

## India and Bhutan-China Boundary Talks

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### Summary

*Bhutan and China recently concluded the 13<sup>th</sup> Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on boundary issues. The Joint Technical Team, established by the two sides, also held its first meeting on the sidelines of the 13<sup>th</sup> EGM. Given India's geographic proximity to Bhutan and China, any change in the territorial status quo will have an impact on India.*

Frequent boundary-related meetings between Bhutan and China seem to reflect their seriousness in wanting to resolve their boundary issues. Their territorial disputes revolve around the 495 square kilometres in north-central Bhutan and 269 square kilometres in western Bhutan. Since 2020, Beijing has extended its claim on 740 square kilometres in the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in eastern Bhutan.

In an effort to resolve their boundary demarcation issues, Bhutan and China signed the Guiding Principles on the Settlement of the Boundary Issues in 1988 and the Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the border areas in 1998. These agreements form the basis of the boundary negotiation between [Bhutan and China](#). Under Article Three of the agreement, the status quo is to be maintained on the boundary as before March 1959. The two sides also agreed to refrain from taking any unilateral action on their [boundary](#).

For several commentators, China's border talks with Bhutan are also [targetted at India](#). The Doklam trijunction is near the 27-kilometre-long Siliguri corridor that links the other Indian states with the country's northeast region. Stating its position, during the military stand-off with China at Doklam in 2017, India referred to the [2012 agreement](#) between the two countries. New Delhi pointed out that the tri-junction "boundary between India, China and third countries will be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries. Any attempt, therefore, to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is a [violation](#) of this understanding." On the contrary, some Chinese experts consider India as an obstacle in resolving its boundary matters. They believe that India complicates the border dispute by broadening its scope, making it difficult for a [resolution](#).

In October 2021, Bhutan and China signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on a 'Three-Step Road Map' to expedite their boundary negotiation. However, the road map was not made public. The 13<sup>th</sup> EGM was held in Beijing from 21 to 24 August 2023. The two sides agreed to expedite and take steps to implement the MoU on the ['Three-Step Road Map'](#).

In March 2023, in an interview with Sabine Verhest, a journalist from the Belgian newspaper, *La Libre*, Bhutanese Prime Minister Lotay Tshering underscored Bhutan-China border matters. That interview, as [Tenzing Lamsang writes](#), was "misrepresented" and blown "out of proportion" in many Indian media reports. In that [interview](#), Tshering said that Bhutan and China will be able to demarcate some of their boundaries "in a meeting or two".

He [denied](#) that China has built any infrastructure inside Bhutanese territory. However, some global media reports have provided pictorial evidence of a settlement of more than 200 structures, including two-storey buildings, under construction along the [disputed border](#). Some satellite images also indicate the construction of a Chinese village in the East of Doklam on the [Bhutanese side](#). On Doklam, [Tshering said](#) that “...It is not up to Bhutan alone to solve the problem. We are three. There is no big or small country, there are three equal countries, each counting for a third...” After some Indian media alleged that Bhutan has changed its earlier position on the border issue, making [China a party to Doklam](#), Tshering clarified that he said nothing new and there is no change in [Bhutan’s position](#).

Soon after the 13<sup>th</sup> EGM, on 28 August 2023, [China’s Ministry of Natural Resources](#) released the 2023 edition of the country’s “standard” national map, which it publishes regularly to eliminate “problem maps”. China reasserted its claims on the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (China calls it Zangnan, the southern part of Xizang or Tibet) and Aksai Chin, depicting them to be a part of its territory. India lodged a strong protest and [India’s External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar](#) stated, “Just making absurd claims does not make other people’s territories yours.” Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, [Wang Wenbin](#), retorted, “It is a routine practice in China’s exercise of sovereignty in accordance with the law. We hope the relevant sides can stay objective and calm, and refrain from over-interpreting the issue.”

Should Beijing and Thimphu strike a deal that is based on anything close to what China offered to Bhutan under a [“package deal”](#) in 1997, it will have significant ramifications for India. Under that deal, Beijing agreed to give up its claim over central Bhutan in exchange for territory in western Bhutan that includes Doklam. Then, Bhutan declined the Chinese offer. Bhutan sees India as a close friend and pre-eminent economic partner and it has assured India that the latter’s interest in Doklam will not be harmed or [“compromised”](#) by any agreement between Bhutan and China. However, with Beijing and Thimphu seemingly expediting their expert-level meetings, there must certainly be unease in neighbouring India.

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