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The Doklam Imbroglio

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Executive Summary

In 2017, the Doklam plateau became a flashpoint for the Asian powers, India and China. China's tactics in Doklam are clear examples of its general "salami-slicing" strategy, a policy of gradual encroachment onto disputed territory where other claimants are forced to accede to a new status quo tilted in China's favour.

This Discussion Document¹ outlines the history of the Doklam conflict, places it in contrast with China's strategy on the McMahon line, and examines India's response to China's behaviour in Doklam.

During the June-August 2017 crisis (henceforth referred to as "Doklam 1.0"), India appeared to have adopted a four-pronged approach: physical denial for road building at the face-off site, a restrained public reaction to China's aggressive and vitriolic statements, intense diplomatic back-channelling, and limited defence readiness.

Yet there are discrepancies between the Indian and Chinese sides on whether this plan was successful, given that China has not respected the status quo in areas contiguous to the face-off site. Indeed, it would appear that India has chosen not to contest Chinese assertiveness that has manifested after the agreement of 28 August 2017, in return for as-yet unclear concessions.

India's "China reset", as exemplified by the Xi-Modi unofficial summit at Wuhan, evidently required India's acquiescence of China's military occupation of disputed territory with Bhutan and ipso facto conceded to China its claim on the tri-junction.

We recommend that the Indian Government urgently clarify its policy and the situation at Doklam. A long-term policy of diplomatic, economic, and military balancing must be followed in order to maintain India's ability to defend its national interests and those of its allies. The alternative is a continuous cycle of unilateral Chinese actions and, given India's silence since Doklam 1.0, a sacrifice of long-term national interests for at best a reprieve in border tensions.

Note: This document was updated in July 2020, in the aftermath of the Galwan Valley incident. A trend of unilateral Chinese actions to modify the status quo, Indian official silence, and simmering border tensions – as we predicted in September 2018 – appears to have become the norm in Sino-Indian relations. This version of the document includes an added Annexure, with satellite imagery from Doklam showing how China has intensified its military fortifications since then.

¹ This document is prepared for the purpose of discussion and debate and does not necessarily constitute Takshashila's policy recommendations. To contact us about the research, write to research@takshashila.org.in

Historical Background and Claims

In order to assess the claims being made at the Doklam trijunction, it is necessary to briefly discuss the historical events leading up to it.

Over the course of the 17th and 18th century, a series of geopolitical shifts drastically changed the Himalayan status quo, including the foundation of Bhutan and Nepal, and the Bhutan's wars with the once-dominant region of Tibet.

Nepal's incursions into Tibet prompted a response from China. The Qing Dynasty's armies pushed back the Nepali forces but remained as a garrison in Tibet. Through the 19th century, China's influence in the region drastically decreased – to the point that when the Chinese were informed that the British would be sending a “trade expedition” to Lhasa, their response was that the Tibetans would oppose it, a response clearly indicating China's unsure grip.

By this point, British power in Asia was becoming more and more entrenched. By the late 19th century they had subsumed most of the Himalayas, including Sikkim (as a protectorate), into the Raj and were looking to secure trade into Tibet. Having heard of the planned expeditions, the Tibetans set up a military outpost in the Chumbi Valley to repel the British, to which the British responded by attacking and clearing it.

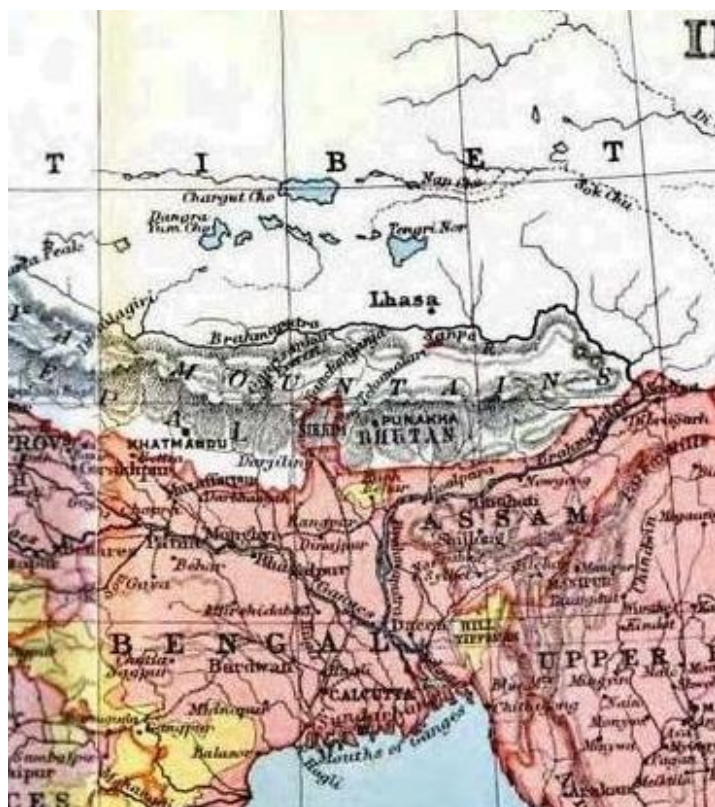


Figure 1. An 1893 map of the British Raj, marking Lhasa as part of Tibet, with no clear boundaries defined for Bhutan. The route from Calcutta to Lhasa would pass through the small gap visible between Sikkim and Bhutan. Source: Wikimedia Commons

This brings us to Doklam itself. The Doklam plateau is situated just south of the Chumbi Valley. The Valley, thanks to its geographical position, was a key stopping point on a thriving trade route leading from Tibet to Calcutta. In order to sign a treaty, the British, evidently sensing the Qing dynasty's weakness, negotiated as Sikkim's overlords with Tibet's nominal overlords to settle the boundary¹. The resulting Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 dealt with the issue as below:

*“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 territory."

This clause is vital to understanding the conflict today. It is also worth noting that Bhutan only entered into a subsidiary alliance with Britain in 1910², 20 years after the Sikkim/Tibet border was settled between Britain and China. Bhutan was not consulted in an issue which was, even then, of trilateral significance.

Legally, Bhutan's border with China in the Doklam/Chumbi region is yet to be settled, even if we accept China's right to sign such a treaty, or India's obligation to adhere to the letter of colonial-era agreements.

Interpreting the Treaty

In order to understand the border line demarcated by the treaty, it is necessary to get a sense of the terrain in the area. This can be seen in Figure 1.

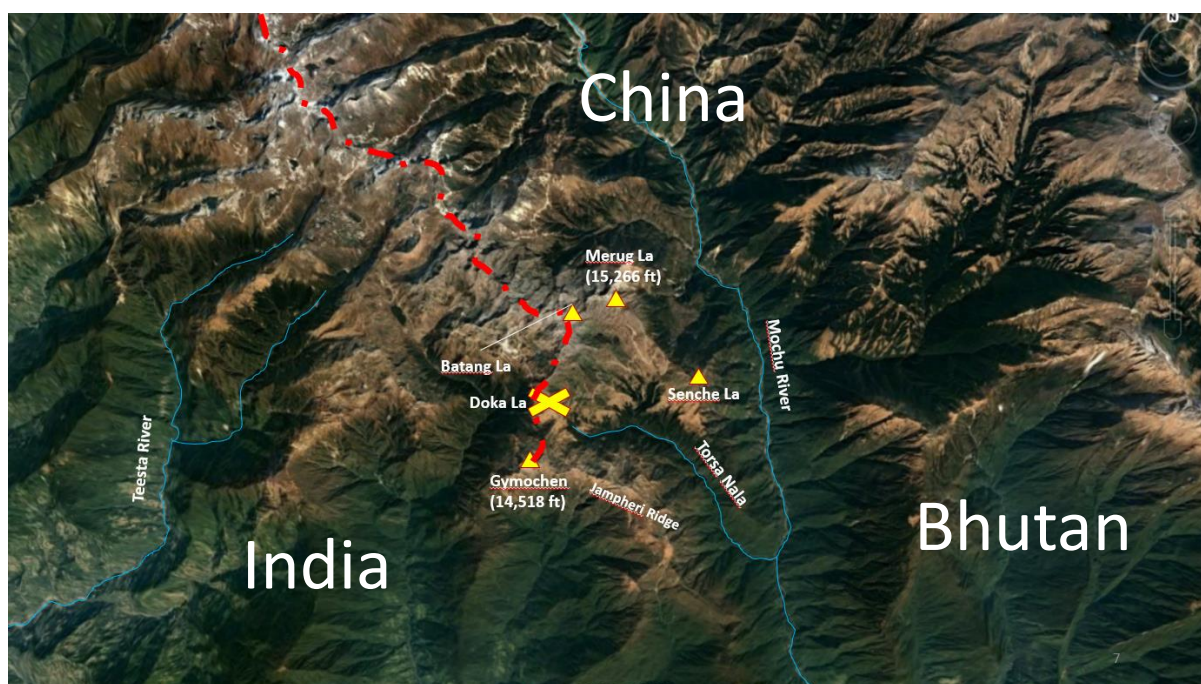


Figure 2. The Doka La area with important terrain features highlighted. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kaniseti

The Teesta and Mochu rivers described in the Convention have been demarcated in blue. The bottom-most yellow triangle is the Mount Gipmochi where, according to the treaty, the border line begins.

In premodern times, borders were generally demarcated using natural features. In mountainous regions, especially, it was common to demarcate using the “watersheds” – the terrain features which separate river systems. It should therefore come as no surprise that the treaty relies on “the crest of the mountain range separating” the Teesta and Mochu systems. Mount Gipmochi was declared

to be the starting point of the border, owing to the state of cartographic knowledge at the time. This is the border outlined in red in Figure 1. This is the Chinese interpretation of the border, which adheres to the *letter of the treaty*.

The key question in the border dispute is whether to follow the letter of the treaty or to follow the watershed principle. Modern cartographic measurements have revealed that the actual crest of the mountain range is Merug La, with a height of 15,266 feet compared to Gymochen/Gipmochi at 14,518 feet³. In that case, the border would look like the yellow line in Figure 2. This is the Indian interpretation of the border, which adheres to the *watershed principle*.



Figure 3. Indian interpretation of the Convention, based on the watershed principle. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kaniseti

Overlaying the two claim lines can help us understand the basis of China's claims in the Doklam area, as below. The yellow line is what India thinks is Chinese territory, and the red line is what China thinks is Chinese territory⁴. The red line, however, also includes Bhutanese territory.

India believes that the trijunction is at Batang La and that its neighbour at the Jampheri Ridge is Bhutan. But China believes that the trijunction is at Gymochen, making India's neighbour at the Jampheri Ridge, China. This has critical strategic implications which will be discussed in a later section.



Figure 4. Overlaying the two opposing interpretations of the border. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kaniseti

In summation, there are three main issues in the border dispute:

1. Bhutan was not a signatory to the original agreement between British India and (nominally) Chinese Tibet.
2. There is no clarity on whether the watershed principle (which is described in the treaty) should prevail when interpreting border disputes, or the letter of the treaty⁵.
3. Irrespective of what the interpretation of the treaty is, China does not have a legal right to construct or deploy troops and materiel on what is clearly disputed territory.

China in the Himalayas

The Indo-China Border in Arunachal Pradesh

After the expulsion of Chinese forces and the declaration of Tibet's independence by the 13th Dalai Lama in 1913⁶, the British summoned Tibetan and Chinese plenipotentiaries to Shimla in 1914 to decide on its status. China refused to ratify the treaty, signalling that China did not consider Tibet to be a sovereign entity despite its lack of tangible authority over it.

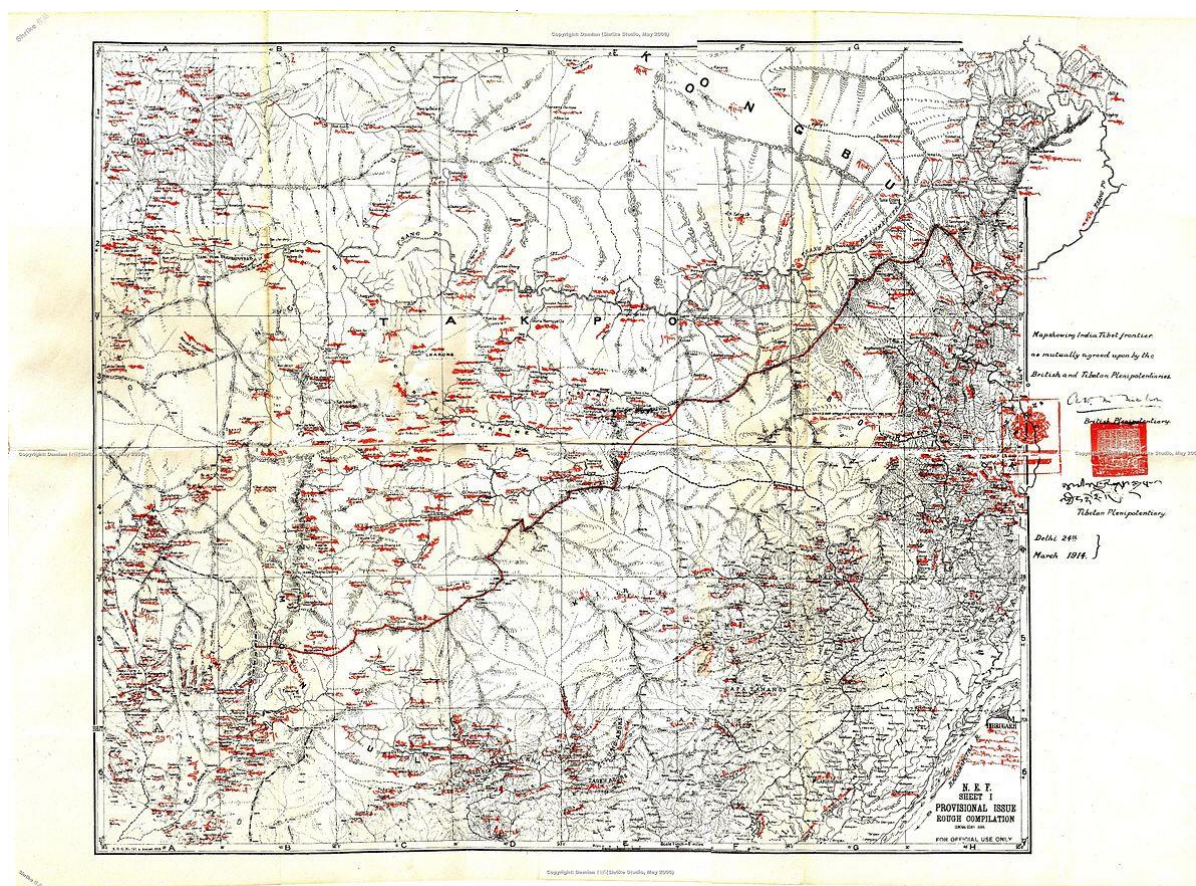


Figure 5. A signed copy of the 1914 agreement between Tibetan and British plenipotentiaries. The McMahon line is clearly visible in relation to the river systems of the region, following the watershed principle.

The treaty was signed between Tibet and Britain instead, though the border was only unilaterally declared on British maps much later. This was not accepted by the Tibetan side since the concession had been contingent on Britain finalising Tibet's border with China, which the 1914 conference had failed to do.

This border, the McMahon Line, adheres to the **watershed principle**, following the highest ridges and peaks. But China has never agreed to the *western* part of the McMahon Line as its border with India.

Post-Independence, India's leadership seemed secure in its power relative to Tibet and did not secure China's acknowledgement of the McMahon Line. This situation was abruptly overturned in 1950 with China's occupation of Tibet, which

suddenly gave India a hostile neighbour in a critically strategic area. Tawang was rapidly occupied –the Tibetans had signed it over in the 1914 treaty.

China, tellingly, **did not object** – perhaps indicating that it was willing to accept the McMahon line as well. Nevertheless, Chinese troops soon began to probe India's borders, leading to the adoption of the "Forward Policy", ratcheting up military pressure on China across the border.

In 1960, China accepted a boundary with Myanmar that followed the *eastern* part of the McMahon line and thus implicitly the watershed principle, though the agreement refers to the line as the "customary boundary".

Most parts of present-day Arunachal Pradesh were quickly overrun in the 1962 Indo-China War, though Chinese troops soon ceded the territory once the war ended. Having secured its dominance in the region, border clashes and incursions continued, keeping up the pressure despite multiple rounds of boundary talks. Post-2000, China even began to refer to Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet.

In this light, China's claims in Arunachal Pradesh should be seen not only as a pressure point in negotiations with India but more importantly, driven by a refusal to acknowledge what has historically been a contentious relationship with Tibet. China's intransigent stance on the 1890 Convention as applied to Doklam, should therefore be seen not merely as "hypocrisy"⁷ but a much shrewder ploy to gain an additional strategic pressure point while deflecting some of the legal questions pointed out in the previous section. It would seem that much of **China's foreign policy stances are contextual and interest-driven, rather than by adherence to principle.**

China and Bhutan, 1950-2018

Much of Bhutanese foreign policy over the 20th century has been driven by reactions to the actions and inactions of major powers⁸. The centralisation of the monarchy and signature of the 1910 Treaty of Punakha, for example, were concluded by a Britain alarmed at the Qing Dynasty's last pre-Revolution burst of assertiveness⁹.

Independent India, thanks largely to the shadow of British power and its own friendly relations with Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, adopted a complacent stance towards securing the Himalayan region. China was a relatively distant problem embroiled with its own internal issues, and the proclamation of the People's Republic was not seen as a fundamental change to the status quo.

China's 1950 occupation of Tibet, once the geopolitical and cultural centre of gravity of the Himalayas, came as a massive shock to all its neighbours, who found that China was now at their doorsteps. Up to this point, Bhutan had been content to more or less leave its foreign policy to India – the 1949 Treaty of Friendship

states “the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations”¹⁰.

Despite claims that Tibet would be autonomous, China made its territorial ambitions fairly clear, with its now-familiar policies of cartographic aggression as well as the following statement from an official in Lhasa, 1959: “Bhutanese, Sikkimese and Ladakhis form a united family in Tibet. They have always been subject to Tibet and to the great motherland of China. They must once again be united and taught the communist doctrine”¹¹.

The Tibetan Uprising of 1959, the brutal reprisals leading up to it, and subsequent influx of refugees into Bhutan prompted the Bhutanese to close their border with Tibet (China) and seek closer ties with India¹².

The reverses suffered by India in the 1962 war set off alarm bells in Bhutan regarding its self-imposed isolation. Some tentative moves were made towards normalising its relationship with China, though friendship with India continued and no formal embassy with China has yet been established – uniquely among all of China’s neighbours. By 1966, Bhutan had conveyed its aspiration for a seat in the UN General Assembly to India. The country was admitted in 1971.

China has been just as aggressive in pushing its claims on Bhutan as it has been with India. Border incursions have ranged from the subtle (sending grazing parties onto disputed or Bhutanese territory) to the overt (military patrols and construction). China’s “salami slicing tactics” first became visible not in the South China Sea, but in Bhutan. At the same time, China’s policy throughout has been to push for a resolution to the border dispute *without* the involvement of India, and the first bilateral meeting was held in 1981¹³.

Talks have continued through the decades, making fitful progress despite extremely warm declarations of resolutions by both sides. Chinese incursions have continued unabated. A “package deal” was offered in 1996, where China offered to cede 495 km² of territory in the remote, uninhabited and glaciated Jakarlung and Pasamlung areas for the far more strategically important areas of Sinchulung and Shakhatoe¹⁴ located on the Western Bhutanese watershed. The geographical motivation for this deal could be the increased strategic potential of Shakhatoe and Sinchulung, which provide security to the narrow Chumbi Valley in addition to easy access across the Himalayas. It should also be noted that a permanent Chinese presence is maintained just short of key passes in these areas.



Figure 6. Map of Bhutan with the general areas of the 1996 exchange highlighted. As described above, Jakarlung and Pasamlung are remote and glaciated, with less strategic value than Sinchulung and Shakhatoe. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kanisetti

While the Bhutanese agreed in principle and the King went so far as to declare that the dispute was almost resolved, little progress was made. Talks broke down after Bhutan demanded *more* territory than before¹⁵. China then affirmed its “respect for Bhutan’s sovereignty” in 1998 – a claim strongly belied by protests made in Bhutan’s National Assembly post-2000 over continued Chinese military incursions.

Under continuous pressure from China, Bhutan began to change its own maps, ceding the mountain of Kula Kangri cartographically in 2009¹⁶. The historical trend certainly seems to be that Bhutan has taken India’s strategic sensitivities about Doklam into consideration. It would seem that China aims to reconfigure Bhutan’s strategic calculus in a way that Bhutan no longer accords primacy to India. India would do well to pay keen attention to these manoeuvres, given that the strategic significance of Doklam is not necessarily an issue that the Bhutanese feel strongly about¹⁷. It is interesting to note that Bhutan has made no protests about Chinese activity in Doklam after Doklam 1.0. The Chinese Vice Foreign Minister visited the country in July 2018.

India, China and the 2017 “Doklam 1.0” Crisis

The previous sections have discussed how China uses its power and pursues an aggressive approach to retain a strategic advantage over its neighbours in the arena of border diplomacy. A clear guiding principle in this behaviour is China’s evaluation of its national interest.

In case of the Burma border, China wished to secure its flank so as to focus on India in the Himalayas. In case of Bhutan, China wished to cajole a minor power that India seemed intent on using as a buffer state. Evidently, by securing the first mover advantage, China intends to keep India on the back foot and focussed on the apparent vulnerability of its northern border, preventing India from pursuing closer ties with Japan and the USA, or, for example, exploiting the Tibet issue¹⁸.

Why Doklam?

This brings up the question: why Doklam? The answer should be evident in the below images.



Figure 7. A view from the Doklam Plateau looking South. Assam and the Siliguri corridor are easily visible as would be any military mobilisation. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kaniseti

The Jampheri Ridge is the only major geographical obstacle to China having a direct vantage point to the Siliguri Corridor, as evidenced by the illustration above. The Ridge has a permanent force of the Royal Bhutanese Army deployed on it. However, it is doubtful whether they would pose any impediment in the event China mobilises its considerable forces built up in the area. An easier route of access to the Siliguri Corridor that the area provides is through eastern Doklam, past the Mochu/Torsa junction and down the Mochu River through Western Bhutan. Yet another route is Yatung-Sinchulung-Damthang-Paro, and from there to Phuntsholing on the India border.

What seems clear from the image is that the road networks and defences that China has built up give the area some strategic significance. Were there no such infrastructure, it is apparent that India would hold much of the higher ground around the plateau, including deployments on the Eastern Sikkim watershed and a post on Batang La. With the new disposition of Chinese forces, however, the

psychological balance is tilted in their favour, with China outflanking India's forces along the Sikkim border and pointed directly towards its key strategic vulnerability – the Siliguri Corridor¹⁹.

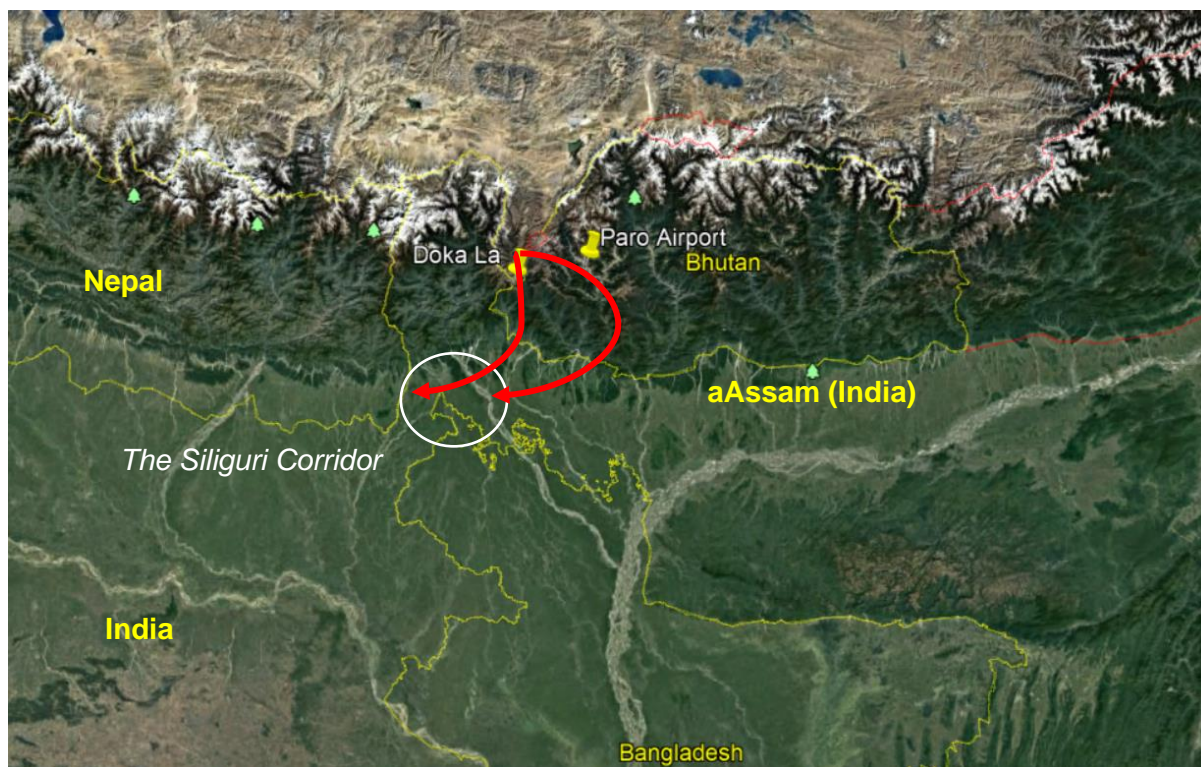


Figure 8. The Siliguri Corridor is a critical strategic vulnerability. China could utilize two avenues- the Chumbi Valley or through Paro in Bhutan. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kaniseti

Geographically, the Siliguri Corridor is vulnerable to a Chinese threat.²⁰ While the question of whether China can *actually* overcome India's forces in Sikkim, outflank them, or mount an air assault may be conjectural, the so-called "Chicken's Neck" at Siliguri is a threat in being. Some military leaders in India have downplayed the potential of the Chinese threat because of the strength of India's defensive posture. This is a tactical viewpoint and discounts the permanency of the strategic advantage.

The very real risk that the corridor could be severed, potentially cutting lines of communication to India's North-East, is a constant political threat that gives China a major pressure point on India's leadership. The question of who India's neighbour is in Doklam, and whether this neighbour is hostile or friendly is therefore key to India's national interest.

"Doklam 1.0"

China's presence in Doklam is not a recent development. Incursions by Chinese patrols into disputed territory has been core to its Himalayan strategy for decades. Incursions in Doklam have been reported since 1966²¹, ranging from cattle herders to foot patrols. Track construction activities in the northern part of the plateau continued throughout, and foot patrols became increasingly

common from 2007 onwards, when China dismantled two Indian bunkers that were apparently constructed ahead of the ridgeline²². No public complaint was raised about this issue by the Indian government then even though the territory, as now, was disputed at the time. As the images below show, Chinese presence in Doklam has steadily increased over the years.

The area continued to be a part of boundary discussions throughout. Former Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon claimed that in 2012, Special Representatives of both countries reached a broad understanding that the trijunction would be finalised in consultation with the third country concerned²³. This understanding was on the “basis of alignment” in the Sikkim sector, which, as illustrated below, makes China’s later stance extremely problematic.



Figure 9. The Doklam plateau in November 2009, showing very rudimentary tracks on the Chinese side. Source: Google Earth



Figure 10. The Doklam Plateau in January 2018, showing extensive permanent roads and encampments on the Chinese side.

Prior to the 2017 crisis, some sources indicate that China had conveyed to the Indian military that they would be upgrading the existing jeep track at Doklam. Presumably, this had been conveyed to New Delhi, but it is not known what decision had been taken. This jeep track was being increasingly used by China for its patrols to reconnoitre the area and walk up to the Torsa Nalla and return. The point to note is that there was no *permanent* deployment in the Doklam Plateau.

On the 16th of June, 2017, Chinese troops attempted to construct a permanent road towards the Doka La (ref. Fig 3), and moved in heavy equipment. On the 18th, Indian forces moved in to bring a physical halt to the construction. China immediately escalated, turning the issue into a public relations bonanza and ramping up the pressure on India. In a press conference on the 28th of June, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang claimed that:

“Doklam has been a part of China [sic] since ancient times. It does not belong to Bhutan, still less India. That is an indisputable fact supported by historical and jurisprudential evidence, *and the ground situation*²⁴. It is utterly unjustifiable if the Indian side wants to make an issue of it. China's construction of road in Doklam is an act of sovereignty *on its own territory*. It is completely justified and lawful, and others have no right to interfere.” (Emphasis added.)



Figure 11. China's sketch map, released by Lu Kang. The English text has been added to clarify some of the claims being made, which are also presented in the first section of the document. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kaniseti

Lu Kang then went on to proclaim that India's diplomatic influence on Bhutan was tantamount to violating its sovereignty, being apparently unaware of tangible Chinese incursions onto Bhutanese territory for decades²⁵. When questioned the next day about an official complaint lodged by Bhutan's ambassador to India²⁶, Lu brought up the 1890 Convention and showed off a sketch map of Beijing's interpretation of it. Lu Kang reiterated that India was violating China's sovereignty and placed the onus on India to de-escalate without actually addressing the issue of Bhutan's complaint²⁷. In Lu's map, the Chinese claim line followed the crest of the Jampheri Ridge. At this juncture, it is worth noting that the sketch map slightly distorts the geography of the plateau to present China's claims. Therefore, a more accurate map is added for the reader's reference.

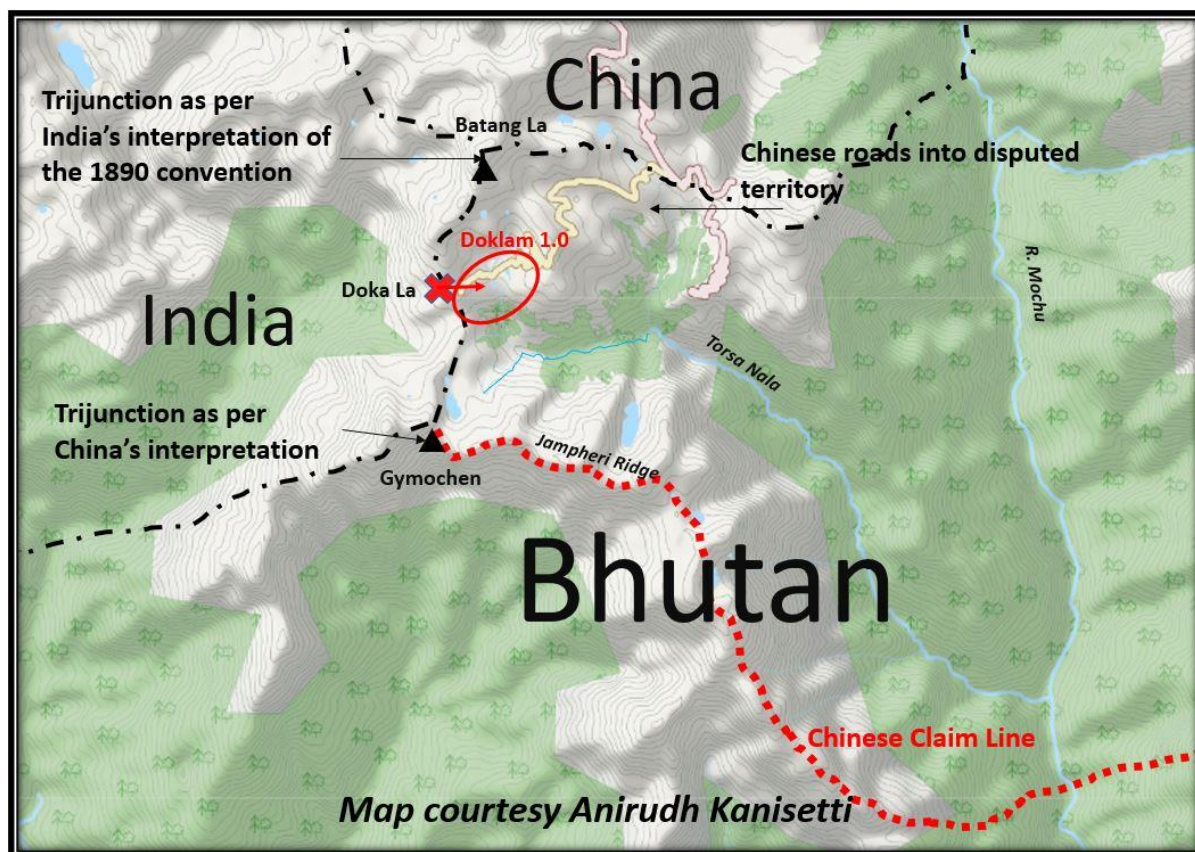


Figure 12. Figure 9. Map of the disputed area, with China's claim line highlighted in red. Source: Google Earth/Anirudh Kanisetti

The emphasis on the 1890 Convention, and China's sudden absolute claims to the region, appear even more absurd given that they agreed in 2012 that the trijunction would be settled in consultation with third countries. Furthermore, an agreement on the basis of alignment was not the same as a final settlement on the trijunction. When asked about this, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Chinese embassy in New Delhi provided a facetious explanation of the understanding and reiterated that the issue was about the 1890 convention, while also stating that India should immediately withdraw from Doklam, describing the move as “undisciplined”, and warning that there could be serious consequences²⁸.

China was not done with its provocative behaviour. Perhaps with an eye to the domestic audience, it announced that “India's regional hegemony has been shaken”²⁹, released visuals of live fire drills in Tibet³⁰, and released the now-infamous “Seven Sins” video, featuring a Chinese person in racist garb meant to cast them as a Sikh³¹.

India, on the other hand, retained a relatively subdued official profile in the public domain despite the Indian media's fairly extensive coverage. The political narrative projected was that of India standing up to China's military aggression. Much can be gleaned, however, from recently submitted testimonies, part of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs on Sino-Indian relations.

Former Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar claimed that de-escalation had begun with a conversation between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi at the G-20 Hamburg Summit on July 7th³². He testified that multiple rounds of backchannel talks -13 to be precise - continued while Indian forces at the face-off site remained at their positions.

The September 4th BRICS meeting was a self-imposed deadline, continued Jaishankar, as “neither side wished to see their leaders meeting in Xiamen under the cloud of Doklam incident...”³³ This can be seen as the view of the Indian side, but questions still remain about the motivations of the Chinese side, given that their public rhetoric continued as before. The end result was a “compromise” put out on the 28th of August.

India’s statement was as follows: “In recent weeks, India and China have maintained diplomatic communication in respect of the incident at Doklam. During these communications, we were able to express our views and convey our concerns and interests. On this basis, *expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam has been agreed to and is on-going.*” (Emphasis added.)

China, on the other hand, stuck to the position it had maintained from the beginning – that its troops had always been on Chinese territory, that India had committed an incursion, and that it would continue to remain in Doklam (Bhutan’s claims notwithstanding):

“The Chinese side has made it clear that the Indian border personnel and equipment that trespassed into China’s territory have all been withdrawn to the Indian side of the border. *The Chinese border troops continue with their patrols and stationing in the Dong Lang area.* China will continue with its exercise of sovereign rights to protect territorial sovereignty in accordance with the stipulations of the border-related historical treaty.” (Emphasis added.)

No other details of what was agreed have been made public, therefore leaving room for doubt as to what the actual terms were.

Nevertheless, this “compromise” was marketed as a huge victory for the Indian government, with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) claiming that both sides had agreed to the disengagement, whereas it seems from China’s official statement that they had agreed to no such thing³⁴. Indeed, it would seem that India had successfully “resolved” the situation by capitulating to all demands made by China from the very onset of the crisis.

India's "China Reset"

Key Events

As Secretary Jaishankar's testimony implies, there may have been a degree of pressure on Indian diplomats to resolve the crisis before the Xiamen summit, perhaps as part of a larger strategy. Further credence is lent to this theory by the fact that both NSA Ajit Doval and Foreign Minister Nirmala Sitharaman were visiting China^{35,36} for the BRICS conferences while the crisis played out. On the sidelines of the Xiamen summit, PM Modi and President Xi, according to Jaishankar, agreed on confidence-building measures at the border and "laid out a very positive view of the relationship."³⁷

Indeed, statements by both sides after Doklam have been optimistic. In December last year, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a striking departure from the tenor of his statements during the Doklam crisis, hailed the importance of "diplomacy" and described China's handling of the issue as "with restraint". He then went on to make a vague claim of the Dragon and the Elephant dancing together with "1+1=11 outlook"³⁸, a rhetorical device he resorted to again in March 2018³⁹. Wang also emphasised the importance of "political trust" – perhaps pointing to the fact that negotiations were driven by something other than national security considerations.

In the interim, on the 22nd of February in New Delhi, Jaishankar's successor as Foreign Secretary, former ambassador to China, Vijay Gokhale, sent out a widely-publicised note to the Cabinet Secretary. The note requested senior leaders and government functionaries to stay away from Tibetan thanksgiving events planned to be held in Delhi in March-April to mark 60 years of the Dalai Lama's exile as it was a "very sensitive time"⁴⁰. On the same day, the MEA withdrew political clearance for the Asian Security Conference, planned to be hosted by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis with the theme "India and China in Asia: Making of a New Equilibrium".

China's "sensitivity" on the issue is apparent from its response to a statement by the new Ambassador, Gautam Bambawale, who claimed late in March that the Chinese military had "changed the status quo" at the site in an interview⁴¹. China immediately shot back, warning India to "learn some lessons"⁴².

Over the course of April, Indian ministers made several high-profile visits to China for meetings of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and to set up the even more high-profile unofficial summit between Modi and Xi at Wuhan⁴³. Despite the carefully stage-managed event, tangible outcomes have been lacking from the Chinese side.

The Wuhan Summit resulted in three key claims: increased economic cooperation, joint projects in Afghanistan, and an agreement to provide "strategic guidance" to the respective militaries⁴⁴ (perhaps to prevent open confrontations

as at Doklam). In the months since, an agreement has been made to exchange trade delegations, and for China to possibly open up its markets to Indian sugar, rice, and generic drugs⁴⁵. It will clearly be some time before any tangible benefits are seen.

The much-vaunted “joint project”⁴⁶ in Afghanistan has been announced to be a “capacity-building measure”, a far cry from the infrastructure or security projects that were initially expected. The capacity-building measure involves Afghan diplomats being trained by both China and India⁴⁷ – a noticeable step down from tangible projects in Afghanistan, perhaps owing to Pakistani sensitivities. Finally, the “strategic guidance” does not seem to have prevented the PLA in Leh from intruding onto disputed territory and pitching tents⁴⁸.

Post-Wuhan, Australia, which had expected to be invited to Exercise Malabar as part of a counterbalancing strategy, confirmed that no such invitation had been extended by India. Australian newspapers reported this as a “snub”⁴⁹.

Despite repeated instances of public uproar, the Indian government has remained coy as to what exactly has been happening at Doklam aside from extolling its own “diplomatic maturity”⁵⁰. It has continually insisted that there has been no build-up *at the faceoff site* – a facetious claim when China has actually ramped up activity a little to the east of it, as the next section will show, and as a US Congresswoman recently stated⁵¹. Worryingly, while some senior members of the government appear to have been economical with the truth in this regard, others have not shied away from outright falsehoods, going to far as to claim that there have been no developments at the faceoff site *or its vicinity*⁵².

Indeed, even India’s Parliamentary Committee report on Doklam was shrouded in mystery. Members of the ruling party in the committee did not show up for meetings, leading to a lack of quorum. The Chairperson, Dr. Shashi Tharoor, was asked to redact depositions of some senior officials by Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj. The reasons given for the redactions were “national security”, to which Tharoor eventually agreed⁵³. The report was submitted just before the close of the Monsoon session of Parliament.

What these reasons could be, when India’s national security is already at risk from Chinese presence in Doklam, can only be speculated upon.

”Doklam 2.0”

“De-escalation” since August 28th, 2017 seems only to apply to India’s deployments and statements made by its officials. At Doklam, China has indeed halted further construction towards Doka La via the earlier alignment. Yet construction a few hundred meters to the rear and few kilometres to the east, directed towards the Torsa Nala, seems to have sped up and tended towards permanent deployments. Consider the satellite imagery below, pulled from Google Earth.

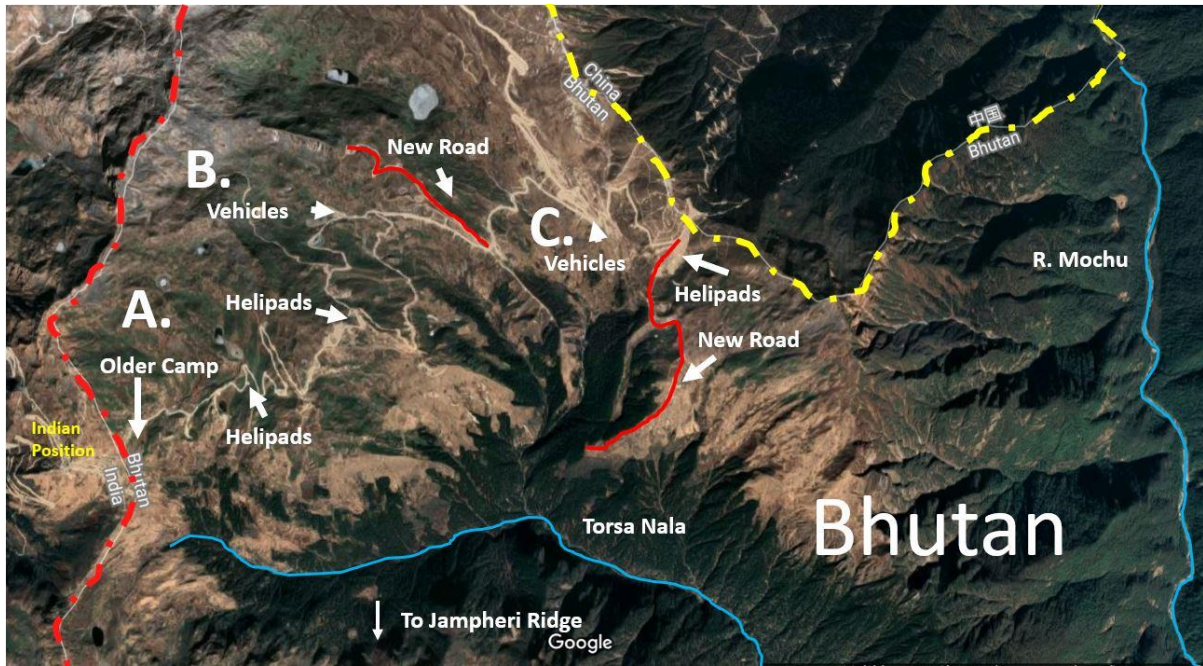


Figure 13. Public domain imagery of China's construction activity at Doklam, first revealed by Col. Vinayak Bhat in *The Print*. Why the Indian government continues to deny Chinese build-up when it is readily visible to anyone is puzzling. Source: Google

A detailed expose was published in *The Print* in January 2018 by former Indian military intelligence officer, Colonel Vinayak Bhat. Col. Bhat's analysis revealed that China's constructions were not just limited to roads. On the contrary, concrete structures, trenches, and vehicles are clearly visible⁵⁴. Images based on his report are reproduced below.



Figure 14. Corresponds to site A in Figure 7. Concrete structures and tents are clearly visible on the Chinese side.



Figure 15. Corresponds to site B in Figure 7. Roads, trenches, and vehicles are visible.



Figure 16. Corresponds to site C in Figure 7. Vehicles, trenches, and tents are visible.

The images released by Col. Bhat were dated October 2017. To reach a state of such completion evident in the pictures by October, construction must have begun soon after the supposed “de-escalation” after August 28th. There seems to be no way for India and Bhutan to have remained ignorant to China undertaking such construction activity. This is especially so given the extent of the deployment illustrated above, unless there was a failure of both technical and human intelligence.

Yet, in the testimony before the Parliamentary Standing Committee, Secretary Jaishankar explained that due to “line of sight” on “good days and bad days” he could not confirm the level of Chinese activity or the number of troops deployed but admitted that “it is possible that there are Chinese troops in northern Doklam”. This is true but conceals the intelligence that would have been available through satellites, and what is already available in the public domain. Also, the Bhutanese troops would have seen some of the activities from the Jampheri Ridge, and would have notified the Indian side.

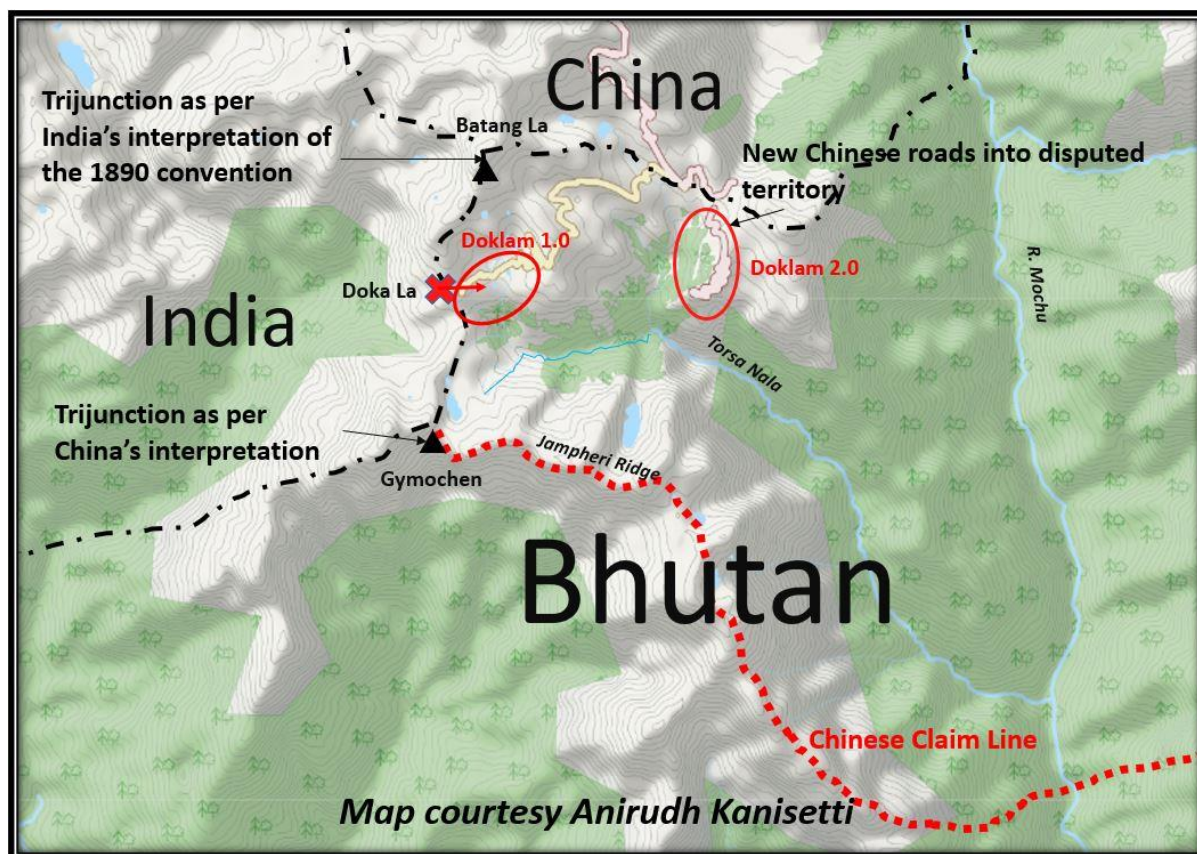


Figure 17. As the map shows, Chinese construction activities leading up to Doklam 2.0 would have been easily visible to Bhutanese troops on the Jampheri Ridge.

Secretary Gokhale's statements were even more puzzling. "... we had only a limited objective. Beyond that, if there is a build-up, if they are doing some activity, that is a matter for China and Bhutan to sort. It is not for Government of India to tell the Chinese side that you construct infrastructure elsewhere along the border." (Emphasis added)

The Indian government, it seems, was not interested in military build-up by a hostile power in an area often declared to be of critical strategic significance by the military establishment. Bhutan has apparently been left to deal with Chinese aggression on its own terms – China's Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou visited Thimphu in July⁵⁵.

The primary reason for India's entry into the Doklam area was the issue of Chinese military aggression in a disputed territory of strategic importance. Despite major concessions having been made by the Indian side, no tangible benefits have accrued from China on other fronts as well. We find, a year on, that the core issue has not yet been resolved. Therefore, the question to be asked is: what are the implications of India's silence?

National Interest Implications

With China's occupation of the Doklam plateau, it has unilaterally occupied territory based on its own claim that the disputed India-China-Bhutan trijunction is at Gyomchen. China's military constructions and deployment (Doklam 2.0) have also enhanced its potential to utilise the Paro approach to gain access to the Siliguri Corridor.

The strategic question to ask is: why has China chosen Doklam to change the status quo? The obvious answer is that the Doklam area offers China the potential to put Bhutan under pressure and test India's ability to protect Bhutan.

What could be China's political objectives? It could be to weaken Indo-Bhutan political ties in order to facilitate their entry into Bhutan. The entry can be expected to follow, in due course, a pattern similar to Nepal and other countries in the neighbourhood.

As explored in previous sections, India has officially refrained from acknowledging that China has militarily altered realities on the ground. However, there are serious implications to such a stance, which are best understood in the context of Sino-India, Indo-Bhutan and Sino-Bhutan relations, as well as by examining the impact on India's neighbourhood and on the interplay between domestic actors.

Sino-India

China has scored both on the political and strategic fronts. The "resolution" of Doklam 1.0 and India's extremely conciliatory stance adopted signal a shift in India's political leadership from a policy of confrontation to one of acquiescence.

Perhaps the cost of India's silence were private assurances of keeping the Sino-Indian border peaceful. It could also be for an improvement of political relations that had once been shadowed by a perceived shift towards the United States, of which only the latter, tentatively appears to be materialising.

Though India's diplomacy may have a broader strategy in mind, it is indisputable that this geopolitical "round" has ended with a psychological victory for China. This is a counter-intuitive result given that China's abrasive posturing had severely restricted their options and begun to turn international opinion against them by the time of India's essentially unilateral withdrawal and de-escalation.

The consequence of China's deployment in Doklam is an increased vulnerability of the Siliguri corridor in addition to the political vulnerability that this confers. On the global stage, India's inability to prevent such deployment projects an image of relative weakness. The subsequent silence and strategic "cover-up" seem to reflect that India's leadership has accepted China's military supremacy – a stance that could impact future military interactions negatively, should they arise.

Indo-Bhutan

India's silence on what was till now touted as a matter of critical national interest is sure to have been noted by the Bhutanese. Bhutan's faith in India's ability to provide security assistance against China's predations must therefore be weakened in no small measure. As a result, it is likely that Bhutan will attempt some balancing between the two powers, as it did after 1962. The Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, renewed in 2007, specifies that neither government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security of the other. It is unlikely that this will change at a fundamental level in the immediate future. Yet the Indo-Bhutan friendship cannot, indeed *must not*, be taken for granted.

Bhutan's own silence on China's occupation of Doklam can be explained by the fact that it has perceived Doklam as not being of vital interest to itself. Consequently, it is indeed willing to barter it for territory in the North as per the terms of China's 1996 offer, which it possibly rejected in deference to India's strategic interests.

Whether that offer still stands is questionable. Indeed, Bhutan is now left with hardly any option but to accept the terms that China presents to them, no matter how diplomatically presented or how beneficial they may seem. Given China's well-observed strategy of debt-trap diplomacy, the implications on what has historically been India's friendliest neighbour may be severely damaging to both itself and to India.

Sino-Bhutan

The visit of China's Vice Foreign Minister to Bhutan, though not unprecedented, is a sign of a shift in Sino-Bhutan relations. Coming on the heels of China's military occupation of Doklam, and with no reference being made to it, it is evident that Bhutan, like India, has accepted the change in status quo. This is a marked contrast to the protest note handed over to China's ambassador in India during Doklam 1.0. Whether the note was made on Bhutan's own initiative or at India's request, it is undeniable that Bhutan appears to now be striking out and dealing with China on its own. Although, realistically, all that Bhutan can do is accept China's terms.

India will need to cultivate this historic friendship and build up its credibility as it enters an uncertain new phase. Bhutan's wariness of China will endure, but India must be aware that in a situation where Bhutan must choose between acceding to a Chinese demand and prioritising India's interest, it is sure to now lean towards the former.

India's Neighbourhood

India's silence on China's predations in disputed territory with Bhutan cannot have gone unnoticed in the capitals of its neighbours. Satellite images of China's military occupation would have conveyed to the neighbours that China's

aggression has been accommodated by India despite the bombastic projection of the image that India had stood up to China in Doklam in 2017. This is sure to make India's claims to regional pre-eminence ring hollow even more than they already have in recent years.

India's role in seeking freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is now questionable, given that it seems unable to protest, let alone protect Bhutan from China's pressure tactics. A deep re-evaluation of India's image in the neighbourhood is necessary in order to fully address the repercussions of the current policy.

Domestic Political Actors

Media. It cannot be denied that the projection of the Indian army "standing up" to Chinese aggression had considerable nationalistic sentiment and harboured electoral appeal, which explains much of the coverage in the period throughout and immediately after Doklam 1.0. This much is unsurprising.

Yet Col. Bhat's expose published in *The Print*, displaying the permanent Chinese installations constructed after the agreement of August 2017 (Doklam 2.0), received a relatively muted reaction. While some of this could be put down to news cycles and attention spans, it is evident that most of the media appeared to toe the Indian government's line of absolute silence on what had been played up only a few months ago. The changed reaction reflects poorly on this pillar of Indian democracy. The actual reasons can only be speculated upon.

Parliament. Parliament has not been officially informed about China's military construction and deployment. Instead, the government has stuck to the line that there is no change of status quo *at the face-off site*, as discussed extensively above. It should also be noted that the Opposition has not made a cogent case or debate about this critical issue, and there is little clarity even within the country's sovereign authority, Parliament, on what India's actual motives are.

Strategic Obfuscation?

In August 2017, India was involved in a crisis. It is clear that, given the jingoistic rhetoric, the government could not be seen as capitulating to China, as there may have been a serious domestic backlash.

The obfuscation on the issue afterwards should be seen as being directed at the domestic **audience**, not a foreign one, which is in itself problematic no matter the reasons.

In later months, the fact that there has been no serious discussion of the policy adopted to resolve the issue shows that the government feels that it may be unable to convince voices in the foreign policy or strategic studies audiences. There is no clarity as to whether the National Security Council has debated this issue or whether existing national security structures such as the Strategic Policy

Group/National Security Advisory Board/National Security Council Secretariat were utilised to decide the policy. Given this, to quote Mearsheimer, "there is a good chance that the problem is with the policy, not the audience"⁵⁶.

The obfuscation may have served to convey the impression of a successful China policy regardless. This perhaps explains why the Indian government is continuing to do so rather than publicly admit to what is evident to a discerning strategic community, but not as much to the general public. After all, such an action would invite censure from experts who are currently unable to draw solid conclusions thanks to perpetual silence on the issue.

Furthermore, the very act of not fully informing the Indian Parliament about this critical issue is deeply worrisome. Not only are India's national interests at risk, but there are serious implications to a corrosion of the norm of transparency.

The Way Forward

The Indian government's stance on Doklam must urgently be clarified, ideally through a White Paper exploring the complexities of this critical issue. The attempts made to sidestep discussion on the larger question of Chinese occupation of disputed territory, not least at Doklam, are baffling. This is especially so when any informed citizen, let alone foreign governments, can easily access satellite imagery that decisively proves a Chinese presence there and leaves the Indian government open to questions about its credibility in the region.

A rational consideration of the issue reveals three key points:

One, China's bellicosity and aggressive rhetoric has closed off many of its negotiating options and made many of its neighbours wary and open to the idea of counterbalancing. While the issue of Doklam can no longer be resolved by coercive means, the principle at stake in China's unilateral occupation of disputed territory can and should be raised through diplomatic channels.

Two, India's neighbours are certainly pursuing a strategy of balancing between India and China, pointing to the fact that their relationships with China must be managed with a subtle and considerate hand, rather than ignored complacently or seen as hostile and dealt with heavy-handedly.

Third, in order to defend its national interests, India must step up its power projection capabilities both in an economic and military sense, or risk having to compromise them due to the inability to effectively challenge China on critical issues.

China, like India, has areas of great political sensitivity. Under President Xi, the narrative of economic growth coupled with jingoistic nationalism has proven to be a source of popularity and authority. Indeed, continued economic development is a necessary safeguard against domestic social unrest. India, with its sheer size, can be a spoiler to China's rise. It is this political power that India can leverage

while navigating the turbulent waters of Sino-Indian relations. India must, therefore, play the long game and not cede too much in the short run.

The costs of US President Trump's trade war with China are certainly taking a toll, providing opportunities for India to either strengthen economic ties with China or to remodel itself as a locus of low-cost manufacturing.

China has shown a keen understanding of Indian politics and understood how to extract concessions: India must show that it can play the game just as well, or risk losing an opportunity to even the strategic scales. India is one of the few powers in the region with the ability to do so. The Doklam flashpoint is not just about Doklam but about India's status as a regional power able to defend its interests and those of its allies. The government's policy on it must be clarified, scrutinised, and held to account.

Conclusion

History is unlikely to be kind to the political attitude adopted by the Indian government on Doklam. It is well understood that the build-up in Doklam 2.0 could not have been contested militarily and should be dealt with diplomatically. But it is also an issue that should not be concealed from the public and prevaricated upon in Parliament, unless there are compelling reasons of national interest to do so.

One possible explanation is that India's new attitude merely reflects an understanding of ground realities, not merely in Doklam but also in the larger sense that China is far more powerful in economic and military terms. While China is certainly ahead in *absolute* terms, in contextual and *relative* terms, they do not have a major edge over India.

For China has many other challenges on its Eastern seaboard, in addition to the Sino-Indian border itself, where the Himalayas pose a formidable barrier for the projection of any major force. Admittedly, China has developed sufficient military capacity to carry out small-scale territorial grabs that could be a huge embarrassment for any government. But surely the Indian military, which has been dealing with this eventuality for more than a decade, has planned their reaction. It may be possible that the political leadership is not confident of the Indian military's ability to deal with such contingencies.

To use the ancient Indian strategic vocabulary, in Kautilyan⁵⁷ terms, the current policy adopted seems to be *samshraya*, which is advisable when one's rival's strategic advantages are overwhelming. This policy involves submitting and seeking refuge. But given the relatively balanced strategic scales overall, India should in fact be following the policy of *asana*, or remaining stationary while building up its own strategic advantages to regain parity. This should include counter-balancing through seeking allies – which is to say, building up credibility in the neighbourhood, building counter-coalitions against China, and augmenting

economic and military resources while simultaneously continuing with dialogue and discussion.

The adopted strategy of absolute silence in the face of military aggression in disputed territory where Indian national security interests are at stake is short-sighted in the extreme. It betrays several of India's long-term interests in the name of buying peace and receiving unreliable assurances from China. A stance of "anticipatory compliance" where India toes China's line on all matters in the hope of border tranquillity serves only to weaken its negotiating power on other critical issues. Despite China's claims of seeking cooperation and closer economic ties with India – which, at a politico-strategic level, may be true – it should also be recognised that China is and will remain a strategic competitor in India's neighbourhood.

Silence was the preferred posture for the Indian government in 2007, when China dismantled two bunkers near Doka La. Obfuscation seems to be the posture in 2017/18, when China has physically occupied a major portion of Doklam. In the process, each regime has not lost out, but India certainly has.

Annexure: Doklam Update, July 2020

Since the 2017 Doklam crisis, India has continued to maintain a studied silence on the change of the status quo on the plateau. There is yet to be an official acknowledgement that far from mutual disengagement, the area has only seen a continued build-up of Chinese military presence.

In this annexure, we use satellite imagery to trace the development of Chinese facilities in a few parts of the disputed plateau. Starting with footpaths in 2009, by late 2019 trenches, power facilities, residential quarters, and helipads are all visible on publicly available satellite imagery. It is evident that China now has an indisputable grip over the plateau, Indian official statements notwithstanding. It would appear that India has ceded crucial strategic ground since the 2017 crisis, despite the favourable coverage and optics that the government received during the crisis and the Wuhan summit that followed.

Overall View of the Plateau



The Doklam Plateau in November 2009, showing very rudimentary tracks on the Chinese side.



A view of the plateau in February 2014, showing some roads on the Chinese side.



The Doklam Plateau January 2018, a few months after the India-China standoff. This shows extensive permanent roads and encampments on the Chinese side.



The Doklam Plateau as of December 2019, showing pucca roads covered with asphalt and extensive levelling of the terrain for future construction activity.

East of Doka La



Just East of Doka La, increasingly permanent Chinese facilities are visible from 2017 onwards.



By 2019, these facilities are permanent, with defensive trenches, asphalt roads, and flattened terrain.

Route from Yadong – West of Senche La



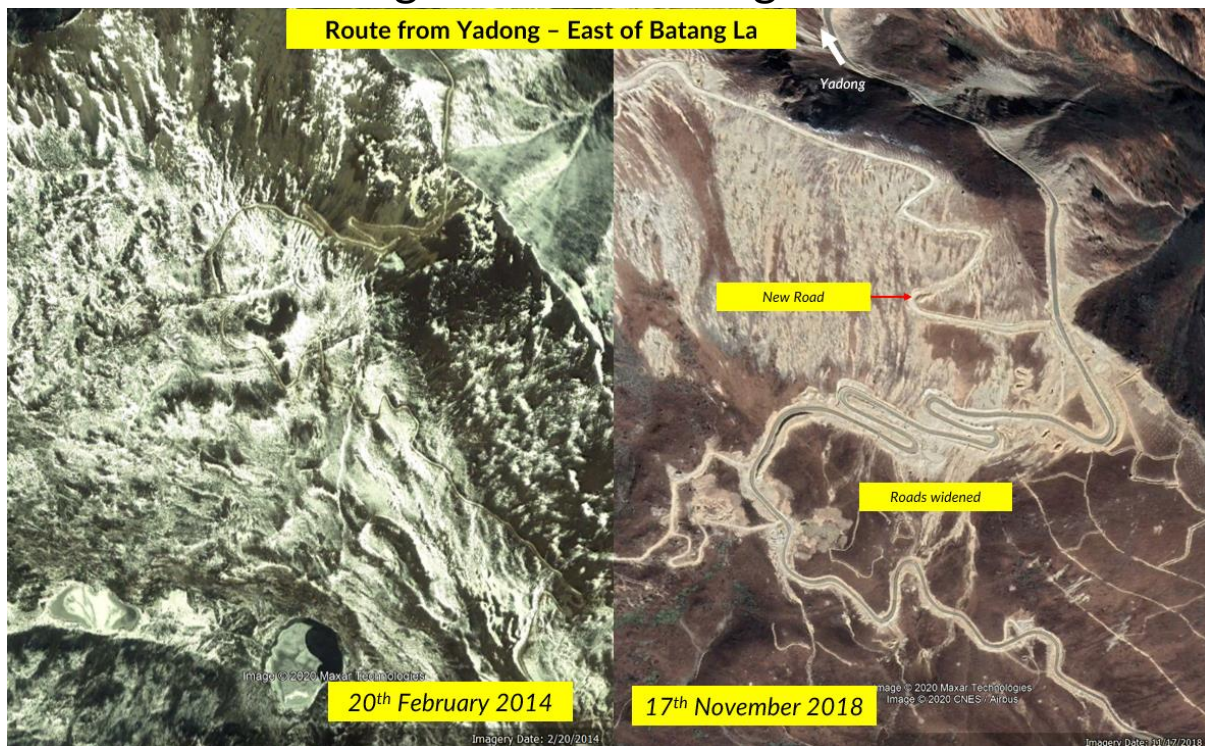
West of Senche La, the road from Yadong is protected by defensive works from satellite imagery available from 2018. These are likely meant to defend the route

from Indian artillery: India occupies mountains at higher elevations west of Doklam.

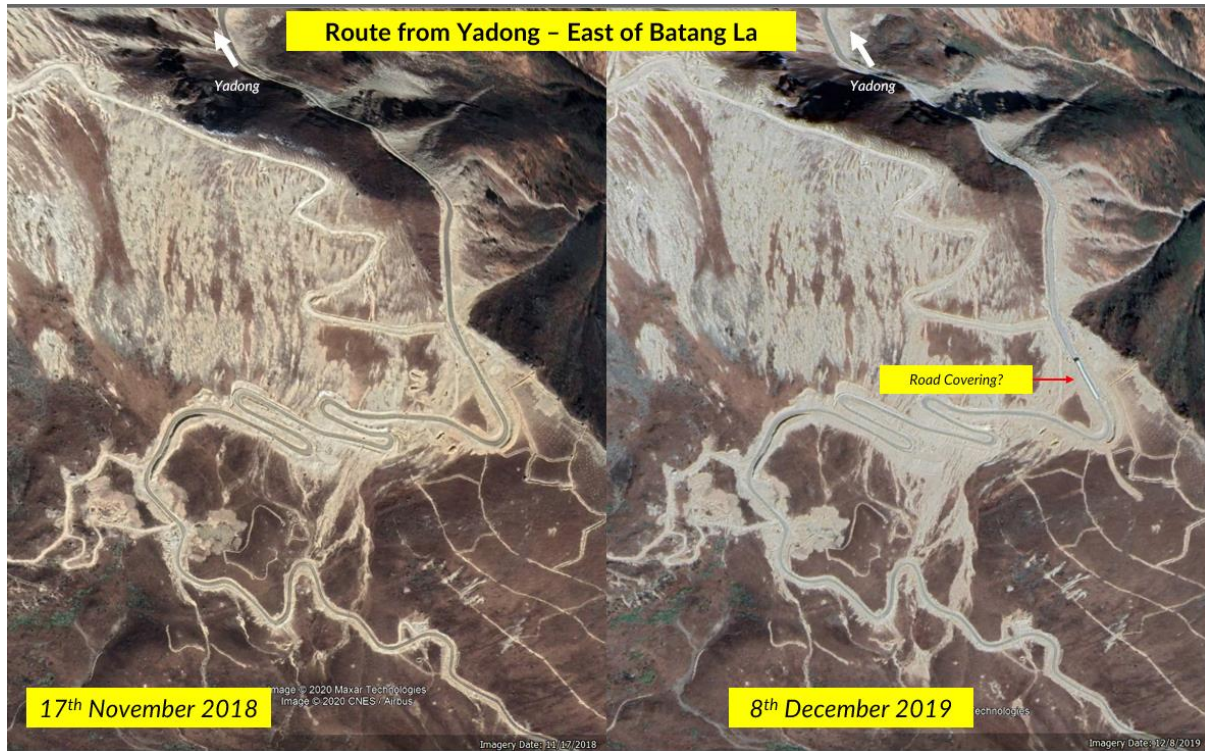


From 2019, Chinese barracks and an asphalt road are visible.

Route from Yadong - East of Batang La



By 2018, permanent roads with flattened terrain are visible.



Most recently, some road covering can also be seen.



Just below this route, extensive road works and permanent Chinese buildings are visible by 2018.



By 2019, the roads are asphalt, terrain has been flattened, and more buildings are visible.

Extension of Roads towards Torsa Nalla



Chinese troops have increasingly easy access to the Torsa Nalla with defensive works, flattened terrain, and wider roads.

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- ² It is possible that the British expeditiously signed this treaty with Bhutan in order to guarantee their ability to repel Chinese forces. Qing China, in 1910-1912, followed a surprisingly assertive policy which was soon ended by the Republican Revolution.
- ³ It should be noted that some cartographers argue that Gymochen and Gipmochi are actually at different ends of the Jampheri Ridge marked in the map. A fair point, but as Figure 3 shows, it does not change the fundamental issues at stake in the interpretation of the border. Furthermore, official Chinese maps released in 2017 label the peak highlighted as the Gipmochi/Gymochen of the Convention.
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