

Tensions mount in India-China Himalayan border standoff

By Wasantha Rupasinghe and Keith Jones
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Indian and Chinese troops remain in a tense standoff on the remote Doklam or Donglang Plateau in the Himalayas, in what is being described as the most serious border dispute between New Delhi and Beijing since the two countries fought a month-long border war in 1962.

Both countries have made repeated bellicose statements, insisting that the other must stand down.

Yesterday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang reiterated Beijing's demand that India immediately withdraw its 3,000 troops from the contested area, so "as to avoid there being an even more serious situation, creating more serious consequences."

Only after an Indian withdrawal would negotiations on the border dispute begin, said Geng. He went on to dismiss any possibility of a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of this weekend's G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, saying that the "atmosphere is not right" for bilateral talks.

At issue is control of an 89-square kilometer (34.5-square mile) section of Himalayan grassland that China says is hers and India insists rightfully belongs to the tiny kingdom of Bhutan.

While nominally an independent state, Bhutan is effectively a protectorate of India. It does not have formal diplomatic relations with China, Britain, the US or any other major power apart from Japan and India.

Only on June 29, days after Indian troops had intervened to stop Chinese labourers building a road on the Doklam Plateau, did Bhutan's Foreign Ministry issue a statement charging that the construction was on its territory.

India is accusing China of trying to push the tri-junction of the Indian-Chinese and Bhutan border further south. This, it claims, would place Chinese troops in a much better position, in the event of war, to seize control of the strategic Siliguri corridor—a narrow slice of Indian territory, squeezed between Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and China, that connects West Bengal and the rest of India to its seven northeastern states.

India and Bhutan are also charging Beijing with violating a 1998 accord between Bhutan and China committing them to maintaining peace, tranquillity, and the status quo in disputed areas pending a final settlement of their common border.

Beijing counters that India long ago recognized Chinese sovereignty over the whole plateau, pointing to the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 and a 1959 letter from Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to his Chinese counterpart accepting the validity of that Convention.

China also notes that not until the fourteenth round of Sino-Bhutan border negotiations, held in November 2000, did Bhutan even extend its border claim to include the Doklam area. Implicit in this is the suggestion that it was India that pressured Bhutan to expand its territorial claims.

The flaring up of the Sino-Indian border dispute is only the latest in a long and rapidly growing list of bilateral disputes.

Whatever the immediate issue, they are being propelled forward by the polarization of the region's geopolitics, with India under Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party-led government emerging as a veritable "frontline state" in American imperialism's military-strategic offensive against China, and Beijing responding by deepening its military-strategic partnership with India's archenemy, Pakistan.

China publicly denounced India for intruding on its territory and blocking its road-building project in Doklam June 26, the very day Modi met US President Donald Trump at the White House and vowed to further expand the Indo-US alliance.

Beijing has long been aware that Washington is intent on building up New Delhi as a strategic counterweight to China and making it the fourth member, along with Japan and Australia, of a US-led NATO-style anti-China alliance.

Until recently, Beijing responded to the expansion of strategic ties between India and the US with offers of investments and collaboration, choosing not to push back aggressively for fear of propelling India into Washington's embrace.

But over the past two years—with India parroting Washington's provocative line on the South China Sea dispute, throwing open its military bases and ports to use by the Pentagon, and the US proclaiming India a "Major Defense Partner"—Beijing has adopted an increasingly aggressive stance.

During the current border dispute, Chinese officials have repeatedly made threats of military action. These have included

direct references to the 1962 border war, as well as to the provocative comments of India's new army chief, General Bipin Rawat, who has repeatedly proclaimed India ready to fight a two-front war against China and Pakistan.

On July 5, China's Ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, made a strongly worded statement saying that there was no scope for "compromise" in the standoff in Doklam and that the only way to defuse the "grave" situation was for India to "unconditionally" withdraw its troops.

When asked about suggestions in the media that the conflict could end in war, Ambassador Luo sought to give the impression that China is not fazed by such a possibility. "There has been talk about that option," said Zhou. "It is up to your government to decide whether to exercise (the) military option."

The day before, the People's Liberation Army website had published a comment by a prominent strategic analyst affiliated with Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Wang Dehua, that said those in India seeking "confrontation" with China over the border "should be fully aware ... another armed conflict between China and India is not completely out of the question." Wang went on to boast, "The Indian side didn't get the upper hand in the past. And it won't get an advantage today when the Chinese military has made remarkable progress on modernization over the past few decades."

China's state-owned press, especially the *Global Times*, have been churning out belligerent anti-Indian commentary. On Wednesday, the *Times* published an editorial titled "China can rethink stance on Sikkim, Bhutan." It denounced the "unequal treaties" between India and Bhutan, saying they should be "abolished," and said China should consider revoking its 2003 recognition of Indian sovereignty over Sikkim, a neighbouring one-time Himalayan kingdom, that New Delhi annexed in 1975.

The *Times'* editorial said Beijing would have "a powerful card" in dealing with New Delhi were it to "fuel pro-independence appeals in Sikkim" and should not refrain from doing so because of fears about India interfering in Tibet, as "this card is already overplayed."

India's government and military were quick to raise the threat of military action when the Doklam border dispute first flared. Army chief Rawat personally flew to Sikkim to meet with Indian commanders and Defence Minister Arun Jaitley boasted that India in 2017 is very different from 1962—a reference both to its nuclear-armed military and its strategic partnership with the US.

In recent days, Indian government and military officials have been somewhat more restrained in public, but they have also underlined that they consider India's strategic interests to be at stake in the dispute and will not back down.

"Across the table we can solve all the problems," Indian Minister of State for Defence Subhash Bhamre told a press conference Wednesday, then added, "China is approaching

towards Bhutanese territory. We want them not to come forward. This is our security concern and this is our stand."

The Indian media, for its part, has been whipping up a bellicose anti-China atmosphere. This includes repeatedly showing footage of Indian and Chinese troops jostling each other, while concealing that this incident happened long before the recent events in Doklam.

The Indian government and elite are also seeking to exploit the situation to gain US support for their hegemonic ambitions in South Asia.

Writing in Wednesday's *Wall Street Journal*, Harsh V. Pant of the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation hails Modi for "standing up to China," including by refusing to support its One Belt One Road initiative, but says Washington must do more to assist it. "The Trump administration," he claims, "may have inadvertently given China a green light to bully its neighbors," "by signaling that it is ready for a transactional relationship with Beijing." "As Washington reviews its stance on China," he continues, "it needs to be aware that Asia is being shaped by China's rise much faster than many anticipated even a few years back."

India's opposition parties, especially the Congress Party, are urging the BJP government to take a tough stand against China. At a July 3 press conference, Congress spokesperson and parliamentarian Dr. Abhishek Manu Singhvi complained of a "humongous number" of Chinese border violations, and demanded that the BJP "take strong, corrective measures on national security for national interest, with respect to our border situation."

The Stalinist Communist Party of India or CPM, which last fall endorsed the Modi government's reckless and illegal "surgical strikes" inside Pakistan, has not made a single statement or comment about the current border crisis, which exemplifies how the Indian bourgeoisie's alliance with US imperialism threatens to embroil the people of Asia in catastrophic military conflict.

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