

Rhetoric and Reality of Doklam Incident

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Doklam standoff which took place between the armies of India and China was a major clash between the two Asian giants. The incident lasted from 18 June to 28 August 2017. For the first time, Bhutan was involved in a conflict between its two neighbours. Exchange of fiery rhetoric characterized the incident, besides unprecedented scale of military drills on both sides of the border, and speculations of an imminent war. The standoff was resolved for now, but the issues related to border dispute continue to emerge, raising the concern for a similar face-off at any time. This article discusses the events that unfolded in the course of the Doklam standoff based on online news articles and a few reports posted on the internet.

Background

On 16 June 2017, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China began to build a road in Doklam, an area disputed by Bhutan. The area is called Doklam¹ by Bhutan and Dong Lang by China.² The Indian border troops interrupted the work two days later, and this led to a standoff between armies of the two countries. The so-called Doklam standoff lasted for 73 days. Although such incidences are not uncommon along the 3,488 kilometres of unsettled boundary between India and China, the Doklam incident is described as the biggest border conflict after the 1962 border war. What was significant for Bhutan was that the Doklam conflict took place in an area contested by Bhutan. Any use of force would have had a significant impact

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¹ In Tibetan and Dzongkha, it is written as 'brog lam, which literacy means "nomad's road".

² In the Chinese official statement released on 5 August 2017, the area is first referred to as "Dong Lang area (Doklam)".

on Bhutan's security and sovereignty. For the first time Bhutan was directly involved in a conflict between its two neighbours.

In an interview given to the *Asian News International*, the Chief of Indian Army General Bipin Rawat stated that India is "fully ready for a two-and-a-half front war".³ Several news reports referred to the statement as one of the starting points for the India-China war of words. The statement was read as being directed towards China, Pakistan and internal insurgencies.⁴ This interview took place on 9 June 2017 before the Doklam conflict began, and there was understandably no mention about Doklam in that interview. However, on 29 June 2017, the Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian described Rawat's remarks as "extremely irresponsible", and urged India to "stop clamouring for war" and learn "historical lessons",⁵ referring to India's defeat in the 1962 war. This statement was made in context of Doklam issue.⁶ The reply to the statement then came from Indian Defence Minister Arun Jaitley on 30 June 2017. He said "India in 2017 is different from India in 1962."⁷ By then, media outlets were flooding with news about Doklam.

The following events were often cited as triggers to Doklam standoff: the visit of Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama in April 2017 to Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state disputed by

³ Minnie Chan, 2017; Jiangtao, 2017, wrongly reported this as being said by General Rawat during an inspection of the disputed Sikkim border. For details see Shi Jiangtao, China, India border dispute bubbles over once more, but no one is quite sure why, *South China Morning Post*, 6 July 2017.

⁴ Indian Army prepared for a two-and-a-half fronts war: Army Chief, *The Times of India*, 9 June 2017.

⁵ Shi Jiangtao, 2017.

⁶ Learn from 'historical lessons', China warns India as Army Chief Bipin Rawat says 'ready for war', *The Indian Express*, 29 June 2017.

⁷ India of 2017 different from that of 1962: Jaitley to China, *The Times of India*, 1 July 2017.

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China;⁸ India's refusal to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI);⁹ Chinese President Xi Jinping's attempt to boost nationalist sentiment ahead of the 19th Communist Party Congress,¹⁰ and Chinese attempt to weaken the close ties between India and Bhutan.¹¹ While these and several other events might have contributed to the standoff, India and China's race for regional domination and the balance of power in Asia are being seen as major forces behind their aggression.

The former Indian Ambassador Ashok Kantha and the former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran described the Chinese action as a part of a larger pattern of their behaviour citing similar instances in the South China Sea. Ashok Kantha described Chinese construction activities as a deliberate action to change the facts on the ground.¹² Likewise, Shyam Saran (2017) described Chinese action as a "cabbage strategy", which he explained as follows:

One layer after another you keep opening. None of the singular moves are serious enough to attract opposition but then, cumulatively, you come to a point where it has actually

⁸ China accuses Indian border guards of crossing into its territory, *South China Morning Post*, 27 June 2017; Restraint needed in border dispute between China and India, *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 2017; Devirupa Mitra, Six expert views on how India should look at the latest border standoff with China, *The Wire*, 5 July 2017a.

⁹ Mohan Guruswamy, China's border row with India points to mutual distrust – economic and trade ties notwithstanding, *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 2017; Arnab Sengupta, How Hindu nationalist agenda is linked to Doklam standoff, *The Quint*, 27 July 2017; Mitra, 2017a.

¹⁰ Cohen & Dutton, How India border standoff gives China a chance to burnish its global image, *South China Morning Post*, 21 July 2017.

¹¹ Cohen & Dutton, 2017; Mitra, 2017a; Soutik Biswas, Why is the India-China border standoff escalating? *BBC*, 20 July 2017; A. K. Bardalai, Doklam and the Indo-China boundary, *Journal of Defence Studies*, 12 (1), January-March 2018, 5-13.

¹² See Sushant Singh, Two perspectives on Doklam standoff (interview), *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2017.

changed their entire security situation. It is very hard to reverse.

Both described India's reaction to the Chinese action at Doklam as unexpected and a cause of disappointment and anger for the PLA.

Following the standoff, China temporarily barred Indian pilgrims from entering Tibet via the Nathu-la pass, citing "security concerns",¹³ and announced that re-opening the road would depend on "whether the Indian side could correct mistakes in time",¹⁴ and called on India for an unconditional withdrawal of her troops.¹⁵ China said that it had shown utmost goodwill over the prolonged military standoff with India but warned that its restraint had a bottom line¹⁶ and that "it is easier to shake a mountain than the PLA."¹⁷

The world witnessed the height of fiery rhetoric exchanged between India and China in one of the longest standoffs in Doklam. There was a high chance for this rhetoric to culminate into a full-scale war. Surprisingly, however, the standoff did not result in any visible impacts on its economic and the people-to-people relationship. India and China recorded the highest level of trade in 2017 at USD \$84.5 billion; a Hindi movie called 'Dangal' became a big hit in China; and a China-

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ The pass was opened for Indian officially-organized pilgrims in 2015. The opening of Nathu-la pass in 2015 was described as a sign of the two sides' acknowledgement of the fact that the Sikkim section of boundary has been demarcated by the Chinese side. For detail see Mu Xuequan (Ed.), China says Nathu-la pass 're-opening depends on the Indian side', *Xinhua News Agency*.

¹⁵ Pull back troops from Doklam with 'no strings attached': China to India, *The Times of India*, 2 August 2017.

¹⁶ K J M Varma, Doklam Standoff: China Says Its Restraint Has a 'Bottom Line', *The Wire*, 4 August 2017.

¹⁷ Shubhajit Roy Apurva, Doklam standoff: Have taken measures, pull out or we step up deployment, China tells India, *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2017.

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based Xiaomi became the single largest mobile headset provider in India during the same year.¹⁸

Three positions

All three countries have released official public statements that reflect the respective governments' stance on the conflict: Bhutan on 29 June 2017, India on 30 June 2017, and China on 5 August 2017.¹⁹

Royal Government of Bhutan, in its short press release,²⁰ pointed out that the Chinese road construction from Dokala in the Doklam area towards the Bhutanese army camp at Zompelri is a direct violation of the written agreements of 1988 and 1998 signed between China and Bhutan where the two sides have agreed

... to maintain peace and tranquility in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959. The agreements also state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary.²¹

Bhutan urged China to maintain status quo in Doklam area as before 16 June 2017. A protest was earlier lodged through its embassy in New Delhi on 20 June.

The following day, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a seven-point press release. It stated that India was

¹⁸ India and China must be frank with each other to prevent another Doklam, ambassador warns, *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2018.

¹⁹ Chinese government has in fact spoken about their position on the issue much earlier during the regular press conferences.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017.

deeply concerned with Chinese action because “such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India.” It was also mentioned that Indian personnel in coordination with the government of Bhutan has “approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo.” The press release explained that the Chinese action was in violation to the 2012 agreement which states that “the tri-junction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalized in consultation with the concerned countries.” It also mentioned about the status of China-India border in that sector.²²

Where the boundary in the Sikkim sector is concerned, India and China had reached an understanding also in 2012 reconfirming their mutual agreement on the “basis of the alignment”. Further discussions regarding finalization of the boundary have been taking place under the special representative frameworks.²³

A month after the official statements of Bhutan and India were released, China finally issued a massive 15-page written statement on 5 August 2017.²⁴ In that, China repeatedly referred to the “Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet” signed in 1890 to justify her claims to Doklam, and the “road building on its own territory” the statement read, “is aimed at improving local transportation, which is completely lawful and legitimate.”

China accused that the Indian border troops had trespassed more than 2,000 meters from the tri-junction boundary into the Chinese territory and that India should “immediately and unconditionally withdraw its trespassing border troops back to

²² Ministry of External Affairs, 2017. Recent Development in Doklam Area.

²³ Ministry of External Affairs, 2017. Recent Development in Doklam Area.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 August 2017. The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops.

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the Indian side of the boundary.” This was the prerequisite for resolving the current conflict and India had no legal basis to interfere according to the press release.

The statement explained that the China-Bhutan boundary issue was one between China and Bhutan, and it had nothing to do with India.

As a third party, India had no right to interfere in or impede the boundary talks between China and Bhutan, still less the right to make territorial claims on Bhutan’s behalf. India's intrusion into the Chinese territory under the pretext of Bhutan had not only violated China's territorial sovereignty but also challenged Bhutan’s sovereignty and independence.²⁵

All three governments had each issued a statement until 28 August 2017. A very late official response from China in writing is indeed noteworthy. A little more than a month period was a long delay since such standoffs normally last less than a month. While these statements helped understand respective government’s position on the conflict to a great extent, they are ambiguous and incomplete with rooms for different interpretations. For instance, the Indian government justified its basis for intervention using the 2012 agreement signed with China. But, not a single word was mentioned about this in the massive document issued by China. On the other hand, Chinese assertion is fully based on the 1890 Convention to which India did not make a single reference. China also did not mention about the 1988 and 1998 agreements with Bhutan, which Bhutan used to protest against the Chinese road construction. Thus, to fill up the gaps left by these statements,

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 August 2017. The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops.

media houses picked up the opportunity to take their own biased positions on the issue, further clouding the reality.

Bhutan-China Border Disputes

Bhutan has border disputes with China in two sectors: in the north covering 495 square kilometres and, in the west, covering 269 square kilometres. Doklam is a part of the latter sector that includes Dramana, Charithang, Sinchulung and Doklam in Haa and Paro. Talks for border settlement between the two countries started from 1984. Since then, 24 rounds of border talks have been conducted between the two countries. The contents of the talks are kept secret but the protracted nature of the talks indicates major disagreement as pointed out by Tsering Shakya,²⁶ a prominent historian and scholar on Tibet.

Many sources pointed out that the border settlement between China and Bhutan almost came to an end in 1996. During the 10th round of talks, it was reported that China had offered a 'package deal' settlement whereby China would concede the 495 square kilometres of land in the northern sector of Bhutan in return for the 269 square kilometres in the western sector which includes Doklam. But, Bhutan didn't accept the offer. Many argue that Bhutan couldn't accept because it would not be in India's interest to lose this strategic area to China.²⁷ On a side note, this incidence indicates strongly that Doklam is of great interest to China as it is ready to sacrifice almost double the size of land area (though disputed) for Doklam. However,

²⁶ Tshering Shakya, Bhutan can solve its border problem with China – if India lets it, *South China Morning Post*, 22 July 2017a.

²⁷ See Shakya, 2017a; Mitra, 2017a; B.R. Deepak, The Doklam standoff: what could be done, *South Asia Democratic Forum Comment N.98*, 2017; Amy Kazmin, 'China and India rivalry smoulders in Bhutan', *Financial Times*, 13 August 2017; Praveen Swami, 'Behind the ongoing standoff in Doklam, century-old manoeuvres of geostrategy', *The Indian Express*, 24 July 2017.

such a ‘package deal’ approach for settlement of boundary by China is not new and was also done with Nepal.²⁸

Divergent Views on the Tri-Junction Point

Chinese government and the media outlets have been consistent on their claim that the India-China boundary in the Sikkim sector was delimited by the ‘Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet’ signed between the representatives of Great Britain and the Qing dynasty of China on 17 March 1890, in Kolkatta, India.

The 1890 Convention was signed as a result of repeated Tibetan invasions into Lingtu, a place 18 miles within the Sikkim frontier that was claimed by Tibet as her territory.²⁹ The convention was signed by Sheng Tai, Chinese Amban or imperial resident in Lhasa. Alistair Lamb wrote that, even after ten years of long discussions from 1894 to 1903, the British and Chinese failed to persuade the Tibetans to accept the boundary as per the convention.³⁰ Narrating a similar context, Tsering Sakya in fact contends that delimiting “border was not the main objective of 1890 Convention, and its actual description in the treaty was vague and contradictory; the agreement was far more important for China and Britain because it provided legitimisation of the British position in Sikkim and the tacit acknowledgement of China’s authority in Tibet”.³¹ So, it was an unfair treaty signed without consent

²⁸ Thierry Mathou, *Bhutan-China Relations: Towards a New Step in Himalayan Politics*.

²⁹ See Deepak, 2017

³⁰ See Deepak, 2017.

³¹ Tsering Shakya, *Doklam then and now: From British to Chinese interests, follow the money*, *South China Morning Post*, 19 August 2017b.

from Tibet. As is evident, Bhutan played no role in this, nor did the independent Sikkim or Tibet at that time.³²

The convention, however, did decide the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. Article 1 of the 1890 Convention states the following:

The boundary of Sikkim and Tibet shall be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta and its affluents from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other Rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier, and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nipal [Nepal] territory.

However, the description in the treaty is not consistent with the geographical reality according to many sources. An article in *The Wire* stated that “alignment on the ground is not an established fact” justifying that “line [that] commences at Mount Gimpochi on the Bhutan frontier” violates the principle that the “boundary of Sikkim and Tibet [was to] be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing” southwards and northwards, and should in fact be six kilometres to the north – making the area of trespass wholly Bhutanese soil.³³ Similarly, Deepak³⁴ (an Indian sinologist and a professor) mentioned that the ‘watershed’ and ‘the crest of the mountain range’ do not stretch beyond Batang La, six kilometres north of Doka La. Several articles also pointed out that the tri-junction lies at Batang La if one follows the ‘watershed principle.’³⁵ On the contrary, not a single article was found, at

³² Manoj Joshi, Doklam, Gipmochi, Gyemochen: It’s Hard Making Cartographic Sense of a Geopolitical Quagmire, *The Wire*, 20 July 2017; Arpi, as cited in Mitra, 2017a.

³³ No mention of the 1890 Convention was made by the Indian press statement released on 30 June 2017.

³⁴ See Deepak, 2017.

³⁵ Singh and Sabgal, 2017; D. Mitra, Current Standoff an Attempt by China to Change the Status Quo at Tri-Junction: Shivshankar Menon, *The Wire*, 9 July

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least during this period, which points out otherwise. So, the 1890 Convention has an inherent problem, and how India and China interpreted and valued it over time is unclear.

China claims that Indian representatives starting from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru have formally accepted the legality of 1890 Convention on numerous occasions. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng said that, in a letter to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai on March 22, 1959, Nehru stated the border of India's protectorate Sikkim and China's Tibet was defined by the 1890 Convention and marked by both sides on the ground in 1895. In another letter from Nehru to Zhou on September 26 of the same year, it was found that Nehru had repeated the information, adding there was no dispute regarding the border between Sikkim and Tibet. But, in the same letter of September 26,³⁶ Nehru stated that the "Chinese maps show sizeable areas of Bhutan as part of Tibet," adding, "[t]he rectification of errors in Chinese maps regarding the boundary of Bhutan³⁷ with Tibet is therefore a matter which has to be discussed along with the boundary of India with the Tibet region of China in the same sector". How this issue evolved over time is not discussed by anyone.

Against the backdrop of these conflicting and confusing assertions, it remains true that Sino-Indian border at the Sikkim sector is officially not finalized, at least on the ground. Despite their assertion of having demarcated the boundary, China's 15-page statement stated that the two countries expect an 'early harvest' in the settlement of the boundary in the

2017c; P. K. Dutta, 'Doklam standoff: Why Chinese mock video is pack of lies, India has committed no 'sin'', *India Today*, 17 August 2017.

³⁶ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, www.pib.nic.in

³⁷ Bhutan's boundary discussions with China was done in consultation with India till 1984. Nehru's letter on September 26, 1959 state that "under treaty relationships with Bhutan, the Government of India are the only competent authority to take up with other Governments matters concerning Bhutan's external relations..."

Sikkim sector which imply that the demarcation is not complete, but later argues that the only issue was to sign a new convention in their own names. India in its press release stated that the “finalization of the boundary” is not complete despite a mutual agreement on the “basis of alignment”.

However, it must be understood that India and China have no dispute of territorial claims across the Sikkim sector. It only concerns the finalization of the tri-junction point between Mount Gipmochi and Mount Batang La. A tri-junction at Mount Gipmochi will of course bring the Chinese troops closer to the Siliguri corridor by about six kilometers. The key question then is whether the Convention must be viewed in terms of the exact terms of reference (Mount Gipmochi which is mentioned specifically) or on the principle of geographical features specified as ‘the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing...’ (which must be Mount Batang La). Whether Bhutan must adhere to an Anglo-Chinese Convention signed without Bhutan being even informed is also worth discussing. In Bhutan’s record, the 68th session of the Bhutanese National Assembly in 1989 noted that the border would go from Batangla to Merugla to Sinchela along the ridge and then down to Amo Chhu river.³⁸

India’s Involvement

India argued that Chinese action in Doklam was an attempt to unilaterally determine the tri-junction point.³⁹ It was viewed as an attempt to push the tri-junction further south, and accused China of violating an understanding between Indian and Chinese boundary negotiators in 2012 where they agreed that

³⁸ The Resolutions of the 68th Session of the National Assembly; Translation of the Proceedings and Resolutions of the 82nd Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan.

³⁹ This is on the basis of their assertion that Mount Batang La is the tri-junction point.

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the final alignment of the boundary in the tri-junction area would be settled in consultations with India, China and the concerned third country.

However, the Chinese official document alleged that India had been "notified" ahead of the road building exercise. The Deputy Chief of Mission of the Chinese Embassy in Delhi, Liu Jinsong, said that India was notified through mechanisms at the border troop level about its intended road construction at Doklam on two separate occasions (May 18 and June 8), but there was no response till the Indian troops came in from Sikkim.⁴⁰ Shyam Saran questions Chinese government for such a need to inform the Indian side if Chinese were so sure that Doklam belonged to them.⁴¹ While he indicate that this Chinese action quietly acknowledges the status of Doklam as a disputed area, it can also be argued that informing may not necessarily amount to seeking permission or consultation with India. In retrospect, it must also be noted that India never accepted this claim that they were pre-informed by the Chinese before their action on ground.⁴² Hence, no conclusion can be drawn on it.

Other reason that the Indian government had explicitly mentioned in their official press release is the 'security implications' posed by the Chinese action. This implies the threat to India's Chicken's Neck - a narrow strip of land (20 km wide) that connects the seven northeast states to the mainland. However, China argues that "to cross a delimited boundary and

⁴⁰ Devirupa Mitra, China Disputes Indian Version of 2012 Understanding on Border Tri-junction, *The Wire*, 3 August 2017d.

⁴¹ Sikkim Standoff: People say in Doklam, India is better placed. Why do we think Chinese could only act here, asks former foreign secretary Shyam Saran, *Financial Express*, 13 August 2017.

⁴² Delhi's ambassador to Beijing Gautam Bambawale said in March 2018 in an interview with the South China Morning Post that "If the Chinese military are going to build a road, then they must tell us that 'we are going to build a road'". For detail see 'India and China must be frank with each other to prevent another Doklam, ambassador warns', *South China Morning Post*, 24 March 2018.

enter the territory of a neighboring country on the grounds of so-called "security concerns", for whatever activities, runs counter to the basic principles of international law and basic norms governing international relations".⁴³ On a side note, there are some who also justify that India already has a strategic advantage in this part of the border, and that there is not much to be concerned by with the Chinese action. For instance, one of them said that the vulnerability of the Chicken's Neck is a mere 'cartographic illusion that has been taken advantage of by armchair strategists to create their stock-in-trade fear'.⁴⁴ Bardalai, in a paper published in the *Journal of Defence Studies*, also mentioned clearly that India has an advantage in Chumbi valley, but he pointed out that the need to maintain stronghold in this sector was viewed as crucial as early as 1950 after the invasion of Tibet by China.⁴⁵ Taking a different perspective, a historian⁴⁶ argued that, "[unfortunately] 'Neck', road and plateaus continue to define our security concepts in the 21st century where drones, satellites and missiles have brought distant parts of India under Chinese surveillance."

Some news articles reported that India had to intervene because of the bilateral Friendship Treaty of 2007 between Bhutan and India, under which both sides agreed to "cooperate closely ... on issues relating to their national interests".⁴⁷

⁴³ It refers to the 1974 UN General Assembly Resolution which states that "no consideration of whatsoever nature, whether political, economic, military or otherwise, may serve as a justification for the invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State".

⁴⁴ Prem Shankar Jha, Neither win nor loss, the end of the Doklam standoff is an opportunity, *The Wire*, 28 August 2017.

⁴⁵ Bardalai, 2018.

⁴⁶ Atul Bhardwaj, Diplomacy at Doklam was an afterthought when it should have been the first step, *The Wire*, 8 September 2017.

⁴⁷ Sourabh Gupta, India's got itself into a fine mess in Doklam, it's time to get out and let China and Bhutan work it out, *South China Morning Post*, 23 July 2017; Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan raised Doklam at all boundary negotiations with China, *The Wire*, 21 August 2017b.

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However, from the official sources, the only information regarding the process of intervention was the following:

... RGOB and the Government of India have been in continuous contact through the unfolding of these developments. ... In coordination with the RGOB, Indian personnel, who were present at general area Doka La, approached the Chinese construction party and urged them to desist from changing the status quo. These efforts continue.

Notwithstanding the above matters of fact, a number of news articles from several news agencies including the reputed *BBC* and *Aljazeera* have reported that India sent its border troops on Bhutan's request.⁴⁸ This is misleading and has potential to cause great damage.

Disengagement or Withdrawal

Many speculated that the pre-BRICS NSA meeting between India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and State Councillor Yang Jiechi in Beijing on 27 July 2017 would bring an end to the standoff.⁴⁹ But no immediate breakthrough was reached at that meeting. However, some authors later credited

⁴⁸ Liu Zhen, India ready for talks with China to end border standoff, but Beijing digs in heels, *South China Morning Post*, 20 July 2017; China warns India over 'military build-up' in Doklam, *Aljazeera*, 5 August 2017; Biswas, 2017; Mitra, 2017d; M Minnie Chan, China calls border row with India 'the worst in 30 years' as both sides dig in heels, *South China Morning Post*, 5 July 2017; 'Restraint needed in border dispute between China and India', *South China Morning Post*, 8 July 2017.

⁴⁹ Biswas, 2017; Sushant Singh, Two perspectives on Doklam standoff, *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2017.

this meeting as a starting point of diplomatic negotiation that resulted in a peaceful end to the standoff.⁵⁰

To everyone's relief, Doklam standoff came to an end on 28 August 2017 with the Indian Ministry of External Affairs first issuing a two-paragraph public statement. It stated that the two sides have agreed for an "expeditious disengagement."

The Chinese also implied that it had stopped its road building efforts but cited that it was due to "weather and other factors." China's foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said that they "will make proper building plans in light of the actual situation".⁵¹ She said that China had been "long involved in road construction in Doklam area in order to improve living condition and ramp up local military instruction." "China will continue to exercise sovereignty rights to protect territorial sovereignty in accordance with the rules of the historical boundary," she said.

A day later, Bhutan welcomed the disengagement through a short public statement. Unlike the earlier statement that did not mention anything about India, the second statement acknowledges India as a part of the dispute.⁵² To this, Ambassador Phunchok Stobdan said that "Bhutan is shifting its emphasis away from its bilateral dispute with China over Doklam and focusing instead on the importance of the tri-junction area being properly managed".⁵³

We hope this contributes to the maintenance of peace and tranquility and status quo along the borders of Bhutan, China

⁵⁰ Lui & Huang, Aggression to agreement: the inside story of the Doklam deal, *The Times of India*, 30 August 2017.

⁵¹ Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan welcomes end of Doklam standoff, China says it has stopped road building – for Now, *The Wire*, 29 August 2017e.

⁵² Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan welcomes end of Doklam standoff.

⁵³ Devirupa Mitra, Bhutan welcomes end of Doklam standoff.

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and India in keeping with the existing agreements between respective countries. (29 August 2017)

Official statements regarding the end of Doklam standoff are vague and the exact terms of the settlement is not known. India called it “disengagement” of the two sides from the earlier place of standoff. The fact that both sides disengaged from Doklam was described as a victory for Indian side by the Indian media because it fulfilled what India has asked for: that both sides should withdraw to resolve the issue. But Chinese has called it as “withdrawal” of Indian troops from Doklam saying that the Chinese PLA has moved out, but only temporarily due to bad weather. This is a way of saying that it has fulfilled their position that Indian withdrawal from Doklam was a prerequisite for any meaningful dialogue to take place. While such controversies existed, it made little sense as long as both sides agreed to resolve the standoff at that point of time. After all, this was a display of successful diplomacy from both sides, including Bhutan where studied silence played positively.

The timing of the resolution fell few days before the BRICS summit from 3 to 5 September 2017 in southeast China which was attended by both President Xi Jinping and PM Narendra Modi. This was also seen as the main reason for the “expeditious disengagement”. The duo also met at the sidelines of G20 meeting at Hamburg on 7 July 2017.⁵⁴

Post-Doklam Standoff

Even as the mid-June to August Doklam standoff came to an end, news of Chinese road construction in the Doklam region continues to appear in the media.⁵⁵ On 6 October 2017, it was

⁵⁴ See Aggression to agreement, *The Times of India*, 30 August 2017.

⁵⁵ Panda reported that troops on both sides have retreated their position from the standoff point by 150 meters each. For details see Ankit Panda, ‘The

reported that about 1,000 Chinese soldiers are still deployed in the border region to carry out infrastructure construction work.⁵⁶ On 12 December 2017, based on satellite images, Som reported, 'Chinese have expanded multiple stretches of road in the disputed area, just a short distance from the site where Indian and Chinese soldiers faced off.'⁵⁷ He stated that at least two stretches were constructed between 17 October and 8 December 2017 towards north and east of the earlier face-off site. Unlike the previous years, it was reported that around 1,600-1,800 Chinese troops have now 'virtually established a permanent presence in the Doklam area' (withstanding the freezing winter for the first time).⁵⁸ 'But the status quo prevails at the earlier face-off site,' Pandit noted. On 28 January 2018, it was again reported that hectic build-up of permanent structure is underway in the disputed area of Doklam based on an analysis of the satellite images by a retired Indian colonel.⁵⁹ On 23 March, a report pointed out that PLA is now building a new road to bypass the point of the previous year's blockade, and highlighted that it 'would not be amenable to the type of blockade India placed last year'.⁶⁰

However, official sources say that the status quo of 28 August 2017 is maintained. Indian Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on 5 March that PLA's infrastructure build-up at the border areas is 'to maintain these troops during the

troops may have stepped back, but the China-India dispute in the Himalayas is far from over', *South China Morning Post*, 21 October 2017.

⁵⁶ 1,000 Chinese soldiers reportedly still in Doklam a month after border standoff ended,' *South China Morning Post*, 6 October 2017.

⁵⁷ Vishnu Som, Exclusive: In Doklam, Chinese built new roads in last 2 months, show satellite pics, NDTV, 12 December 2017.

⁵⁸ Rajat Pandit, In first winter stay, 1,800 Chinese troops camping at Doklam, *The Times of India*, 11 December 2017.

⁵⁹ Debasish Roy Chowdhury, China and India: are war clouds gathering over Doklam again? *South China Morning Post*, 27 January 2018.

⁶⁰ Manoj Joshi, After Doklam, military postures continue to escalate in India, China, *Asia Times*, 23 March 2018.

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winter'. She stated that the troops of both sides have redeployed from the face-off site and the strength of troops on both sides has been reduced since then.⁶¹ Likewise, the Indian Army Chief has mentioned that the Chinese build-up is mostly temporary in nature.⁶² But the fact is, India is wary about the increased PLA concentration in the border areas. On 12 January, Army Chief said that it's time for India to shift their focus from its western border with Pakistan to its northern border with China.⁶³

These post-Doklam standoff developments in the area may be seen in the context of the China's Press Release issued on 5 August where China refused to indicate clearly whether they have abandoned the area.

Conclusion

Doklam standoff has shown the extent of a fragile relationship between India and China who fought a short war in 1962. Though small-scale flare-ups at the border occur frequently, the scale of Doklam face-off was unprecedented since 1962. Until the standoff came to an end on 28 August, nobody could rule out possibilities of a war between the two countries. Military exercises were undertaken on both sides alongside the brutal exchange of war rhetoric. But both countries have displayed high level of diplomatic maturity in closing the Doklam chapter without inflicting major damages on any side.

By the virtue of its strategic location, the threat of such conflicts on the security and sovereignty of Bhutan is extremely

⁶¹ Nirmala Sitharaman, China building helipads, sentry posts, trenches in Doklam area, *Times of India*, 5 March 2018.

⁶² China builds up presence at Doklam, army chief Gen Rawat says it is temporary, *Hindustan Times*, 18 January 2018.

⁶³ India can't allow its neighbours to drift away to China: Gen Bipin Rawat, *The Times of India*, 11 January 2018.

high. It got into a very difficult situation and had the standoff lasted any longer, any action or prolonged inaction from Bhutan's side would have resulted in serious problems. The government of Bhutan's position in remaining silent has fortunately played out very well during the 73-day standoff.

Doklam standoff has come to end but the border disputes remain. News of Chinese PLA strengthening their military base near the conflict site were repeatedly reported after 28 August 2017. No breakthrough negotiation took place since then except the news that Doklam issue was a part of the 20th round of India-China Special Representatives talks held at Delhi on 22 December 2017. Specific discussion and results were not revealed and one could safely assume that it must have been like any other border talks till now. The main issue now is how to move forward from here. India and China must pick up from what they agreed to in 2012. The concerned parties must continue to search for common grounds to negotiate. Until that time where border disputes are solved once and for all, there may not be an end to border incursions, flare-ups, psy-war, media hypes, rhetoric, and blurring of the realities.

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