

## Doklam Dispute : Sino – Indian Perspectives

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### **Abstract**

The current situation in the Doklam area is the worst crisis in the Sino – Indian relations since the 1962 war. Since the middle of the June 2017, the Indian army have been facing the China's People's liberation Army (PLA) on the Himalayan plateau in the Doklam area on the border of Sikkim. Though no shots have been fired and both the countries have also pulled back their troops from the disputed site, yet the major question remained, Could the Doklam issue has been resolved peacefully? through diplomatic channels forever ? Or, is it the beginning of a major crisis engulfing Sino – Indian relations in the future?

### **The Geo-political Profile**

Doklam is at the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan in the strategic area of Chumbi Valley leading to the Doka La pass that connects Tibet with Sikkim, Doklam area – The Chinese call it Donglang, have been remained a territorial dispute between China and Bhutan and both the countries have agreed in the year 1998 not to change the status quo in the area until a final settlement is achieved. Since 1984, the officials of both the States have held about 24 rounds of talks for the settlement of their borders (including for the Doklam dispute) but no final agreement have been signed so far.

In the past, China has offered 495 sq kms of its territory in the Northern part of the Himalayas to Bhutan in return for the 269 sq kms of its area lying in the Doklam plateau. But Bhutan has categorically denied for it because this is the rich grazing pasture for its pastoralists and also the main source for their livelihood. The present problem cropped up when the Chinese military start building up a motor able road in the Doklam area - a disputed territory at the tri-junction of India, Bhutan and China. The Bhutanese Government made a complaint to China in June that the construction of the road is taking place in her territory and it is a clear violation of the 1988 and 1998 written agreements between the two countries in which it was pledged to maintain peace and tranquility along the border till the final settlement of the boundary is not achieved. Bhutan's Ambassador to India, V. Namgyel formally handed over a letter of protest to the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi on 20<sup>th</sup> June demanding an immediate halt of the road construction in its territory. It is notable that Bhutan has full diplomatic ties with more than 50 countries of the world but not with its immediate neighbor, China and this rankles in the ruling establishment in Beijing.

The Chinese unilateral step of constructing a motorable road in the Doklam area came into the spot light almost at the time when the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was visiting the United States in late June. India is obligated to Bhutan as the two countries have special ties which is legally affirmed by the Indo-Bhutan friendship Treaty of 2007. Article-II of the Friendship Treaty, which succeeded the 1949 treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship, clearly affirms that India and Bhutan shall “Co-operate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests” and “neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interests of the other”. Obviously, India could neither afford to remain aloof nor could be the mute spectator legally and strategically. The result was that the Indian troops moved into the area where Chinese road construction was going on. As a result of India's resolute military forward step, the construction activities were stopped. Since, the middle of June, Indian and Chinese soldiers have been facing each other on a Himalayan Plateau in the Doklam area on the borders with Sikkim causing the

precedented military standoff between the two countries and worst crisis in Sino – Indian relations since the 1962 war.

### **The Conflicting Perspectives**

The Indian Government's decision to move the troops to stop the Chinese road construction was taken after the close consultations with the Government of Bhutan. India informed China that the construction of road violated the written agreement between Indian and Chinese Special Representatives on the border talks that the status of the boundary at tri-junctions would be resolved only through the participation of all the three parties i.e. including India also. The Indian External Affairs Ministry issued a statement in which “deep concern” was made and also claimed that “the Chinese construction activity in the Doklam area has undermined the 2012 agreement and this significant change in the status quo is of serious implications for India.” The quick deployment of the Indian troops forced the Chinese to stop the construction activities but an immensely tense situation is created facing Indian troops with the eye-ball to eye-ball contact with its counter Chinese soldiers which had never happened since 1962 war. After the Indo-Chinese war of 1962, the LAC remained completely calm and peaceful and when the thick thaw started melting away in their bi-lateral relations, after the historic visit of Rajeev Gandhi both the countries have signed major agreements for maintaining complete peace and tranquility on the borders till the final settlement is made. Thus pushing the border dispute under the carpet, both the States willingly opened up a new chapter of Economic & Trade Co-operation, making China the largest trading partner of India.

The Chinese Government reacted very furiously. China's ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui said that “there is no question of withdrawing the PLA this time.” He also made it clear that “the withdrawal of Indian troops would be the pre-condition for any talks related to the latest dispute.” China insisted that the Sikkim - China sector of the LAC is a settled border in accordance with the historic convention signed between Great Britain and China in 1890. China also warned that if India refuses to adhere with this treaty which clearly defined the Sikkim section of the Sino – Indian boundary, the legality of Sikkim's accession to the Indian Union could be re-opened. Thus, China created hyper-tension on the issue, making India responsible for the military incursion in the area and started mounting diplomatic pressure for pulling back the Indian troops first and then keeps herself aloof from this latest Sino – Bhutanese entanglement.

Indian Government quickly responded to the Chinese illegal construction of motor able road in Doklam and Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat rushed to the disputed area and disclosed that Indian troops had entered the Doklam to stop the illegal construction activity at the invitation of the Bhutanese Government. India accused that China triggered the current stand-off, therefore, Chinese Government should pull back its soldiers first than India will reciprocate willingly.

### **Conclusion**

China and India's perspectives on borders demarcation had always differed with each other so much so that both had fought a bloody war in 1962. There are political and strategic factors, together with regional and global geo-political compulsions that made the matter more complex and complicated. On the other hand, the shifting global alliances in International politics, particularly, in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's regime and emerging New Delhi – Washington – Tokyo axis has created serious suspicion in the Chinese mind.

The Doklam plateau is strategically a very sensitive area for India. If China succeeds in making the motorable road, which she had already started without talking and taking Bhutan or India into the

confidence, through Yadong, which is inside the Chumbi valley, the whole area will be well connected with the Chinese road and rail network. This strategic and military advantage which China wanted to usurp forcefully is obviously a dangerous threat to the security of adjacent Siliguri Corridor, also known as "Chicken's Neck" that connects the entire North-Eastern provinces with India. This Corridor, which is only 30 Kms wide, at its narrowest point, is the life-line for the entire North-East region which also includes Arunachal Pradesh for which China is repeatedly making its claim. China's over whelming support and keenness for the China – Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), development of Gwadar port as main Chinese naval base in the Arabian Sea and launching of One Belt One Road (OBOR) project are the main Chinese initiatives that have created doubts in the Indian mind. When China organized a great show for launching its most ambitious and strategic project in Beijing in May this year, the only notable absentee was India. On the issue of regional terrorism, both the States have adopted almost the divergent rather antagonistic position so much so that the Pakistani militant Masood Azhar could not be included in the UN "terror list" obviously due to China's opposition.

Not only this, it is also well known that blocking India's membership in the prestigious Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) China is solely responsible, none else. Though, Doklam issue has been resolved and both the States have withdrawn their troops from the disputed side peacefully, but the main question that loom large upon the whole gamut of Sino – Indian relationship is that whether the deep suspicions and main misunderstanding that have been cropped up in their bi-lateral relationship have been washed off or not? If not, then mutual responsibility lies with both the Asian States – the two emerging power centers in the global arena in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to consult each other and remove the mutual antagonistic perceptions, unfortunately that have been created in their minds. There is no doubt that both India and China are certainly disdained to play a vital role in the global scenario in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have achieved the status, for the first time in recent history, to re-shape and re-design the Internal System in accordance with the wider interests of Afro-Asian States. Hence, the historic opportunity that have befallen upon them be not lost. More so, the Sino – Indian relationship would be a defining relationship that will not only determine the course of world history in the present century but will also be the single most potent force to establish and ensure the peace and security, in the Asian region at large and in the South Asian region in particular.

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