

# FACE-OFF IN DOKLAM PLATEAU

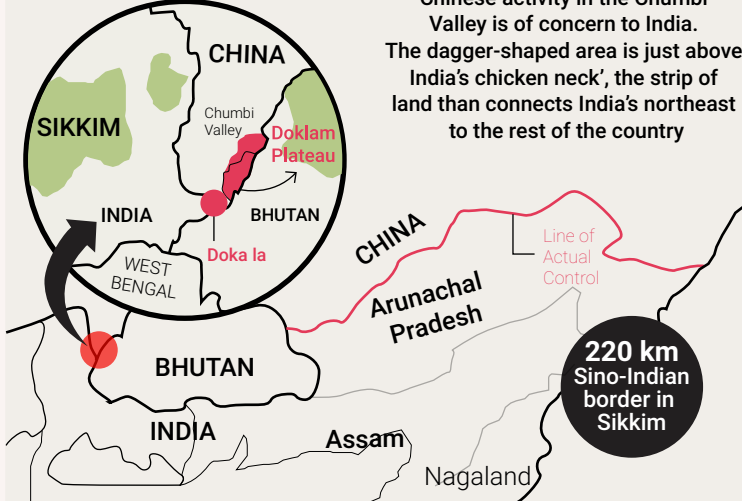


Indian troops intervened to block the path of Chinese People's Liberation Army soldiers engaged in building road-works on the Doklam plateau (Donglong), a strategically vital 269 sq. km. patch of Bhutan's territory that Beijing laid claim to in the 1980s.

## BIGGEST FACE-OFF IN DECADES

India, China bolster in Sikkim-Bhutan-Tibet tri-junction

**WHY CHUMBI VALLEY IS KEY**  
Chinese activity in the Chumbi Valley is of concern to India. The dagger-shaped area is just above India's 'chicken neck', the strip of land that connects India's northeast to the rest of the country.



This is the first time that India used troops to protect Bhutan's territorial interests.

The tri-junction stretch of the boundary at Sikkim, though contested, has witnessed far fewer tensions than the western sector of the India-China boundary even as India & Bhutan have carried on separate negotiations with China.

## BACKGROUND

The Doklam dispute flows from the territorial dispute between Bhutan and China, which dates back to the 1950s when China published maps claiming vast portions of the Bhutanese territory.

In 1998, both countries for the first time signed a peace agreement promising to 'Maintain Peace and Tranquillity on the Bhutan-China Border Areas'. This was also an official recognition that the two have unsettled territorial issues, including the Doklam plateau, which require a peaceful settlement.

In the early 1990s China is understood to have made Bhutan a "package deal" under which the Chinese agreed to renounce their claim over the 495-sq.-km disputed land in the Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys to the north, in exchange for a smaller tract of disputed land measuring 269 sq. km, the Doklam plateau.



## INDIA'S CONCERN ABOUT ROAD BUILDING

India has also rejected Chinese interpretation of the 1890 Sino-British Treaty, pointing out that the road construction by China would undermine India's security.

India is vulnerable in this corridor as it is the only access point to the northeast. The Corridor is about 500 km from the Chumbi Valley.

The construction of a new road through the Chumbi valley would further endanger the "Chicken's Neck" - the narrow Siliguri corridor links the north-east with the rest of India.

India has conveyed to the Chinese government that the latter's construction of road in the disputed Doklam area 'would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India.'

India's military presence in Doklam gives it the ability to snap vital road and in the near future, rail - links between Lhasa and the Nathu-La region in the event of war.

For Chinese troops to transgress over non-finalised borders in Sikkim and into Bhutanese territory is unprecedented, and is a violation of agreements with Bhutan from 1998 & 1999 as well as with India in 2012 to maintain the status quo, and causes special worries for the future.

In recent time, China appears to have escalated its pressure on Bhutan. The aim of the pressure is well known: To persuade Bhutan to cede Doklam, through which China has built a road linking Lhasa to the Nathu-La pass and is in the process of driving a railway line, for two other disputed enclaves.

## CHINESE REACTION TO LATEST FACE-OFF

Beijing finds itself in a strange position in not having diplomatic ties with neighbouring Bhutan, which has lately widened its foreign relations with 53 countries, including Japan.

China has said that Indian forces had intruded into the Donglang or Doklam - an area, which according to Chinese interpretation lies undisputedly on its side of the boundary in the Sikkim border area.

China served notice on India to withdraw its forces, which had allegedly "trespassed" into its territory, as a precondition for a "meaningful dialogue" with New Delhi.

China has long desired an independent Bhutanese stand without Indian advocacy & interference on the boundary issue. Chinese academia often dubbed hegemony in South Asia.

By challenging Bhutanese security, Beijing hopes to put a strain on the India-Bhutan "special relationship"

Following the tensions, Chinese authorities have closed the Nathu La pass to Kailash Mansarovar pilgrims.

China has justified the construction of a road in the Sikkim sector, saying the area undoubtedly "is located on its side of the 1890 Sino-British Treaty.

## DETERIORATION OF INDIA-CHINA RELATION

India-China relation has deteriorated continuously since the Mr. Xi's 2014 visit to India. The stand-off comes after a series of setbacks to bilateral ties.

Dalai Lama visit to Tawang was strongly protested by the China and it accused India for fuelling secessionist in Tibet.

India is also working with Japan, South Korea and the US to contain China's power in the Indian Ocean, provoking, warnings from China's Foreign Ministry.

### OBOR

In turn, India's spurning of the Belt and Road Initiative & cooperation with the U.S. on maritime issues has not played well in China.

Delhi has expressed disappointment over China's rejection of its concerns on sovereignty issues, and refusal to corner Pakistan on cross-border terrorism or help India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers Group membership.

## Way forward

These issues have to be addressed through sustained dialogue. In the immediate term, however, talks must focus on defusing the tensions at the tri-junction.

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Apart from its own commitments to the status quo, Beijing must recognise the special relationship since 1947, the friendship treaty of 2007 that commits India to protecting Bhutan's interests, and the close coordination between the two militaries.

Its influence over Bhutan is hereditary, inherited by historical contingency. Once lost, it would be near impossible to replenish, especially when competing against a powerful and more powerful Beijing.

The Indian government must see that Bhutan's sovereignty is no trivial matter, and ensure that Bhutan's sovereignty must be maintained as that is the basis for the "exemplary" ties between Thimphu and New Delhi.

China has made the withdrawal of Indian troops a precondition for dialogue. This would be unacceptable to India, unless the PLA also withdraws its troops and road-building teams.

India needs to rise to this challenge. It must take a firm stand in the current Doklam standoff to demonstrate its commitment to its ally.