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Doklam: To Start at the Very Beginning

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Since the clashes at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967, Doklam has been relatively quiet / Source: India Travel Forum

INTRODUCTION

There is a geographical and geopolitical aspect to the ongoing Sino-Indian standoff in the Doklam region. Geography locates Bhutan on a sensitive part of the Himalayan belt. Its history, small size and state capacity have made it an element in the geopolitical contest between India and China.

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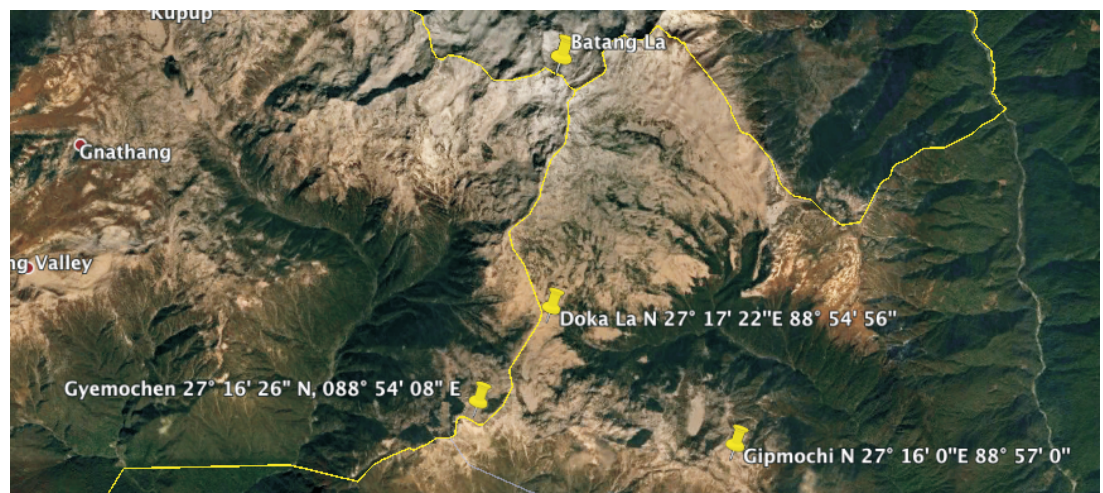
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The Doklam issue came to the fore between June and July this year almost without preamble. Since the clashes at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967, this border had been relatively quiet as the alignment of the Sino-Indian border in Sikkim is, to a large extent, accepted by both sides. However, there has always been a problem with the China-India-Bhutan trijunction. In 2007, India rushed the deployment of forces to the region following the destruction by China of a number of Indian bunkers in the Batang La area. China also laid claim to the 2.1-sq km “Finger Area” in north Sikkim that protrudes into the Sora Funnel and dismantled some cairns marking the border in the region. This story would be repeated in 2012.

The ongoing crisis has amplified the question-mark over where that trijunction lies. Indian and Bhutanese maps put it some 200 metres south-east of Batang La, while the Chinese say it is at a place called Gipmochi which is also confused for Gyemochen (or Gamochen). As of August 2, the Chinese say that the name of the mountain is Ji Mu Ma Zhen.



Map 1. The Chinese claim Gipmochi as the trijunction, but the GeoNames database shows it 5 km east of where they place it along with Gyemochen. / Source: GeoNames database

India has no claim on the territory south of Batang La which it believes to be Bhutan's, but China has insistently contested the Bhutanese claim; as far back as 2005, they had built a road in the area that terminated at a point below the Indian posts at Doka La. Chinese vehicles would come to this point and thereafter their personnel would go on foot and patrol the region south of this till the Jampheri or Zompelri ridge, where a Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) post is located.

On June 16 this year, however, the Chinese brought heavy road-building equipment to the area and began constructing a road from the point below Doka La to the Bhutanese post on Jampheri ridge. This provoked the Indian

intervention on June 18 to block the road construction, and thus beginning the current crisis.

There were expectations that the visit of India's National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, at a BRICS meeting at the end of July would aid in tempering the crisis and restoring the status quo ante. Whether or not this is happening is not clear at this point.¹ On August 2, China issued a lengthy document outlining their case. Separately, the Chinese spokesperson Geng Shuang said in an official briefing that the Indian action posed a “grave challenge to the peace and stability and normal international order,” and that China would not tolerate it. Nevertheless, the August 2 document noted a reduction in the Indian troops in the area, and indicating that the Chinese, too, have cut back on their personnel.

Just how the Doklam crisis will play out is difficult to hazard. The best way to deal with the immediate issue is to achieve status quo ante June 16. This will not, however, take care of the bigger issues. Those issues relate not only to the finalisation of the Bhutan-China border—which must be situated in the Bhutan-India relationship, if not the Indian border settlement with China—but also the larger geopolitical moves being made by China in the South Asian and Indian Ocean Region.

BHUTAN AS BUFFER: A BRIEF HISTORY

The Sikkim-Tibet border was defined in 1890 through the Anglo-Chinese Convention that was signed in Kolkata on 17 March 1890. Article I of the Convention said that the boundary of Sikkim and Tibet would be “the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta...from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu.” The beginning point of the boundary line would be “Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier...” However, there does not seem to have been any map attached to the Convention.

Bhutan was not party to this agreement, nor was Sikkim or Tibet; the agreement was solely between two empires – the British and the Qing. The Tibetans refused to implement the convention and for this, they were punished when Francis Younghusband, using the Jelep La route, went through the Chumbi Valley to storm Lhasa in his 1903-1904 expedition. The hapless Dalai Lama sought the aid of the Chinese emperor and later, another convention was signed between Great Britain and China in Peking in 1906, to confirm China's “suzerainty” over Tibet in exchange for a number of rights for the British.

In the wake of this development the British encouraged the creation of Bhutan under a hereditary king in 1907, recognised it through a 1910 treaty, and brought it under its own “suzerainty.” Bhutan was seen as a buffer between India and Chinese-controlled Tibet. It was in 1954 that China first published a map claiming large areas of Bhutan. Following the Tibetan revolt, China seized a number of enclaves held by Bhutan in Tibet. Bhutan, as noted earlier, was not party to the 1890 convention and has not ratified it at any point. However, the original survey of the Bhutan boundary and the first official map of Bhutan was made with the help of the Survey of India between 1961-1963.

Subsequently, the Bhutanese organised their own surveys and prepared a map of Bhutan in the mid-1980s that was approved by the 68th session of the National Assembly in 1989. Simultaneously, they engaged India and China in border talks to resolve outstanding issues. The Bhutan-India boundary was demarcated in 1963 and by 1971, the demarcation and the boundary pillar work was completed. Of the mosaic of 62 maps (minus the two trijunctions), 47 maps were signed immediately, but it took further discussion for the remaining 15 maps in 2005-2006.² However, the resolution of the China-Bhutan boundary has turned out to be more complex.



Map 2. A map showing the focal points of the border. / Source: Government of India

The Chumbi Valley region has historical echoes in the geopolitics of the Himalayas. The Valley offers the shortest and most convenient route between Lhasa and the sea port of Kolkata. It was through Jelep La that Sir Francis Younghusband invaded Tibet. When Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan in September 1958 to persuade it to come out of its isolation, he travelled through the Valley, and was seen off and received by Chinese officials at his crossing points. When the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1950, the Dalai Lama took up residence in Yadong, in the Chumbi Valley, close to the Indian border and later upon India's urging returned to Lhasa to try to make peace with the Chinese.

CHINA-BHUTAN BOUNDARY TALKS

The Bhutanese decided to hold boundary talks with China in 1980 and in preparation, began gathering material from their own archives, as well as those available in India and the UK. Data on the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) patrolling limits, administrative limits and local practices were also ascertained. It was only after this process that the Bhutanese established their claim lines that were plotted on the map that was approved by the members of the 68th session of the National Assembly in 1989. In the process, Bhutan voluntarily shed territory, though its details were not immediately disclosed. For example, older maps showed the Kula Kangri mountain and its surrounding areas within Bhutan, but the new one showed them clearly in Tibetan territory.

Talks between China and Bhutan on their 470-km border have been going on since 1984, although substantive talks only began in the 6th round in Beijing in 1989, as the first five rounds were spent on finalising the guiding principles. It was at the 1989 session that the official map was given to the Chinese. As Medha Bisht has noted, boundary negotiations between Bhutan and China have transpired in three phases—the first, started in 1984, was the “engagement phase”; the second (1996) was the “redistribution phase” in which China offered a package to Bhutan; and the third (2000) was the “normalisation phase”, in which Bhutan also advanced its claims.³

In the seventh round of talks in 1990, the Chinese had offered the Bhutanese a “package proposal” for the Pasamlung and Jakarlung Valleys, with a total area of 495 sq km in the north, if Bhutan conceded their western claims. This proposal was rejected by the National Assembly and subsequent sessions of the Assembly, too, indicated opposition for any kind of an exchange.

Yet, there are indications that in the 10th round of talks, the Bhutanese were ready to strike a deal with the Chinese and indeed agree to the swap. This

can be gleaned from the king's statement to the 73rd session of the National Assembly in August-September 1995, which said among others that the differences in claims have to be negotiated in four areas only—the 89 sq km of Doklam, 42 sq km in Sinchulumpa, and 138 sq km in Dramana-Shakhartoe, all totalling 269 sq km. At the same time, the king had stated that “the northern boundary will be successfully demarcated through the process of friendly dialogue.”⁴ It needs to be kept in mind that at the time Bhutan was an absolute monarchy and the National Assembly's role was purely advisory. The Bhutanese position hardened thereafter. When the two sides met for the 11th round of talks in November 1996, “to China's surprise, Bhutan revised its claims in the south and asserted a claim to larger territory than before, leading the talks to break down.” There is no doubt that China saw an Indian hand in this development and so Beijing reverted to its earlier stance of calling for an exchange of claims.⁵

The National Assembly's 75th session was told that in the 11th round of talks, Bhutan had put forward their claim to Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana and Shakhartoe in the western area. It was not only the Indian hand; the session report suggests that the deal would not have been popular within Bhutan. As one of the ministers pointed out during the session, the Chinese were essentially offering to exchange what were essentially Bhutanese lands.⁶

In 1997, the king told the 75th session of the Assembly that the two sides were back to discussing the exchange of the 495 sq km of the Pasamlung and Jakarlung Valleys with the western claims, that included the 89 sq km of Doklam.⁷ Thus the current dispute involves some 764 sq km since the Bhutanese had earlier voluntarily shed some 400 sq km in the north, along with Kula Kangri.

The two sides tried to stabilise the situation through an agreement on the ‘Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity’ on the Bhutan-China border, signed in December 1998. Clause 3 of the document specifically noted, “Both sides agreed that prior to the ultimate solution of the boundary issues, peace and tranquillity along the border should be maintained and the status quo of the boundary prior to March 1959 be upheld, and not resort to unilateral action to alter the status quo of the border.” This is what Bhutan now says is being violated through the Chinese activity in Doklam.

After Bhutan reverted to its 1989 claim line at the 14th round of talks in November 2000, it also extended “its claim line beyond what the Chinese had offered so far.” This was in the Doklam, Sinchulumpa (sometimes written as

Sinchulung) and Dramana area. This was a decision taken by the council of ministers who felt “that the earlier agreement was not acceptable to Bhutan and felt that some changes had to be made in the claims”.⁸

The proceedings of the National Assembly did not always catch the nuances of the debates within Bhutan and the border talks. As Thierry Mathou wrote, citing Kuensel, that despite the kerfuffle over Bhutan’s shift in the previous round, in the 15th round held in Thimphu in December 2001, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi had said at the time that “the boundary issue had, by and large, been resolved.” At the end of 2001, it was believed that the issue was close to final resolution. The following year, however, Foreign Minister Lynpo Jigme Thinley told the National Assembly that the Chinese had come up with new “documentary evidence on the ownership of the disputed tracts of land.” The report also said that China had asked Bhutan as to why they were raising new issues after many years of talks. Clearly, the new issues had to do with Doklam.⁹ It is not known whether India played any role in these developments.



Map 3. Chinese map clearly showing the claims in the west and the north. / Source: weibo

In 2006, Bhutan’s National Assembly was told of six roads being constructed near the Bhutan border, of which three were crossing the border itself. Indeed, between 2006 and 2009 no talks were held; this period saw increased Chinese activity on the Bhutanese border.

In the fourth session of the new Parliament of Bhutan on 4 December 2009, a report on the China-Bhutan border negotiations was presented to the house by Dasho Pema Wangchuk who was for a long time the Secretary for International Boundaries. In the question and answer session, there were

complaints that had echoed over the years of the activities of Tibetan grazers and medicinal herb collectors, as well as the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Dasho Pema said that the Chinese had at various occasions offered concessions from their own claim line, but, he noted, "We do not know where the line will fall as the Chinese maps and our maps are different in scale, names of places, rivers, passes and ridges are also different." He explained that the Bhutanese government had protested twice in 2008 and five times in 2009 about the road constructions, in addition to protests over 21 PLA incursions in 2008 and 17 in 2009. In any case, Dasho Pema said, the Parliament decided that the border talks should continue to be held on the basis of the 1989 claim line.

It was in the same meeting that Dasho Pema also disclosed, in response to a question about Kula Kangri being shown as part of Tibet, that "due to cartographic mistakes of the map in the olden days" the mountain was shown in Bhutan whereas it was actually "well inside Tibetan territory".¹⁰

The last major information about the Sino-Bhutanese negotiations came from the 6th session of the first Parliament held in November 2010. There Dasho Pema told the Parliament that talks in Thimphu in January 2010 and the Expert Group meeting in Beijing in July 2010 had failed to yield results since there were "differences of views and positions on our border such as Doklam, Charithang, Sinchulumpa and Dramana, all in the western border". The two sides agreed to set up Joint Technical Field Survey teams and exchange 1:100,000 scale maps.¹¹

After this point the reports on border negotiations peter out in the proceedings of the sessions of the Bhutanese Parliament, perhaps indicating that there has been little movement in the negotiations.

THE CURRENT CRISIS

As has been noted earlier in this report, China had built a dirt track to the area near Doka La in 2005. They used to park their vehicles there and conduct foot patrols to the Jampheri ridge where the RBA maintained an outpost.

Some time on June 16, the PLA construction party began road construction, and the RBA personnel sought to stop them on the basis of the Chinese commitment to maintain status quo in disputed areas. The Chinese say that as a goodwill gesture they had informed the Indian side, once in May and then again in early June, that they were planning the construction. Two days later, Indian Army personnel came down from Doka La to dissuade the Chinese as well and blocked their movement forward. Subsequently, the

matter was taken up at the diplomatic level and also discussed at a Border Personnel Meeting at Nathu La on June 20.

The public would only get a hint of the crisis on June 23, when newspapers reported that China had abruptly closed the Nathu La to pilgrims traveling to Kailash Mansarovar. The reports cited the Indian official spokesperson confirming this development, saying that “the matter is being discussed with the Chinese side.” According to the reports, the Chinese side claimed that there were landslides in the mountain route on their side. However, the real story became apparent soon enough when the Chinese official spokesperson Geng Shuang acknowledged on June 26 that the yatra was indeed barred from the Nathu La due to “security concerns”. The official said: “Recently, the Indian border troops crossed the China-India boundary at the Sikkim section and entered the Chinese territory, obstructing Chinese border troops’ normal activities in Doklam. The Chinese side has taken proportionate measures in response.” He pointed out that the Sikkim part of the Sino-Indian boundary had been defined by the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 which had “repeatedly” been confirmed by India.¹²

The Bhutanese Ambassador in New Delhi, Maj Gen (retd) V Namgyel, responded through an interview that appeared in *The Hindu* on June 28, noting that the road construction was in an area which is disputed between China and Bhutan and was, in fact moving towards a camp of the RBA at Zompelri (Jampheri) ridge. He said, “Bhutan has conveyed that the road construction by the PLA is not in keeping with the agreements between China and Bhutan. We have asked them to stop and refrain from changing the status quo.” The Bhutanese government issued a press release on June 29, reaffirming Namgyel’s remarks. It provided a backdrop to the events: “On 16th June 2017, the Chinese Army started constructing a motorable road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri... Bhutan has 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 [on maintaining the status quo pending a settlement] 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.”¹³

THE INDIA-CHINA WAR OF WORDS

On the last day of June, India issued a press statement noting China’s attempts to alter the status quo in a disputed area near Doka La. According to the

statement, in coordination with the Royal Government of Bhutan, Indian personnel who were in Doka La also “approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo.” The statement made it clear that the events that had transpired were not only about Bhutan, but “would represent a significant change of status quo with security implications for India.”

In that context, New Delhi did the unexpected and added a new angle to the Sino-Indian border issue. The statement affirmed that there was an agreement between China and India in 2012 that “trijunction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries.” Since no public declaration has been made of the agreement, it can be assumed that this was, in fact, an understanding arrived at by the Special Representatives of the two countries.

The statement also made another startling revelation that India was no longer basing its claim in Sikkim on the basis of the 1890 Convention, but on the belief that it only signified a “mutual agreement on the ‘basis of alignment’”, which had also been reconfirmed in 2012. In fact, the statement said, “Further discussions would have to take place to actually finalise the boundary.”¹⁴

This fact was remarked on by the Chinese spokesperson on July 3, when he complained: “As to the statement issued by India’s Ministry of External Affairs last Friday (i.e., June 30), we have noted that this statement completely left out the Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet (1890), none other than which clearly defined the China-India boundary alignment in areas where the incident happened.”¹⁵ In subsequent remarks, the Chinese spokesperson also weighed in on the Indian side’s perfidy in equating the general region of Doklam with the trijunction. On July 7, he said, “The illegal trespass took place at the Sikkim section of the China-India boundary over 2000 metres from Mount Gipmochi and has nothing to do with the trijunction.”

On 2 August 2017, China issued a document, “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”. A translated version was issued by the Chinese embassy in New Delhi. The document recounted the events and restated the point that the Indian side had violated a border that had been settled by the 1890 Convention, accepted by Prime Minister Nehru and reconfirmed by the Indian Special Representative in 2006. “The incident occurred in an area where there is a clear and delimited

boundary,” it declared, rejecting India’s contention that the Chinese road building had security implications for India. It referred to a 1974 resolution by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), declaring that no consideration whatsoever can justify “the invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another state.” It also spoke of the importance of stability and inviolability of boundaries in international law.

As for Bhutan, the Chinese note said that the China-Bhutan boundary issue has “nothing to do with India” and that India’s intrusion not only violated Chinese territorial sovereignty, “but also challenged Bhutan’s sovereignty and independence.” China ignored India’s point on the 2012 agreements between the two SRs on the final settlement of the trijunction and the contention that all that existed with regard to the 1890 Convention was “a basis for alignment”, not a fixed border. Indeed, the use of the term ‘delimited’ in the August 2 Chinese note suggested that notwithstanding references to demarcation in Nehru’s letters, the border does need to be actually demarcated on the ground through boundary pillars and other markers. In fact, given that the term ‘delimited’ refers to a line being drawn on a map, it is not even clear whether the border was ever even delimited, since there was no map attached to the 1890 Convention.

For their part, the Chinese revealed their own take of the SR’s discussions when they included a phrase from a May 2006 non-paper given by the Indians which noted, “Both sides agree on the border alignment in the Sikkim sector.” This is consistent with the Indian view that, as of now, the agreement is only on the “basis of alignment” and not a delimited and demarcated border. Srinath Raghavan has pointed out that a month later, China replied in their non-paper that based on the 1890 Convention, both sides may “verify and determine the specific alignment of the Sikkim sector and produce a common record.”¹⁶

Moreover, the discrepancy on the location of the trijunction suggests that there are differences about the location of the boundary line, possibly an outcome of the faulty cartography of the past. Indeed, the Chinese document itself suggests that “China and India ought to sign a new boundary convention in their own names to replace the 1890 Convention,” though, they say it would not alter the delimited boundary. This is strange, since there are always minor differences in the delimitation of a boundary and its demarcation.

CARTOGRAPHIC ISSUES

To begin with, just how the boundary was delimited is not clear. There do not appear to be any maps accompanying the 1890 Convention. Therefore, using

the strict construction of the 1890 Convention is fraught with problems. China insists, for one, that the trijunction is at Mount Gipmochi or Mount Ji Mu Ma Zhen. As the Chinese spokesperson noted on July 5, “the 1890 convention stipulates that the Sikkim section of the China-India boundary commences at Mount Gipmochi.”¹⁷

The biggest problem, of course, is that Bhutan was not party to that treaty and cannot be bound by the wording of that Convention which says that the trijunction must be at Mount Gipmochi. Bhutan and India, on the other hand, place it at a point near Batang La (N27°19'24.83" N & 88°55'20.04"E) based on actual surveys which show that that it the true water-parting point between the Teesta and the Amo Chhu. A record of the 68th session of the Bhutanese National Assembly in 1989 was told that “our proposal was to demarcate Bhutan’s boundary with China from Batangla to Merugla upto Sinchela along the ridge” and then down to Amo Chhu river.¹⁸

But the bigger problem arises from trying to locate Mount Gipmochi. Many old maps show the beginning of the border from a place called Gyemochen. Indeed, the Bhutanese themselves noted, as revealed in the records of the 82nd session of their National Assembly, that “the Chinese had been going from Gyemochen and Chela to Amo Chhu.” Gyemochen, with coordinates, is mentioned in a 1937 Survey of India map and a 1955 US military map. A British map of 1923 mentions the same feature of 14,518 ft as Gipmochi. And a 1910 map also mentions a place called Giaomochi but shows the trijunction around Batang La.¹⁹

The conclusion could well be that Gipmochi and Gyemochen are the same place. But that does not seem to be the case. An authoritative database, one created and maintained by the US Geospatial Intelligence Agency is showing Gipmochi/Gyemochen at two locations. One is at 27°16'26.00"N 88°54'21.02"E at the Indian border as per the Google maps, and the other some 5 km to its east as the crow flies to its east within Bhutan (27°16' 00"N 88°54'08"E), adjacent to a distinct feature called Elephant Lake.²⁰

Clearly, what emerges is the difficulty of relying on an 1890 convention, based on possibly flawed surveys for modern-day boundaries that may have taken place in the early part of the 20th century in a mountainous and inhospitable region. India and China have clearly indicated their intention of following the watershed principle for following their border. But to do it by relying on maps alone would be an imperfect process. It has to be done on the

ground. In other words, not only does it have to be delimited, but actually demarcated on the ground.

BHUTAN AND INDIA: DANCING THE TANGO

What was the motive for the Chinese move? While it is difficult to pass a definitive judgement, it is likely that it was done to push the Bhutanese to complete their border negotiations with China and allow Beijing to establish an embassy in Thimphu. From the outset, as the debates at the Bhutan National Assembly reveal, there has been great eagerness among their officials to finally resolve the border issue because they are aware that Bhutan lacks the state capacity to cope with the constant influx of yak herders and medicinal herb collectors from China. How many of these are being sent deliberately to harass the Bhutanese is not clear.²¹

Equally important is the fact that there is a section of the Bhutanese public who perceive that none of the areas, including Doklam, have any major implications for their country's security. They are essentially grazing grounds of little economic value. Bhutan would also like to normalise its ties with its giant northern neighbour, but Beijing reportedly insists that the price for this is a border agreement. In addition, diplomatic relations with Beijing also comes with the promise of economic largesse, even though this could well be a mixed blessing, given the small population base of the country. In any case, even with normal relations, and with China developing road links, Bhutan is not likely to be the beneficiary. The historical connection is actually through the Chumbi Valley to Kalimpong and Kolkata. If the historical Kolkata, Kalimpong, Yadong, Lhasa route is developed it could have a transformative effect on the region, but may not be of any special benefit to Bhutan.

There is a perception in Bhutan that India is holding it back from completing the border negotiation and that this may not be in the Himalayan kingdom's interest. This is why it is now possible to hear new voices amongst the Bhutanese, like Yeshey Dorji, a professional photographer living in Thimphu—who think that India goes “completely berserk” at the thought of Bhutan conceding Chinese claims on Doklam.²² Another blogger, Sangey of Haa Wangcha, writing in the online forum of the *Kuensel* newspaper noted that “India has been controlling the Sino-Bhutan international boundary talks through its iron grip on Bhutan's economic and communication dependence on India.” He argued that where China had been “quite sincere and mostly positive”, Bhutan had “been trying to delay progress for many years at the

insistence of India.” The Indian goal, in his view, was to stall the normalisation of Bhutan’s ties with China.²³

The Indian decision to withhold subsidies in 2013, which reportedly led to the defeat of Prime Minister Jigme Thinley in the elections, is often alluded to in the context of New Delhi’s sensitivities. Yet, given its size and its experience of dealing with India, Bhutan is unlikely to play the politics of seeking to use China to balance India. But as Pranav Kumar, an academic in Bhutan, has noted, “for a small county like Bhutan, it is very dangerous to live with an undefined and disputed border.”²⁴ However, acceptance of a deal that gives away Doklam would violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the 2007 agreement with India, especially the clause which says that both parties agree that they will not allow their territory to be used for any inimical activities against the other. Should Thimphu strike out on its own to resolve its border issues with China, it could well lead to a fracture in its relationship with India.

Beijing realises that Bhutan has no capacity to deal with border incursions; whereas India has steadily acquired them. The road construction move was likely a means of pressuring Thimphu. Not surprisingly, the August 2 Chinese statement and subsequent remarks from various Chinese diplomats seem to suggest that India is firing its guns from Bhutan’s shoulders.

Bhutan has not handled its border claim too well. Its claims have been varying and it may have done its documentation poorly. It cannot be blamed for this, considering that even as late as 1961 it had to depend on another country to even determine its boundaries. Its modesty must be commended, in fact, considering that when it did determine those boundaries, it voluntarily ceded areas to China. On Doklam, Bhutan’s claim is not entirely without foundation. Tsering Shakya, a US-based historian and scholar of Tibetan literature, who otherwise says Thimphu’s claims are weak, points out that there is evidence that part of the region was indeed given by the 13th Dalai Lama to Kazi Ugyen Dorje, an adviser to the first king of Bhutan.²⁵

Relations between India and Bhutan are in a flux, not only because of Bhutanese aspirations and Indian security concerns. The emergence of a constitutional monarchy in Bhutan is part of a carefully structured process that is bringing Bhutan into the 21st century. The arrival of cable TV and the internet have played a significant role in opening up the country to the world in an unprecedented manner. For India, security is indeed a major consideration in its relations with Bhutan. This is especially so because of its poor relations

with China and its border dispute which overlaps Bhutan in two trijunctions. Bhutan was virtually enabled its modern form by the British to be a buffer between China and India. Even today, it serves this role by keeping China at a distance from the Siliguri Corridor. For its part, independent India has carefully sheltered Bhutan and enabled it to play an international role at the time and pace of its own choosing.

Yet, perhaps because of its overly defensive mindset, India worries about Chinese military capacities in the Chumbi Valley and the possibility of the PLA establishing itself along the Jampheri ridge. This lies at the root of the Indian response to the current situation.²⁶ There is no point citing UN resolutions, as the Chinese have done on August 2, because when a country is concerned about its security, international agreements have little value. China should know this because this was the reason why Beijing has given short shrift to the arbitration award on the South China Sea in 2016. And speaking of agreements and international law, China should not lose sight of its original sin of breaching the status quo that it committed itself to maintain through the 1998 agreement with Bhutan.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The future of India-China relations might appear bleak. After all, since the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement of 1993, the two countries have maintained stable, even predictable, relations, keeping border issues in check and creating confidence-building measures in the process. Yet the fact remains that India and China have failed to come to a resolution to their border dispute. There have been two distinct cycles over the years. The first was between 1993 and 2003 when the Joint Working Groups sought to stabilise the LAC, as per the agreement of 1993, as a prelude to resolving the dispute itself.

Since 2003, they decided that a political dimension needed to be added and appointed Special Representatives to deal with the issue. The SRs have seen 19 rounds of talks and, in 2005, the two countries signed what was hoped to be a far-reaching agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles of a Border Settlement. More than a decade since, a deal is nowhere in sight. In 2012, Dai Bingguo, the Chinese Special Representative, and his Indian counterpart Shivshankar Menon, drew up an 18-point consensus document on the eve of the former's retirement, summing up the work they had done. The use of this document in the current standoff by both sides could well be a signal that the Special Representative process has run out of steam. Parallel to this,

China and Bhutan have had 24 rounds of border talks. As has been shown in this report, those, too, have run their course without successfully leading to a settlement.

The present crisis has shown that today, any resolution of Bhutan's boundary issue must be embedded in the bigger picture of a Sino-Indian border settlement. With the Sino-Indian and the China-Bhutan processes facing a dead-end, the time has come for the countries to explore new institutional mechanisms of resolving their border dispute and maintaining peace and tranquillity on their border.

Further, there is the larger view of both China and India emerging as global powers. The root of the problem lies in the rise of China from 1949 till today. The People's Republic of China's decision to claim the imperial borders of the Qing empire have set the backdrop for many border conflicts that China has seen since then. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, there was no Chinese presence on the borders of Tibet with India till the occupation of Tibet in 1950-51, especially not in places like the Chumbi Valley or the borders of Arunachal Pradesh. Indeed, countries like Bhutan had no problems till the Tibetan revolt of 1959 and the Dalai Lama's escape to India. Since then, India has seen the manner in which China has sought to limit India to South Asia by using Pakistan. Now, a much richer China is pushing into India's neighbourhood with a relentlessness not seen before. It is not that Bhutan will become a new platform for Chinese forays into South Asia, but that it will neutralise India's most faithful ally in South Asia and add to Beijing's self-worth as a regional power. And, as Kumar has pointed out, "it would help in legitimising Chinese rule in Tibet" since Tibet and Bhutan share similar cultures, traditions and cultures.²⁷

In response, India is intensifying cooperation with the US and Japan. India's actions are still constrained by its self-image as an independent player in the international system. It therefore does not have a military alliance with the US and will not be privileged to receive US assistance in the event of a conflict with China. Historian John Garver suggests that Beijing may be seeing India as "the weakest link in the chain of "anti-China containment" being built in Asia."²⁸ India's military modernisation is delayed by a decade and a half, and there is nothing to suggest that it is doing anything about it.

Yet even as China may be rising, so is India. Unlike the smaller countries of Asia, India not only has the state capacity—only projected to increase in the

coming years—to deal with China on its own terms. However, conflict between the two Asian giants will act as a drag on their rise. It has been famously said by both Chinese and Indian leaders that there is enough room for both countries to grow. Clearly, though, as they do so, there seems to be greater friction between them and border issues could well be an occasion for the crisis, rather than their cause. If so, the two giant neighbours urgently need to devise what the Chinese call “win-win” mechanisms to rework their relationship. [ORF](#)

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ENDNOTES

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