

**India, Bhutan security indivisible: President**

Brothers in arms: Ram Nath Kovind with Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, Queen Jetsun Pema and Prince Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck in Delhi. AFP/rashtrapati bhavan

The security of India and Bhutan is "indivisible and mutual", President Ram Nath Kovind said here on Wednesday. The first such statement on the subject since the Doklam standoff with China ended in August indicates a closer engagement between India and Bhutan after the months-long episode.

Mr. Kovind, who issued the statement after meeting Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in Delhi, thanked the King for his "personal involvement" in addressing the Doklam crisis, the first time a reference has been made to the King's role during the tensions between Indian and Chinese troops.

"[The President] conveyed deep appreciation for the King of Bhutan's personal involvement and guidance and the support provided by Bhutan in addressing the recent situation in the Doklam area. He added that the manner in which both India and Bhutan stood together to address the situation in the Doklam area is a clear testimony to our friendship," said a press release issued by Rashtrapati Bhavan after the King and Queen of Bhutan met Mr. Kovind.

However, neither the External Affairs Ministry nor the Bhutanese embassy responded to queries from *The Hindu* about the nature of the King's role.

Officials said the King, who is on a four-day visit to meet the President, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and senior Cabinet Ministers, will return to India for a formal "state visit" next year, which marks the golden jubilee of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The Rashtrapati Bhavan statement is significant as it seeks to end speculation over India's decision to send troops into land caught in a dispute between Bhutan and China.

While Indian officials said the Indian troops went into Doklam at the request of the Royal Bhutanese Army, Bhutan's government has never said so officially.

In two statements issued on June 29 and August 29, the Bhutanese Foreign Ministry had said China was in violation of its agreements, but gave no statement on the Indian Army's role there.

**Clearing the air**

The visit by the Royal couple to Delhi this week is therefore being seen as not just a personal one, but one that signals a tacit endorsement of India's actions during the Doklam crisis, as well as a reaffirmation of ties, analysts said.

President Kovind's comment that "security concerns of India and Bhutan are indivisible and mutual", is also likely to be analysed closely for whether the two are considering a new formulation in their ties post-Doklam.

Although Article 2 of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 1949 had said Bhutan would be "guided by the advice" of India on its external relations, the treaty was amended in 2007 to a less entwined "close cooperation on various issues relating to their national interests."

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