



China-India Imbroglia: From Doklam to Wuhan

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Abstract

China and India, the two Asian influential powers have been competing in several bilateral, regional and international issues. Literally, the two countries can be assumed to have intriguing divergent interests in several spheres. Among these, the most severe issues distracting the relationship between the two countries remain geopolitical issues. Hence, Indo-China border problems persist since the post-colonial era to the present century. In this backdrop, the paper attempts to study India-China relations in the light of geopolitical problems in the Doklam plateau. The strategic area called the Doklam plateau has been disputed by China and Bhutan with India playing a prominent role, supporting Bhutan in this highland. India has accused China of altering the status quo in the existing border agreement signed by the two countries. In this situation, tensions flared up in the region which emerged as bilateral contentions between India and China.

Keywords: *China Ideology, Doklam Crisis, India, Bhutan, Galwan, CPEC.*

Introduction

The post-Cold War era procures a fresh epoch of a strategic situation in which the world witnessed shifting of power among nations. Since the dissolution of world war years international set up, reevaluation of foreign policy was the foremost challenge before countries of the world and to the newly independent countries. Subsequent to this changing international order, the mirage of the modern statesmen and observers turn factual in which the Asian country, China made its augmenting entry into the scene of the international stage. The rise of China, which has been perceived by many as rapid and aggressive instantly altered the international scenario and thereafter the Asian region and its neighbouring countries particularly were not exempt from the consequences. The decisive elements of China's rise have been frequented to incompatibility with her neighbour's interests and sometimes poses serious challenges to its borderlands which often flared up escalations and even war, and among which India is one.

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The Chinese had maintained long standing centuries of self-sufficient civilization under different dynasties. In their immediate exposure to the world, the Chinese were introduced to perceptive religions and ideologies from the outside world and this immensely guided the morale of the country in a long way which is conspicuous in its global political interplay. In the light of this background, it is necessary to identify how China's rise had impacted its relation with neighbour India with special reference to the Doklam standoff till the Summit between the two countries in Wuhan in 2018. In the present scenario, Indo-China relations accordingly is one of the most influential relations and the boundary dispute between the two nations became one of the most critical challenging issues in the region.

A Brief Early Legacy

Commercial and cultural contacts existed between India and China, which was predominantly overwhelmed by religious interactions since the 4th and 5th centuries. The records of India-China relations during the ancient period show that the relationship pathway was smoothed over. The two countries maintained commercial and even diplomatic linkages for centuries with frequent exchanges of official envoys which convey that the two countries' ties were relatively peaceful for a comparatively long period of time. However, the positive trends of Sino-India bilateral ties have been increasingly overshadowed largely by negative inclinations.

To a greater degree, the British administration was responsible for delimiting the borders of their colony. India is one country that felt the fallacies of these colonial measures. The present differences between India and China started to develop in the early 20th century which the British India Government had to handle tacitly several times. The most far-reaching consequences in Sino-India relations regarding the boundary line drawn by British India was in 1914 at the Shimla Conference, thereby drawing the official map in 1937. However, the Chinese officials claimed they never accepted the Mc Mohan line which demarcated India and China. It can be analysed that while China and India maintained centuries-old commercial relations, geopolitical problems, since the colonial period it had been a bone of contention between British India, Tibet, and China and practically remains the crux of the paradox in their relations. Meanwhile, it is also admissible that the Chinese leaders in the early 20th century remained slightly unaware of neighboring India, probably due to the fact that they were enormously swayed by the ideals and goals of Communist ideology. Their different views on the issue of Tibet formed a formidable and the significant agreement was signed in 1954 called 'Pansheel' to guide their relationship in a light and positive goals.

Bilateral Complications

Traditional Indian thought has the Mandala doctrine that advocated 'A strong neighbor is an enemy' conceptualization, and its foreign policy doctrine too saw a neighbouring country automatically as an enemy and further, the enemy of a neighbour as a natural ally. Traditional Chinese thought too had a similar 'Two tigers cannot live in the same forest and close neighbours are enemies and farther nations' 'friends' perspectives. This

doctrine meant for the kingdoms of the old period still carries resonance. Thus, analysts in both countries believe that close neighbours rising simultaneously cannot but be strategic competitors or enemies. They say Asia will witness a high level of competition between India and China, and ultimately, confrontation is inevitable' (Shihai, 2013). In view of the current relations, these maxims run well to a larger extent and the query remains as what rudiments complicate the relationship for the delay of long standing and unending peace?

Being the two big powers in the region, sharing a 3488 km long border, India and China undoubtedly hold the biggest bilateral confrontation in the east. There are overlapping areas of interest and influence in their multifarious strategies. It is apparent that Sino-India relations are based on mutual suspicion in a bitter security environment. Hence, many observers take different views and interpret the fundamental areas of their clash variedly. In view of their big economy, some regard that the basic and most intensification of the dispute lies in the struggle over the leadership role in the region. While approaches are also made from national security perspective, which is regarded as the fundamental concern of both India and China in dealing with each other. Besides these, it is also analysed by many that the roots of the conflict mostly centered around the geopolitical paradigm. The Cold War politics which set a new direction in international politics had an outlying cost in the bilateral relations and political approaches of both India and China. This atmosphere had been endured for several decades, which led to reshuffling of nation's friends and enemies. Throughout the 1960s following the next few decades, the geopolitical dilemma remains at the top priority of India and China's national security strategy.

Ideological Apparatus

Ideology has been a principal prism through which Mao looked at the security issues (Li, 2009). This had guided the foreign policy of Mao's China for a long time. The moral stance adopted by India and China during the Cold War era in the international arena were largely shaped by the political moves of superpowers. Moreover, it aligned itself with other weaker nations when the world had undergone strategic changes of cold war and post colonization ambiance. However, Mao's perception changed after the Tibet crisis, Nehru's perspective also experienced a shift from viewing China as a friend to a possible threat. The gradual proximity developed between India and the Soviet Union confirmed Mao's perception of India as a threat to China.

In the early 1950s, China maintained an 'asymmetrical' approach to the non-Soviet bloc. The newly independent South Asian countries from colonial rule saw China as the greatest enemy of western imperialism. As a result, China and South Asian countries established a framework of quasi-allies. At this time, the first India-Pakistan war took place, leading to concern over India's role in the region. Coupled with India's stand on China's Tibet policy, China felt that if the situation was not properly dealt with, it could lead to war. While India saw Pakistan as its main security concern, for China, the security threat came from the United States' influence in South East Asia and Taiwan (Gancheng, 2013). However, Nehru also denied China claims made by Zhou En Lai in his letter in 1959. Two years later, India fought her first war after independence with China. The post 1962 witnessed

major security concern for India and China with simultaneous collaboration of Sino-Pak relations. At this moment, India stood the test of time in its position of neutrality in the Cold War plight. Moreover, Indira Gandhi's perception of China was rather negative. Hence, when she first came to power in 1966, rivalry with China appeared to be an inescapable situation. Throughout her two tenures, Indira Gandhi viewed China with alertness and suspicion. China's ideological pattern entered into a new arena in the 1970's with the coming to power of Deng Xiaoping. Deng's motive in maintaining China's relationship with India lies in prioritizing economic relations. This had raised Sino-India relations to a new level. However, Deng's visionary assertion on political proximity with India through economic cooperation was doubtful. And this was further perturbed by Sino-India geopolitical complications.

The Hardline

The all-encompassing relationship between India and China has been influenced and shaped by several circumstances. India conducted the first nuclear test in 1974, thereby becoming a nuclear state and suddenly made its reputation of entering into the big powers club of the world. India's nuclear test aroused speculation of India's position, especially from China. Apart from the historical complication leftover, China-India relations witnessed fluctuations and underwent the worst phase after the direct confrontation in 1962. The 1962 Indo-China war decisively pushed China to refocus its position in relation to South Asia and here India comes to the primary focus of China's foreign policy. Consequently, tensions remained throughout the 1970s and the 1980s saw several efforts for mending relations. In 1988 Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited China and this marked the ice-breaking incident which led to the starting point of normalization. There were positive developments steadily until India tested its nuclear power and got the world's condemnation including China. With several upsides down, the 21st century rotated unexpected turn in the relationship with frequent political front-high level visits. Numerous memoranda and agreements were signed between the two covering comprehensive aspects including the declaration of no war between the two in 2003. All these initiatives aimed at normalization and development of relations in a peaceful manner.

Geopolitical Issues

As mentioned earlier, India and China shares a long border, which occupies the core unresolved issues in their bilateral ties. China's enmeshment with India becomes worsened with the proclamation of Tibet as its territory. China today has been in a state of complexities with her bordering countries and with the famous policy of 'salami slicing' tactic, the Chinese government had gradually moved its strategy in her bordering lands and water. The South China Sea is one such tactic China is applying by claiming ninety percent of the waters and are in disputes with the South East Asian countries. In its eastern side China had a territorial dispute with Japan over Senkaku islands or Diaoyu islands. Territorial conflicts in the western part of China centered around the Mc Mohan line shared with India. From Aksai Chin to Arunachal Pradesh in India, heated tensions and even war happened between the two. However, among these conflicts, Doklam territorial skirmishes proved exclusively crucial in the bilateral relations of India and China truly noteworthy in the current times.

The strategic trajectory of the Asian powers such as China, Bhutan and India, commonly identify it as 'Doklam' or 'Donglang' plateau which was a flash up point in the news in 2017. Bhutan has been geographically sandwiched between two enemies. The 89 long square kilometers do not necessarily seem to be inhabited by people nor does it serve energy of valuable quantity. However, the so-called 'Doklam' remains a zone of contention among these three countries in the current decade and it has been one of the significant arenas in redefining the relations of the two Asian powers- India and China. This area is a trijunction of Bhutan in the east, India in the west and Tibet in its northern side. The crux of the tensions which flared up in this area is certainly the question of ownership of this tiny belt. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine why ownership of this particular area emerged so crucial.

Apparently, China and Bhutan are in constant squabble on the entitlement of this region. Both sides brought out their respective maps highlighting the Doklam plateau as their territory. The official map of Bhutan in 1959 stipulating Doklam as its territory. The Chinese side on the other hand also recurrently shows it as its own. Both countries claimed on the basis of historical grounds, the Chinese upkeeps its claim according to the 1890 Convention of Calcutta between India and British which states that 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 (Yi, 2018). The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nepal territory (Yi, 2018). However, the Tibetans refused to accept on the ground that no Tibetan representative was present or took part in the negotiations.

According to the claims made by the Chinese, Doklam is an inseparable part of Tibet (Prasanna, 2021). On the contrary, the Bhutanese government while accepting Doklam as a disputed territory never capitulate its claims. Since the 1960's both China and Bhutan were vociferous of their assertions condemning each other for crossing their respective proclaimed soils. Despite the fact that several talks on boundary issues were held between the two since 1984 and agreement on maintaining a peaceful status quo were made, no substantial breakthrough has been reached till today. Bhutan has been locked in a border dispute with China for decades and since 1984, the two sides have held 24 rounds of border talks (Jha, 16).

From China's perspective, the Doklam area nonetheless grasps historical asset, however, it is more skeptical that India's geographical proximity hold a more critical place in Beijing's thinking. From the package deal offered by China to Bhutan in 1996 containing its agreement to withdraw some portion of its claims in the Northern part of Doklam in exchange for north-west Bhutan controlled Doklam area, an area adjacent to India's Siliguri. But Bhutan never agrees with Beijing's persuasion. In a move to change the status quo, the Chinese side started construction of road from Yadong towards the southern part of Doklam and this has pushed India de-facto entering into China-Bhutan territorial conflict. India rapidly criticized China and accused China of crossing the border illegally. On 16 June 2017, in an attempt to prevent road construction, Indian Armed Forces entered the disputed area by

crossing the border, and a military standoff between Indian troops and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) remained till 28 August 2017 when both sides agree to withdraw their forces. The Bhutanese government severely condemned and criticized China for constructing roads within its territory. However, the Chinese government made its position stronger by claiming the disputed area as its own.

Violation of agreement or changing status quo in any conflict is no small measure for involved parties in international relations. From a common perspective, the opposing country entering the border without its prior consent emerged as a precarious incident. In the real sense of the term, the Chinese were constructing roads at the southern portion of Doklam area where the Bhutanese government proclaimed territorial sovereignty. Further, it was a direct violation of the agreements signed between China and Bhutan in the past and specifically the 1988 and 1998 agreements of both sides to maintain the status quo. Surprisingly, the Bhutan Government made a press statement only on 29 June 2017, condemning Chinese activities in its own territory. However, the only response from the Bhutanese side was its official statement and that no army was sent to the disputed area.

India Factor in Doklam Crisis

Today, any discussion on the disputes in the Doklam plateau is incomplete without stating the role of India. India, though mentioned frequently, or even more prominent than Bhutan in the Doklam conflict is a non-claimant state involved in the dispute. Disputes over Thimphu and Beijing over the territorial issue have distinct significant implications for India perceptibly to its security concern. India believes that if China controls the Doklam plateau, it will severely hamper India's national security in its northeastern border due to the fact that India's mainland being connected with its northeastern states by a narrow belt in Siliguri which is adjacent to China's claim of the Chumbi valley. Consequently, China-Bhutan rivalry over the tiny valley can in no term be ignored by India.

Bhutan is a tiny country in the Himalayan zone, fortunately, or unfortunately sandwiched between the two contending influential countries. The neighbor India shared a special relationship with Bhutan and remains a protected state of India. India assists Bhutan in terms of giving frequent training to its military force. The Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship with India signed in 1949 offered India the advisory role and military assistance of Bhutan's foreign policy (Kumar, 2019). As an affirmation of the existing cordial ties, another friendship treaty was signed in 2007 which added India's autonomy in Bhutan developmental process and foreign affairs. The recent Chinese aggressiveness and offensive policy massively infuriated India and India's quick reaction to Chinese territorial expansion is a glare illustration of the deeper Delhi-Thimphu ties.

The inquisitiveness of India in China-Bhutan territorial conflicts and India's stands by Bhutan is seen by many as a reaction to the increasing cordial relationship between China and Pakistan. China in the recent years has prompted policies which is well beneficial to India's neighbouring countries. China impelled huge investment for the implementation of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which passes through the disputed area of Gilgit-

Baltistan in Jammu and Kashmir. Moreover, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has bluntly announced its assurances and support to Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir conflict. India's control over Jammu and Kashmir is a matter of ample security concern for China due to multifarious reasons ranging from Aksai Chin to successfully implementing CPEC. There are around 20 places along the LAC where the claims of both the countries overlap besides Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh which China claims as its own territories. The confusion has resulted in frequent intrusions by the army into each other's territories in the past several years. At the same time, there are Sinologists and a section of Indian government officials who are less optimistic and doubtful of an early resolution of the border dispute between the two countries. "In addition, when armed forces face each other in the field small mistakes can quickly escalate into major confrontation" (Bhattacharya, 2019). The Doklam crisis happens to be a test of time between India and Bhutan for their longstanding friendship built on common legacy. However, this test proves a strong complimentary that existed between these two countries which enhances the significance of the role played by Bhutan in India's security situation. On the other hand, China never failed to acknowledge the budding Delhi-Thimphu ties, thereby initializing its willingness to build pragmatic cooperation particularly in terms of peacefully resolving boundary spat with Bhutan. Despite having no diplomatic relations, Beijing sought to mend its fragile links and adopted soft diplomacy with Bhutan to compete with its rival India.

Acknowledging the vitality of Bhutan and its sensitivity to India's national security arena, India had been fostering its relationship and build more political engagement with Bhutan. In recent years, India started providing more technical assistance to Bhutan and the two countries' economic relations had grown enormously with a reach of 92.28 billion in 2018 (Taneja, Bimal, Nadeem , & Roy , 2019), 96.47 billion in 2019 and 94.89 billion in 2020 (India-Bhutan Trade Relations, n.d.). The political leaders of India often remind Bhutan for its special position in the heart of India.

Having been said that India and Bhutan maintained special relationship overtime and India hugely remains exasperated at the infringement of the neighbour Bhutan's sovereignty, the Bhutanese government moderate feedback on Chinese activities pose a question on Thimphu's actual situation. Some observers were contemplating that Bhutan is maintaining a calculating balance between India and China and did not want the situation got worsened. On the other hand, the accelerating growth of Chinese economy and its influences in international arena makes Thimphu cynical of its special relations and security dependence on India.

India remained deeply concerned on the actions of China. India's standpoint on the tri-junction of China, Bhutan and India was based on the 2012 agreement between Beijing and New Delhi. On 30th June 2017, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India made a statement upon which any change in the status quo at the tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding(Recent Development in Doklam Area, 2017). The Doklam issue had added another point of complications regarding the 'special relationship' of India and Bhutan.

Wuhan Summit

As the current century unfolds, a remarkable constructivist approach in the 21st century was taken by both countries in innumerable ways. On 28th April 2018, the first ever informal summit was held in the Chinese province of Wuhan between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping. Prior to the announcement of the Summit, the world closely watched the details and outcome of this summit. Unlike earlier bilateral talks, no formal documents were discussed between the two in this summit. However, the significance of Wuhan Summit lies in the fact that it could be an ice-breaking event in the bilateral relations or could turn out to be a meager adjustment to the existing complex scenario.

The informal summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping may not be “a milestone in bilateral relations” as sections of the Chinese media have suggested, but it certainly has the potential of changing the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations in a positive direction (Pant, 2018). The distinctive attribute of this Summit lies in the fact that both leaders have the rare occasion for exchanging opinions in a relaxing mode. Since it is an informal summit, there were no fixed purposes of discussion. However diverse range of issues were well covered by the two leaders ranging from bilateral to global importance. Both leaders assessed various opportunities to work together and the earlier possibilities of resolving boundary issues and other mis-understandings. The two leaders expressed their support for the work of the Special Representatives on the India China Boundary Question and urged them to intensify their efforts to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018).

Several rounds of talks and agreements were signed between the two Asian giants since the Doklam standoff and before, the meeting in Wuhan is regarded by many as a new chapter in Beijing-Delhi ties. But this may not be sufficient for building lasting peace and stability. Frequent high-level political talks still do not ensue each other’s support in international arena, like, China’s opposition to India’s entry in Nuclear Supplier’s Group, India’s efforts for permanent membership, etc. Till today, no structural changes have been witnessed into the framework on the analysis of bilateral relations. However, it is clear that Wuhan Summit served an important signal for both country’s determination for diverting a more deteriorating situation.

The second roundtable of Wuhan Summit was hosted by India in the state of Tamil Nadu on 11 October 2019. In this informal summit, the two leader’s emphasis centered around moving from past indifferences that hinder the relations and focused more on the cooperative prospects. The success of the two informal summits can hardly be measured and calculated. The Wuhan and Mamallapuram summits can be regarded as a thaw of tension in Indo-China disputes. Nevertheless, there is a clear indication that both countries still hardly step back from their constant positions. The Chinese Foreign Ministry supports Pakistan’s stand on Kashmir issue and openly objected India’s revocation of Article 370. In viewing the current condition, it appears that both countries hold the relationship by improving several sectors like technology, economy, education etc. by keeping aside the hard-key areas of conflicts. From the assessment of the behaviors of both India and China, it is apparent that

any change or action of one side is bound to have ramifications over other or in the bilateral relations in general. The questions remain as to whether these two countries really wish to end the conflicts or for any better none will be capitulated until the situations ends at their own favor. Meanwhile, it is also a bitter truth that a win-win situation is quite pessimistic, especially in the context of Galwan incident where more than 20 Indian soldiers were injured. On 15th June 2020, India-China Galwan valley military clash happened in the eastern Ladakh. This had sparked a war-like situation; however, the situation has cooled down following 11 rounds of military-level talks between India and China, and both countries agreeing to de-escalate (Recalling Galwan Valley clash incident – when India lost 20 soldiers at LAC on June 15 last year, 2021) The Galwan incident had added heated provocations in Sino-India relations.

Now, it is high time for both countries to find an innovative way and deeper field of cooperation. Mutual perception of security between these two states is necessary for overcoming mistrust and tensions, and instability. In order to contribute to a more peaceful regional and international environment, both countries need not only avoid war and stabilize the relations while conspiring on the back. The post-Wuhan summit situation proves that indifferences in one aspect led to negative actions of others which is truly a tit-for-tat action. The future calls for factors necessary for healthy and stable relationships with mutual cooperation and strategic trust. Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that a fresh impetus was made recently by China and Bhutan, signing a virtual agreement on a ‘three-step roadmap’ on 14th October 2021, the detail of which are yet to be declared.

Conclusion

The Chinese hold the reputation of having mighty successive dynasties over thousands of years. Therefore, the rise of China has been seen by many as a resurgent from its antique splendor. To its neighbours, the corollary of the dramatic rise of China proved to be somewhat assertive and complex. Awareness of its geopolitical possession and the feeling to take back its claimed missing territories have been a critical attribute of China’s rise and this further directs its foreign policy perspectives. While the Chinese strongly asserts that its rise and growth is peaceful, however it may be doubtful for many observers and particularly to its competing countries. There are several multilateral regional and international platforms in which China and India are working cooperatively, however, these prove insufficient in view of the current complexities. All these forums proved well sufficient for normalizing tensions but not for ending security competition and long-term bilateral conflicts. It is apparent that there are uncountable talks held between the two leaders, but indirectness and discursiveness still dominated the environment. Smaller nations having disputes with China are welcoming external powers interference, which is quite evident in South China Sea dispute and the recent Doklam crisis. Therefore, Bhutan regards India as a natural big brother which can be relied upon. China and India need peaceful environment, which is highly consequential for regional and global environment. On the other hand, it appears that these two countries relationship is more anarchic that it appears and cooperation with competition is far reality. Had they not been sharing a border; the story be possibly different. Therefore,

the most basic need of the time is to move forward from being beating around the bushes and get the hardline problems over it.

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