



## India and China : A Journey From Doklam To Wuhan

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the Doklam crisis and ends with Wuhan Summit and later's impact on the subsequent development in Sino-Indian relations. It was the belligerent attitude of China and the stubbornness of India that had precipitated the Doklam crisis. The Chinese understood very well that India was obliged to support Bhutan as the two countries had special ties according to the Indo -Bhutanese Treaty of 1949 and the revised version of it in 2007. It had been alleged that the Chinese stated that the Indians had no right to interfere in the Sino-Bhutanese boundary talks and that it was not entitled to make territorial claims on behalf of Bhutan. On the other hand, India is not happy with a separate deal between China and Bhutan, and insists rather on a comprehensive settlement on the border disputes that include India, Bhutan and China.

The Doklam crisis was a reflection of the Chinese expansionist ambition. As the Doklam scenario worsened, India had briefed the Delhi based envoys of major countries on the deplorable situation arising from the on-going military stand-off between India and China. Beijing maintained its acrimonious attitude towards India asking the latter to withdraw immediately all troops from Doklam.

The Doklam crisis officially came to an end on August 28, 2017, as both sides agreed to pull back from the tri-junction point.

In order that the probability of future military dispute could not arise, an informal summit' took place between the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Chinese President Xi Jinping on April 27 and 28, 2018 in Wuhan. The Modi-Xi meeting had opened a new chapter in the bilateral ties between India and China. It was ensured that their relationship would be considered from a strategic stand-point and move forward in a positive direction and would continue to grow "like the Yangtze and the Ganges flowing forward forever."

In sum, although China is an all-weather strategic ally of Pakistan supporting the latter in safeguarding its sovereignty and national dignity, China harboured hope, on April 28, 2019, that Pakistan and India could meet each other half way to improve their strained relations following the February 14 Pulwama terror attack. That China requested Pakistan, at least on paper, to exercise restraint and de-escalate tension vis-à-vis India, is itself commensurate with the 'Wuhan spirit'.

### Keywords:

Doklam Crisis; Military stand-off between India and China'; Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949; Sino-Indian relations. Wuhan Summit; Pulwama terror attack.

### INTRODUCTION

The Doklam Crisis is one of the principal issues affecting the Sino-Indian relations in the post-Cold War period. This is the most deteriorating season behind the worsening ties of the two countries, since the border war of 1962. The Doklam stand-off between India and China near the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction has brought into focus the strategic importance of the Nathula Pass and the Chumbi Valley, a place where China has built a military aerodrome apart from deploying its armed forces. The military crisis in Doklam should be viewed against the background of the overall Chinese response to the McMahon Line that has put the seal on the official boundary between India and China. It is worth-remembering that Beijing does not accept the legal validity of this McMahon Line and claims the area south of this Line as its own.

### THE DOKLAM CRISIS: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

The causes and consequences of the military crisis at Doklam had been of far-reaching significance. It underlined the respective military standpoints of New Delhi and Beijing. Brahma Chellaney, the foremost of the strategic thinkers of India, has advanced some points indicating the causes and also the significance of the crisis. It has been noted by Chellaney that China attempted to alter the *status quo* existing at the tri-junction point of India-Bhutan-China boundary by building a strategic highway via Doklam. To quote Chellaney, "the Peoples Liberation Army's (PLA's) violation of the Doklam *status quo* is the central issue that has triggered the current troop stand-off, but Beijing is seeking to mask this by spotlighting the issue relating to the tri-junction point".<sup>1</sup> Secondly, all the three countries – India, Bhutan and China – have different perceptions on where the tri-junction is and the dispute awaits a negotiated settlement.<sup>2</sup> With a view to pressurizing India, the Chinese had advanced dubious maps, as Chellaney has said, claiming the areas south of the tri-junction is and determined and perceived by India.<sup>3</sup> Beijing alleged that the Indian troops had crossed over to the Chinese side through interference in the construction project. The Chinese intention had been to forcefully alter the ground scenario to its advantages. Thirdly, it had been alleged that Beijing might strategically covet Chumbi Valley situated





near India's Siliiguri Corridor thereby undoubtedly increasing the geo-political implications of the valley.<sup>14</sup> Fourthly, India supported Bhutan's sovereignty after China had started building a road via Doklam for military purposes.<sup>15</sup> So far as the operational scenario is concerned, India has the full responsibility for Bhutan's defense and foreign policy. The friendship treaty of 1949 between India and Bhutan has put the complete implementation of Bhutan's external policy in the hands of India. The treaty was revised in 2007 allowing Bhutan to look for India's assistance in the implementation of its own foreign and defense policy. Dr. Hu Shishang, a noted Chinese scholar and the Director of the Beijing-based Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceania Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations opined that "May be if this is a disputed area, this should be a disputed area between China and Bhutan not directly between China and India."<sup>16</sup> But, as Shiv Shankar Menon, India's former National Security Advisor, pointed out in an interview with *The Hindu* that though the concerned area of the stand-off is in Bhutan "we are there because of

Bhutan and we have a certain relationship and certain obligations to Bhutan. In this case, China's actions have disturbed the *status quo* and that needs to be addressed."<sup>17</sup> The fact is that the New Delhi Government could not remain indifferent to the mounting pressure of the crisis. The Chinese understood very well that India was obligated to support Bhutan as the two countries have special ties according to the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949 and also by the Friendship Treaty of 2007. The revised treaty of 2007 points out that "neither government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other." China knew that very well, especially, after India and China signed in 1993 the 'Peace and Tranquility Agreement' followed by other major documents, such as the 'Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination' and the 'Border Defence Co-operation Agreement' in 2012 and 2013 respectively.<sup>18</sup> The border between India and China had been relatively calm since then, until the present Doklam crisis took place. The Chinese ambassador to India had stated that New Delhi had no right to interfere in the Sino-Bhutanese boundary talks and that it was not entitled to make territorial claims on behalf of Bhutan. Actually India is not happy with a separate deal between China and Bhutan, and insists rather on a comprehensive settlement on the border disputes that includes all three countries – India, Bhutan and China.

The Doklam crisis was a reflection of the Chinese expansionist ambitions. It produced at the same time

certain geo-political significance for India. It is well known that China has had an excellent rail-road network in the direction of the Chumbi Valley. Meanwhile, the Doklam scenario worsened and India was reported to have briefed the Delhi-based envoys of Major Countries on the deplorable situation arising from the ongoing stand-off between the Indian and Chinese armed forces.<sup>19</sup> Beijing maintained its acrimonious attitude towards New Delhi, asking the latter to withdraw immediately all troops from Doklam. Claiming that it was easier to shake a mountain than the PLA, China said that it was ready to protect its territorial sovereignty "at all costs".<sup>20</sup>

In the subsequent days, on July 25, 2017, the PLA intruded into the Chamoli district in Uttarakhand just three days prior to the visit of National Security Advisor Ajit Doval to Beijing for the BRICS meeting.<sup>21</sup> In the midst of the Doklam crisis, tensions escalated as the boat patrols of Indian and Chinese armies clashed on the Pangong Lake in Ladakh on August 15 and the PLA skipped the ceremonial meetings on India's Independence Day.<sup>22</sup>

#### OFFICIAL SOLUTION OF THE CRISIS

The Doklam crisis came to an end on August 28, 2017, as both sides agreed to pull back from the tri-junction point.<sup>23</sup> According to the agreement, 'the Chinese will continue to patrol the region as it had done earlier. But there will be no road construction activity. The Chinese government actually went out of its way to convince its internal audience that India unwaveringly withdrew its troops without China making any concessions. The Chinese Foreign Ministry, however, said that China would 'continue to develop friendly relations with India.' India described the agreement as nothing more than 'mutual disengagement of troops' to restore the *status quo*. This resolution came on the eve of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China for BRICS summit in September that year. It also came before the 19th Party Congress in China. Later 2017, where Xi Jinping was expected to get another five years as the leader of China. The wording of the Chinese Statement appeared to be an attempt to appease hawks within China, who were insistent that nothing short of the sole and unconditional Indian withdrawal will be acceptable to Beijing.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE CRISIS

Although the Doklam Crisis had been officially resolved through an Agreement on August 28, 2017, it had produced certain implications. First, the incident showed that China's attempts to bully smaller countries into submissions could be countered by strong diplomacy and alliances backed





by military resolve. Secondly, as Professor Kanit Bajpai maintained months back in July 2017, that "both countries need a face saver to avoid a further deterioration in relations." India relieved China of a loss of face by not contesting the wordings of a agreement. China initially wanted that the Indian troops had to be withdrawn first from the site and that it would continue to 'maintained sovereignty' on the plateau. New Delhi did not contend this publicly until the second Indian statement clarified that both sides has withdrawn 'under verification'. The Government of India did not want practically to match China's public position terming India as the 'aggressor state' and demanding that India called its troops back to avoid a fiery retaliation. However, India firmly held that bilateral relations with China would suffer if the latter did not ensure peace. This was possible if both sides had pulled back their troops. Thus, an understanding was reached after Beijing had realized that New Delhi would firmly adhere to its position and would not budge an inch until China withdrew its troops. This actually paved the path for both countries to withdraw and come to a settlement. Thirdly, although India gave China the much needed face saving, the Indian troops were sitting pretty in a militarily advantageous position at the Doka La outpost on the Sikkim border having almost completed their withdrawal from the site of the Doklam face-off. It is now possible for the Indian soldiers from the Doka La post to keep a close watch on the Doklam region so that the Indian forces could give a fitting reply if the PLA once again tried to unilaterally change the *status quo* by constructing the road near the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction point. Fourthly, as Brahma Chellaney rightly pointed out, that India, in the face of Beijing's vitriolic war rhetoric, had defiantly "stood up to China and refused to budge. By calling the bully's bluff, India has set an example for other Asian states to emulate."<sup>vi</sup> He further maintained that "China, henceforth, will refrain from unilaterally disturbing the territorial *status quo* anywhere in the Himalayan borderlands."<sup>vii</sup> It is expected that "there should be no more Depsang, Chumars and Doklams or the quiet chipping away at Indian and Bhutanese lands."<sup>viii</sup> Fifthly, the Doklam impasse and its solutions later seemed to have encouraged the smaller Asian nations and would bolster up the claims of Vietnam, Japan, Philippines etc. Last but not the least, New Delhi asked neither the USA nor Russia to stand in favour of India. While Russia maintained a studied silence, the USA called for peaceful talks. Japan's absolute support to the Indian position irked the Chinese.<sup>ix</sup> It showed, therefore, that New Delhi could now manage any crisis situation by itself without depending on the Great Powers.

## MODI-XI TALKS IN WUHAN

While the Doklam Crisis had been defused for the time being, the probability of a future military dispute cannot be ruled out. So a period of lull in the Doklam situation arose, when India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Chinese President Xi Jinping held their first 'informal summit' in Wuhan on April 27 and 28, 2018. Prior to this, India's Defense Minister Nirmala Sitaraman and India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, who attended the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) held in Beijing in April 2018, and paved the path for the Modi-Xi meeting.

The Modi-Xi Summit, held during April 27-28, 2018, was primarily intended to "solidify" the India-China relationship and exchanged views on how the two countries could work together for the benefit of their people and the world. The 'heart-to-heart' summit in Wuhan was essentially an effort by India and China to rebuild trust and improve ties that were derailed by the 73-day long Doklam crisis in 2017.<sup>xvi</sup> Surely, the year 2018 constituted a watershed in the history of Sino-Indian relations for its remarkable turnaround – from the brink of a major military standoff at Doklam to bothomie with the cooling down of tensions between the two Asian neighbours in Wuhan in April 2018<sup>xvii</sup>.

The talks in Wuhan focussed mainly on candid discussions on solutions to some of the vexed problems like the boundary question and other issues<sup>xviii</sup>. Both India and China sought to mutually repair the damage that had been inflicted on their relations by the military standoff at Doklam. Prime Minister Modi hailed the centuries' old Sino-Indian ties making the remark that both China and India had the responsibility to work for the forty percent of the world population. The two countries had a bright opportunity to work together for the benefit of the people and the world. President Xi Jinping opined that China and India – the two Asian countries – constitute the "back bone" of the multi-polar world and economic globalization and must contribute to the global peace and development. He added that China and India, as it were, are the two important engines of the world economic growth.

The Chinese leader believed that Beijing and New Delhi could become good neighbours and good friends and should regard each other as an "active factor" in the change of world power and as a partner to realize their dream of development. He added that both India and China should pursue and independent foreign policy and "adopt a positive, open and inclusive attitude and correctly analyze and view each other's intentions." While dealing with major



powers. China pleaded for strategic autonomy and was bent on "building a new type of international relationship that is based on mutual respect, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation."<sup>xxi</sup> This was in consonance with the 'Panchsheel Agreement' by China and India in the 1950s.

In essence, therefore, the Modi-Xi meeting in Wuhan was not just 'talk shop'. Both side arrived at a consensus that there would be implementation of the decisions taken at the summit. India referred to the problem of trade deficit and wanted China to open up its market to Indian sugar, pharmaceutical products and non-basmati rice. China pledged to help reduced trade imbalance between India and China in future. President Xi said that this was the first of several states that would be taken up and asked the relevant ministries to see how China could import more from India.<sup>xxii</sup> Further India and China had agreed to work on realizing the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) grouping as well as on a joint project in Afghanistan<sup>xxiii</sup>. Moreover, the leaders of the two countries were reported to have devoted a lot of time to discussing global situation and took various decisions to coordinate their respective regional and global issues. The discussions took the leaders to Afghanistan, the Korean peninsula, the USA and Russia.

In substance, Xi told Modi that their meeting had opened in new chapter in bilateral ties and that they should consider the Sino-Indian relations from a strategic stand point and ensure that their relationship would continue to move forward in a positive direction. Xi was quoted by China's state-run CCTV as saying "the friendship between the two countries should continue to grow like the Yangtze and Ganges flowing forward forever."<sup>xxiv</sup>

#### IMPACT OF THE WUHAN SUMMIT ON THE SUBSEQUENT INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

As the *South China Morning Post* declared, India's absence at the first and second Belt and Road Forums did not produce any negative impact on India-China ties as the two countries had moved to stabilize their relationship as well as better manage their differences. Most importantly, the post Wuhan summit approach appeared to be one driven by pragmatism.<sup>xxv</sup> It had been further argued that India and China had worked assiduously to restore their relationship to an even keel in 2018 after the Doklam crisis, though New Delhi continued to harbour concerns about greater access to the Chinese market and the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>xxvi</sup>

As a matter of fact, certain developments had taken place in the aftermath of the Wuhan Summit. First,

the National Security Advisor Ajit Dowal met with Wang Yi, the State Councillor and Foreign Minister on November 23-24, 2018, at Chengdu in South west China. According to the diplomats based in New Delhi and Beijing, the basic purpose of the 21<sup>st</sup> round of Special Representative Dialogues between India and China apart from resolution of the vexed boundary difference is to maintain peace along the largely undefined or loosely defined Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western and eastern sector. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pointed out that China's Belt and Road Initiative was purely an economic initiative and not aimed at India. Secondly, India and China resumed their joint military drills after a one-year gap on December 11, 2018, at Chengdu in South west China to "promote understanding between the two militaries and improving their capabilities in fighting terrorism"<sup>xxvii</sup>. As the *Hindustan Times* editorialized, "India and China are capping a year marked by a flurry of high-level contacts with engagements in two diverse and equally important areas. One hundred troops from each side are currently participating in the fortnight-long "hand in hand" war game at Chengdu. Without a doubt, these contacts have been driven by the informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi Xi Jinping in Wuhan in April a meeting that did much to address the tensions that had characterised the relationship in the wake of last year's military standoff at Doklam near the Sikkim border."<sup>xxviii</sup>

It is too much to expect that all the thorny issues between China and India will be solved overnight. China has so long blocked the listing of Pakistan-based terrorist Masood Azhar at the UN<sup>xxix</sup>, and what is more, it has objected to India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. New Delhi opposes the OBOR Initiative including the CPEC over the sovereignty issue. India's continued absence in the two Belt Road Forum has also irked China.

In the recent Indo-Pakistani tension over the Pulwama terror attack of February 14, 2019, China backed India's action, especially at the Joint Communiqué issued after the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China (RIC). It strongly condemned terrorism saying that the three sides "stressed that terrorist groups can not be supported and used in political and geo-political goals"<sup>xxx</sup>. Moreover, China urged both India and Pakistan to de-escalate tension and called for restrained by both sides. Terming India and Pakistan as "friends of China," Beijing said that both India and China should resolve the issue through dialogue and properly handle the differences to prevent a further deterioration of their relations<sup>xxxi</sup>.



In sum, China harboured hope, on April 28, 2019, that Pakistan and India could meet each other half way to improve their strained relations following the February 14 Pulwama terror attack by a JeM (Jaish-e-Muhammad) suicide bomber, although China is an all-weather strategic ally of Pakistan firmly

#### Notes & References:-

<sup>i</sup> For details of Brahma Chellaney's views, see *The Times of India*, Kolkata, July 3, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> It has been officially settled through negotiation.

<sup>iii</sup> *The Times of India*, Kolkata, July 3, 2017

<sup>iv</sup> The 'Siliguri Corridor' is called, in military parlance, the 'Chicken's neck' which connects mainland India with the north-eastern states of the country. Moreover, it is just 30 km wide at its narrowest point. The Chumbi Valley is akin to 'a dagger' pointing towards the 'Chicken's Neck'. China occupies a narrow strip of land in the Chumbi Valley with the areas controlled by India and Bhutan flanking it. For details see *Frontline*, Vol. 34, No. 15, July 22-August 4, 2017, p. 10.

<sup>v</sup> China and Bhutan had already had 24 rounds of boundary talks and there was, in fact, an apparent unease in the small Himalayan Kingdom as its two giant neighbours square off each other at its door step. Senior Bhutanese Officials, as such, wanted the dispute to be settled through talks and mutual consultation between India and China. *Ibid*.

<sup>vi</sup> Cited in *Frontline*, p.13

<sup>vii</sup> Cited in *ibid*.

<sup>viii</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 4 .China and Bhutan had themselves signed an 'Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility' along the border in 1998. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Statesman*, Kolkata, July 25, 2017. It was reported that there was some concern in diplomatic circles in New Delhi over India's position. A diplomatic source said that what happened if the Chinese entered Jammu and Kashmir and said that they were doing so on behalf of Pakistan. Cited in *ibid*.

<sup>x</sup> *Xinhua* quoted a spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defence Wu Qian saying at a Press Conference "We strongly urge India to take solid measures to correct its mistakes and desist from provocation." Cited in *ibid*. See also *The Times of India*, Kolkata, July 25, 2017.

<sup>xi</sup> For a detailed discussion, see *The Times of India*, Kolkata, August 1, 2017

supporting the latter in safeguarding its sovereignty and national dignity<sup>xxii</sup>. That China has requested Pakistan, at least on paper, to exercise restraint and de-escalate tensions vis-à-vis India, is commensurate with the 'Wuhan spirit.'

<sup>xii</sup> The clash between the Indian and Chinese Armies led to jostling and exchange of blows between soldiers of the two armies though no shots were fired. This was the first time since 2005 that this meeting on August 15 was cancelled. Another ceremonial meeting which used to be held on the Chinese side on August 1, the founding day of the PLA, was also not held that year. For detail on this, see *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, August 16, 2017. Another report on this incident appeared in *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, August 17, 2017.

<sup>xiii</sup> For a detailed report and discussion, see *The Times of India*, Kolkata, August 29, 2017.

<sup>xiv</sup> For detail, see Chellaney's article in *The Times of India*, Kolkata, August 3, 2017

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xvii</sup> See *The Sunday Statesman*, Kolkata, August 20, 2017.

<sup>xviii</sup> For a detailed report of the Wuhan Summit, see *The Statesman*, Kolkata, April 28, 2018; *The Sunday Statesman*, Bhubaneswar, April 29, 2018 and *The Times of India*, Kolkata, May 5, 2018.

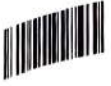
<sup>xix</sup> Cited in "From Doklam to Wuhan, 2018 will go down as watershed year in tasty India-China ties", *economictimes.indiatimes.com*, accessed on 25/04/2019., In 2017, the bilateral ties were deteriorated by the Doklam Crisis. New Delhi's objection to CPEC and China's pet project 'Belt and Road Initiative led Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping to explore peaceful negotiations and bring about an overall atmosphere of mutuality of interests.

<sup>xx</sup> Xi commented at the summit : "I 'll be happy, if in 2019, we can have such informal summit in India." The Chinese President viewed that he believed in future, and they could meet in a format like this from time to time.

<sup>xxi</sup> See, for detail, *The Sunday Statesman*, Bhubaneswar, April 29, 2018.

<sup>xxii</sup> *The Times of India*, Kolkata, May 5, 2018

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid*



<sup>xxiv</sup> Cited in *The Statesman*, Kolkata, April 28, 2018

<sup>xxv</sup> Cited in "China India relations|*South China Morning Post*", <https://www.scmp.com>, accessed on 28/04/2019

<sup>xxvi</sup> See for detail "2018: Indo-China relationship back on normal track, some concerns remain", [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com), accessed on 28/04/2019.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, December 10, 2018. See also *ibid.*, November 22 and December 20, 2018

<sup>xxviii</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 'Joint military drills will help neighbourhood ties' (editorial), New Delhi, December 17, 2018.

<sup>xxix</sup> Beijing has so long opposed the international sanctioning of Jaish-e Mohammad head Masood

Azhar numerous times over the past decade. But on May 1, 2019, Beijing's support of the UN Security Council sanctions is a welcome development on India China relations. It conveyed its decision to lift the technical hold to the Pakistani Prime Minister on that day. See, "China-India relations | *South China Morning Post*,"

<https://www.scmp.com>, accessed on 03/05/2019 and *The Statesman*, Kolkata, May 3, 2019.

<sup>xxx</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, February 28, 2019

<sup>xxxi</sup> *The Statesman*, Kolkata, March 1, 2019

<sup>xxxii</sup> As reported in *The Statesman*, Kolkata, April 29, 2019.

