

# India-China border tensions continue unabated

K. Ratnayake  
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A tense stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops on the Doklam or Donglang Plateau—a ridge in the Himalayan foothills claimed by both China and Bhutan—continues.

Late last week, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, met China State Councillor Yang Jiechi on the sidelines of a BRICS security summit in Beijing. However, they failed to arrive at any agreement on defusing what is being described as the most serious Sino-Indian border dispute since the two countries fought a month-long border war in 1962.

Beijing is adamant India must withdraw its troops unconditionally before there can be any substantive talks on the Doklam issue and the related question of where the tri-junction between the borders of India, China, and Bhutan lies.

Beijing emphasizes that the intervention Indian troops made on June 18 to prevent Chinese construction workers from expanding a road on the disputed ridge is without precedent. Never before has the Indian Army confronted Chinese troops on territory to which New Delhi makes no claim, acting instead in the name of a third country.

Chinese officials and the country's state-owned media have repeatedly indicated that Beijing's patience is wearing thin. According to a report in yesterday's *Indian Express*, the Chinese government is anxious to have the dispute settled by the time of a BRICS heads of government summit that is to be held in Xiamen, China at the beginning of next month.

India's government, meanwhile, has signalled it is prepared for a long stand-off, lasting months, even years. While claiming it doesn't want a military clash with Beijing, New Delhi insists that control over the remote ridge is vital to India's national security, because it lies some 50 kilometres (31 miles) from the Siliguri Corridor—a narrow slice of territory that connects India's seven northeastern states to the rest of the country.

The US and other great powers have thus far made only pro forma statements urging the two sides to pursue a diplomatic solution. But the principal factor driving the dispute is India's emergence as a veritable “frontline state”

in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China. Indeed, on June 18, the very day that Indian troops interceded on the Doklam Plateau, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump vowed, following a White House meeting, to further expand the Indo-US “global strategic partnership.”

Last month India, the US, and Japan held what Trump boasted was the largest-ever Indian Ocean naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal. And speaking Monday at the inaugural session of an India-US Forum, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj parroted the language that Washington uses to paint China as an aggressor in the South China Sea. A “strong India-US partnership,” declared Swaraj, is “critical” for “upholding an international rules-based system”—i.e. a US-led order—across the Indo-Pacific region.

On Wednesday, China's foreign ministry issued a 15-page statement detailing its position on the Doklam dispute. It reiterated Beijing's demand that India “pull back all its troops to end the military standoff,” while noting that “there were still over 40 Indian border troops and one bulldozer illegally staying in Chinese territory.” This, the statement said, was down from a high of 400 Indian troops.

The statement included a thinly-veiled threat of military action. “No country,” it warned, “should ever underestimate the resolve of the Chinese government” to defend China's territorial sovereignty and integrity, adding Beijing would take “all necessary measures to safeguard its legitimate and lawful rights and interests.”

The statement said that as a sign of “goodwill” China had informed New Delhi of the road-building project in advance. “India's intrusion into the Chinese territory under the pretext of Bhutan,” it continued, “has not only violated China's territorial sovereignty but also challenged Bhutan's sovereignty and independence.”

Since the eruption of the dispute, the Indian media has raised a hue and cry over China's alleged bullying of Bhutan, a tiny Himalayan border kingdom.

But India has itself long treated Bhutan as a protectorate. Moreover, there is much evidence to suggest that New Delhi

ordered its troops to intervene on the Doklam without even seeking Bhutan's agreement, let alone in response to a "distress call" from Bhutan as New Delhi has implied.

Only on June 29, that is a week-and-a-half after the standoff began, did Bhutan's government even issue a statement protesting the alleged Chinese incursion.

India's corporate media has for years been stoking animosity toward China and this has increased over the past two years as Beijing, in response to the burgeoning Indo-US alliance, has strengthened its longstanding strategic ties with Pakistan, India's arch-enemy.

However, a handful of columnists have expressed concern about the brazenness with which India has treated Bhutan. Several have also suggested that New Delhi's stance is being fueled at least in part by fears that Bhutan's government may be preparing, in response to overtures from Beijing, to act more independently of India.

Reportedly, it is only at India's insistence that Bhutan has spurned a Chinese proposal that it abandon its claim to the Doklam in exchange for China acknowledging Bhutan's sovereignty over a large area further north.

In 2013, with the obvious aim of bringing about the defeat of the then-sitting Bhutan prime minister, who had defied New Delhi's wishes by meeting with the Chinese premier, India withdrew energy subsidies to the country.

The *Hindu*'s diplomatic editor, Suhashini Haidar, cautioned the Indian government not to overplay its hand in a column last week. Arguing that "the Indian government must see that Bhutan's sovereignty is no trivial matter," Haidar chastised a Foreign Ministry official for "likening the question of whether Bhutan had sought the help of Indian troops" or India had acted unilaterally to "whether the ball came first ... or the batsman had taken a stand before the ball was bowled."

India's ruling elite has long viewed itself as the regional hegemon of South Asia. Emboldened by Washington's support, the Modi government is intervening across the region and in the island states of the Indian Ocean to counter Beijing's influence, which has grown in recent years thanks to burgeoning economic ties, including investments in infrastructure.

New Delhi is aggressively courting and seeking to forge anti-China factions within the local bourgeois elites. India worked with the US to carry out a "regime operation" in Sri Lanka, helping orchestrate a "common opposition" candidate in the 2015 presidential election to unseat Mahindra Rajapakse who they deemed too close to Beijing.

China's capitalist regime, for its part, has responded to Washington's ever escalating threats and the forging of the Indo-US partnership by whipping up Chinese nationalism and oscillating between aggressive counter-threats and

appeals for an accommodation with the US.

In the current dispute with India, Beijing has adopted a hardline and bellicose stance that contrasts markedly with the manner it dealt with previous disputes with New Delhi. Not only has the state-run media given the dispute great prominence, but papers like the *Global Times* have churned out article after article threatening and taunting India with a massive military defeat should it not back down.

In an interview with the *Hindu*, Joshua T. White, a former top diplomat in the Obama administration, made clear that Washington would not remain on the sidelines in the event of a clash between India and China.

"The US," said White, "is largely sympathetic to the challenge that India faces in dealing with a territorially assertive China. Given the nature of Sino-Indian disputes, India technically does not ask for our help because it does not need it. But it knows that Washington presents a sympathetic ear and that if there were to be wider a Sino-Indian crisis, we will have a totally different conversation."

Hidden in these diplomatic words is that a conflict between China and India, themselves both nuclear-armed powers, would rapidly draw in the US and potentially other great powers, threatening a global conflagration.

A recent article in *Foreign Policy*, a mouthpiece of the US establishment, warned of the danger of a Sino-Indian war. "Seven weeks into the crisis, the continued impasse—and increasingly caustic rhetoric—indicates the potential for escalation remains high ... 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."

*Foreign Policy* was studiously silent, however, on the role US imperialism's drive to harness India to its reckless military-strategic offensive against China has played in dangerously destabilizing Sino-Indian relations and the entire Indo-Pacific region.



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