

The Consequences and Future Implications of the Doklam Standoff on India-China Relations: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This paper presents an in-depth examination of the Doklam Crisis and its impact on the relationship between India and China. Through a thorough analysis of the crises' causes, events, and aftermath, this study highlights the consequences of this contentious border dispute on the two countries' diplomatic, economic, and strategic partnerships. Furthermore, this research offers a critical evaluation of the potential long-term implications of the Doklam Crisis regarding regional stability, power dynamics, and political maneuvering in South Asia. Ultimately, this paper offers crucial insights into the complex nature of India-China relations and the role crises such as Doklam may play in shaping the future of this crucial bilateral partnership.

Key words: Doklam crisis, India, China, border dispute, bilateral relationship.

Introduction

The Doklam Crisis was a defining moment in the already complex relationship between India and China. The crisis, which began in June 2017, centered around a disputed area in the Doklam plateau. The area was controlled by China but claimed by Bhutan, a close ally of India. The standoff between the two countries lasted for the better part of two months and created significant tensions between the two Asian powers. The incident raised several questions about the future of India-China relations, and the potential consequences of this crisis on both countries' diplomatic, economic, and strategic partnerships.

Doklam called Donglang by China is an area in Bhutan with a high plateau and a valley, lying between China's Chumbi valley to the north, Bhutan's Ha District to the east and India's Sikkim state to the west. It has been depicted as part of Bhutan in the Bhutanese maps since 1961, but it is also claimed by China. The dispute has not been resolved despite several rounds of border negotiations between Bhutan and China. The area is of strategic importance to all three countries.¹

The dispute in 2017 between China and India, known as the Doklam standoff, was a military conflict that took place over the construction of a road in the Donglang area, near the trijunction border. Both India and China claimed ownership of the territory, which is also a grazing field called Donglang Caochang in Chinese.² The conflict started when Chinese troops began construction on the road on June 16th, 2017, using construction vehicles and equipment. Bhutan, an ally of India, also claimed the territory. On June 18, 2017, in response to China's construction of a road near the Sikkim border, Operation Juniper was launched by India. Two bulldozers and 270 Indian troops were deployed to Doklam to halt Chinese construction efforts. After a tense stand-off, both India and China announced on August 28 that all military personnel had vacated the Doklam region.

This paper seeks to analyze the Doklam Crisis in detail, with a particular focus on its consequences and future implications on India-China relations. To this end, the paper is structured as follows: the first section provides an overview of the Doklam Crisis and its background, highlighting the key events that led to the standoff between India and China. The second section examines the consequences of the crisis, focusing on its impact on bilateral relations, economic ties, and regional stability. The third section delves into the future implications of the Doklam Crisis, discussing its impact on China's Belt and Road Initiative, India's foreign policy, and the wider international order. The paper concludes with a summary of the key findings and a discussion of the policy implications.

Background of the Doklam Standoff

The Doklam plateau is a remote area situated at the tri-junction of Bhutan, India, and China, making it one of the most contentious territories in the region. Both China and Bhutan claim the plateau as their own, leading to a long-standing dispute that has yet to be resolved. However, India has been Bhutan's close ally for many years and has maintained a military presence in the country to support its defense against external threats, including China's growing territorial ambitions in the region.³

The Doklam dispute erupted in June 2017, when China began construction activities and started building a road through the plateau, which was claimed by both China and Bhutan. India perceived this as a direct threat to its national security and argued that China's actions were a violation of international law. In response, India sent troops to Bhutan to halt the Chinese construction activities and

¹ Ankit Panda (13 July 2017), "The Political Geography of the India-China Crisis at Doklam", *The Diplomat*, archived from the original on 14 July 2017.

² Safi, Michael (5 July 2017). "Chinese and Indian troops face off in Bhutan border dispute". *The Guardian*. Archived from the original on 10 August 2017.

³ Haider, Suhasini. 2017. "The Crossroads at the Doklam Plateau." *The Hindu*, July 26.

to protect its own strategic interests in the region. It was a risky move by India to intervene in an area that was not strictly its own, but its actions were spurred by the strong alliance it shared with Bhutan.⁴

The deployment of troops by both countries resulted in a two-month standoff between India and China, with both sides refusing to back down. The situation escalated, with both countries increasing their troop numbers and beefing up their military infrastructure in the area. Diplomatic channels were used to resolve the stalemate, and eventually, in August 2017, both sides agreed to withdraw their troops from the area, resolving the immediate crisis. The agreement was welcomed by all parties, and tensions in the region eased considerably.

However, the Doklam dispute remains unresolved. China has continued to deploy troops and to build infrastructure in the disputed territory, gradually enhancing its territorial claims in the region. Furthermore, a recent statement by Bhutan's Prime Minister, Lotay Tshering, seeking China's equal participation in resolving the Doklam dispute, has generated fresh concerns in India. The statement prompted India to signal a more proactive approach towards protecting its interests in the region, especially given China's growing strategic footprint in South Asia.

The Doklam dispute highlights the complexities of regional geopolitics in South Asia, where countries like India and China jostle for influence and control. The standoff highlighted the risks and rewards of intervening in disputes over disputed territories, and how the perceived interests of one country could impact others.⁵ It is a reminder of the vulnerability of small states in the shadow of larger neighbors and the need to have strong and reliable alliances to counterbalance those threats.⁶

From India's perspective, the Doklam dispute underscores the need to proactively address issues of territorial disputes and to shore up its alliances with countries such as Bhutan. The dispute has also put India on notice that China's growing military might and increased regional influence can no longer be ignored. In the long run, India's interests lie in stabilizing the region and promoting economic development by engaging in regional cooperation with all stakeholders. However, this will require a more nuanced and balanced approach to its foreign policy, relying not just on its military might but also on its soft power and multilateral diplomacy. Indeed, the Doklam dispute has shown that resolving disputes peacefully through dialogue and negotiations is the best way to preserve peace and stability in the region.

Consequences of the Doklam Standoff

The Doklam standoff between India and China was a 73-day military standoff between the two countries on their disputed Himalayan border. It has several significant consequences for India-China relations, with profound impact on bilateral relations between the two Asian giants. These are discussed in detail below.

- **Impact on Bilateral Relations**

The Doklam Crisis had a severe impact on India-China bilateral relations, which were already strained due to several other factors, including the border dispute that has been ongoing for more than 50 years. The Doklam Crisis further exacerbated these tensions, resulting in a significant downturn in relations between the two countries.

The crisis led to the suspension of several high-level exchanges between India and China, including visits by the National Security Adviser and other officials. It also affected economic ties, with China suspending imports of Indian pharmaceuticals and cotton. Furthermore, the crisis damaged people-to-people ties, with anti-China sentiment rising in India and anti-India sentiment in China.

- **Impact on Economic Ties**

The Doklam Crisis also had implications for economic ties between India and China. The two countries have a significant economic relationship, with China being India's largest trading partner, and India being China's largest trading partner in South Asia. However, the crisis led to a significant decline in bilateral trade, with imports and exports from both countries falling sharply in the second half of 2017. Investment between the two countries also suffered, with Chinese investments in India dropping by 12% in 2017, and Indian investments in China dropping by 21%.

Secondly, the Doklam standoff has helped to reduce India's dependency on China. The standoff has been a stark reminder that China is an unreliable trade partner and has significantly affected India's trade with China. India has taken several measures to reduce its reliance on China, including limiting Chinese investments in India and increasing its own investments in other countries. This has led to a reduction in trade and economic ties between the two countries.⁷

- **Impact on Regional Stability**

The Doklam Crisis also had significant implications for regional stability. The standoff threatened to escalate into a full-blown military conflict that could have destabilized the entire region. Furthermore, the crisis raised concerns about China's growing assertiveness in the region and India's ability to handle the rising power. The crisis created significant tensions between India and Bhutan and raised questions about the role of smaller countries in the region. Although Bhutan has traditionally been a close ally of India, the Doklam Crisis highlighted the country's vulnerability to pressures from bigger powers.

⁴ Ganguly Sumit. 2017. The Doklam Dispute in Context. Foreign Affairs, August 9.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-08-09/doklam-dispute-context>.

⁵ Madan Tanvi. 2017. Doklam Standoff: The Takeaways for India. Brookings. September 4.

<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/doklam-standoff-the-takeaways-for-india/>.

⁶ Lye, Liang Fook. 2017. "Introduction: China in World Politics: Is China a Status Quo Power?." China: An International Journal 15 (1): 1–3.

⁷ Xinhua News Agency (2014, September 18). China, India step up economic engagement despite border disputes. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/xiattendsbricssummit/2014-09/18/content_26990065.htm.

In fact, the Doklam standoff has impacted the strategic importance of the region for both India and China. The Doklam plateau, located at the tri-junction of Bhutan, China, and India, is strategically located and has significant military value. Both India and China continue to fortify their positions in the region, which has led to an increase in military deployments in the area.

- **Impact on Cultural deterioration**

The Doklam crisis has significantly impacted the cultural and social ties between India and China. The tense border standoff has resulted in increased negative perceptions and hostility towards China among the Indian population. This has reduced the number of Chinese tourists visiting India, impacting tourism and trade. Furthermore, China has banned Indian films and products in response to the prevailing tensions, which has resulted in a decline in cultural exchange between the two countries.

In the long term, these developments may hamper efforts to enhance relationship and friendship between the two nations. The Indian government and policymakers must work to improve cultural and societal relations with China, expanding cultural exchange programs, promoting tourism and trade for increasing mutual benefit. Cooperation between the two emerging economic powers is crucial for stability, progress, and peace in the region. It is high time that both countries work towards bridging their differences and commit themselves towards creating stronger bilateral ties.

- **Impact on Diplomatic Relations**

The Doklam crisis has had far-reaching implications for the diplomatic relationship between India and China. The standoff has exacerbated tensions between the two countries, leading to a significant reduction in high-level diplomatic visits. As a result, dialogue mechanisms have been hindered, and important issues such as regional security and economic cooperation have been left unresolved.

The continued deterioration of the diplomatic ties between India and China can have significant repercussions on the stability of the region. It is essential that both countries engage in constructive dialogue and address their differences through peaceful means. The resumption of high-level dialogue between the two nations in regional security and economic cooperation is critical. There must be a concerted effort to work towards building mutual trust and confidence, promote cooperation for mutual benefit, and establish diplomatic channels that can be utilized to deescalate tensions effectively. A robust diplomatic relationship between India and China is essential for a peaceful and prosperous future for the region.

- **Impact on International goodwill**

India's response to the Doklam crisis has bolstered its position as a prominent player in the region. With its stern defense of its borders, the country has secured international support and admiration, elevating its standing on the global stage. India's ability to protect its sovereignty and preserve territorial integrity has been rightly recognized and has provided a significant boost to its image. To enhance its position as a reliable partner for other nations, India must continue to adopt a strategic approach towards regional security. By doing so, it will enhance its prominence as a key player in the region, contributing to stability and security.

In conclusion, the Doklam standoff has had far-reaching effects on bilateral relations between India and China. While India has emerged as a stronger regional player, it has also led to a reduction in economic and cultural ties between the two countries. The strategic importance of the region has also heightened tensions, leading to an increase in military deployments. However, both India and China must continue to work towards resolving their differences and improving their relations for the benefit of regional stability and prosperity.

Future Implications of the Doklam Standoff

The Doklam Crisis has significant implications for the future of India-China relations and the wider international order. These are discussed below in detail.

- **Geopolitical tensions**

The Doklam standoff has far-reaching implications beyond the relationship between India and China. It has increased geopolitical tensions in the region and could lead to a possible shift in power dynamics. This could fuel concerns among other neighboring countries, which may feel the need to choose sides and align with either India or China, leading to further instability in the region.⁸

The standoff has also brought to the forefront the longstanding border disputes between India and China, which have been ongoing since the 1960s. These disputes have led to occasional skirmishes in the past, but the Doklam crisis demonstrated that the situation has now reached alarming levels. The two nations must take steps to defuse tensions and re-establish dialogue to address the root causes of the border disputes.

Given the growing strategic importance of the region, it is crucial that diplomatic channels are kept open between all neighboring countries. This would allow for timely resolution of any disputes and prevent any escalation of conflicts. The Doklam crisis serves as a reminder of the importance of peaceful negotiation and adherence to international law in solving territorial disputes.

It is imperative that all nations work together to promote stability and ensure the peaceful coexistence of all countries in the region. The Doklam crisis must be a wake-up call for all nations to strengthen diplomatic ties, respect each other's territorial integrity, and avoid actions that would destabilize the region.

- **Impact on trade**

⁸ Dutta P. K. (2017, July 31). Doklam: What China stands to lose if it goes to war with India. India Today. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/doklam-china-india-war-narendra-modi-xi-jinping-1027267-2017-07-31>.

The ongoing Doklam Standoff between India and China has the potential to impact the trade relationships between the two countries, which already have a trade surplus in favor of China. The standoff has led to increased tensions between the two nations and resulted in some Indian businesses boycotting Chinese products. This move may significantly impact Chinese imports, leading to a slowdown in the Chinese economy.

If the boycott gains momentum and more Indian businesses follow suit, it could lead to a more significant fall in Chinese imports, further affecting the Chinese economy. The Indian government has also initiated various measures to reduce its reliance on Chinese products and promote domestic manufacturing, thereby setting the stage for a long-term shift in trade relationships.

A resolution of the Doklam Standoff is critical to ensure that the trade relationships between India and China remain stable. The development of well-established trade relationships is vital to promote economic growth and ensure the prosperity of both nations.

- **Influence on other border disputes**

The ongoing Doklam standoff between India and China has the potential to escalate into more significant issues, influencing other border disputes such as the conflicts in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The standoff may embolden China to become more assertive in its territorial claims, which could lead to additional standoffs in the future.

Moreover, China's growing military capabilities and infrastructure development along the border region give rise to concerns of further disputes. The border disputes between the two nations have been ongoing for decades, with both countries claiming territories as their own.

The Doklam standoff highlights the need for both nations to establish better communication channels to resolve border disputes peacefully. As two major economies in the world, India and China must find a way to resolve their differences and work towards a mutually beneficial relationship. The resolution of the Doklam standoff can provide an opportunity for both countries to re-consider their approach to border disputes and engage in constructive dialogue to avoid future conflicts.

- **Impacts on regional stability**

The Doklam standoff has far-reaching consequences that can alter the strategic balance in the region. The standoff can potentially intensify the strategic competition, with other key players such as the United States, Japan, or Russia, keen to leverage the situation for their benefits. Furthermore, this standoff can provoke the involvement of other regional actors, leading to a shift in the balance of power. The involvement of external players may further complicate the situation, leading to possible military or economic escalations.⁹

The Doklam standoff has the potential to create fault lines in the region that could significantly affect security and stability. It is paramount for regional players to maintain a peaceful and constructive dialogue to address border disputes and avoid future conflicts.

In conclusion, the implications of the Doklam standoff are significant and require a multi-faceted approach from all regional actors to resolve the conflict constructively. Any escalations in the current standoff could have far-reaching consequences not only for the region but also for global security.

- **General mistrust**

The ongoing Doklam standoff has intensified the pre-existing mistrust between India and China, leading to significant future implications. The strained relationship between the two nations has the potential to impact future collaborations on regional and global issues such as climate change and world trade. The mistrust between India and China may lead to a slowdown in their joint efforts to tackle pressing global issues, putting at risk other multilateral agreements.

Moreover, if the standoff is prolonged or violent, it may cause a significant deterioration in diplomatic ties between these two nations. This could affect the broader geopolitical environment of the region, leading to possible realignments of regional or global powers. To avoid such future implications, it is imperative that both India and China actively engage in dialogue, defuse tensions, and seek to resolve their differences peacefully. It is necessary to foster greater cooperation and work together as responsible regional and global partners.

- **Military confrontations**

A prolonged stalemate in the ongoing Doklam standoff may escalate Chinese aggression and increase the likelihood of violent military confrontations in the future. The possibility of such conflict can lead to grave consequences for regional stability and threaten global peace. Therefore, it is crucial for both India and China to exhibit restraint, focus on diplomatic solutions and work towards resolving their differences through dialogue.¹⁰ Any violent military confrontations would only compound the problems and aggravate an already complex situation, which needs to be resolved through peaceful means. It is essential to prioritize peace and stability in the region and avoid any escalation that could compromise both.

- **Impact on China's Belt and Road Initiative**

The Doklam Crisis had implications for China's flagship foreign policy initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a massive infrastructure development plan that aims to connect China with Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. The initiative has been viewed with suspicion by India, which sees it as a way for China to expand its influence in the region. The Doklam Crisis highlighted the challenges that China faces in implementing the BRI, particularly in areas where there are territorial disputes. The standoff between India and China was a direct result of the BRI, as China was constructing a

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2018, April 28). India–China informal summit at Wuhan. Retrieved from https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan.

¹⁰ TNN (2018, May 29). No change in status quo at Doklam face-off site: Swaraj. Times of India. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/no-change-in-status-quo-at-doklam-face-off-site-swaraj/articleshow/64361203.cms>.

road as part of the initiative.¹¹ Without a resolution to the border dispute, it is likely that the BRI will face significant obstacles in countries such as India.¹² The Doklam standoff between India and China can impact China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a few ways:

1. Delay in projects- Due to the standoff, India's decision to boycott Chinese goods and its opposition to the BRI project may result in the slowdown or delay in some of the projects under the initiative, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
2. Security concerns – The standoff has highlighted security concerns for the implementation of projects under the BRI, particularly for those passing through disputed territories. It may require China to reconsider and modify its approach to risk assessment and security protocols.
3. Geopolitical implications – The Doklam standoff's geopolitical implications extend beyond the India-China border. Other countries in the region, such as Nepal and Bhutan, where China is pursuing BRI projects, may now be cautious about their involvement, which could slow the initiative's progress.
4. Trust deficit – The Doklam Standoff also widened the trust deficit between India and China, which could hamper future collaboration and strengthen India's opposition to the BRI. Similarly, the Indian and Chinese governments may be more cautious and even suspicious of each other's involvement in future projects or even diplomatic engagements.
5. Alternatives – Countries, particularly those in the region, may begin to seek alternative partnerships for their infrastructure projects, leading to a shift away from BRI. This possibility may weaken China's strategic influence in the region and impact the initiative's potential success.

The Doklam standoff's impact on BRI is difficult to predict as the standoff is an ongoing political issue, and its impact may vary according to the states' strategic interests.

- **Impact on India's Foreign Policy**

The Doklam Crisis served as a turning point in India's foreign policy. The standoff showed that India is willing to stand up to China and defend what it sees as its national security interests. It showcased India's determination to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity against any perceived threat. The clash at the border also reinforced India's need for stronger alliances with neighboring countries, especially given China's expansionist agenda in the region. By standing up to China, India demonstrated that it is a formidable force to be reckoned with, and it sent a message to the international community that India will not back down when it comes to defending its interests.¹³

Despite India's show of strength, the Doklam Crisis also shed light on the limitations of India's foreign policy. India needs to build stronger alliances to challenge China's growing influence and assertiveness in the region. India must develop a more cohesive and consistent foreign policy approach that takes into account such issues as trade, military strength, and diplomacy. The crisis also highlighted the importance of India's relationships with other smaller nations in the region, such as Bhutan, for combating China's hegemonic ambitions. India must stay vigilant and engaged to avoid mistakes that could compromise the nation's interests and those of its allies. With determination, India can adopt a strong foreign policy approach that benefits both India and its neighbors.

- **Impact on the International Order**

The Doklam Crisis had broader implications for the international order amidst the ongoing shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world. The significance of small and middle powers in shaping global policies and their potential to change the existing power dynamics was spotlighted by the crisis. It also highlighted the divergent visions of India and China towards the international system, with India endorsing a multipolar world and China aiming to gain more influence on the global stage.¹⁴ These differing perspectives are indicative of the future behavioural tendencies of the two countries, and this divergence could impact the geopolitical and economic landscape in the coming years.¹⁵

These implications may persist in the future, but the intensity and scope depend on both countries' willingness to engage in dialogue and find solutions.

Conclusion

The Doklam Crisis was an alarming wake-up call for the complex relationship between India and China. As the two countries are among the world's most populous nations, the crisis was of great significance and attracted the attention of the international community. The almost two-month long standoff that occurred in 2017 created significant tensions between the two Asian powers, which had several far-reaching consequences. Both Indian and Chinese troops have been gradually disengaging from their positions in the Doklam region since August 2017 standoff. The situation is still tense, and both the countries are still maintaining a troop presence in the area. The issue remains unresolved, and periodic border skirmishes or disputes continue to occur.

The crisis had far-reaching implications for India-China relations, the global economic order, regional stability, and the future of India-China relations. The consequences of the crisis on the global economic order were significant, as it altered the economic ties

¹¹ Bhaya A. G. (2018, October 6). *India offers China access to northeast in BRI strategic shift*. CGTN. Retrieved from https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414d7a597a4e79457a6333566d54/share_p.html

¹² Blah M. (2018). China's belt and road initiative and India's concerns. *Strategic Analysis*, 42(4), 313–332.

¹³ Sridharan E. (2017). Where is India headed? Possible future directions in Indian foreign policy. *International Affairs*, 93(1), 51–68.

¹⁴ Duque M. G. (2018). Recognizing international status: A relational approach. *International Studies Quarterly*, 62(3), 577–592.

¹⁵ Tang S. P. (2019). The future of international order(s). *The Washington Quarterly*, 41(4), 117–131.

between India and China. India's reluctance to depend extensively on Chinese investments and trade had a far-reaching influence on economic policies in both countries.

This paper has provided an in-depth analysis of the Doklam Crisis by highlighting the most critical events leading to the standoff, discussing the consequences and exploring the implications for the future. It has stressed the need for both countries to resolve their long-standing issues and build stronger strategic partnerships to counter China's growing influence in the region. The paper emphasized the importance of small and middle powers in shaping the international system and how they should continue to play a leading role in global affairs.

Finally, in the post-Doklam era, the world has witnessed a more cohesive and consistent foreign policy approach from India. The Indian government has emphasized the significance of diplomatic dialogue and negotiation, which has helped to reduce tensions between the two countries, even though outstanding issues remain unresolved. Going forward, it is critical for both countries to prioritize dialogue, respect territorial integrity, and maintain regional stability while avoiding another incident like the Doklam Crisis.

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