



A year after Doklam face-off

Posted at: 29/08/2018

When, and why, did the face-off begin?

- The faceoff on Dolam plateau in Doklam area of Bhutan between Indian and Chinese soldiers started on June 16, 2017, when a large construction party of the Chinese Army entered the area with road construction equipment and tried to build a road in Southern Doklam region to Jampheri ridge.
- The Bhutanese patrol initially confronted them but they turned the patrol away.
- Indian soldiers from Doka La, an Army post overlooking the area, sought to dissuade the Chinese personnel from their attempt to alter the status quo.
- The Chinese did not agree, leading to a face-off between soldiers of the two sides deployed in the close vicinity, as Indians physically stopped any Chinese construction attempt.

Did Bhutan raise it with China?

- The Bhutanese Ambassador to India had lodged a protest on June 20, 2017, with the Chinese government through their Embassy in New Delhi.
- On June 29, Bhutan's Foreign Ministry issued a statement underlining that the construction of a road inside Bhutanese territory was a violation of the 1988 and 1998 agreements between Bhutan and China.
- It also urged a return to the status quo as before June 16, 2017.

What were India's concerns?

- Change the status quo on the ground by building a road in violation of China's existing understanding with both India and Bhutan.
- This had implications for the determination of the tri-junction point demarcating India, China and Bhutan — India says it is at Batang la while Chinese claim it to be at Gyumochen — and the alignment of the India-China boundary in the Sikkim sector.
- India was working in close coordination with Bhutan at various levels, and was equally concerned about the violation of its 1988 and 1998 agreements with China.

Doklam standoff

Road construction would have brought the Chinese military close to the India border in West Bengal and exposed the Jampheri ridge to the possibility of Chinese presence, creating serious security vulnerability for the Silguri Corridor which became a red line for New Delhi.

When did negotiations between India and China to resolve the crisis begin?

India initiated diplomatic communications with the Chinese side in Beijing to seek a resolution: 13 rounds of negotiations were held, led by then Indian Ambassador to China Vijay Gokhale, the current Foreign Secretary.

What arguments did India put forth in these negotiations?

- India contested the Chinese claims of sovereignty over this region as it is part of Bhutan.
- India argued that the Chinese attempt to alter the status quo amounted to a unilateral determination of the tri-junction of the three countries.
- Moreover, the India-China boundary in Sikkim sector had not been settled as the Anglo-Chinese convention of 1890.
- China was violating the 2012 written common understanding between the two countries that the tri-junction would be finalized in consultation with all concerned countries.
- Having a basis of alignment of the India-China boundary is not the same as finalisation of boundary, as corroborated by the Chinese request for an early harvest to finalise the boundary.
- China selectively quoting Nehru on the Sikkim boundary was against a full and accurate account of his letter.
- Settlement of India-China boundary questions was best left to the two Special Representatives.
- Continuation of the faceoff was not in the mutual interest of India and China and prolonging it would only give others an opportunity to take advantage.
- Astana Consensus wherein both sides had agreed that differences should not become disputes.

What led to a breakthrough?

- After six weeks of diplomatic persuasion, India got the Chinese side to reach an agreement to resolve the situation with the disengagement of border personnel at the site on August 28, 2017.
- The Chinese removed troops, equipment and tents by 150 m from the site, while Indian troops returned to their original positions.
- But it did not bring the Chinese troops back to the status quo as before June 16, 2017 as they remained deployed in northern Doklam where they were earlier absent.

Had China entered Doklam earlier?

- As per External Affairs Ministry records, Chinese troops have been entering Bhutan areas since as far back as 1966, when India sent a protest note as it was handling the foreign policy for Bhutan.
- In Doklam, this has been happening regularly in the last two decades, where the Chinese have been coming down from Batang la, Merugla Sinchala ridge line.
- The Bhutanese usually stop them when they come up to the Torsana la.
- Usual Chinese patrols comprised less than 10 soldiers, but this time there were 80 people with a lot of construction equipment.
- In 2007, a Chinese patrol came and destroyed Indian self-help bunkers in Doklam.
- But 2017 was the first time a Chinese transgression was meant to alter the tri-junction and threaten India's national security.

What has happened in the one year since?

- Tensions have subsided to a great extent following an informal summit between Modi and Xi in Wuhan four months ago.
- The two leaders agreed to provide “strategic guidance” to their militaries, which has since led to both armies working actively to avoid any confrontation.
- In June, Foreign Secretary Gokhale said India and China would be holding a series of dialogues, including the 21st round of talks on the unsettled boundary between their special representatives, besides separate talks involving their defence and home ministers.
- Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe was on a four-day visit to India last week that focused on stepping up strategic communication between the two countries.

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