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China's Himalayan "Mission Creep"

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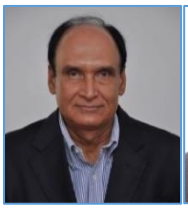
"China's actions violate past commitments regarding border alignments at the tri-junction.... as well as longstanding agreement with Bhutan"



Introduction

For the past three weeks, India and China have been locked in a tense stand-off on the strategically important Doklam plateau along the disputed Bhutan-China boundary, located in the proximity of the tri-junction where the boundaries of India, Bhutan and China meet. This eyeball to eyeball confrontation is the direct result of China's unilateral encroachment and road construction in a recognised disputed border area with Bhutan, in a blatant attempt to change the existing status quo with a small neighbour and wrest military advantage vis a vis India. China's actions violate past commitments that any issue regarding border alignments at the tri-junction will be decided through consultations among the three parties, as well as its longstanding agreement with Bhutan to maintain the status quo on the boundary pending final settlement.

Source: http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sikkim-row-part-of-indias-attempt-to-impress-donald-trump-chinese-media/articleshow/59422118.cms

IN THIS ISSUE

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In keeping with the growing dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise as a leading power. To support that goal, the DPG undertakes research and organizes policy interactions across a wide canvas, including strategic and geo-political issues, geo-economic issues and defence and security issues.

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
Director General

"…all established confidence building measures agreed between 1993 and 2014 have been sidelined and replaced by a single, strident and orchestrated demand: "India must vacate the aggression"."

In terms of scale, duration and belligerence, this standoff is unlike any other in the past, when India and China have walked back from periodic Chinese incursions and physical posturing in areas where there are differences on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) through diplomatic demarches and border meetings. In the present instance, all established confidence building measures agreed between 1993 and 2014 have been sidelined and replaced by a single, strident and orchestrated demand: "India must vacate the aggression".

China appears to have taken this pre-mediated step to stoke tensions and create a military face-off with India along these disputed Himalayan borders, and more importantly to test the strength of India-Bhutan relations. It is also no coincidence that the incident was triggered close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's summit meeting with US President Donald Trump on June 26, 2017. The manner in which Beijing has since raised the stakes and used all elements of the state apparatus, including official spokespersons backed by social media, the academic community and think tanks, points towards a coordinated campaign to coerce and intimidate India, undermine India's relations with Bhutan and its primacy in South Asia, and impose China's regional dominance. This fits into the familiar pattern of China's unilateral and expansionist territorial assertions, grey zone incursions and salami slicing tactics that we have witnessed, from the East China Sea to the South China Sea and now extending into the Indo-Pacific, since it began its overt pursuit of establishing hegemonic power nearly a decade ago.

Divergent Viewpoints

China has raised yet another "historical" claim, contending that the Doklam plateau is part of its territory and thus its road construction is legitimate.[1] It claims that India is trespassing on the pretext of upholding Bhutan's interests. China's Ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, has said that "the ball is in India's court" to resolve the dispute by withdrawing Indian troops from what is claimed as Chinese territory.[2] On its part, the Chinese state run media has issued dire warnings such as "India will suffer greater losses than in 1962 if it incites military conflicts".[3]

India's concerns are centered around the strategic ramifications if China was to seize control of the Doklam plateau from Bhutan. It supports Bhutan's claim over the plateau and is also providing military support as part of bilateral commitments towards a vulnerable and friendly neighbour. The Ministry of External Affairs has made it clear that Chinese activities in Doklam "represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India".[4]

"…India's concerns are centered around the strategic ramifications if China was to seize control of the Doklam plateau from Bhutan. … Chinese activities in Doklam "represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India"."

Bhutan contends that the 1890 China-Britain treaty was limited to border areas of India and China and not to those of Bhutan and China, on which boundary negotiations have been taking place. Bhutan's Ambassador to India, V. Namgyel, has asserted that "the road construction by the PLA is not in keeping with the agreements between China and Bhutan".[5] According to Bhutan, China is violating a 1959 agreement through its current actions aimed at unilaterally altering the status quo.

The Stand Off

As previously stated, Doklam is located near the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction in the strategically important Chumbi Valley. The genesis of the standoff lies in differing perceptions on the location of the tri-junction and the related alignment of the India-China-Bhutan boundary.

Source: http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/dances-with-dragons/article3800096.ece

For India and Bhutan, the tri-junction lies at the boundary point Batangla, based on the watershed principle which has been the guiding principle for India's approach to the boundary with China in the Eastern Sector. China on the other hand bases its claim on the 1890 Agreement between Great Britain and China,

which located the tri-junction at Gyemochen, around 18 Km to the south of Batangla.[6] The Indian action of moving into the Doklam Plateau on the Bhutan-China border and stalling Chinese road construction activity is seen by the Chinese as an intrusion that must be vacated.

"…Indian actions are in concert with the India-Bhutan Peace and Friendship Treaty of 2007, … "not to allow the use of their territories for activities that are harmful to the national security interest of the other". "

However, Indian actions are in concert with the India-Bhutan Peace and Friendship Treaty of 2007, which obliges the two sides "not to allow the use of their territories for activities that are harmful to the national security interest of the other".[7] India's actions in conjunction with the Royal Bhutan Army are part of its treaty obligations to halt China's attempt to build a military road in a strategically important region of the Chumbi Valley to gain strategic depth.

Source: http://indianexpress.com/article/what-is/what-is-india-china-bhutan-border-standoff-sikkim-doklam-chumbi-valley-4736620/

"…China is making territorial claims based on a 1890 Agreement between the Qing Dynasty and Great Britain … even as it rejects the 1914 Shimla Agreement as unequal "

Surprisingly, China is making territorial claims based on a 1890 Agreement between the Qing Dynasty and Great Britain which defines the border between Sikkim and Tibet along the watershed principle, even as it rejects the 1914 Shimla Agreement, which also established the watershed principle for boundary delineation between India and Tibet, as unequal.[8] The fact is that neither the Bhutan-China boundary in Doklam nor the tri-junction itself have been settled between the parties concerned. China's claims of the Indian Army intruding into its territory have been rejected by the Bhutanese Government by countering that it is the Chinese intrusion in Doklam that violates commitments to maintain the status quo, pending the finalisation of the Bhutan-China boundary. China is prone to citing selective and self-serving arguments to justify its territorial assertions.

Understanding Chinese Behaviour

"China's … bellicose campaign is part of a well planned, three pronged strategy of coercion. First … create proxies and foster instability along India's strategic periphery … Second, upgradation of … military posture and operational deployments in the Tibet … Third … questioning of even 'settled' or undisputed areas like Sikkim constitute tactics of 'subterranean coercion' …"

China's current bellicose campaign is part of a well planned, three pronged strategy of coercion. First, China is attempting to create proxies and foster instability along India's strategic periphery through military posturing and economic inducement as well as by questioning the validity of existing agreements. Second, upgradation of China's military posture and operational deployments in the Tibet theatre are aimed at showcasing asymmetry to brow beat India by highlighting the costs of military confrontation. Third, China's incursions in Ladakh and Doklam or questioning of even 'settled' or undisputed areas like Sikkim constitute tactics of 'subterranean coercion' to keep bilateral tensions alive till New Delhi succumbs to China's demands.

Conflict with India?

From China's perspective, there can be three scenarios for a possible conflict with India:

- ***"Teaching India a lesson"-*** Rapid and limited operations resulting in India suffering visible military losses which diminishes its stature and asserts Chinese primacy. Build up of forces in Tibet and showcasing of its growing military power, including live firing exercises, are all part of this design.

- "***Territorial gains"***- China is unlikely to launch an all out offensive with nuclear armed India. Its aims will be restricted to areas of strategic interest, or strategic bargaining. These are largely in the continental domain, and there is a deliberate tendency to underplay the nuclear balance which has created dissuasive deterrence.
- **"Psychological pressure and moral intervention"-** This can take the form of provoking India and then justifying Chinese actions as legitimate reactions.

Flowing from the above scenarios, China's responses to the ongoing tensions may escalate to "psychological pressure and moral intervention" through strategic messaging that if India persists with the standoff, China will be prepared to teach India a lesson. China's show of force, manipulation of domestic public opinion, arm twisting of the Indian strategic community and blunt threats from its diplomats are all designed to confuse Indian public opinion and undermine India's resolve to defend its core security interests. In other words, these blatant attempts to gain psychological and moral ascendancy have one ultimate goal: arm twisting the Indian political leadership to back off from standing up to China.

> *"…blatant attempts to gain psychological and moral ascendancy have one ultimate goal: arm twisting the Indian political leadership to back off from standing up to China."*

India-China Balance of Power

There is no doubt that China has built up massive strategic and operational infrastructure in Tibet which allows the PLA to build up forces much more quickly than in the past and in more significant numbers if desired. Post PLA re-organization, the former Lanzhou and Chengdu Military Region Commands have been combined into a single "Western Theatre Command", integrating Army, Air and Rocket Force units. According to estimates, China has the capability to induct upto seven divisions within a week's time in a theatre of choice, together with rapid reaction forces building up to a division every 24-36 hours.[9] China has also developed adequate logistical capabilities to support these forces in a short term conflict.

These ground forces are to be backed by PLA Air and Rocket Force units operating in tandem. The PLA Rocket Force has substantial deployments opposite India that include DF-21 medium range ballistic missiles, DF15/16 SRBMs, as well as substantial short to medium range cruise missiles.

Against this formidable capability, India may be lagging but is no longer a pushover. Over the years, India has not only strengthened its defensive deployments but also upgraded its firepower and border infrastructure, logistical strength and troop habitats. Raising of a dedicated Mountain Strike Corps has also created a strong riposte capability. Further, the IAF with 31 airfields located close to the LAC, has an edge over the PLAAF flying from high altitude TAR airfields. India is also deploying Brahmos Block III missiles as a symmetric counter to PLA Rocket Forces in Tibet.[10]

Source: *http://www.india.com/news/india/brahmos-supersonic-cruise-missile-successfully-test-fired-by-indian-navy-in-bay-of-bengal-2052506*

> *"…if the PLA launches military initiatives, the best it can do is to create limited pockets of encroachment before getting bogged down in attrition warfare … India has the wherewithal to vacate such encroachments …"*

In the obtaining military scenario, if the PLA launches military initiatives, the best it can do is to create limited pockets of encroachment before getting bogged down in attrition warfare, particularly in the absence of any element of surprise. India has the wherewithal to vacate such encroachments through the offensive capabilities which it can bring to bear.

Regional Consequences of Standoff

Bhutan is not the only small neighbour that has been on the receiving end of Chinese territorial ambitions. Several countries in Central Asia (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan),

Southeast Asia (Vietnam and Myanmar) and East Asia (Taiwan and Japan) have been forced by China to either accept its territorial claims or suffer the consequences.

"China's penchant to compare its modern borders with those that existed prior to the perceived 'historical losses' of territories is significant to understanding of China's current boundary issues"[11]. But this expansionist mindset has adverse consequences. China's unresolved land and maritime border disputes with neighbours also continue to hurt its relations with several countries and vitiate the regional political and security environment. A China which is fixated on territorial power plays is hardly capable of generating the soft power it needs to achieve the pre-eminent status it seeks.

Success in brow-beating India will make China's behaviour even more aggressive across Asia and sow the seeds of a China-led neo-tributary system in the Asia-Pacific. ASEAN countries, as evidenced by the remarks of senior analysts and diplomats from ASEAN at the recently concluded "Delhi Dialogue" [12], are already in thrall of Chinese power and psychological dominance. They are far too dependent on China's largesse in terms of investments and trade and thus several among them tend to overlook the implications of China's creeping maritime dominance of the South China Sea. In fact, there are open questions being raised by these South East Asian nations about the significance of the US Navy's Freedom of Navigation patrols and what interests they serve. ASEAN countries do not subscribe to any notion of containment of China.

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Therefore, the stakes are high in this India-China confrontation, not only for India as a regional power and a security stakeholder in Asia, but equally for a rules based regional order that can effectively check China's strategy of region-wide intimidation. The eventual outcome of the present impasse will have a bearing on whether Asia can evolve a stable and balanced security architecture that accommodates the interests of major and rising powers as well as smaller states, or we are headed towards a destabilising era of attempted domination by an authoritarian hegemon.

While it remains to be seen how matters progress on the Doklam plateau, as of now it is China which is appearing to be tactical and showcasing its anxieties, while India is maintaining a measured and principled stand.

"…as of now it is China which is appearing to be tactical and showcasing its anxieties, while India is maintaining a measured and principled stand."

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Endnotes:

[1] "China says India violates 1890 agreement in border stand-off", *South China Morning Post*, July 6, 2017.

[2] China's Ambassador to India Luo Zhaohui, "Ball is in India's court", quoted in *Times of India*, July 4, 2017.

[3] "India will suffer worse losses than 1962 if it incites border clash", *Global Times,* July 4, 2017.

[4] "Recent Developments in Doklam Area, see http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28572/Recent_Developments_in_Doklam_Area.

[5] "Construction of road by China 'direct violation': Bhutan", *Times of India*, June 29, 2017.

[6] Lt Gen S L Narasimhan (Retd), "Saner Voices Need To Prevail", *Defence Aviation Post*, July 7, 2017.

[7] "India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty", February 8, 2017.

[8] Claude Arpi Blog, "When China refuses to talk about Bhutan and Sikkim boundaries, July 4, 2017.

[9] Saurav Jha, "China's Creeping Invasion of India", *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2017.

[10] Note 9, ibid.

[11] "Bhutan not the sole sufferer; Beijing bullying other nations too", Times of India, July 7, 2007

[12] "Delhi Dialogue IX: Charting course for India-ASEAN relations" held in New Delhi on July 4-5, 2017.

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