

China's New Claim in Eastern Bhutan: Pressure Tactic or Message to India?

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Summary

China's territorial claim over Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary has surprised Bhutan, as it has never been a part of the Bhutan-China boundary talks. This development will further complicate Bhutan-China boundary talks.

During the 58th meeting of the Global Environment Facility Council in June 2020, China tried to oppose the funding to a project for the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in Trashigang district of Bhutan, calling it “disputed” territory.¹ Despite Chinese objection, the project was cleared by a majority of the council members.² China had a representative to the council while Bhutan was represented by an Indian Administrative Service officer and World Bank official, Aparna Subramani. Incidentally, she also represents India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.³

In reaction, Bhutan handed over a demarche to the Chinese embassy located in New Delhi,⁴ as the two countries do not have diplomatic ties. Thimphu made it clear that Sakteng is a sovereign territory of Bhutan and there is no dispute over it.⁵ Afterwards, Beijing doubled its claim and included Bhutan's “Eastern sectors” to the boundary dispute between the two countries.⁶ On the territory issue with Bhutan, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated, “The boundary between China and Bhutan has never been delimited. There have been disputes over the eastern, central and western sectors for a long time.”⁷

¹ Geeta Mohan, “China now lays claim on Bhutan's territory, Thimphu counters Beijing's move”, *India Today*, 29 June 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/china-now-lays-claim-on-bhutan-s-territory-thimphu-counters-beijing-s-move-1695276-2020-06-29>. Accessed on 1 July 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Suhasini Haider, “China doubles down on claims on eastern Bhutan boundary”, *The Hindu*, 5 July 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/days-after-demarche-china-doubles-down-on-claims-on-eastern-bhutan-boundary/article31993470.ece>. Accessed on 5 July 2020. The World Bank, “Aparna Subramani”. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/people/a/aparna-subramani>. Accessed on 12 June 2020.

⁴ “China makes border dispute with Bhutan public, in apparent move to pressure India”, *Scroll.in*, 6 July 2020. <https://scroll.in/latest/966621/china-makes-border-dispute-with-bhutan-public-in-apparent-move-to-pressure-india>. Accessed on 7 July 2020.

⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Bhutan issues demarche to China over its bid to create border trouble”, *The Economic Times*, 4 July 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/bhutan-issues-demarche-to-china-over-its-bid-to-create-border-trouble/articleshow/76779385.cms>. Accessed on 9 July 2020.

⁶ Suhasini Haider, op cit.

⁷ Manoj Joshi, “In China's Territorial Claims in Eastern Bhutan, a message for India?”, *The Wire*, 10 July 2020. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/china-bhutan-india-territory>. Accessed on 11 July 2020.

This paper looks at the Bhutan-China boundary issues and examines the reasons for China making its claim over the Bhutanese territory.

History of Bhutan-China Border Talks

Bhutan and China share around 470 square kilometres of border between them. Some of the territorial disputes came into light in the 1950s when China published official maps showing Bhutanese territory as its part. China claimed an area of about 764 square kilometres covering the Northwest (269 square kilometres) and Central parts of Bhutan (495 square kilometres).⁸ The Northwest part constitutes the Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana and Shakhatoe in Samste, Haa and Paro districts whereas the Central parts constitute the Pasamlung and the Jakarlung valley in the Wangdue Phodrang district.⁹ Following the publication of the maps, there have been intrusions by Chinese soldiers into Bhutanese territory. Since the first intrusion by Chinese soldiers and Tibetan herders, the issue has been of a major concern to the Bhutanese and a subject of discussion in the National Assembly.¹⁰ At that time, there was no reference to disputes in the Eastern sector which the Chinese now say covers 3,300 square kilometres of Bhutanese land in the extreme East.¹¹

In 1979, the Bhutan government considered direct negotiations with China on the boundary issue.¹² However, it was only in 1984 that the two sides held the first round of boundary talks. In 1997, the Bhutanese King informed the National Assembly that, "[T]he Chinese wanted to exchange Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys, with an area of 495 square kilometres with the pasture land of Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana and Shakhatoe, totaling 269 square kilometres."¹³ After four years of discussion, by 2001, the Chinese came close to a deal over the exchange of territories but could not conclude it, as things changed after India convinced Bhutan about its security concerns.¹⁴ Bhutan has gone along with India till now.¹⁵

In 1998, Bhutan and China signed an agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Sino-Bhutanese Border Areas. Under this agreement, the two sides accepted that they have reached at an agreement and were willing to work in accordance with the five principles of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs

⁸ Medha Bisht, "Back to History: The Negotiation Phases", *IDSA*, 19 January 2010, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/Sino-BhutanBoundaryNegotiations_mbisht_190110. Accessed on 12 July 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Manoj Joshi, op cit.

¹² Mathou, Thierry, "Bhutan China Relations: Towards a New Step in Himalayan Politics", *Bhutan Studies*. www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publicationFiles/ConferenceProceedings/SpiderAndPiglet/19-Spdr&Pglt.pdf. Accessed on 17 September 2018.

¹³ "Proceedings and Resolutions of the 75th session of the National Assembly Held from 25th June to 16th July 1997". https://www.nab.gov.bt/assets/uploads/docs/resolution/2014/75th_Session.pdf. Accessed on 12 July 2020.

¹⁴ Manoj Joshi, op cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and peaceful co-existence for the purpose of maintaining peace and tranquility along the Sino-Bhutanese border.¹⁶ Till 2016, Bhutan and China had held 24 rounds of boundary talks. Despite the agreement and ongoing talks, in 2017, China's encroachment into Doklam led to a military stand-off between Indian and Chinese Army. Doklam is a tri-junction of India, China, and Bhutan. The situation remained tense for about 73 days, following which India and China agreed to disengage their personnel from the site on 28 August 2017.

The Chinese government claimed that the land at Doklam is located on its side of the border as per the 1890 Convention between Great Britain and China relating to Sikkim and Tibet. It was, therefore, free to construct a road near the site. Refuting the Chinese position on Doklam, on 29 June 2017, in a press release, the Bhutanese government stated:

Boundary talks are ongoing between Bhutan and China and we have written agreements of 1988 and 1998 stating that the two sides agree to maintain peace and tranquility in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959. The agreements also state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary. Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic channel, 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. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16 June 2017.¹⁷

Post the India-China military stand-off at Doklam, Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister, Kong Xuanyou, visited Bhutan from 22 to 24 July 2018. During the meetings with the Bhutanese King, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and other officials, Xuanyou said, "Both sides should continue to promote the boundary negotiations, abide by the already-reached principles and consensus, and jointly maintain peace and tranquility in border areas so as to create positive conditions for the final settlement of the boundary issue."¹⁸ To this, Bhutan said, it "... stands ready to maintain communication with the Chinese side on bilateral relations and the boundary issue".¹⁹

Since the Doklam stand-off, Bhutan-China talks on the boundary issue have been halted. In 2018, talks could not take place because of the general elections in Bhutan. In October 2019, the two sides decided to break the hiatus and hold the 25th round of boundary talks²⁰ but could not schedule it. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

¹⁶ Mathou, Thierry, op cit.

¹⁷ Press release by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, 29 June 2017. www.mfa.gov.bt/?p=4799. Accessed on 3 September 2017.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou Visits Bhutan, 2018/07/24". www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1580397.shtml. Accessed on 3 September 2018.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tenzing Lamsang, "Bhutan -China boundary talks to be held soon", *The Bhutanese*, 26 October 2019. <https://thebhutanese.bt/bhutan-china-boundary-talks-to-be-held-soon/>. Accessed on 12 June 2020.

On the Chinese claim over eastern Bhutan, Tenzing Lamsang, editor of *The Bhutanese* wrote on his Twitter that, since 1984, Bhutan and China have discussed only two disputed areas during their border talks – 269 square kilometres in the West and 495 square kilometres in North-central Bhutan. Chinese have never raised the issue of any dispute on the Eastern side.²¹ He further elaborated that, in fact, the 1977 Chinese map shows Sakteng within Bhutan's territory even when China made claim on the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.²² Moreover, Bhutan and China do not share a border at Sakteng. China could reach there only after military invasion of Arunachal Pradesh.²³

Many in India believe that Chinese claim over the eastern Bhutan border is apparently to pressure and “provoke”²⁴ India which shares very close relations with Bhutan. To meet any challenge, India has now proposed a road connecting Lumla near Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh with Trashiganag in Bhutan. This will reduce the distance between Tawang and Guwahati by 150 kilometres.²⁵

China's Territorial Claims in South Asia

China's territorial claims in Bhutan, Nepal and India are attributed to Mao De Zong, the first head of the People's Republic of China, who has been cited by the Chinese officials. Mao believed that China is a palm which has responsibility to “liberate” five fingers defined as Ladakh (Indian Union Territory), Nepal, Sikkim (Indian State), Bhutan and the North East Frontier Agency (Arunachal Pradesh).²⁶

During the last years of the 20th and in early 21st century, Chinese leaders talked about the “Asian century”. Its current focus, however, as former Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao says, is to build a “Chinese century”.²⁷ Chinese President Xi Jinping talks about Asian unity which, largely, refers to neighbours acquiescing to China's primacy in their region and Asia.²⁸ This change in the Chinese vision manifests itself in its behaviour towards its neighbours in East, Southeast, Central and South Asia.

²¹ Tenzing Lamsang on Twitter. <https://twitter.com/TenzingLamsang/status/1278330454618198016>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nayanima Basu, “India ‘talking’ to Bhutan as Beijing opens new front with Thimphu along Arunachal border”, *The Print*, 7 July 2020. <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-talking-to-bhutan-as-beijing-opens-new-front-with-thimphu-along-arunachal-border/456425/>. Accessed on 8 July 2020.

²⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, “India proposes road in Bhutan's ‘Yeti’ territory which China claimed recently”, *The Economic Times*, 14 July 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-proposes-to-build-road-via-bhutans-wildlife-park/articleshow/76950740.cms>. Accessed on 14 July 2020.

²⁶ Suhasini Haider, “History, the standoff, and policy worth rereading”, *The Hindu*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/history-the-stand-off-and-policy-worth-rereading/article31854822.ece>. Accessed on 19 June 2020.

²⁷ C Rajamohan, “China's hegemonic ambitions mean that Beijing's focus is now on building Chinese century”, *The Indian Express*, 7 July 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/china-nationalism-xi-jinping-beijing-foreign-policy-india-china-lac-row-c-raja-mohan-6493168/>. Accessed on 8 July 2020.

²⁸ Ibid.

In South Asia, China does not have major territorial disputes with Pakistan, as the two countries settled it in 1963. Under the treaty of 1963, Pakistan surrendered, as India accuses, thousands of acres of land to China.²⁹

With India, China is in dispute over the demarcation and definition of the Line of Actual Control. India and China fought a war in 1962. In 1967 and again in 1987, there were skirmishes on their eastern border. In 1993, 1996, 2003 and 2005m arrangements were made to keep the troops disengaged. In September 1993, India and China signed the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas.³⁰ In 1996, the two countries signed the Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas.³¹ In 2003, they signed the Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between India and China and, in 2005, they agreed on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question.³² Special Representatives from the two countries have also engaged with each other on the border talks. Notwithstanding, intrusions into the Indian territory by Chinese soldiers have been regular. According to data from the Indian government, between 2016 and 2018, there were 1,025 Chinese transgressions into Indian territory.³³

China's recent action against India in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh was mainly due to its perception that India was getting too close to the United States (US),³⁴ thus defying and challenging the Chinese hegemony in the region. For P Stobdan, through the incursion into Ladakh, the Chinese wanted to convey three essential points to India. The first is India should settle the border issue on Chinese terms. Second, it does not want any Indian interference in post-Dalai Lama developments in Tibet. Three, the US-led Quad strategic forum should not be encouraged.³⁵

Nepal and China share 1,414 square kilometres of border. Media reports have accused Chinese of encroaching into Nepali lands on their border.³⁶ However, Nepal's Foreign

²⁹ Alstair Lamb, "The Sino-Pakistani boundary agreement of 2 March 1963", *Australian International Affairs* 2008 Volume 18, 1964, pp. 299-312.

³⁰ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India 2005, "Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question", <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6534/Agreement+between+the+Government+of+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Government+of+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China+on+the+Political+Parameters+and+Guiding+Principles+for+the+Settlement+of+the+IndiaChina+Boundary+Question>. Accessed on 12 January 2020.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ "1025 Chinese transgressions reported from 2016 to 2018: Government data", *The Economic Times*, 28 November 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/1025-chinese-transgressions-reported-from-2016-to-2018-government-data/articleshow/72262114.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 24 June 2020.

³⁴ Ai June, "India knows US won't help it achieve its goals", *Global Times*, 23 June 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192579.shtml>. Accessed on 28 June 2020.

³⁵ P Stobdan, "China's past border tactics, especially in Central Asia, offer India a clue", *The Indian Express*, 29 June 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-diplomacy-border-dispute-lac-china-foreign-policy-galwan-valley-ladakh-6480700/>. Accessed on 3 July 2020.

³⁶ Vasudevan Sridharn "Nepal protestors burn Xi Jinping effigies over China's alleged border encroachment", *South China Morning Post*, 12 November 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3037449/protesters-nepal-burn-effigies-chinas-xi-jinping-over-alleged>. Accessed on 18 June 2020.

Minister Pradeep Gyawali reiterated that there is no boundary dispute with China and rejected that any Nepali territory has been encroached.³⁷

Conclusion

During the years of boundary talks with Bhutan, China has never raised the issue of Eastern border. Tenzing writes that, “Such claims undermine the boundary talks and wild claims on either side by officials will only exacerbate issues as Bhutan too can lay claims for north”.³⁸ He also writes, “...such false claims will come up as pressure tactic”.³⁹ As a small and weak country, Bhutan will be at a disadvantaged position to secure its territorial interests against China. To help Bhutan, India has done well by engaging in talks⁴⁰ with it as soon China made territorial claims in eastern Bhutan. The Bhutan-China border disputes and discussions are set to continue and India will continue be part of the equation.

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³⁷ Anil Giri, “India refuses to sit for talks and there is no boundary dispute with China, foreign minister says”, *The Kathmandu Post*, 27 June 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/06/27/india-refuses-to-sit-for-talks-and-there-is-no-boundary-dispute-with-china-foreign-minister-says>. Accessed on 29 June 2020.

³⁸ Suhasini Haider, “China doubles down on claims on eastern Bhutan boundary”, op cit.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Naryani Basu, op cit.