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How Long Can China and India Avoid War in the Himalayas?

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A remote corner of the Himalayas has become the unlikely scene of a major power standoff between China and India. Now entering its seventh week, the standoff centers on the tri-junction border shared by China, India, and Bhutan referred to as Doklam in India and Donglang in China. Neither side is spoiling for a fight, nor are they ready to back down anytime soon considering the security concerns, domestic political pressures, and regional reputational stakes. A series of quiet diplomatic interactions has not restrained the brinkmanship or ultimatums and the risk of a major armed clash between two Asian heavyweights remains.

China and India have sparred along the Himalayan border for decades, including a brief war (and clear Chinese victory) in 1962. In areas like Aksai Chin or Arunachal Pradesh, long-standing disputes still play out in regular diplomatic arguments. Yet until recently there seemed to be a settled status quo in the comparatively peaceful tri-national border area, which has special strategic significance, lying as it does above the 14-mile-wide Siliguri valley, or the "chicken's neck," that connects northeast India to the rest of the country. As it turns out, both sides had very different visions of just what that status quo was.

The clash of perceptions has left them both smarting, and dialed jingoistic language up to 11. To China, Doklam is its own sovereign territory based on treaties, tacit agreements, and de facto control. India considers Doklam a disputed territory and contends that any changes to the territory's jurisdiction must be made in consultation with India per a 2012 understanding between the three parties.

Thus, when roughly 100 People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers arrived on the Dolam plateau (an area within Doklam) on June 16 with bulldozers and earthmoving machinery to improve and extend an existing Chinese road, a company-sized unit of Indian soldiers crossed into Dolam from a nearby Indian army post and interdicted the construction team. The Indian soldiers formed a "human chain" to physically obstruct the road-building project and urged the Chinese to "desist from changing the status quo."

Since the Indian interdiction on June 18, PLA construction has halted and both sides remain at an impasse. Between 300-350 Indian troops have pitched tents near the standoff site and dug in for the long haul, supported by supply lines and 2,500 reinforcements. China recently threatened to move its own reinforcements into the area and conducted live-fire military exercises in Tibet. While Indian officials have voiced interest in dialogue, official Chinese statements demand India's unconditional withdrawal before any talks can begin. After issuing a complaint against Chinese actions on June 20, Bhutan has otherwise remained studiously ambiguous as to its views of the standoff.

The Doklam standoff stems from China's and India's deep-seated suspicions about the other's intentions. Conventional wisdom on international politics guides states to confront, not appease, those attempting to revise any status quo, lest it encourage further belligerence. But identifying exactly who the revisionist side is, and what the status quo was, is notoriously difficult in any case, because the definitions are vague and under-theorized. And it is especially hard amid the murky legacies of empire that make up the Himalayan frontiers.

For China, India's military deployment into a disputed region is revising norms of sovereignty as well as long-standing public and private agreements. China believes its own actions and demands are sanctioned by existing agreements and understandings, and that India is subverting those agreements for unprecedented military deployments on foreign soil.

For India, China's attempts to construct roads in disputed territories appears consistent with its previous "salami-slicing" maneuvers of unilaterally revising unsettled borders for territorial aggrandizement and expanded influence in the region. India believes China is deliberately exploiting the ambiguity of existing territorial disputes to expand its borders, influence, and offensive capability while its own actions are more explicitly legitimated by other treaties, arrangements, and security imperatives.

The historical and diplomatic ambiguity around the border has also created plenty of space for both sides to feel self-righteously aggrieved. China contends it has unquestioned sovereignty over Doklam based on an 1890 treaty between Great Britain and China delimiting the border between the Indian state of Sikkim and Tibet, as well as the boundary point with Bhutan. As both

India and China have accepted this treaty, India had no legitimate grounds to cross the border and thus its actions constitute an "invasion" of Chinese territory. Secondly, China argues even if Doklam is disputed, India is still inappropriately interfering with and prejudicing a bilateral dispute between Bhutan and China.

India concedes its troops crossed an international border but into Bhutan, not China. India's interdiction is furthermore justified by another treaty, India's 2007 treaty of friendship with Bhutan, and both countries' interest in halting China's attempts to unilaterally revise the status quo. As several analysts have pointed out, the vagaries of colonial cartography and internal contradictions within the 1890 treaty mean it can actually be interpreted to support both Indian and Chinese claims.

Adding to the confusion is Bhutan's ambiguous position. As a tiny Himalayan kingdom sandwiched between the region's two major powers, Bhutan has enjoyed a "special relationship" with India since 1949 that some might describe more as suzerainty. While the 2007 India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty updates the 1949 agreement to accord Bhutan greater autonomy, India still wields considerable influence over Bhutan's foreign policy. To justify its recent military actions, India has invoked an article which states that neither country will allow its territory to be used for activities that harm the other's national security interests.

To date, however, Bhutan has yet to clarify whether India acted independently or at Bhutan's request for military assistance in Doklam. China has argued that, absent a clear invitation, India lacks legitimate grounds for its involvement. India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has used more circumspect language like "coordination," and has flubbed opportunities to clarify Bhutan's request. It is possible Bhutan privately requested help or that India coerced its way into the dispute for its own security interests as it did in Sri Lanka in 1987.

Another point of contention is private diplomacy among the various actors. While not publicly brandished as justification, our sources suggest (and some reporting seems to corroborate) that PLA actions in Doklam may be based on a private understanding between China and Bhutan. Both countries have at least seven disputed territories between themselves and reports indicate Bhutan may have implicitly agreed to cede Doklam to China in the late 1990s — a period when China was busily cleaning up its frontiers — in favor of territorial gains on its northern border.

Thus, China deems its road-building in Doklam legitimate within this private, pre-settlement agreement, and fearing such a settlement, India's military "invasion" seeks to challenge that agreement and Bhutan's sovereignty. It is possible India was privy to this private Chinese-Bhutanese agreement over Doklam and may have tried to thwart it. Regardless, India would likely maintain that no formal agreement means no final settlement. In its diplomatic demarche to China on June 20, Bhutan stated that Chinese actions violated its 1988 and 1998 agreements prohibiting alteration of the status quo before the completion of negotiations. Moreover, another private and superseding 2012 agreement between India and China purportedly required the consultation of all three countries before a final determination on the tri-junction is made.

China also implicitly contends it has had a decades-long presence and effective jurisdiction over Doklam where Tibetan herdsman bring their livestock to graze. According to Chinese records, the PLA began patrolling Doklam once a year since 1975 and gradually extended its geographical coverage southward.

India argues the remoteness of Doklam, its harsh winters, and poor infrastructure mean China has not always exercised de facto control over the area. Bhutanese herdsman have also traditionally used Doklam as a grazing land, and security forces from all three countries have regularly patrolled the area, leading to occasional confrontations. China destroyed two Bhutanese

military posts in 2007 and allegedly constructed Chinese posts at the same spot. One unofficial map circulated by Chinese bloggers even refers to a "line of actual control" between China and Bhutan, implying Bhutan exercises de facto control of Doklam.

China is also arguing that India's *actions* are unprecedented. To China, India has not only interfered in a bilateral dispute but escalated it by deploying forces across a recognized international border into a third country. Indeed, even Indian observers have acknowledged Doklam is the first time India has engaged Chinese forces from the soil of a third country. Upending established norms of sovereignty through force in the name of self-defense could permit future "adventurism."

Yet India's argument is that it was responding to unprecedented Chinese revision of borders through road construction (both hardening and extension) in disputed territory. Such moves would create permanent facts on the ground with grave implications for Indian national security.

In our estimation, Chinese claims are vulnerable due to the ambiguity of treaty language, private agreements, and de facto possession claims. But Indian claims are by no means less vulnerable given the unprecedented nature of India's actions on the plateau and Bhutan's deafening silence. Both sides' views of the status quo may appear to themselves entirely justifiable, yet to their adversary as thin gruel.

Seven weeks into the crisis, the continued impasse — and increasingly caustic rhetoric — indicates the potential for escalation remains high. The Indian national security advisor's recent visit to Beijing did not yield any breakthroughs, contrary to some reporting. Aggressive signals of resolve like military exercises or mobilization or perceived windows of tactical opportunity in a different sector of the disputed India-China border could lead either side to miscalculate, resulting in accidental or inadvertent escalation. And any shooting that begins on the border could even expand into other domains like cyber- or naval warfare.

Despite the challenges, there are several possible resolutions in sight if both sides — and third parties trying to defuse tension — strive to understand what might seem like mutually incompatible perspectives.

For example, India could find alternative ways to grant Beijing a "win" by softening its position on China's "One Belt, One Road" project, both sides could pursue international arbitration, or both sides could wait until harsh winter weather conditions force both sides forces to quietly draw down.

Another "off ramp" to deescalate the crisis is a back-channel agreement with Bhutan appearing as the public arbiter, allowing both sides to save face. The most obvious solution, as many have identified, would be a mutual withdrawal and return to pre-June 16 positions – something which may already be slowly happening, as both draw back troops. For both sides to save face, the public narrative of their back-channel dialogue could rely on Bhutan.

For example, India could claim Bhutan "thanked" India for its support and commitment to upholding the bilateral friendship treaty, but after deploying its own monitoring force, Bhutan requests that India withdraw its forces. This would allow India to withdraw without appearing to bend to Chinese demands, send a message that China's salami tactics will be challenged, and buttress its credibility with states concerned with Chinese encroachment. For its part, China can claim India withdrew first and quietly halt road construction until a final settlement is reached between itself and Bhutan. This would give all sides, including Bhutan, a face-saving exit necessary to appease domestic audiences. At the same time, India and China will have exchanged clear signals on just how serious they are about the border — and how dangerous assumptions about the other side can be.