

India and China heighten war readiness as Himalayan standoff continues

By K. Ratnayake
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Media reports indicate that both India and China have increased military deployments along their disputed border, increasing the danger that their eight-week-long standoff on the Doklam Plateau—a ridge in the Himalayan foothills claimed by both China and Bhutan—could cascade into war.

Beijing is said to have stationed 800 People's Liberation Army troops near to where 300 Chinese troops are deployed on the Doklam Plateau “eyeball-to-eyeball” from Indian forces. Some Indian sources are also claiming that China has sent Chengdu J-9 and J-10 fighter jets to Tibet and deployed surface-to-air missile batteries near its disputed border with the northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Indian Army, meanwhile, has ordered troops from its 3rd and 4th Corps to move closer to the Line of Actual Control that separates Arunachal Pradesh from Chinese Tibet and placed them in high-alert, “No War, No Peace mode.”

The Indian Army's presence in Sikkim, the Indian state closest to the site of the standoff, was expanded earlier in the crisis. The units that were advanced toward the border with China at that time remain in forward-deployed positions.

On Thursday, *News18* reported that residents of Nathang, a village in Sikkim situated some 35 kilometers from the Doklam Plateau, were leaving the area. Indian government and army officials have denied that an evacuation has been ordered. The report said that it was unclear “if an (evacuation) order has been issued to accommodate thousands of soldiers of the 33 Corps who are reportedly moving from Sukna (West Bengal) towards Doklam” or as a “precautionary measure to avoid civilian casualties in case of a skirmish.”

The Indian-based *The Quint* website has since confirmed that “33 Corps, which was mobilized nearly a month ago, has moved ‘very close’ to the India-China

border in Sikkim as part of the massive positioning of troops in the wake of the continuing standoff over the Doklam issue.”

Since the standoff began on June 18, Beijing and New Delhi have each insisted that the other has taken unprecedentedly aggressive action—action that requires a hardline response.

Beijing says it is unprecedented for Indian troops to confront Chinese forces on territory that India does not claim as its own, but rather considers to belong to a third country, Bhutan. New Delhi, which deployed its troops to prevent Chinese construction workers from expanding a road on the Plateau, said that the roadwork violated a “standstill agreement” Beijing has with Bhutan pending resolution of their border dispute and, moreover, that its core “strategic” interests are at stake, because Chinese control over the Doklam would increase the vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor—a narrow slice of territory that links India's seven northeastern states with the rest of the country.

Late last week Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj met with her Bhutanese counterpart, Damcho Dorji, on the sidelines of a meeting of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), a seven-state bloc India is using to try to expand its economic and strategic influence at China's expense.

Swaraj and Dorji provided no details at the conclusion of their talks, but the Bhutanese minister did tell waiting media persons, “We hope the situation in Doklam will be resolved peacefully and amicably.”

New Delhi claims to be supporting Bhutan against Chinese bullying, but India itself has long treated the Himalayan kingdom like a protectorate. Even sections of the Indian media have said that New Delhi's claims about the threat to the Siliguri Corridor are exaggerated and that its real worry is that Bhutan, having been heavily courted

by Beijing, could escape its unbridled domination.

Bhutan has protested the Chinese “incursion” on the Doklam, but it has not repeated New Delhi’s claims Indian troops interceded at its request.

Beijing has accused New Delhi of violating Bhutan’s sovereignty, as part of an aggressive pushback against India. For weeks, Chinese government officials and the state-owned press have been churning out belligerent statements. This has included frequent taunting references to the month-long 1962 Sino-Indian border war, in which Chinese troops routed Indian forces, and, more recently, blunt warnings that Beijing’s patience is rapidly running out.

Publicly China has explained its new, hardline stance as due to India’s unprecedented action of confronting Chinese troops on territory that it does not even claim as its own.

However, the real explanation for Beijing’s more aggressive stance against India is the latter’s ever-deeper integration into American imperialism’s military-strategic offensive against China. Under the three-year rule of Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, India has been transformed into a veritable “frontline state” in Washington’s anti-China war drive. New Delhi has thrown open its military bases and ports to routine use by the Pentagon; parroted Washington’s provocative stance on the South China Sea; and expanded bilateral and trilateral strategic ties with America’s principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

As the Doklam standoff began, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump were pledging at a White House meeting to further expand the Indo-US “global strategic partnership.”

Official Washington has said little about the border crisis in the Himalayas, but in recent days calls for a diplomatic solution have become more frequent. This is no doubt a sign of increasing concern that events could spin out of control, even as the US is ratcheting up tensions with North Korea and using the Washington-instigated crisis on the Korean Peninsula to bully China.

On Saturday Admiral Harry B. Harris, the head of the US Pacific Command, told the Press Trust of India that he “encourages” China and India “to resolve their differences diplomatically,” adding, “I think that any time you have two great powers at odds across a common border, that’s an area of concern. Of course, it’s potentially dangerous.”

Harris’ statements are deeply cynical. He has been a major player in the push to harness India to the US offensive against China. He has publicly pressed for India to mount joint patrols with the US Navy across the Indian Pacific Oceans, including in the South China Sea. Last month, India, the US and Japan staged what the Trump administration boasted was the largest ever Indian Ocean war exercises—exercises that the press of all three countries characterized as a “message to China.”

Washington no doubt does not want things to boil over between India and China in the midst of a possible nuclear confrontation with North Korea. However, the aggressive US stance in northeast Asia may encourage New Delhi to calculate it can press a hard bargain on a threatened Beijing.

Moreover, there are concerns within Washington that the US needs to make clear that it stands with India, so as to bolster New Delhi and ensure that the “gains” of the Indo-US alliance are not undermined.

This was the significance of an August 9 article by Bruce Riedel, a longtime CIA hand, former Obama administration official, and Brookings Institute fellow. Titled “JFK stopped a China-India War. Can Trump? The nuclear stakes are much higher now,” the article argued that the Kennedy administration forced China to unilaterally withdraw its troops from India in 1962 by sending “the US Air Force to India to resupply the Indians” and “a carrier battle group to the Bay of Bengal.”

Noting that the current standoff has “potentially enormous consequences for the world” and that American imperialist interests are very much at stake, Riedel urged Washington to be prepared to intervene aggressively in the Indo-Chinese dispute. While he presents this largely in diplomatic terms, the implication is clear: if the Indo-Chinese border crisis continues to escalate, the Trump administration must be ready to come to New Delhi’s support militarily.

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