

The lowdown on Doklam

Several reports in recent days have spoken about the Chinese side beefing up its military presence in the disputed Doklam area, where Indian and Chinese troops were engaged in a two-month stand-off in the summer of 2017. Recent satellite images and intelligence reports show the Chinese have erected several permanent military posts, a few helipads and new trenches not very far from where the two Armies faced off. About 1,800 Chinese troops are stationed, even in deep winter, in the Doklam area, according to other reports. India has also strengthened its presence in the region.

Doklam, or Donglang in Chinese, is an area spread over less than a 100 sq km comprising a plateau and a valley at the trijunction between India, Bhutan and China. It is surrounded by the Chumbi Valley of Tibet, Bhutan's Ha Valley and Sikkim.

Despite several rounds of engagement between China and Bhutan, the dispute between the two over Doklam has not been resolved. It flared up in 2017 when the Chinese were trying to construct a road in the area, and Indian troops, in aid of their Bhutanese counterparts, objected to it, resulting in the stand-off. Doklam is strategically located close to the Siliguri Corridor, which connects mainland India with its north-eastern region. The corridor, also called Chicken's Neck, is a vulnerable point for India.

While India-Tibet trade flourished along the Siliguri corridor and Chumbi Valley, Doklam had very little significance. Even during British rule, Doklam did not command much attention. In recent years however, China has been beefing up its military presence in the Chumbi Valley, where the Chinese are at a great disadvantage militarily. Both Indian and Bhutanese troops are on a higher ground around the Valley.

This is also the reason, the Indian security establishment suspect, why the Chinese have a deep interest in Doklam, which would give them a commanding view of and an easy access to both the Chumbi Valley and the Siliguri Corridor. The desolate Doklam region grabbed global attention after the stand-off. According to Indian claims, it began on June 16, 2017, when Chinese troops came to the area with equipment to extend a road southward in Doklam, towards the Bhutanese Army camp near the Jampheri Ridge, which according to both Bhutan and India are an integral part of Bhutanese territory. China says the ridge is the border. Two days later, a few hundred Indian troops entered Doklam, at the request of Bhutan, and stopped the construction.

The Bhutanese government told China that "the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries." On June 30, the Ministry of External Affairs said: "Such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India."

The Chinese government released a map to accuse India of trespassing into its territory, and in a detailed statement in the first week of August, it said "India has no right to interfere in or impede the boundary talks between China and Bhutan."

India and China have one of the world's longest disputed borders and areas — which include 37,000 sq km of uninhabited Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh with 1.4 million residents and over 84,000 sq km.

Despite several rounds of negotiations between Special Representatives, the dispute is nowhere near a solution.

Meanwhile, their Armies have been modernising at a frenetic pace. The two sides are also carrying out one of history's biggest conventional military build-ups along their borders. Doklam adds yet another flashpoint along the disputed borders of the two Asian giants.

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