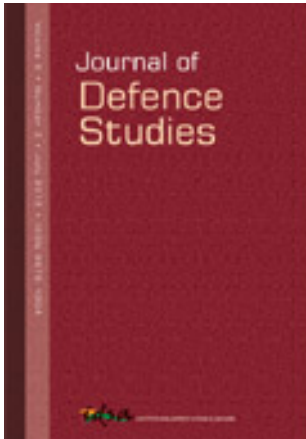


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No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
Delhi Cantonment, New Delhi-110010



Journal of Defence Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.idsa.in/journalofdefencestudies>

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To cite this article: A.K. Bardalai (2018): Doklam and the Indo-China Boundary, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January-March 2018, pp. 5-13

URL <http://idsa.in/jds/jds-12-1-2018-doklam-indo-china-boundary>

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Doklam and the Indo-China Boundary

*A.K Bardalai**

INDO-CHINA BOUNDARY

On 19 December 2017, three days ahead of the scheduled 20th Round of Indo-China border talk between the Indian National Security Advisor (NSA), Ajit Doval, and China's State Councillor, Yang Jiechi (the details of which are yet to be made public), the daily *Times of India* reported a statement by China that the Doklam standoff posed a 'major test' for the bilateral ties and that lessons should be learnt from it to avoid a similar situation of its kind in the future.¹ China's statement was made in the context of the face-off between Indian Army and China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Doklam plateau (see Figure 1), a disputed area of 89 sq km in western Bhutan, near East Sikkim. The crisis occurred on 8 June 2017, when PLA troops crossed over to the Bhutanese territory with road construction machinery, with the aim of building a motorable road connecting Chumbi Valley and the Doklam Plateau. In response, the Indian Army from the nearby Sikkim garrison quickly moved inside the Bhutanese territory and prevented the PLA from constructing the road. The standoff continued till 28 August when both the countries agreed to pull back their troops with the media hailing it as a diplomatic victory.

However, two months later, in October 2017, online news portal *The Print* published a few satellite images indicating the build-up of

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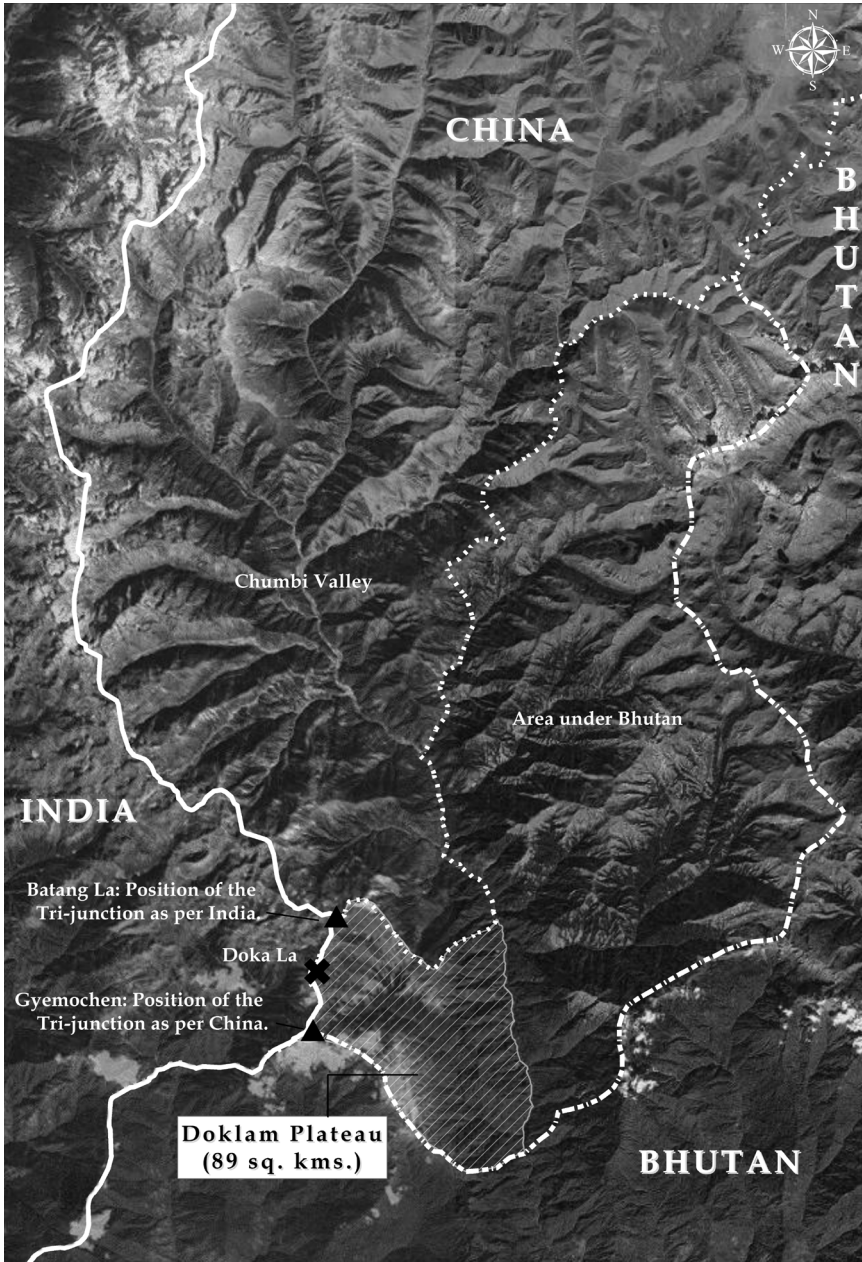


Figure 1 Chumbi Valley and Doklam Plateau

approximately 3,000 PLA troops opposite Sikkim; this was not the case earlier.² Clearly, the military situation in Doklam has not normalised and unease continues to persist in the region. The PLA's disposition in the satellite images was very clear because of the absence of any passive measures to hide its deployment. Since it is unlikely for a professional army to neglect even routine defensive measures, it would be logical to assume that the PLA wanted the world and India to pick up these images.

In response, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson, in his weekly media briefing, stated: 'This news report refers to alleged Chinese build-up well within China. There have been no new developments at the face-off site and its vicinity since the August 28 disengagement between the two countries', adding, 'The status quo prevails at Doklam. Any report to the contrary is mischievous,'³ Even though the MEA correctly pointed out that there was no new development at the face-off site in the Doklam area post 28 August 2017, it avoided commenting on the deployment of the 3,000 additional troops and the fact that the PLA did not completely withdraw from the Doklam Plateau on 28 August. *The Indian Express* further reported on 6 October 2017 that the PLA troops did not completely pull out from the Doklam plateau after 28 August.⁴ The latest news reports also mention an increase in PLA troops deployment inside the Chumbi Valley.

This increase in deployment of troops should be seen in context of the 28 August 2017 statement by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying: 'China will, in light of the changes on the ground, make necessary adjustments and deployment, and continue fulfilling its sovereign rights to safeguard territorial sovereignty in compliance with the stipulations of the border-related historical treaty.' The report of the deployment of an additional 3,000 PLA troops near the Sikkim border, unsurprisingly, is likely to have raised concerns as a possible new PLA threat to India's northern border in the Sikkim area. However, it is this author's contention there is little need for alarm, for two reasons. One, the Indian Army is already in a position of advantage here; and two, the development of such a build-up would have been factored into the army's military plans along with a number of options for appropriate responses. Thus, the question that needs to be asked is: 'why the build up by the PLA?' The answer to that lies in the Chinese grand strategy in maintaining the power balance in the region.

REGIONAL POWER BALANCE

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Jonah Blank opines: ‘The *status quo ante* has been essentially restored, but the dispute raised important questions about the balance of power in Asia, China’s grand strategy...’²⁵ The Doklam stand-off, although a military face-off at the tactical level, has wider strategic implications; in this case, especially for the Indo-Bhutan relationship, and a message to India from China indicating its resolve to fiercely protect its status in the region.

THE TIMING OF DOKLAM

To be sure, 8 June was not the first time the PLA patrol visited the Doklam Plateau. This author was aware during his service in Bhutan as the Commandant of the Indian Military Training Team, of PLA patrols regularly visiting the disputed areas, more specifically, ahead of important events like boundary talks between China and Bhutan. This was also the case just before Bhutan’s second parliamentary election in 2013, when PLA troops visited Doklam. Therefore, the move to build a motorable track on 8 June, such as those in other claim areas further north of the Chumbi Valley, did not make sense. This would logically have been part of the PLA’s pattern of activities if they took place near or before the next round of boundary talks or Bhutan’s forthcoming elections in 2018. Therefore, the question then is: ‘Why in June 2017?’

The reason for the PLA to make such an aggressive move lies, most probably, in the external geopolitical compulsions of China and in Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power domestically. Chumbi Valley, a narrow strip of land only few kilometres at its narrowest point, has been an Achilles heel for China. What drives China in its desire to delineate its boundary with Bhutan—coupled with the aim to enlarge the size of the Chumbi Valley by annexing a large portion of Bhutanese territory—is the fear of being cut off by the Indian Army from the west as well as from the east, the latter in collusion with Royal Bhutan Army. Failing to settle the boundary despite 24 rounds of talks as well as its inability hitherto to alter the Indo-Bhutan friendship equation has created a sense of uneasiness for China. As far as India is concerned, the enlargement of the Chumbi Valley will enhance the PLA threat to its Siliguri Corridor. This is not a new threat; there existed such a threat even in 1950. Claude Arpi quotes from a classified communication from Hariswhar Dayal, the then Indian Political Officer in Sikkim to the MEA on 21 November

1950, one month after PLA invaded Tibet and occupied the town of Chamdo:

An attack on Sikkim or Bhutan would call for defensive military operations by the Government of India. In such a situation, occupation of the Chumbi Valley might be a vital factor in defence. In former times it formed part of the territories of the rulers of Sikkim from whom it was wrested by the Tibetans by force. It is now a thin wedge between Sikkim and Bhutan and through it lie important routes to both these territories. Control of this region means control of both Jelep La and Nathu La routes between Sikkim and Tibet as well as of the easiest routes into Western Bhutan both from our side and from Tibetan side. It is a trough with high mountains to both east and west and thus offers good defensive possibilities. I would therefore suggest that possibility of occupying the Chumbi Valley be included in any defensive military plans though this step would NOT of course be taken unless we became involved in military operations in defence of our borders.⁶

Even though Dayal's suggestions were not accepted, Arpi described some parts thereof as prophetic. More than six decades later, there is considerable change, not just in regional geopolitics but in India's economic and military status as well. Therefore, in the context of the likely responses from India to any threat to the Siliguri Corridor because of an enhanced PLA deployment on the Doklam Plateau—though it is questionable at present—can (and should) be part of a military discussion.

Politically, the decreasing military and economic gap between China and India, India's growing proximity to the USA, and an assertive and confident government in New Delhi, can be said to be political challenges for Xi Jinping, whose desire is to create an image for himself larger than Mao and Deng within the country. India's sheltering of the Dalai Lama for more than six decades, inviting Lobsang Sangay, Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government in exile to Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony in 2014, and, most recently, allowing the Dalai Lama to visit Tibetan communities in Arunachal Pradesh (territory claimed by China), and its opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative have turned out to be an irritation to Xi. China's concerns also encompass the possibility of India-based extremist groups that may influence Tibetan affairs in the post-Dalai Lama phase.⁷ Doklam thus provided the appropriate platform to Xi to assert and display his strength just ahead of the BRIC summit

and 19th National Congress of the Communist Party, held in November 2017. A key feature of the Congress was the passing of the 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era', with unanimous approval as a guiding principle in the Party Charter. With this, Xi has been elevated at par with Mao Zedong. Moreover, in the reshuffle of leaders, the PLA retained its Army General Zhao Zongqi who was responsible for the Doklam intrusion.

Also of immediate concern to China is the security of its western flank. Settling its boundary with Bhutan after annexing the disputed area will meet that end. On the other hand, India's stand on the boundary is based on its threat perception from the PLA. Unfortunately, the conflicting stands of the two big Asian powers could place Bhutan, a long-term friend of India and an important neighbour, in an embarrassing situation and that too for a piece of territory which holds neither strategic nor economic value for it. Therefore, unless a middle path is found to settle the boundary between China and Bhutan without compromising India's security, the Doklam episode will resurface to nag New Delhi. China had offered a package deal—in effect, to forego its claim of a portion of the disputed areas in central Bhutan in place of Doklam Plateau—to Bhutan around 1990–96. So, it is clear that China is not going to vacate the area that it has already occupied in the further north of Chumbi Valley as well as the area inside Doklam Plateau from where PLA did not pull back even after 28 August 2017.⁸ Thus, it could be conjectured that Doklam was initiated by China to probe and gauge India's response and, thereafter, re-calibrate its defensive posture in order to make it more challenging for the Indian Army, whenever there is similar standoff in future.

THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Therefore, the question that needs to be asked next is: 'what is the way forward for India?' The answer to this lies in two other related questions: first, is there a way to find a mutually acceptable solution without compromising India's security; and second, should India continue to live with more such stand-offs in future and let the issue linger for our next generations to find a solution? The answer to the first question is relatively easy. A mutually acceptable solution taking into account India's security as well as its long-standing and deep relations with Bhutan could be found in consultation with the King of Bhutan. Even though Bhutan is a democracy now, the subjects of defence and national security are

personally dealt with by the King. Having full faith in their ruler, the Bhutanese people have, till date, never questioned the King's wisdom in deciding the country's policy vis-à-vis national security.

With respect to the second question, we could live with an option of allowing the issue to linger simply by relying on our military prowess, but restricted only to areas where the Indian Army and the PLA stand face-to-face. The standoff at Doklam Plateau is different in the sense that, apart from sovereignty and prestige of a third country that are at stake, Bhutan remains an old and close friend of India. It is therefore important that India moves forward to nurture this relationship with the democratic government. The Indo-Bhutan relationship, inked in the Punakha Treaty of 1910 that was followed by the treaties of 1949 and 2007, is grounded in India's security interests and, at the same time, respect for Bhutanese sovereignty. India's relationship with Bhutan, therefore, must be based on the premise of achieving the following twin objectives: *respecting and supporting Bhutan's sovereignty* and *safeguarding India's strategic interests*. It is this author's view that support for the King's continued influential role in the country and to a democratic government that feels more confident to further strengthen its relations with India, while, at the same time, enabling Bhutan to be economically independent and building the capacity of its security forces would help in achieving both these objectives. The visit of the King of Bhutan to India from 31 October to 3 November 2017 was an opportunity for both nations to discuss and review bilateral relations, and also the way forward, post the standoff at Doklam.

In the wake of the 28 August 2017 drawdown, security experts may like to argue that it was a miscalculation on China's part to try and build a road in the Doklam region. But China is not known for committing such mistakes. As mentioned earlier, the events at Doklam were calculated to probe and gauge India's response. Having done that, PLA would have re-organised its defences and put in place a new plan to face the Indian Army's probable response to its next move on the plateau. Simply put, China does not acknowledge any parity between the two countries. That is why the PLA's intrusion in Doklam can be seen as an implicit message to India to dissuade it from attempting to change the regional power balance. Thus, in this context, Hua Chunying's statement of 19th December 2017 should be seen as a message that there would be more incidents like Doklam in future, and that the story is not over as yet. China's resolve to adhere to the historical records, even if many are make-

believe and without much supporting evidence, is likely to reverberate in different areas and in different forms. These may take the shape of the PLA's attempt to nibble at the disputed areas along Indo-China border, not limited to just either the northern or the eastern sectors (Arunachal Pradesh) alone. It could possibly occur in dormant areas like Barahoti in the middle sector of the Indo-China boundary, and in the Tri-Junction area bordering India, China and Nepal. And in the part of the Doklam plateau which is under its occupation after 8 August 2017, the PLA is very likely to further attempt to create infrastructures similar to the areas north of the Chumbi Valley, if it has not already been done. For that matter, China may give a fresh impetus to its geopolitical imperatives by upping the ante of its 'water wars' and expedite the work on the proposed dam over Yarlung Tsangpo river (origin of River Brahmaputra).⁹

For now, with Indian Army's military advantage over PLA all along the Sikkim border, we can claim to have resolved the Doklam standoff to some extent. Even if one were to expect more responsible behaviour from a big regional power like China, the ambitions of its current leadership could end up posing bigger challenges for India in the future.

NOTES

1. See 'Lessons Should be Learnt from Doklam Standoff: China', *The Times of India*, 19 December 2017, available at <https://m.timesofindia.com/world/china/lessons-should-be-learnt-from-doklam-standoff-china>, accessed on 20 December 2017.
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 8. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang: 'If the senior official [Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat] according to the report referred to Donglang [the name China uses for Doklam], I think you are clear about our position – Donglang belongs to China and has always been in the effective jurisdiction of China.' This statement was made after the Indian Army Chief's comments on 15 January 2018. See 'Indian Army Chief's 'Unconstructive' Comments Will Hurt Peace, Says China', *NDTV.com*, 15 January 2018, available at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/indian-army-chiefs-unconstructive-comments-will-hurt-peace-says-china-1800233>, accessed on 16 January 2018.
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