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Sino-Indian Standoff on the Doklam plateau

Abstract

In the summer of 2017, the armies of the two most populous nations of the world stood eye-to-eye, seemingly without any preceding cause, on the Doklam plateau, the ownership of which is disputed by both Bhutan and China. The aim of this paper is to place this episode in the context of Sino-Indian relations, assessing its repercussions for their shared future as two neighbouring nuclear powers, as well as for their past, keeping in mind the lasting scars and consequences of the Sino-Indian War of 1962, which was caused by similar reasons. We will search for the answers to the following questions: how was this border dispute similar or different than the one 55 years before? What effect did the then-approaching 19th Party Congress have on the decisions of Beijing and Xi Jinping? What was the reason of the sudden assertiveness of the Indian side? What did Bhutan, the third party, think about the dispute, stuck between the two Asian giants? And meanwhile, where was the United States of America?

Keywords: Border conflict, Bhutan, China, Doklam plateau, India.

Introduction

The aim of this study is introduction and analysis of the events of the summer of 2017 which transpired between China and India on the Doklam plateau.¹ This episode, which lasted from June 16² to August 28,³ when Chinese and Indian troops engaged in a staring match on the disputed Doklam plateau, is different in many ways from previous border clashes and incidents, as this disputed area has been mostly calm so far, and opposed to other border disputes between the two countries,

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¹ Also called Dolam plateau.

² Ankit Panda, 'Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End?', 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01.03.2018).

³ Simon Denyer, Annie Gowen, 'Who blinked in the China-India military standoff?', 30 August 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/30/who-blinked-in-china-india-military-standoff/>, (accessed 01. 03. 2018.)

it happened on the land of a third country. After a short historical summary and a brief introduction of Bhutan, the third player of the incident, I continue with the history of the area in question and previous attempts at negotiations, ending with the antecedent events of the standoff. The second part will deal with the motivations and arguments of the Chinese and Indian sides, finishing with the resolution and possible continuation of the crisis.

The first and bloodiest conflict between the two countries reborn after the Second World War was the war of 1962. As a result of colonial power politics, the two countries share a nearly 3,500 km-long and often disputed border. The two biggest disputed areas are Aksai Chin in the west, just north of Ladakh, and the border area at Arunachal Pradesh on the eastern side of the border. The former is controlled by the Chinese, while the latter area is controlled by the Indians. In the middle of the shared border, there are numerous smaller passes under dispute. The first border incidents starting in the 1950s culminated in a war, when on the eastern side of the border, Chinese troops attacked Indian patrols crossing to the other side of the infamous McMahon-Line, and after a successful offensive, pushed back the Indian troops deep behind the line with another attack. The war ended with a unilateral ceasefire by the Chinese, after pulling back behind the line.⁴

⁴ Ádám Róma, *Sino-Indian Relations Since the Second World War - From Panchsheel to the Sino-Indian War of 1962 - Deterioration of Relations*, BA Dissertation, Eötvös Lóránd University, 2016, p.52.



Picture 1: Disputed areas in 1962⁵

In the decades following the war, there were no shortages of border incidents, with the last ones in 2013 at Depsang⁶ and in 2014 at Chumar.⁷ The border-section now in question has been relatively silent until now, except for some local skirmishes in 1967.⁸ Although the trijunction between the Bhutanese, Chinese and Indian border has never been a centre of this kind of attention before, there were signs pointing to it, even as far back as 1959. In that year Jawaharal Nehru pointed out

⁵ Gen. Deepak Kapoor, 'Chinese Provocation: Is India Prepared?', 3 May 2013, <http://www.facenfacts.com/NewsDetails/38459/chinese-provocation:-is-india-prepared?.htm>, (accessed 01.03.2018.)

⁶ Chinese built a base in a disputed area, then the Indians did the same, the incident lasted three weeks.

⁷ A standoff for two weeks, because of a Chinese road-building plan, the conflict ended with concessions from both sides.

⁸ At the Nathu La and Cho La passes.

in a letter written to Zhou Enlai that certain Chinese maps showed substantial Bhutanese territories belonging to Tibet.⁹

Bhutan between giants

As we can see from above, the events of the summer of 2017 are of vital concern not just for China and India, but for Bhutan too, as the conflict was on soil claimed by Bhutan. For this reason, a short, but crucial, introduction of the small Himalayan kingdom is necessary. Although its size is smaller than Switzerland and its population is less than Cyprus', its geographical position elevated it into its current position. Not long ago it was in relative seclusion from the world between the ranges of the Himalayas, but it has started to open up to the rest of the world. This relative seclusion can be put into perspective by the fact that television and internet was legalised in 1999.¹⁰ The kingdom also transformed into a constitutional monarchy, with the first elections held in 2008,¹¹ and the third to be held in 2018.¹² This change was initiated by the current king of Bhutan, Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck.

A closer look at Bhutan's relations with its two neighbours reveals disproportional differences. While diplomatic relations with China are almost nonexistent, India, stepping into the shoes the British left behind, is exerting significant influence on Bhutan's security and foreign policy. Although the two countries 'friendship treaty' made in 1947 was updated in 2007 with the recent changes in Bhutan, thus gaining more autonomy in the two aforementioned areas, the following sentence should be noted:

⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Prime Minister Nehru's Letter to Chou En-lai', 26 September 1959.

¹⁰ Brian Benedictus, 'Bhutan and the Great Power Tussle', 2 August 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151222212344/http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/bhutan-and-the-great-power-tussle/>, (accessed 01.03.2018.)

¹¹ Pillalamarri Akhilesh, Subanthore Aswin, 'What Do the Bhutanese People Think About Doklam?', 14 August 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170929185502/https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/what-do-the-bhutanese-people-think-about-doklam/>, (accessed 01.03.2018.)

¹² Chaudhuri Rudra, 'Looking for Godot', 3 September 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/looking-for-godot-doklam-standoff-india-china-bhutan-neighbours-lite/>, (accessed 01.03.2018.)

„Neither government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other.”¹³

Besides the Treaty, India’s role in Bhutan can be further explained with the fact that India is Bhutan’s biggest economic and trade partner: Bhutan exports 60% of its goods and services to India and 75% of its imports come from there. India also plays the strongest, if not the only, role in Bhutan’s energy sector, and regularly provides credits and aid to Bhutan.



Picture 2: An Indian bridge-construction project in Bhutan¹⁴

But the exclusion of China is not without its reasons. On a map issued after the birth of the People’s Republic the greater part of Bhutan is shown as an ancient Chinese territory, while the following statement from 1960 also made Bhutan more worry:

¹³ Ankit Panda, ‘The Political Geography of the India-China Crisis at Doklam’, 13 July 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170714232229/http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/the-political-geography-of-the-india-china-crisis-at-doklam/>, (accessed 01.03.2018).

¹⁴ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, ‘Doklam discussed, Pakistan skipped: Here’s what happened at the 1 hour meet between Xi and Modi’, 5 September 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/doklam-discussed-pakistan-skipped-heres-what-happened-at-the-1-hour-meet-between-xi-and-modi/articleshow/60372716.cms>, (accessed 01.03.2018).

“Bhutanese, Sikkimese and Ladakhis form a united family in Tibet. They have always been subject to Tibet and the great motherland of China. They must once again be united and taught the communist doctrine.”

After these events, Bhutan closed off the 470 km long border section and ended all relations with China. The Bhutanese Royal Army was also established in 1963, still vividly remembering the annexation of Tibet.¹⁵



Sources: maps4news.com/HERE, Reuters, openstreetmap, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indian Express

THE WASHINGTON POST

Picture 3: The disputed area and the standoff location¹⁶

¹⁵ Brian Benedictus, 'Bhutan and the Great Power Tussle', 2 August 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151222212344/http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/bhutan-and-the-great-power-tussle/>, (accessed 01.03.2018).

¹⁶ Denyer and Gowen, 2017.

The Origin of the Border Dispute and Previous Attempts to Solve it

The origin of the border dispute goes back to a survey in the 19th century, which was followed by the *Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet* signed in Calcutta in 1890. The aim of the convention was the ascertainment of the borders between the then-British protectorate, the Kingdom of Sikkim, and Tibet. But India's interpretation of the Convention is different, seemingly confirmed by the geographical reality, as in this Convention, just like in any other Himalayan border-treaty from the era, the main principle behind the determination of the borders was the watershed principle, meaning the border falls on the highest continuous mountain ridge in the area in question. Unsurprisingly, there is a ridge in the Doklam area too, but this ridge stops at Batang La. This is the point which the Bhutanese and Indian side see as the trijunction point, even though the text of the Convention puts this point at Mount Gimpochi, south of Batang La. Because of this, the first sentence of the Convention, which states the use of the watershed principle, comes into conflict with the second sentence, which names Mount Gimpochi as the end of the mountain ridge. This contradiction is further complicated by the fact that no map was made with the Convention, and some Sikkimese sources claim that Mount Gimpochi is in fact Batang-La.¹⁷

¹⁷ Brian Benedictus, 'Bhutan and the Great Power Tussle', 2 August 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151222212344/http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/bhutan-and-the-great-power-tussle/>, (accessed 01.03.2018).



Picture 4: The contradiction on a map¹⁸

This was not the first time that this Convention had an important impact in the area, as the Kingdom of Sikkim and Tibet was not a part of it, thus Tibet rejected the Convention, a decision that was followed by the punitive Younghusband expedition in 1903-1904. After the expedition, the British recognised Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, in exchange for a number of rights in China. The Convention is also tied into the birth of the Kingdom of Bhutan as a hereditary monarchy in 1907 under the British Empire to serve as a buffer between India and Chinese-ruled Tibet.¹⁹

Negotiations

The negotiations to solve the problem in this inaccurately surveyed and contradictory border section with the other six disputed areas started in 1972. While the negotiations started between China and India, by 1984 Beijing had succeeded in bringing Bhutan to the table

¹⁸Ankit Panda, 'Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End?', 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01.03.2018.).

¹⁹Joshi Manoj, Doklam: To start at the very beginning, *ORF Special Report*, Observer Research Foundation, 2017, <http://www.orfonline.org/research/doklam-start-very-beginning/> (accessed 01.03.2018).

instead of India.²⁰ Since then, there have been a total of 24 rounds of talk about the disputed areas²¹ without success. Although in 1996 China offered a swap-deal to Bhutan, which was seriously considering accepting it in 1997, but in the end, possibly thanks to Indian pressure, it was rejected. The first real progress was in 1998 after the twelfth round, which was the *Agreement to Maintain Peace and Tranquility on the Bhutan-China Border*, the first bilateral agreement between the two countries. In this Agreement China recognised the Bhutanese sovereignty and agreed to maintain the peaceful conditions, on the basis of the status quo before March 1959, and at the same time refraining from unilaterally changing the aforementioned status quo. Later, in 2007, Bhutan also issued a map, conceding a mountain to China, but this gesture did not solve the question, and moreover the Chinese claims shows continuous growth. If Bhutan would have accepted every claim, it would face losing around 4,500 km², 10% of its territory.²²



²⁰ Brian Benedictus, 'Bhutan and the Great Power Tussle', 2 August 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151222212344/http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/bhutan-and-the-great-power-tussle/>, (accessed 01.03.2018).

²¹ 'The Facts and China's Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops' Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory.', *Government of China*, 2017.

²² "Bhutan-China Border Mismatch", 1 January 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170810053429/http://www.bhutannewsservice.org/bhutan-china-border-mismatch/>. (access: 01.03.2018).

Picture 5: The location of the planned road construction²³

The Incident in 2017 and Its Immediate Antecedents

The catalyst for the military standoff was a Chinese plan to extend a road in the disputed area.²⁴ According to Bhutanese and Indian statements, Chinese engineers started the work on June 16, and in response Indian troops arrived on June 18, crossing the border and halting the construction, resulting in the standoff.²⁵ According to the statement of the Bhutanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese planned to build a motorable road to the south, from Dokola in the



direction of a Bhutanese military base at Zomperli. On the basis of the agreements before, Bhutan saw this as a violation of the status quo, and called China to reinstate the status quo preceding June 16. The planned road was supposed to be the prolongation of a dirt road built in 2005, which had been used up to then as a way to reach the border area, and from where the Chinese troops could patrol and survey the area on foot until the military base at Zomperli.

²³ Ankit Panda, 'What's Driving the India-China Standoff at Doklam?', 18 July 2017 <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/whats-driving-the-india-china-standoff-at-doklam/> (accessed 01. 03. 2018).

²⁴ Dashed arrow on the map.

²⁵ Ankit Panda, 'Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End?', 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01. 03. 2018).

*Picture 6: A map issued by the Chinese Government depicting the disputed area*²⁶

The public only got wind of the events on June 23, when the Chinese closed down the Nathu La pass, preventing pilgrims to pass. At first the Chinese side cited the danger of landslides as their reason, but on the 26th, the Chinese spokesperson, Geng Shuang admitted that the closing down of Nathu La happened out of security concerns, and then stated the Chinese standpoint. This was that Indian troops had crossed the border and obstructed the Chinese border patrol in their routine tasks, despite the fact that the border has been settled according to the Convention of 1890. On June 28, the Bhutanese ambassador in New Delhi gave an interview, where he explained the Bhutanese standpoint about the disputed border and the status quo, reaffirmed the next day with the official statement of the Bhutanese Government.²⁷

This signaled the start of the battle of statements, which lasted until the end of August. There were more notable events during this time, for example the G20 summit, where both Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi were in attendance, but there were no separate meetings between them, which could have helped to ease the tension.²⁸

Up until the end of the conflict in late August, while the armies were staring each other down on the plateau, the two nations started to issue statements and publish articles as part of their dispute, both hoping to force the other to back down, while stressing their interpretation of the events. Despite the strong language of these publications, often loaded with nationalistic sentiments, both sides refrained from armed confrontations, supported by their shared and time-proven rule of not letting the border patrols use loaded guns while carrying out their duties, but this did not prevent them from using other creative methods, whether it was simple pushing and shoving, fighting with their gun-

²⁶ Ankit Panda, 'Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End?', 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01. 03. 2018).

²⁷ Joshi Manoj, 'Doklam: To start at the very beginning', *ORF Special Report*. Observer Research Foundation, 2017.

²⁸ Steven Lee Myers, Ellen Barry, Max Fisher, 'How India and China Have Come to the Brink Over a Remote Mountain Pass', 26 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/world/asia/doklam-plateau-china-india-bhutan.html> (accessed 01.03.2018).

stock or pelting rocks.²⁹ There were around 300-400 soldiers from both sides in the immediate vicinity, while approximately 3,000-4,000 battle-ready troops were stationed nearby.³⁰ An interesting episode of the quarrel was a video made by the Chinese Xinhua News Agency, which listed the sins of India, presenting the Indians in a mocking and caricature-like way.³¹ Despite all of these, diplomacy succeeded at the end of August, with both sides withdrawing from the area. In the next parts, I will attempt to analyse the motivations of the three countries and the possible consequences.

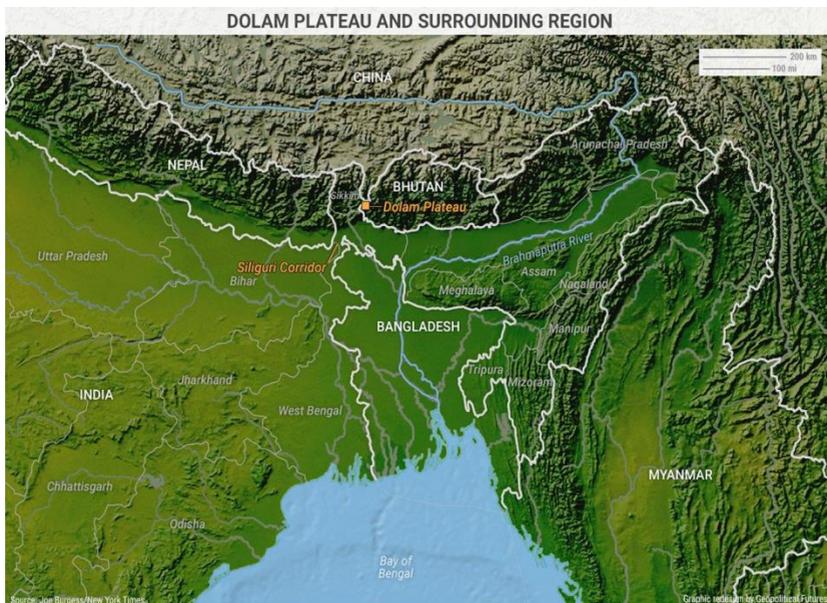
If we read the document issued by the Chinese Government on August 2, we could ask, why would New Delhi interfered with a road construction using 270 soldiers in an area belonging to China based on the Convention of 1890, especially if we take into account that the area is disputed by Bhutan, not by India, and the number of negotiations clearly implies the will to resolve it on both sides.³² Unfortunately, as we saw before, the Convention offers little help, and is not as reliable in pinpointing the trijunction point as Beijing would like it to be.

²⁹ Ankit Panda, 'Stone-Pelting at Lake Pangong: India, China Border Tensions Under the Spotlight', 21 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/stone-pelting-at-lake-pangong-india-china-border-tensions-under-the-spotlight/> (accessed 01.03.2018).

³⁰ Fedrika Allison, 'China and India may be on a path to war', 5 August 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170810052011/http://uk.businessinsider.com/china-and-india-and-doklam-2017-8?r=US&IR=T> (accessed 01.03.2018).

³¹ Chandran Nyshka, 'Racist video from China's official press agency mocks Indians', 17 August 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/17/chinese-media-xinhua-mocks-indians-and-pm-narendra-modis-policies-in-racist-video.html> (accessed 01.03.2018).

³² "The Facts and China's Position..."



Picture 7: *The Siliguri corridor and the Doklam plateau*³³

Keeping in mind, that if China successfully enforces her claims against Bhutan, India would face a grave security problem, as the Chinese military on the disputed Doklam plateau would be able to threaten the territorial integrity of India from a highly advantageous position, because just south of the plateau lies the 23 km-wide Siliguri corridor, also known as the “chicken-neck” between Nepal and Bangladesh, which provides the connection between the main territories and the north-western states of India. Accounting for this geostrategic weakness, the never-before shown assertiveness of the Indian interference is everything but surprising,³⁴ even if it happened on the soil of a third country, or she has to face accusations of infringing international law and the national sovereignty of China.³⁵ According to India, there is also an obscure agreement made in 2012, where the two sides agreed to

³³ Fedrika, 2017.

³⁴ Ankit Panda, ‘Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End?’, 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01. 03. 2018).

³⁵ “The Facts and China’s Position...”

consider the Convention of 1890 only in a broad sense, and further talks would be needed to precisely determine the border alignment. However China never commented on this and kept referencing to the Convention as the conclusive evidence.³⁶

Another accusation that India had to face was that Bhutan had never asked for India's help. True enough, there were no official or public request of this nature, but the close nature of the two countries' connection can't be ignored, especially seeing that there were already interferences from India's part during Bhutan-China negotiations, and the use of unofficial channels is always an option, which could seem entirely plausible even if we just think of their 'friendship treaty', or just taking into account the Indian statements where they mention their cooperation with Bhutan. The silence of the latter country during the crisis drew heavy criticism from both the Chinese and Indian public, but local sources attributes this to a well-thought out strategy to not interfere with the Sino-Indian negotiations, leaving them more room to maneuver and save face, thus evading the possibility of a larger military conflict, which would have happened on their land.³⁷

Motivations of China

To understand what happened on the Doklam plateau and why, a much needed summary of the Chinese – suspected – motivations is needed, as their actions served as the catalyst for the crisis. According to the official statements given by the Chinese, this road-building plan does not seem as important or menacing as the Indian reaction would suggest. From their perspective, they wanted to improve the infrastructure in an undeveloped area, inside Chinese borders. While India over recent decades has already made huge progress in infrastructural developments in the nearby areas, China has not done anything similar, and most of the already existing roads are dirt tracks, making them vulnerable to the harsh weather conditions in the Himalayas. It is entirely plausible, that Beijing decided that this year would be the time for undertaking infrastructural improvements in the region. The only difference between them is that while India made these improvements on undisputed Indian soil, the Chinese undertaking was supposed to happen on disputed soil,

³⁶ Joshi Manoj, 'Doklam: To start at the very beginning', *ORF Special Report*. Observer Research Foundation, 2017.

³⁷ Tenzing Lamsang, 'The Third Leg of Doklam', 8 May 2017, <http://thebhutanese.bt/the-third-leg-of-doklam-2/> (accessed [03.01.2018](#)).

which they undoubtedly knew. Still, there are signs, that China did not consider this building plan as a violation of the status quo. Such a sign was an unnamed diplomatic source from New Delhi, who claimed that the Chinese had already informed the Indians about their plans on June 1, two weeks before the start of the road building. If this piece of information is true, it would explain the overly negative reactions to the Indian actions from Beijing.³⁸

Besides the improvement of infrastructure in the area, there are other interpretations for the Chinese “provocation”. The Chinese actions could be seen as a tool to pressure Bhutan, mainly to reach a swift agreement in the border disputes, as well as to finally establish embassy-level relations between the two states. China’s main objective in the region is to counterbalance Indian influence, even if attaining Chinese hegemony in Bhutan and the neighbouring small states is an unrealistic goal, a less India-dependent region would be a both an attainable and favourable outcome from Beijing’s perspective. A Bhutan more open to China could also help develop the Tibetan region in line with Beijing’s aims, given that before colonial times, Bhutan served as a regional trading hotspot, which might have the potential to re-emerge as such, thus facilitating much needed regional development.³⁹

Another interpretation of the events from a long-term geopolitical viewpoint takes into account that control over the Siliguri corridor means control over the upper part of the Brahmaputra River, which flows through Bangladesh into the Indian ocean. Controlling the river means controlling the water sources of the region, as well as an open route to the ocean, thus avoiding the strong resistance facing the Chinese in the South China Sea, although at this point, this interpretation has to be taken with a grain of salt.⁴⁰

Resolution and Aftermath

The worst border dispute of the last 30 years ended in a peaceful, diplomatic way, despite concerns of an armed conflict. At the end of August, both countries issued a statement reporting of

³⁸ Ankit Panda, ‘Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End?’, 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01. 03. 2018).

³⁹ Jha Tilak, ‘China and its Peripheries: Limited Objectives in Bhutan’, *Issue Brief*, No. 233, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2013.

⁴⁰ Fedrika, 2017.

a mutual agreement about the withdrawal of troops from both sides and China has refrained from further pressing the issue of road building in question, at least for now.⁴¹ Seeing that the aim of both Bhutan and India was the restoration of the status quo preceeding June 16, they appear to be the “winner” of this conflict, while letting China save face, as according to the agreement, the first side to retreat was India. In this way Beijing is able to communicate some kind of success at home.⁴² However the origin of the dispute is yet to be resolved and China still sustains her claim to the plateau, continuing the patrols and surveys, without any guarantee of preventing a repeat of an incident of the same nature. China also had a number of other factors which might have helped to arrive at a peaceful solution. To an aging China with a slowing economy, a “cold war” with India spanning through generations would definitely be a drawback,⁴³ especially with the heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula, the question of which is more vital than a border dispute on a remote Himalayan plateau. Another angle is that a risky, drawn-out military conflict might have proven disadvantageous to Xi Jinping just months before the 19th Party Congress, where he cemented his paramount leadership over the Party. The BRICS summit, held in Xiamen, China in September, 2017, was also drawing closer, where the aim of the Chinese leadership was to emphasise China’s positive global role, and a serious conflict with another member state would have been counterproductive.^{44, 45} The circumstances mentioned above coupled with the fact that China has other options to bolster its capabilities in the region, where Indian interference can be avoided, and does not happen to be a disputed area, can help understanding the Chinese motivation to arrive to the conclusion at the end of August.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Jeffrey Gettleman, Javier Hernández, ‘China and India Agree to Ease Tensions in Border Dispute’, 28 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/world/asia/china-india-standoff-withdrawal.html> (accessed 01.03.2018.).

⁴² Ankit Panda, ‘Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End ?’, 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01. 03. 2018).

⁴³ Gettleman, Hernández, 2017.

⁴⁴ Denyer, Gowen, 2017.

⁴⁵ Fravel M. Taylor, ‘Why India Did Not ‘Win’ the Standoff with China’, 1 September 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/why-india-did-not-win-the-standoff-with-china/> (accessed 01.03.2018).

⁴⁶ Ankit Panda, ‘Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End ?’, 29 August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/> (accessed 01. 03. 2018).

Although the risky move by India at the middle of June proved to be successful on the short-term, but even with a more formidable military presence on the border, a military engagement with China would easily put an end to any domestic goal that Narendra Modi is working towards, from the centralisation of the political power to the much needed economic reforms, not to mention the war costs in such an inhospitable and desolate area like the ridges of the Himalayas.⁴⁷ Although there are signs signaling the normalisation of relations after the summer, like the visit of the Indian Defense Minister's visit to the border, where she paid a visit to the Chinese border patrol too,⁴⁸ or the one hour long talk of Xi and Modi at the BRICS summit,⁴⁹ the troop movements in the area paint a different picture. Already in September reports from the area confirmed the withdrawal of the troops, but only to an extent of 150 meters on both sides.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Fedrika, 2017.

⁴⁸ 'Ready to maintain peace with India: China on Sitharaman's visit to Nathu La', *Press Trust of India*, 9 October 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ready-to-maintain-peace-at-frontiers-with-india-china-on-sitharaman-s-visit-to-nathu-la/story-EVdlopKMXI0rkre9mRlZqM.html> (accessed 01.03.2018).

⁴⁹ Chaudhury, 2017.

⁵⁰ 'Doklam standoff: Indian, Chinese troops still on face-off site, they have merely stepped back 150 meters each', *FE Online*, 7 September 2017, <http://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/doklam-standoff-indian-chinese-troops-still-on-face-off-site-they-have-merely-stepped-back-150-meters-each/844812/> (accessed 01.03.2018).



Picture 8: Indian Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman meets Chinese border troops⁵¹

It seems that relations between the two countries have returned to their normal course for now, but the reemergence of the border dispute, either on the Doklam plateau or at any other Sino-Indian border section, is still a reality. Although the United States offered little comment on the events transpiring at Doklam, in part thanks to the murky nature of the claims, in part thanks to the nuclear weapon tests conducted by North Korea, where Chinese assistance would help them greatly, Washington's attitude could change at any time. The first Asian trip of Donald Trump also left out India from the itinerary, but the fact remains that most of their military drills are conducted with each other, which could serve as a basis of cooperation to counter China in the region.⁵²

⁵¹ Press Trust of India, 2017.

⁵² Brahma Chellaney, 'Asia's New Entente', 3 November 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/asia-power-balance-china-tillerson-speech-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-11> (accessed 01.03.2018).

