

Satellite imagery shows build-up near Doklam

Point of friction:The closest point to Doklam on the Indian side of the border. **SUVOJIT BAGCHI**

India and China are pursuing a “wide-ranging strategic build-up” in airbases close to the Doklam Plateau, according to the latest analysis of satellite imagery acquired by Stratfor, an American geopolitical intelligence company.

The analysis looked at four critical airbases, two each on both sides, to study the air and air-defence aspects of the two countries.

“The imagery shows that the Chinese and Indian build-ups have only accelerated in the aftermath of the Doklam crisis. Now it is only a question of time until a new flashpoint along the LAC emerges, and as the increased activity shows, both sides will have greater capabilities to bring to bear next time,” the report warns.

India and China had been engaged in an almost two-month standoff at Doklam in the summer of 2017. “Though the impasse was temporarily resolved in late August through a negotiated drawdown, it has been clear all along that the LAC will remain a contentious border because both countries will continue to seek an advantage in this difficult terrain,” Stratfor says.

Supremacy on air

The company looked at imageries from two Indian airbases — Siliguri Bagdogra air base and the Hasimara Air Force Station. Both depict “how India has moved to reinforce its air power close to the Doklam Plateau,” it says. “Siliguri Bagdogra normally hosts a transport helicopter unit, while Hasimara was the base for the MiG-27ML ground attack aircraft until they were retired at the end of 2017. Since the Doklam crisis of mid-2017, however, the Indian Air Force has greatly increased the deployment of Su-30MKI warplanes to these air bases as can be seen from the imagery,” the analysis pointed out. “An even greater level of activity is visible from imagery of the Chinese airbases near Lhasa and Shigatse,” the report says. “This expansion may indicate a greater build-up by the Chinese, but it could also reflect the more advanced facilities at these bases. Furthermore, unlike India, China’s lack of airbases close to the LAC forces it to concentrate more of its air power at these airports,” the report says.

Increased deployment

Imagery of the two airbases shows a significant presence of fighter aircraft, which peaked in October, and a notable increase in helicopters and deployments of the KJ-500 airborne early warning and command aircraft, components of the HQ-9 long-range surface-to-air missile system and the Soar Dragon UAVs at Shigatse Peace Airport.

“The Chinese made a number of major airfield upgrades at Shigatse immediately after the end of the crisis. A new runway was constructed by mid-December, nine aircraft aprons measuring 41 metres by 70 metres were built along the main taxiway and eight helipads were set up in the northeast corner of the airfield,” the report says. “This construction, along with the deployment of new equipment in greater numbers, highlights how China has undertaken a serious effort to improve capabilities close to the LAC,” it says.

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