

Growing concerns in Bangladesh over India-China tensions

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The ongoing standoff between India and China over Doklam, a narrow plateau in the Himalayas at the junction of Bhutan, China and India, has seen a number of concerned political comments in the Bangladesh media. Bangladesh has close relations with both India and China.

The conflict over the Doklam Plateau began in mid-June when Indian troops crossed into the territory in an attempt to prevent road expansion by Chinese forces, raising the danger of a military conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.

China wants to build a link road to access the Chumbi Valley, already the subject of a border dispute between China and the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. The Chumbi Valley adjoins India's Siliguri Corridor, a narrow stretch of land also known as the Chicken's Neck. India's rail and road connections to its north-eastern states pass through this corridor, which is sandwiched between Bangladesh and China.

Bangladesh has previously attempted to politically balance between US-backed India and China but its ability to continue these manoeuvres is being hampered by the Doklam dispute. The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has not issued any official statements on the issue.

The political silence is in contrast to Dhaka's reaction to conflicts between India and Pakistan. Last November, India withdrew from the South Asian Association of Regional Corporation summit in Islamabad after accusing Pakistani troops of attacking its army post at Uri, in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in September 2016. India carried out so-called surgical strikes into Pakistan-held Kashmir in retaliation for Uri. Hasina supported New Delhi's cross border military attacks and later followed India in withdrawing from the event.

While the Bangladesh government remains silent, local media commentators and strategic analysts have voiced their concerns.

On August 7, the *Dhaka Tribune* published an article entitled, "What does the China-India standoff mean for Bangladesh?" Noting that Bangladesh had "extensive ties with both countries on the political, economic and military front," it said that Dhaka was in a "precarious situation." It warned that if China took control of the Doklam Plateau, Bangladesh would be in a "serious predicament" and that "India would want to use Bangladesh as a transit for military purposes" to counter China.

Bangladesh, which has a 4,000 km border with India, is heavily dependent on India for water, trade and security. Dhaka is attempting to improve relations and plans to develop four river ports between the two countries and improve infrastructure in three existing ports.

New Delhi, however, is concerned about Dhaka's close military and economic ties with Beijing. In an effort to counter Beijing's influence, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh in May 2015, promising economic and military assistance. Bangladesh signed a comprehensive defence agreement with India during the trip.

In April, Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina travelled to New Delhi. During the visit officials from both countries signed a number of agreements, including on defence, cyber security, information technology, connectivity, energy and human resource development and a civil nuclear cooperation pact.

An August 4 article on *wionews.com* by Sarvar Jahan Chowdhry from BRAC University in Bangladesh, noted that the "worst thing for Bangladesh would be if the Chinese and the Indians start fighting each other in

a big way and Bangladesh is forced to take sides.”

The author commented that so far, Bangladesh “has been careful about Indian sensitivities and honoured it even by accepting losses,” and cited the country’s cancellation of a contract with China’s state-owned company to build a deep seaport at Sonadia. The deal was called off after Dhaka came under pressure from New Delhi and Washington, as part of US-led efforts to diplomatically isolate Beijing.

While arguing the merits of Bangladesh maintaining good relations with China and India, the author failed to explain how this could be achieved under conditions of increasing US economic and military provocations against China.

For its part, China is boosting its economic and military ties with Bangladesh. The *Tribune* comment pointed out that the two countries have signed agreements worth \$US13.6 billion and Beijing has promised to provide \$20 billion in loan assistance.

In 2016, China channeled \$61 million in foreign direct investments (FDI) into Bangladesh. While this is small compared with US investment, it is a marked increase on the \$18 million Chinese FDI in 2011. The Hasina government has also joined China’s ambitious “One Belt, One Road” initiative, which is aimed at boosting trade and transport links across Asia and into Europe.

Bilateral trade between the two countries has increased dramatically over the past four years. According to Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh statistics, Dhaka’s total merchandise exports to China climbed to \$US808.14 million in 2015–16, up from \$US319.66 million in 2010–11.

China is also Bangladesh’s principal supplier of military hardware. Dhaka’s recent purchase of two Chinese submarines for \$203 million has provoked concerns in New Delhi.

On July 31, the Chinese embassy in Dhaka hosted a function to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. The embassy’s military attaché declared that military relations between China and Bangladesh had reached “unprecedented heights.”

While media commentators have limited their analysis to the strategic and economic impact on Bangladesh of the Doklam Plateau conflict, the rivalry between India and China—two nuclear-armed

countries—could erupt into war with far-reaching implications for South Asia and throughout Asia. Such a conflict could involve the US, which would back India, and become a catastrophic global conflagration.

The major destabilising factor in the geopolitical tensions in South Asia is the US. Having made India one of its principal regional partners in the military build-up against China, Washington has fueled New Delhi’s geopolitical ambitions and, in turn, provoked Beijing’s counter-moves.



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