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India–China Relations: Doklam Standoff

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Abstract

The Doklam standoff of 2017 marked a critical juncture in India-China relations, representing one of the most significant military confrontations between the two Asian giants since the 1962 border war. This 73-day military face-off began on June 16, 2017, when the People's Liberation Army of China initiated road construction in the disputed Doklam plateau, a territory claimed by both China and India's ally Bhutan, near the strategically vital Siliguri Corridor. In response, India launched Operation Juniper on June 18, 2017, deploying approximately 270 armed troops with bulldozers across the Sikkim border to prevent the Chinese road construction activities. The standoff concluded on August 28, 2017, with both nations agreeing to withdraw their forces without military escalation, though China agreed to halt road construction temporarily. This incident exposed the fragility of existing confidence-building measures between the two nuclear-armed neighbors and fundamentally altered the strategic calculations of both nations, with implications extending beyond bilateral relations to impact regional stability and the broader international order. The crisis served as a stark warning to both sides that tensions caused by their competition and unresolved border issues could easily escalate and derail their relationship.

Keywords: Doklam standoff, India–China relations, border dispute, Operation Juniper, regional security

Background and Historical Context

The India-China border dispute represents one of the longest contested borders in the world, with recurring tensions since the 1962 war that deeply scarred bilateral relations and established enduring patterns of mutual suspicion. The Line of Actual Control (LAC), serving as the de facto border between the two nations, remains undefined and undemarcated in several sectors, leading to differing perceptions and recurrent confrontations over territorial claims. The historical roots trace back to competing interpretations of traditional and colonial-era boundaries, with India believing that the boundaries China proposed in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh have no written basis and no documentation of acceptance by anyone apart from China. The tri-junction point where India, China, and Bhutan meet remained particularly contentious, with no consensus achieved on its exact location despite multiple rounds of negotiations. Despite various diplomatic initiatives aimed at managing border tensions, including the 2003 Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation and the appointment of



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Special Representatives to explore boundary settlement frameworks, fundamental disagreements persisted regarding the precise alignment and demarcation of the border. Sino-Indian relations are characterized by a security dilemma as a result of mutual lack of trust, with both parties attempting to determine the true intentions of the other. China's increasingly assertive posture along disputed borders, combined with its rapid military modernization and infrastructure development through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia, created an environment of heightened tensions and strategic competition with India.

The Doklam Crisis

Genesis and Strategic Significance

The Doklam standoff erupted at a strategically sensitive trijunction where India, China, and Bhutan meet, in an area measuring approximately 89 square kilometers that both China and Bhutan claim as sovereign territory. The crisis originated in mid-June 2017 when Chinese troops equipped with construction vehicles and road-building equipment began extending an existing road southward on the Doklam plateau, known as Donglang in Chinese, moving toward areas uncomfortably close to India's strategic interests. The problem started when Chinese army engineers attempted to build a road through the Doklam plateau, an activity that the Indian side deemed was an attempt to change the status quo in an area near the sensitive 'Chicken's neck' corridor connecting mainland India with Northeast India.

This area holds immense strategic significance for India as it lies near the Siliguri Corridor, a narrow strip that provides the only land connection between India's northeastern states and the rest of the country. Intelligence reports suggest that Chinese road construction activities may have begun as early as March 2017, with Indian intelligence detecting these activities in April 2017, though diplomatic protests were not filed until May 2017, reflecting a significant delay in India's response mechanism. The Chinese road construction was perceived as an attempt to alter the status quo unilaterally, violating existing understandings between the parties regarding infrastructure development in disputed areas. India viewed China's road-building activities in Doklam as providing Beijing with a strategic advantage that could threaten the Siliguri Corridor and compromise India's ability to defend its northeastern territories.

India's Military Response and Diplomatic Positioning

Following coordination with Bhutanese authorities and recognition of the direct strategic threat, Indian soldiers based just across the border intervened to stop the Chinese construction crews. On June 18, 2017, as part of Operation Juniper, approximately 270 armed Indian troops accompanied by two bulldozers crossed the Sikkim border into Doklam to physically prevent Chinese troops from constructing the road. This marked a significant and unprecedented departure from India's previous border management approach, demonstrating New Delhi's



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willingness to intervene militarily in disputed territory between two other countries to defend allied interests and protect critical strategic corridors.

On June 30, 2017, the Ministry of External Affairs of India released a comprehensive statement entitled "Recent Developments in Doklam Area" stating its official position. The statement alleged that China had changed the status quo in violation of a 2012 understanding between the two governments regarding finalizing tri-junction boundary points and causing security concerns, widely understood as relating to India's strategic Siliguri Corridor. The statement noted that "Indian personnel" at Doka La coordinated with Bhutan and "approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo". India's intervention represented a clear signal that it would not passively accept Chinese attempts to alter territorial arrangements in areas of vital strategic interest, even when the disputed territory was not directly claimed by India itself.

Diplomatic Tensions and International Dimensions

The standoff intensified through July and August 2017, with China repeatedly demanding India's unconditional withdrawal and issuing statements through official channels and state media. On July 5, 2017, the Chinese government claimed that it had, for the past 24 months, reached a basic consensus with Bhutan that Doklam belongs to China and that there was no dispute between the two countries, attempting to undermine India's justification for intervention. This claim was disputed by Bhutan, which issued a demarche on July 5 asking China to restore the status quo as of before June 16. On July 19, 2017, China renewed its call for India to withdraw its troops from Doklam, maintaining diplomatic pressure throughout the crisis.

The diplomatic confrontation occurred against broader geopolitical considerations, with the crisis escalating amid increasing competition between the two Asian giants in the Himalayan belt, more assertive Indian policy on the "Tibet issue," an increasing security dilemma partly fueled by closer U.S.-India relations, and the advancement of China's Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia. For 73 days, the world watched as Chinese and Indian forces faced off in a remote stretch of the Himalayas, with international attention focused on the crisis and growing concern about the possibility of military escalation between two nuclear-armed neighbors. Chinese military units claimed that India had blocked construction of a road that was taking place in China's sovereign territory, while India maintained that the construction violated existing agreements and threatened its security interests.

Military Mobilization and Crisis Management

During the 73-day standoff, both sides engaged in significant military mobilization along the border areas, though both nations demonstrated restraint in avoiding direct armed conflict. Throughout July and August, the Doklam issue remained unresolved, with neither side willing to back down from their positions. The crisis highlighted the risks inherent in the Sino-Indian



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border dispute, where there exists a significant gap in perception of boundaries and a massive deficit of mutual trust between the two states, in addition to political differences and populism confronting both Chinese and Indian policy-makers. The standoff demonstrated how quickly localized incidents could escalate into major confrontations capable of disrupting the broader bilateral relationship.

Resolution And Strategic Implications

Disengagement Process and Immediate Aftermath

After weeks of intensive diplomatic negotiations conducted through multiple channels, Delhi and Beijing agreed to withdraw their troops to their original positions. On August 28, 2017, both India and China announced that they had agreed to pull their troops back from the face-off site in Doklam, with both sides committing to "expeditious disengagement" in the region. By the end of the day, it was reported that the withdrawal was completed, bringing an end to the military face-off that lasted for close to three months. The resolution came just days before the BRICS summit, suggesting that both nations recognized the costs of continued confrontation.

Initially, it appeared that China had "blinked" because it had to abandon the road construction project, leading some observers to view the outcome as a tactical victory for India. China may have backed down because local PLA units were caught off guard by India's rapid response, and because Chinese President Xi Jinping did not wish to face a diplomatic fiasco months before his leadership tenure was to be renewed at the 19th Party Congress. However, the resolution proved to be more complex than initial assessments suggested, as subsequent developments revealed China's longer-term strategic approach to the disputed region.

China's Long-Term Strategic Approach

Since the crisis ended in August 2017, China has quietly maintained and, in some ways, deepened its presence in and around Doklam, demonstrating a patient, long-term approach to territorial consolidation. In late August 2017, just after the standoff was resolved, a Chinese defense ministry spokesman stated that the PLA would increase patrols in Doklam to "resolutely safeguard" the country's sovereignty claims. In December 2017, Indian media reported that China had continued to deploy roughly 1,600 troops, about the size of an army regiment, in the contested area. Within six months of the disengagement, Indian media reported that Beijing had built a permanent all-weather military complex in the region. As the first anniversary of the crisis approached in 2018, neither India nor Bhutan stepped in to block these Chinese infrastructure and military activities, suggesting that the immediate resolution had not addressed the underlying strategic dynamics. This demonstrated China's systematic strategy to establish facts on the ground through infrastructure development and territorial assertions, while India celebrated what appeared to be a tactical victory but faced China's systematic expansion of strategic advantage across multiple dimensions. The post-Doklam developments revealed



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that while India had succeeded in halting the immediate road construction, China had adapted its approach to achieve its strategic objectives through incremental expansion rather than dramatic confrontation.

Impact on Bilateral Relations and Regional Dynamics

The Doklam standoff represented a watershed moment in India-China relations, serving as a warning to both sides that tensions caused by their competition and unresolved border issues could easily escalate and derail their relationship. The crisis exposed the inadequacy of existing confidence-building measures and bilateral mechanisms designed to prevent such escalations, despite decades of efforts to institutionalize peaceful border management through regular talks. Sino-Indian relations demonstrated characteristics of a security dilemma, with both parties trying to determine the true intentions of the other in an environment of mutual mistrust.

Following the Doklam crisis, both nations recognized the need to manage their bilateral tensions more effectively to prevent future escalations. In 2018, China and India worked hard to manage various bilateral points of tension, fearful that the many issues on which their interests clashed would produce tensions or even a crisis that would disrupt their post-Wuhan thaw following the informal summit between the leaders in April 2018. However, new sources of tension continued to emerge, including India's decision to change Kashmir's status in August 2018, which Beijing brought to the UN Security Council while leaning toward Pakistan's position, leading India to postpone regular talks on the border dispute. In 2018, India and China decided to coordinate border patrolling at one disputed point along the LAC, demonstrating some continued efforts at managing the disputed boundary.

Strategic Realignment and Future Implications

The Doklam crisis prompted significant strategic recalibrations in both nations' foreign and defense policies, with lasting implications for regional security dynamics. India intensified its focus on border infrastructure development and military preparedness, recognizing that the existing infrastructure gap with China along the LAC had provided Beijing with significant advantages. The construction of border roads close to the LAC, especially the 255-km Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road aimed at narrowing the infrastructure gap and providing India with all-weather access to strategic areas, became a priority following the Doklam experience.

The crisis highlighted the complex interplay between territorial disputes, strategic interests, and regional power dynamics in South Asia, with implications extending to the broader Indo-Pacific region. The Doklam standoff occurred within a context of escalating competition between the two Asian giants, more assertive policies on sensitive issues like Tibet, an increasing security dilemma partly fueled by closer U.S.-India relations, and the advancement of China's Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia. For China, according to analysts, South Asia was not its primary



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theater, and it was not in China's interest to engage in large-scale conflict with India, though the lack of mutual trust meant that repeated confrontations along the LAC signaled to Indian observers that China's activities represented a pattern of "salami slicing" territorial expansion.

Conclusion

The 2017 Doklam standoff stands as a defining moment in contemporary India-China relations, transforming the nature of border disputes from localized incidents into manifestations of broader strategic rivalry between Asia's two rising powers. While the immediate crisis was resolved through diplomatic channels without military escalation, it fundamentally altered the bilateral relationship by exposing deep-seated strategic mistrust and competing visions for regional dominance. The crisis demonstrated that despite significant economic interdependence and multilateral cooperation in forums like BRICS, territorial disputes and strategic competition remained capable of triggering serious confrontations that threatened regional stability. The Doklam experience revealed critical vulnerabilities in the existing framework for managing India-China border tensions, highlighting the need for more robust mechanisms to prevent unilateral actions and manage disputes peacefully. The incident underscored the strategic significance of seemingly small disputed areas when they carry implications for broader security interests, particularly India's concern about the Siliguri Corridor and China's desire to establish strategic positions along its periphery. The standoff's resolution, while averting immediate conflict, left fundamental issues unresolved and demonstrated China's capacity to pursue long-term strategic objectives through patient infrastructure development and incremental territorial consolidation. Looking forward from the perspective of 2018, the Doklam crisis necessitated that both India and China recognize the high costs of military confrontation and develop more effective means of managing their complex relationship. The crisis served as a warning that escalation of tensions could easily occur in the absence of trust and effective crisis management mechanisms. For regional and global stability, the effective management of India-China relations remained crucial, requiring sustained diplomatic engagement, confidence-building measures with genuine commitment, and mutual recognition of each other's legitimate security concerns. The challenge for both nations was to prevent the repetition of Doklam-type crises while managing their strategic competition and numerous bilateral points of tension in a manner that would not undermine broader regional stability and their own developmental priorities.



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