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India-China Standoff in Doklam: Geopolitical Significance, Historical Context and Future Implications

Dr. Sanjana Devi

Former Scholar Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, K.C. College (HSNC University),
Mumbai

Abstract:

The India-China standoff in the Doklam region during mid-2017 was one of the most significant confrontations between the two Asian powers since the 1962 war. Located at the tri-junction of India, Bhutan and China, Doklam holds immense geopolitical and strategic importance, particularly for India's security and access to its northeastern states. This paper analyzes the historical, geographical and political dimensions of the Doklam dispute, its impact on India-China relations and the implications for regional stability. The study traces the evolution of the border dispute, the cultural and strategic dynamics influencing the two nations and the key events leading to the 73-day standoff. It further examines the consequences on bilateral trade, diplomacy and regional alliances, as well as India's support for Bhutan based on historical treaties and strategic interests. Finally, the paper discusses the lessons learned and the potential pathways for future engagement and conflict management between the two powers.

Keywords: Doklam; India-China relations; Bhutan; border dispute; Siliguri corridor; strategic rivalry; regional security; South Asia.

Introduction:

Following independence, China and India both desired to play prominent roles in world politics. Due to which, China does not want India to move towards progress. The reason why China keeps putting obstacles in India's way. ¹ Between June and July of 2017, the Doklam issue was brought to the force relatively immediately. ² This paper will focus on the geographical and geopolitical aspect of the India-China face-off in the Doklam region. Doklam also known as Zhoglam is a thin two faced plateau in tri-junction area of three countries Bhutan-China and India. Geographically, this Tibetan autonomous region is located near the Yadong region of the Ha valley of Bhutan. This area distributed by Bhutan and China has been declared. This region is also significantly associated with the sovereign territory of India. ³ The Jhamperi mountain range is the starting point for the foothills of southern Bhutan that lead to India's strategic and important Siliguri corridor. Hence, this region has geo-strategic importance for India's territorial sovereignty. Bhutan is located in a delicate region of the Himalayan range. Due to its brief history and tiny size, it is now a factor in the rivalry between China and India in terms of politics. Since, the conflict at Nathula and Chola in 1967, it has remained calm for a long time as the arrangement of the India –China border in



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Sikkim has been largely accepted by both sides. Indian and Bhutanese maps show the Batang La as about 200 meters southeast while the Chinese claim the site as Gipmochi confusingly for Gyemochen. In 2007, India deployed troops after the Chinese destroyed several Indian bunkers in the Batang La area. China claims an area of 2.1 km in Sikkim which is spread over Sora Funnel. India does not claim the area of south Batang La which it considers to be part of Bhutan but China consistently opposed the Bhutanese claim. On 16 June, 2017, the Chinese set up heavy road building equipment Doklam region and built a road that connected the Bhutanese position of Jamperi ridge with the location below Doka La. This provoked the Indian administration to stop road construction on June 18, which started the Doklam crisis. This issue is linked to China's significant geopolitical actions in the South Asian and Indian regions, in addition to the completion of the Bhutan-China border. This paper seeks to analyze the Doklam crisis in detail, with a focus on its consequences and future implications for India-China relations.

Historical Perspective

Because of our strategic interests as well as spiritual ties with the Tibetan civilization. This led to disputes not only on the Indo-China border but also on the Indo-Tibet border. Both countries tried to resolve border issues through dialogue talks but ultimately failed due to their harsh behavior.⁷ After the 1959, uprising in Tibet against Chinese rule, India not only extended its sympathy to the Tibetan but also ensured refuge for the Dalai Lama when he fled to India. China got angry with India's stand on the issue and started adopting anti-India stand.⁸ This created a conflict in the relations between India and China both fought a brief war in 1962 in the eastern sector of Ladakh and western sector of Arunachal Pradesh. This was a big blow to their bilateral relations and ended the spirit of Hindi-Chini-Bhai-Bhai. The war completely ended their bilateral diplomatic relations and there was no diplomatic contact between them for almost three decades. Despite the fact that the Sino-Indian boundary dispute in 1962 dealt a significant setback to their bilateral relations, the two nations have effectively re-established their diplomatic commercial China and India are two of the oldest civilizations in the world with a long history of historical trade and economic relations between them. As Buddhism moved from India to China starting in the first century, there was a great deal of cultural exchange between the two countries. Along with acting as a vital trading route, the historic Silk Road through Tibet was instrumental in allowing the religion to expand from India to East Asia. India established formal diplomatic ties with the "Republic of China", then known as Taiwan, in 1949, following the end of the civil war. At the same time, it recognized the Mao government as the legitimate leader of the "People's Republic of China."⁵ Apart from these, India also supported China's permanent membership in the United Nation Security Council. But the conflict of interest in Tibet between the two countries because China wanted to occupy the entire Tibet and India has a rich history of cultural, economic and religious relations with the Tibetan people. The state of Tibet acted as a buffer state between India and China, yet Pandit Nehru easily



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handed over Tibet to the control of China to avoid provoking China, which was a wrong decision. Pandit Nehru always believed in cordial relations with China and both had signed a landmark agreement called 'Panchsheel' in their bilateral relations in 1954.⁶ Due to this approach of India, China during the 1950 not only annexed Aksai Chin (J&K, Xinjiang & Plateau adjacent to Tibet), which was once a part of Jammu & Kashmir, but also built a strategic highway there. Chinese incursions into Tibet created a lot of tension in India ties since the late 1980s. The historic visit of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988 marked a new chapter of progress in their bilateral relations. Apart from this, Prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao visit to China in 1993 added a new dimension to their bilateral relations. Since 2001, there has been a steady increase in political, diplomatic, economic, cultural and educational relations between the two hostile giants of the Asian region. The strengthening of connection was evident when the two nations signed a "Shared vision for the 21st century" in 2008 and a "Strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity" in 2005. Without a question, China and India have emerged as two rapidly expanding economies and their bilateral relations have greatly increased in importance on the global and strategic level. China became as a significant commercial partner in 2008 and both countries' strategic and military ties also grew. India and China have been working together in a number of other sectors of mutual interest besides trade and commerce. However, later bilateral relations were marked by uncertainty and occasional antagonism between them. Despite growing strategic and economic ties, there are many obstacles to overcoming for India and China.⁹ The emergence of China as a global power has created many problems in front of India. Both countries have failed to resolve their border dispute and the Chinese army has repeatedly intruded into Indian territory in Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Both have also built up a constant military infrastructure along the areas of disputed borders. Additionally, China remains suspicious of Indian military and economic activities in the disputed South China Sea, while India has expressed concern over china's strong strategic bilateral relationship with Pakistan. At this point of time, India's rise as a great power and respect for India by the United States to counter China's growing regional influence remain the main concerns for both states.¹⁰

Doklam Stand-off

An area of territory called the Doklam plateau is close to the borders of Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan. Both China and Bhutan claim this plateau as their own, due to which it has been disputed for a long time, which has not been resolved yet. Although, India has been a close ally of Bhutan for many years, it has maintained a military presence in the country to protect itself from external threats, including china's growing territorial ambitions in the region.¹¹ The British and the Chinese had not expressed any interest in the prior to India's independence while negotiating various boundary accords among themselves. While this tri-junction holds immense strategic importance for all the three countries.¹² When China made the decision to construct a road on land that Bhutan



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claimed, a conflict ensued. It was a risky move by India to intervene in the region but its action was motivated by its strong alliance with Bhutan which was done under the agreement between the two countries in 2007. India sent troops to the disputed region to stop China from attempting to take physical control of the territory because of this.¹³ China would have taken this estate from Bhutan had India not intervened. The Chinese action reinforced the impression that it intended to block India's progress.

Fears of a new military conflict between the two Himalayan countries increased as a result of the impasse, which was one of the most significant disputes between India and China since the 1962 war. The standoff was one of the most serious confrontations between India and China since the 1962 war, raising fears of another military confrontation between the two Himalayan nations. The Doklam crisis was a result of India's refusal to bow to China's growing aggression.¹⁴ As a result, the standoff continued for two months with both sides refusing to back down. Political channels were used to resolve the standoff and eventually in August 2017, both sides agreed to withdraw their troops from the area, resolving the immediate crisis. Doklam dispute still unresolved China continues to build infrastructure to bolster its territorial claims in the disputed area.¹⁵ Most people agree that Nepal, Bhutan and some of Tibet serve as the historic buffer zone between India and China, preventing direct interaction between the two countries. Increased communication with China has been welcomed by Nepal and the present administration in Kathmandu has been observed openly criticizing Indian policy. Following the battle of Doklam, the door was wide open for the Chinese army to infiltrate those regions, leaving the Indian army in a precarious situation. The standoff highlights the risks and rewards of intervening in disputes over disputed territories, how one country's perceived interests can affect others.¹⁶ In the year 2020, a lot of news came out that China is engaged in building, many construction roads and military base in Doklam so that it can control the Doklam. Some satellite images came out on 25 Nov., 2020, which revealed that China has set up a new village around Doklam. American Tracker Company was found out about it. By opposing China's actions in the Doklam region, India has been attempting to keep things as they are in South Asia. India and China now have a geopolitical and strategic competition as a result of this circumstance.¹⁷

From India's point of view, the controversy points to the need to actively address regional disputes and strengthen its alliance with countries such as Bhutan. The dispute told India that China's growing power and increasing regional influence could no longer be ignored. India's interest lies in stabilizing the region and promoting economic growth by engaging in regional cooperation with all stakeholders. In fact, the Doklam dispute has shown that resolving disputes peacefully through dialogue and negotiation is the best way to maintain peace and stability in the region.



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Consequences of Doklam Standoff

The Doklam standoff between India and China was a 73 days military standoff between the two countries along their disputed Himalayan border. This standoff saw a deep impact on India-China bilateral relations. There are discussed in detail below:

- **Impact on Bilateral Relations** – The Doklam crisis had a serious impact on India-China bilateral relations which were already stained, including a border dispute that has been going on for over 50 years. As a result, relations between the two countries, India and China, saw a significant decline. Due to the Doklam crisis, several high level exchanges between India and China as well as national visits by security advisors and other officials, have been suspended. Its effect was seen on economic relations. Indian imports like **pharmaceuticals and cotton have been suspended by China. Now anti-India feeling has** increased in China and anti-China sentiment in India, which has damaged people-to-people relations.
- **Impact on Economic Ties**- Both India and China is trading partners of each other in South Asia. The Doklam crisis resulted in a significant drop in trade with both the countries importing and exporting. Second, this standoff helped India reduce its dependence on China. To reduce its dependence on China, measures have been taken to limit Chinese investment in India and to increase its investment, due to which there has been decrease in trade and economic relations between the two countries.¹⁸
- **Impact on Regional Stability**- The Doklam crisis also had an impact on regional stability. China's growing assertiveness in the region and India's ability to handle power has increased China's concern. Although, Bhutan has traditionally been an ally of India, the Doklam crisis exposed the country's sensitivity to pressure from the big powers. Both India and China are consolidating their positions in the region which has led to an increase in troop deployment in the region.
- **Impact on cultural deterioration**- Doklam crisis has greatly affected the cultural and social relations between India and China. As a result, negative perceptions and animosity towards China is widespread among the Indian population. The number of Chinese tourist coming to India decreased, affecting both tourism and trade. Whereas the government of India and policy makers should expand cultural and social relations with China to improve them, cultural exchange programs and trade to enhance mutual benefits. It is necessary for both the countries to resolve their differences and establish a strong bilateral relationship.
- **Impact on Diplomatic Relations**- The Doklam crisis had a far reaching impact on diplomatic relations between India and China rising tensions see a drop in high-level diplomatic visits. As a result, dialogue mechanisms were disrupted important issues such as regional security and economic cooperation remained unresolved. The continued



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deterioration of diplomatic relations between India and China could have a significant impact on the stability of the region. It is necessary that both countries engage in constructive dialogue in a peaceful manner and resolve their differences. Strong diplomatic ties between India and China are essential for a peaceful and prosperous future for the region.

- **Impact on International Goodwill-** India's response to the Doklam crisis has strengthened its position as a major player in the region. With tight security across its borders the country has won international support and accolades raising its status in the global area. India should continue to take a strategic approach towards regional security to enhance its position as a reliable partner for other countries. By doing this, India will increase its prominence in this region and contribution to stability.

Why is India supporting Bhutan in the Doklam Issue?

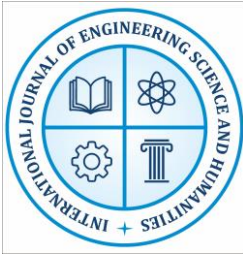
- India and Bhutan have cordial relations as there is no formal relation between Bhutan and China.
- The position of Bhutan is very strategic given the geography of India.
- To boost relations, India and Bhutan signed a "friendship treaty" in the year 2007, which mandates India to protect Bhutan's interests and close coordination between the two armies.
- Additionally, China's increased access to India's strategically sensitive "Siliguri corridor" (also known as the "Chicken Neck"), which connects seven northeastern states to the Indian mainland; it is a concern for India. If the road is finished, China will have more access to this area.

Looking to the future

Looking at the current situation, the future of India-China relations is looking dark. Since, the 1993 border peace and tranquility agreement, keeping border issues under control has kept relations stable and even predictable. Yet the fact remains that both India and China have failed to resolve their border dispute. With the India-China and Bhutan-China processes facing deadlock, the time has come from countries to make fresh institutional discoveries. Apart from this, both India and China have a broad vision of emerging as global powers. The rise of China from 1949 to the current day is at the heart of issue. Since then, India has observed how China has used Pakistan to try and confine India to South Asia. India is stepping up its collaboration with the US and Japan in response. According to historian Johan Garver, Beijing views India as the weakest link in the anti-China containment system being constructed in Asia.¹⁹

Conclusion:

The Doklam standoff highlighted the fragility of India-China relations and the critical role of smaller states like Bhutan in South Asian geopolitics. Despite decades of diplomatic engagement,



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unresolved border issues continue to create friction. The events at Doklam showed India's willingness to protect its strategic interests and uphold its commitments to Bhutan, underscoring the importance of the Siliguri corridor and the Himalayan frontier. The crisis also exposed China's growing assertiveness and its strategic use of infrastructure to expand influence. The fallout of the standoff—strained diplomatic ties, disrupted trade, regional instability and heightened public sentiments—emphasized the need for renewed dialogue and confidence-building measures. For India, strengthening alliances with Bhutan, reinforcing border infrastructure and engaging with global partners are essential. For both countries, peaceful dispute resolution and respect for sovereignty are crucial for long-term regional stability. Future progress will depend on institutionalized mechanisms, balanced strategic competition and the ability to prevent local disputes from escalating into larger conflicts.

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