China-India Boundary into the Chinese Territory, 3 August 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1482345.shtml. Accessed on 4 August 2017.

*India, China and Bhutan”.*³ *India also wants to protect its North-eastern strategic artery which runs close to the tri-junction. For Bhutan, its long-standing security ties with India are at stake, given the current controversy over whether or not Thimphu explicitly invited the Indian troops to stop the Chinese from building roads in Doklam. This is complicated by China’s view that “matters concerning the boundary tri-junction have nothing to do with this incident”.*⁴ *In all, the unfolding situation will likely shape not only Sino-Indian engagement but also that of China and Bhutan, going forward.*

Diplomatic opportunities for crisis-busting moves by China and India have come and gone, without the two major Asian neighbours ending their latest military stand-off near a mountain pass on the Doklam plateau at the inhospitable Himalayan heights. The close-range confrontation, with no exchange of fire to-date, began on 16 June 2017 (according to the Indian side) or 18 June 2017 (as in the Chinese version).

After the crisis erupted, Chinese President Xi Jinping and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi were present at a summit of the Group of Twenty (G20), a forum of established and emerging economies, in Hamburg on 7 and 8 July 2017. However, the two leaders did not hold a formal bilateral meeting to discuss the Doklam crisis, although it seemed that Modi apparently raised the issue in a brief impromptu ‘meeting’ with Xi on the side-lines of that summit.⁵

Later, Ajit Doval, National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India, met Chinese State Counsellor Yang Jiechi for talks in Beijing on 27 July 2017. Doval was also among the top security officials of five countries, including China, who called on Xi in Beijing on the

³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Statement by External Affairs Minister in Rajya Sabha on Doklam Issue (Uncorrected transcript), 3 August 2017, [http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28810/Statement_by_External_Affairs_Minister_in_Rajya_Sabha-on_Doklam_issue_UnCorrected_transcript](http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28810/Statement_by_External_Affairs_Minister_in_Rajya_Sabha-on_Doklam_issue_Uncorrected_transcript). Accessed on 4 August 2017.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops’ Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory, 2 August 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/P020170802542676636134.pdf. Accessed on 2 August 2017.

⁵ India’s External Affairs Ministry said on 13 July 2017 that “a range of issues” figured in an impromptu meeting between the Indian and Chinese leaders on the margins of the G20 summit. However, the Chinese authorities said there was no formal bilateral meeting between the two leaders on that occasion. Unless otherwise specified, the remarks attributed to China, Beijing or Chinese authorities in this paper are derived from the comments made by the spokespersons of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in regular press conferences over a period of time since the eruption of the Doklam crisis in mid-June 2017.

following day. However, no progress was reported by either China or India at the conclusion of those meetings.

A sliver of a silver lining, from the Indian standpoint, was that the Chinese official statements on those talks did not specifically demand that India withdraw its troops from the Doklam plateau. Nonetheless, those statements did not also indicate whether China would be willing to consider India's proposal that both sides disengage at the same time and withdraw their respective troops from that theatre.⁶

Whereas New Delhi's proposal of mutual troop withdrawals was made on 20 July 2017, a Chinese official statement, issued on 2 August 2017, was indicative of a drastic pull-out of the Indian troops in Doklam. The Chinese statement said, "The trespassing Indian border troops, reaching as many as over 400 people at one point, [had] put up three tents and advanced over 180 meters into the Chinese territory. As of the end of July, there were still over 40 Indian border troops and one bulldozer illegally staying in the Chinese territory."⁷ In an update, the Chinese government said that 48 "intruding" Indian soldiers were still "illegally staying" on "Chinese territory" as on 2 August 2017.⁸ Given such an evolving situation, the political genesis of the China-India-Bhutan tussle over Doklam acquires greater strategic importance.

The Doklam plateau, where the Indian and Chinese troops have been deployed in combat-readiness, is claimed not only by China but also Bhutan – Beijing and Thimphu have an overall boundary dispute. Bhutan nestles between China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and India's Northeast states. While the China-Bhutan differences are not intrinsic to the Sino-Indian boundary dispute that began in the 1950s, the special relationship between New Delhi and Thimphu is central to the current Doklam crisis. It is in the context of this special relationship – fortified by the Indo-Bhutanese Treaties of 1949 and 2007 – that New Delhi sent its troops

⁶ The suggestion of mutual withdrawals by the Indian and Chinese troops from Doklam was made by India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in the Upper House of the Indian Parliament on 20 July 2017. Subsequently, India's External Affairs Ministry spokesman said on 27 July 2017, that Xi and Modi had agreed at Astana (Kazakhstan) on 9 June 2017 that "the differences between India and China should be addressed in a manner that they do not become disputes." <http://www.mea.gov.in>.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, The Facts and China's Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops' Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory, 2 August 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/P020170802542676636134.pdf. Accessed on 2 August 2017.

⁸ Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Remarks on the Indian Border Troops' Illegal Crossing of the China-India Boundary into the Chinese Territory, 3 August 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1482345.shtml. Accessed on 4 August 2017.

to face the Chinese in Doklam after they began building a road, with a suspected strategic potential, closer to India than in the past in this sector.

The Bhutanese Interests

Objecting to the Chinese army's commencement of road-building in this segment of the Doklam plateau near India, Bhutan conveyed to China that "the construction of the road *inside Bhutanese territory* is a direct violation of the agreements [of 1988 and 1998]"⁹ between the two sides. (Emphasis added). Bhutan also reminded China that, under those pacts, "the two sides agree[d] 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."¹⁰ That was when China is widely believed to have established absolute control over Tibet after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) almost a decade earlier.

According to Tsering Shakya, a scholar on Tibet, "Bhutan's claim [on Doklam] is not without foundation" but this would apply only to "an enclave" inside Doklam. It is, therefore, argued that "Bhutan's over-assertion of its claims, suspect China and many in Bhutan, may be on the prompting of New Delhi, which sees the narrow strip [as being] essential for the defence of [India's] Sikkim and beyond."¹¹

China and Bhutan do not have diplomatic relations primarily because the latter has historically been a protectorate of British India – a practice that has been carried over to India's post-independence context. However, Thimphu and Beijing have also held 24 rounds of talks in vain to configure an agreed boundary that could pave the way for mutual recognition. Bhutan, like India and China, is a full-fledged member of the United Nations (UN), whereas China is additionally a veto-empowered permanent member of the UN Security Council, an apex global forum for strategic affairs. China's unique status, vis-à-vis India and Bhutan, may prove materially significant if the Sino-Indian military stand-off in Doklam is referred to the UN by

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Royal Government of Bhutan, Press Release, 29 June 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/press-releases/press-release-272.html>. Accessed on 24 July 2017.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tsering Shakya, China-India Border Dispute: Bhutan can solve its border problem with China – if India lets it, *South China Morning Post*, 22 July 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2103601/bhutan-can-solve-its-border-problem-china-if-india-lets-it>. Accessed on 24 July 2017.

a party or parties concerned. Particularly important in this context is China's statement on 2 August 2017 that the "illegal action" of the Indian troops "contravenes" the "UN Charter and tramples grossly on the basic principles of international law and basic norms governing international relations" – phraseology often reserved for submissions to that world body.

By way of context, China and India fought a bitter border war in 1962. Since then, they have been guarding their unmarked Line of Actual Control (LAC), often accusing the other of 'intrusions' across the LAC. To mitigate such tensions, they have indeed agreed on a series of confidence-building measures in the form of agreements or protocols in 1993, 1996, 2003, 2005, 2012 and 2013. Since 2003, the designated Special Representatives of the two countries have also been engaged in seeking a settlement of their boundary dispute from a political perspective, distinct from a mere logistical or geographic standpoint. In more recent years, especially since 2013, the two sides have even risen above their serious but non-lethal confrontations along the LAC and talked to each other even at the highest political levels. Until now, this kind of all-weather dialogue has, by and large, continued in the context of an often-tense border situation, which has, so far, not escalated towards an eerie cold war or an outright war. Some have even described this state of affairs as 'cold peace'.¹² At stake now is the future of this fragile state of affairs.

Treaties, a Century Apart

The crux of the current Sino-Indian crisis at Doklam is that Beijing is insistent that the plateau is "Chinese territory" on the basis of the "Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet", signed at Calcutta on 17 March 1890. It was a document that was agreed to by Britain, then the colonial ruler of India which gained independence almost half-a-century later, and China's Qing government which clearly pre-dated the proclamation of the current PRC in 1949. The issue runs deeper than the poser whether an imperial-era document of 19th century vintage should be held aloft by the anti-imperial China amid its stalled negotiations with Bhutan in the second decade of the 21st century.

¹² Jeff M Smith, *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century*, Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, USA, 2014.

Under Article 1 of this Convention, “the line” which segregates the Doklam plateau from the other parts of the Himalayan terrain, “commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier and follows [a relevant] water-parting to the point where it meets Nipal [Nepal] territory.”¹³ China has been citing Mount Gipmochi as the referral point to lay claim to the high-altitude areas that are close to and overlook the Siliguri Corridor – a strategic artery for the defence of India’s Northeast states which border Bhutan and parts of Chinese TAR. A collateral issue relates to the geographic coordinates of the Mount with reference to the British-imperial-era McMahon Line, itself a subject of contestation in determining the LAC in the first place and a final Sino-Indian boundary settlement in the eastern sector. Also relevant to the maze of details of the Sino-Indian boundary dispute is the exact alignment of the China-Bhutan-India tri-junction.

In this historical-political context, Beijing’s insistence on treating Mount Gipmochi as a marker, for road-building on “Chinese territory”, raised strategic concerns, laced with a security alarm, in India. Desirous of protecting its Northeast flank, India quickly invoked Article 2 of the Indo-Bhutan “Treaty of Friendship” which was signed in New Delhi in February 2007. As a result, within two days after the Chinese began building a road on “Bhutanese territory” in Doklam (the same area which China regards as its territory), Indian troops reached the spot. This can be inferred from the Chinese official version of tracing the commencement of this crisis to 18 June 2017.

Significantly relevant to this sequence of events is a passage from the just-cited Article which says that both countries “shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests”.¹⁴ It is also stipulated that “*Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other.*”¹⁵ (Emphasis added).

¹³ The authoritative text of the 1890 Convention between Britain and China, which the Chinese authorities have now invoked since the outbreak of the Doklam crisis in Sino-Indian relations, has been retrieved from <http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/docs/pdf/1894/TS0011.pdf>.

¹⁴ The authoritative text of the 2007 Indo-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship has been retrieved from the website of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The Entry-Exit Debate

A fundamental question in this regard has remained unanswered by India and Bhutan in a categorical fashion. Did Bhutan formally invite India to send its troops to stop the road-building Chinese soldiers in their tracks? While Bhutan's public statement, cited above, is altogether silent on this aspect, it can also be argued that Thimphu, through its Sphinx-like silence, has apparently accepted the inevitability of a Sino-Indian confrontation on the Doklam plateau. New Delhi's stand is that, the Indian troops, who were already present in the general area of Doklam, were deployed "in coordination" with Bhutan.¹⁶ This was a partial answer to Beijing's stand that the Indian troops had "illegally trespassed into Chinese territory".

In a Chinese television programme immediately after Doval's visit to Beijing, a senior Colonel in the Chinese Ministry of National Defence, Zhou Bo said, "[T]his is not a situation that India's national interests were violated" by China.¹⁷ In saying this, he was implying that the Sino-Indian LAC was not being targeted by the Chinese soldiers who were sent to Dong Lang (Doklam). India was, therefore, in his view, trying only to "save its own face"¹⁸ by suggesting that the Chinese and Indian troops withdraw simultaneously from Doklam. China's military spokesman Wu Qian had already asserted that "the Chinese border troops have taken initial counter measures at the site [in Doklam] and will step up targeted deployment and training."¹⁹ This was a signal from the Chinese military for a potentially long stand-off with India, if not also a fierce fight, on the Doklam plateau if New Delhi were to refuse to unilaterally withdraw its troops unconditionally from there.

Overarching this narrative, two aspects need to be considered. One relates to New Delhi's compulsions behind its proposal that both China and India withdraw their troops simultaneously from Doklam. Fuelling the speculation about India's compulsions was the absence of a public statement from Thimphu that India was, in fact, invited to protect the

¹⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28732/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_Official_Spokesperson_July_20_2017. Accessed on 1 August 2017.

¹⁷ A senior Colonel of the Chinese Ministry of National Defence in a programme telecast by the China Global Television Network, monitored by the author in Singapore on 29 July 2017.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ministry of National Defence, People's Republic of China, "China urges India to abandon illusions", http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-07/24/content_4786638.htm. Accessed on 24 July 2017.

“Bhutanese territory” in Doklam. A relevant factor is the sensitivity of Bhutan. However, the Indo-Bhutanese economic and strategic ties are known to run far and deep.

As pointed out by John Garver in his *China's Quest*, India had protested as far back as in 1966 what it deemed a Chinese intrusion on Bhutan's northern border. Near, but unrelated to, Bhutan, the Sino-Indian ties worsened thereafter, resulting in a fierce armed clash on the border between Sikkim and the Chinese-Tibet in 1967 at a time of rising tensions between China and the then-Soviet Union. During that period, China protested against “several mob attacks” on its embassy in New Delhi. Such an acrimonious phase was followed in 1970 by the reported move by China's helmsman of that era, Mao Zedong, to extend an olive branch towards India. Mao said to India's Chargé d'Affaires Brajesh Mishra that China and India could not go on quarrelling and they must become friends again.²⁰

Thereafter, in 1975, Sikkim, which is separated from Bhutan by a narrow strip of Chinese-Tibetan territory known in India as the Chumbi Valley, ‘merged’²¹ with India in circumstances outside the scope of this paper. Beijing eventually recognised this in 2005. On a parallel track, Bhutan, with no nuclear-arms ambitions, sided with New Delhi in voting against the Comprehensive [Nuclear] Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in the UN General Assembly in 1996. This was significant, because the CTBT was adopted by a vote of 158 to 3, Bhutan and Libya being the only opponents besides India which continues to oppose selective nuclear non-proliferation.²²

The ‘Matching’ Moves

The second overarching aspect is the near-similarity between China's presence in a pocket of disputed territory in Pakistan and India's presence in a disputed part of Bhutan. The Chinese are engaged in carving out the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through some areas which Islamabad controls but India regards as its own sovereign territory. Somewhat similarly, India is now present in a pocket of Bhutan which Beijing regards as its sovereign possession.

²⁰ John Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, Oxford University Press, New York, USA, 2016, p. 435.

²¹ The Chinese and Pakistanis, however, claim that India annexed Sikkim.

²² John Garver, *op.cit.*, p. 743.

There are nuances, too. New Delhi has offered a conditional military withdrawal to meet half-way the Chinese demand that India pull-back its troops unconditionally from Dong Lang (Doklam).²³ By way of some contrast, China has been going ahead with the CPEC projects in the face of Indian objections.²⁴ Despite this, China has repeatedly said that its promotion of the CPEC does not preclude talks between Islamabad and New Delhi to settle their sovereignty dispute over the contested parts of the economic corridor's route. Significantly in this context, Beijing does not believe that India has a similar approach towards the Sino-Bhutanese border dispute. In a categorical signal to New Delhi, Beijing said, in its statement on 2 August 2017, that, "As a third party, India has no right to interfere in or impede the boundary talks between China and Bhutan, still less the right to make territorial claims on Bhutan's behalf".²⁵ In contrast to this Chinese perception, there is nothing in New Delhi's statements to indicate that it opposes the Sino-Bhutanese boundary negotiations.²⁶ In yet another nuance, India has acknowledged its military presence in a Bhutanese pocket that China considers its own while Beijing insists that the CPEC projects have only an economic dimension with no anti-India strategic core.²⁷

In such a complex situation of perceptions and counter-perceptions, the latest China-India crisis over Doklam may mark either a new phase of armed co-existence, Mao's phrase from an altogether different era and context, or lead to a more mature diplomatic engagement in the light of the relative national strengths of the two sides in this second decade of the 21st century.

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²³ While the Chinese Ministries of National Defence and Foreign Affairs have called for unconditional Indian withdrawal from Dong Lang (Doklam), Delhi's proposal of conditional withdrawal was made by India's External Affairs Minister.

²⁴ India cited its objections to the route map of the CPEC and stayed away from the inauguration of Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the related Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in mid-May 2017. China has at the same time projected the CPEC as a flagship project of the BRI.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/P020170802542676636134.pdf. Accessed on 2 August 2017.

²⁶ In the only comprehensive comment from India's External Affairs Ministry on the genesis of the Doklam crisis to-date, issued on 30 June 2017, there is nothing to indicate India's opposition to the China-Bhutan boundary talks.

²⁷ The diplomatic discourse from Beijing, as can be gleaned from its numerous comments, is that the CPEC has no anti-India strategic focus *per se*.