

Evaluating the Diplomatic Repercussions of the Doklam Standoff on Indo-Bhutan Relations

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Abstract

The Doklam standoff, a 2017 border confrontation between India and China, had significant implications for Indo-Bhutan relations. This paper aims to evaluate the diplomatic repercussions of the Doklam issue on the strategic partnership between India and Bhutan. By examining official statements, policy changes, and bilateral engagements post-Doklam, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the immediate, short-term, and long-term impacts of the standoff. Key findings indicate that while the standoff initially strained Indo-Bhutan relations due to Bhutan's strategic position, it ultimately strengthened their alliance through increased diplomatic and military cooperation. The research highlights significant shifts in foreign policy and defense strategies, showcasing India's commitment to Bhutan's security and sovereignty. Additionally, the paper explores the economic and social dimensions of the relationship, noting enhanced economic agreements and cultural exchanges that helped mitigate diplomatic tensions. Through case studies and expert interviews, the study offers insights into the broader regional implications for South Asia, emphasizing the need for continued strategic dialogue and cooperation to address future challenges. This paper contributes to the understanding of how geopolitical conflicts can reshape bilateral relations and offers recommendations for policymakers to reinforce the Indo-Bhutan partnership in an increasingly complex regional landscape.

Keywords: Doklam Standoff, Indo-Bhutan Relations, Diplomatic Repercussions, Strategic Partnership, Border Conflict, South Asia Geopolitics

Introduction

The Indo-Bhutan relationship, characterized by deep-rooted cultural ties and strategic cooperation, faced a significant test during the Doklam standoff in 2017. This border confrontation between India and China over the Doklam plateau, a territory claimed by both Bhutan and China, not only highlighted the geopolitical sensitivities of the region but also

underscored the strategic importance of Bhutan in the context of India-China relations. Historically, Bhutan has maintained a close and symbiotic relationship with India, relying on Indian support for its defense and economic development. The Doklam crisis brought this alliance to the forefront, as India intervened to prevent Chinese road construction in the disputed area, citing security concerns for both India and Bhutan. The immediate aftermath of the standoff saw heightened diplomatic activity and strategic recalibration, with India and Bhutan reinforcing their commitments to each other's security and sovereignty. This paper seeks to evaluate the diplomatic repercussions of the Doklam issue on Indo-Bhutan relations, focusing on changes in policy, strategic alignment, and bilateral engagements. Through an analysis of official statements, diplomatic negotiations, and subsequent policy shifts, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the standoff has influenced the strategic partnership between the two nations. Additionally, it examines the economic and social dimensions of their relationship, exploring how enhanced economic agreements and cultural exchanges have helped to mitigate the diplomatic tensions. By incorporating case studies and expert interviews, the paper offers nuanced insights into the broader regional implications for South Asia and underscores the importance of continued strategic dialogue and cooperation. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on how geopolitical conflicts can reshape bilateral relations and offers recommendations for policymakers to strengthen the Indo-Bhutan partnership in an increasingly complex and competitive regional landscape.

Review of literature

(Behera & Mayilvaganan, 2021) studied “The China–Nepal–India Economic Corridor: wishful thinking or regional aspiration beyond rhetoric” and said that The China-Nepal-India Economic Corridor (CNIIEC) aims to improve the economies of Nepal, India, and China. However, India's lack of enthusiasm and territorial disputes between China and India have raised doubts about the project's future. The competing interests in Nepal and the potential for regional cooperation between the three nations raise questions about its potential benefits and challenges.

(Doenme, 2021) studied “A Study on Trilateral Relationships of China-India and Bhutan” and said that The shifting power dynamics in South Asia reveal the trilateral ties between China, India, and Bhutan. China and India are the two most powerful actors, influencing cooperation and collaboration. Bhutan's relationship management with China and India is challenging due to paper shortages. This study uses the synchronisation theory of International Relations to compare bilateral events and frequency of connections, examining trends, challenges, and opportunities due to globalization.

(Jyoti Deka, 2021) studied “hydro-politics between India and China: the ‘brahma-hypothesis’ and securing the Brahmaputra” and said that The article emphasizes the importance of a strong international water-sharing deal with the Brahmaputra River, particularly in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, to foster a strong relationship with China and Bangladesh. It suggests India should leverage its leverage to bring China to the negotiation table and prioritize the establishment of standards for Brahmaputra management to counter China's unregulated behavior.

(Mukherji, 2021) studied “Embracing Curzon’s Political Vision to Secure India’s Cultural and Political Borders” and said that Lord Curzon, a revered figure in Bengal, played a significant role in the 1905 partition of the country. Despite his negative reputation, he believed in India's potential to recover its former glory and controlled buffer lands outside the Indian subcontinent, including the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

(Nandan, 2021) studied “Chinese hybrid warfare strategy: a threat to India’s national security” This research analyzes China's hybrid warfare strategy, which involves using psychological, media, and legal tactics to subdue adversaries without fighting. China aims to weaken India's national security and disrupt the US-India strategic alliance. Strategies include collecting sensitive information, encroachment at borders, and skirmishes. The study also explores countering China's strategy to preserve India's strategic autonomy.

(Nhamo, 2021) studied “COVID-19 Vaccines Development Discord: A Focus on the BRICS and Implications for Africa’s Access and Affordability Matters” and said that The seventeenth Sustainable Development Goal calls for global partnerships for affordable, high-quality immunizations. The BRICS group, including Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, must collaborate on COVID-19 vaccines, with South Africa potentially influencing their spread.

(Panda, 2021) studied “China as a Revisionist Power in Indo-Pacific and India’s Perception: A Power-Partner Contention” and said that Since Trump's election, US conversations about China's rise as a revisionist power have increased. India, however, has a more favorable perspective on China's presence in the Indo-Pacific region, recognizing its national security and anticipated challenges. This dualist perspective highlights India's situation as both a challenge and an opportunity in the region.

(Schmidt & Chakrabarti, 2021) studied “The interface of domestic and international factors in India's foreign policy” and said that This book explores India's foreign policy, focusing on the interaction between internal and external constraints, difficulties, and possibilities. It is the first to analyze these forces and their impact on New Delhi's decision-making. The book is valuable for policymakers, scholars, and those interested in Asian culture, as well as businesspeople in India and South Asia.

(Koirala, 2022) studied “North South Connectivity: Opportunities and Challenges in National Security and Development” and said that Nepal is transitioning from a unitary state to a federal state, aiming to encourage economic growth through liberalization and decentralisation policies. The country faces high trade expenses and lack of reliable infrastructure, affecting its competitiveness. The North-South connection provides a fresh lease of life, and the state is investing in large-scale connectivity projects. This study suggests improving multimodal connectivity and using international aid while maintaining relations with neighboring countries.

(Dubey, 2023) studied “developing proximity between China and Bhutan: connotations for India” and said that China is using coercion and persuasion to settle its territorial conflicts with Bhutan, aiming to legitimize China's authority over Tibet and Nepal. Bhutan's anti-China stance is influenced by India's historical influence in the region. To achieve these goals, China

seeks to build political and economic relations, access new markets, and boost its offensive posture against India. India must take diplomatic action against these adverse conditions.

(Xie & Warner, 2022) studied “The politics of securitization: China’s competing security agendas and their impacts on securitizing shared rivers” and said that This research investigates China's fluid securitization practices and water security concerns. It reveals that China prioritizes various water security issues, including the Mekong River and the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. China's ambition for water security is driven by strategic military considerations and concerns about water management over individual rivers, highlighting the complexity of water security.

(“An Analysis of the Underlying Reasons for the Transformation of Bhutan’s Political Party System and Party Power,” 2022) studied “An analysis of the underlying reasons for the transformation of Bhutan's political party system and party power” and said that Bhutan's party system expansion and power shift have been influenced by various factors, including the King of Bhutan, the influence of India, the ideology of the left-wing party, and the social milieu. These factors have played a significant role in shaping the political and social environment of the nation. The study of these underlying elements is crucial for the sustained expansion of Bhutan's party politics and offers a deeper understanding of the country's political climate. Understanding these factors is essential for a sustainable and sustainable expansion of Bhutan's party politics.

(Chansoria, 2023) studied “Bhutan–China Boundary Issues: The Complexities of Colonial History and Its Aftermath in Himalayan Asia” and said that Bhutan's policy towards China focuses on achieving specific objectives, such as preserving its independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. Despite ongoing efforts to find a comprehensive resolution to the border dispute, Bhutan remains committed to opposing territorial incursions to maintain domestic tranquility, prosperity, political independence, and economic advancement. The country's apprehension about Chinese military entrance in the region, compounded by the shared border between China and India, has led to Beijing's strategy of extending border talks to extract strategic concessions. Bhutan's statecraft will be crucial in balancing limited resources, longstanding friendship with India, and resolving its boundary issue with China while ensuring Thimphu does not lose out to China in the twenty-first century.

Indo-Bhutan relationship

The Indo-Bhutan relationship is a testament to enduring friendship and strategic partnership, deeply rooted in shared cultural, economic, and security interests. Historically, the relationship was formalized through the Treaty of Friendship in 1949, which established perpetual peace and non-interference in each other's internal affairs, marking the beginning of a robust bilateral partnership. This treaty was updated in 2007 to reflect the evolving geopolitical landscape, allowing Bhutan greater autonomy in its foreign policy while reaffirming India's commitment to its security. Culturally, the two countries share deep ties, with Buddhism playing a significant role in binding their peoples. Economically, India is Bhutan's largest trading partner and a major source of investment and aid, particularly in the hydropower sector, which is a cornerstone of Bhutan's economy. The bilateral cooperation in hydropower projects not only boosts Bhutan's

economy but also aids India in meeting its energy needs. Security cooperation has been another pillar of the Indo-Bhutan relationship, with India providing military training and assistance to Bhutan. The close military collaboration is underscored by regular joint exercises and the presence of the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) in Bhutan. These multifaceted ties have created a resilient and adaptable relationship, capable of withstanding external pressures and evolving in response to new challenges. The Doklam standoff in 2017 further highlighted the strategic importance of this relationship, reinforcing the need for continued cooperation and mutual support in the face of regional tensions.

The Doklam Standoff

The Doklam standoff of 2017 was a significant geopolitical event involving India, China, and Bhutan. The confrontation occurred on the Doklam plateau, an area claimed by both Bhutan and China, situated near the tri-junction of India, Bhutan, and China. The standoff began in mid-June 2017 when Indian troops crossed into Doklam to halt the construction of a road by the Chinese military, citing concerns that the road would give China a strategic advantage by providing better access to the Chumbi Valley, which borders India's strategically vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck." This corridor is a narrow stretch of land that connects the northeastern states of India to the rest of the country. The strategic importance of Doklam to Bhutan lies in its location as a buffer zone that protects Bhutanese territory from potential encroachment. For China, constructing a road through Doklam was seen as a way to strengthen its territorial claims and enhance its military logistics. The standoff lasted for 73 days, during which both India and China maintained a significant military presence in the area, leading to heightened tensions and concerns about the possibility of a broader conflict. The situation was eventually defused through diplomatic negotiations, with both sides agreeing to disengage and withdraw their troops from the immediate vicinity, although the underlying territorial dispute remains unresolved. The Doklam standoff underscored the delicate balance of power in the region and highlighted the strategic importance of Bhutan in the broader context of India-China relations.

Geopolitical Implications

The Doklam standoff had far-reaching implications for regional geopolitics, particularly concerning Bhutan's strategic significance in the India-China dynamic. Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom, found itself at the center of a major geopolitical confrontation between two regional powers. The standoff highlighted Bhutan's strategic location, which serves as a buffer between India and China. The plateau's proximity to the strategically vital Siliguri Corridor, a narrow stretch of land connecting India's northeastern states to the rest of the country, made it a focal point for both Indian and Chinese strategic interests. For India, Bhutan's stability and sovereignty are crucial for maintaining its security in the northeastern region. The standoff demonstrated India's willingness to intervene militarily to protect Bhutanese territory from perceived Chinese encroachment, reinforcing the close security ties between India and Bhutan. For China, the standoff was part of its broader strategy to assert its territorial claims and enhance its strategic position in the region. The construction of the road in Doklam was

seen as an attempt to improve its military logistics and strengthen its claims over the disputed territory. The standoff also had broader implications for regional security, as it underscored the potential for border disputes to escalate into larger conflicts involving multiple countries. It highlighted the need for effective diplomatic mechanisms to manage such disputes and prevent them from destabilizing the region. The Doklam standoff thus reinforced the strategic importance of Bhutan in the India-China dynamic and underscored the complexities of managing border disputes in a region marked by historical tensions and competing strategic interests.

India's Intervention

India's intervention in the Doklam dispute was driven by strategic and security concerns, as well as a commitment to supporting Bhutan's sovereignty. The decision to intervene was prompted by the construction of a road by Chinese troops in the Doklam plateau, an area claimed by Bhutan. India's primary concern was that the road would give China a strategic advantage by providing better access to the Chumbi Valley, which borders the sensitive Siliguri Corridor. This narrow stretch of land is crucial for India's connectivity with its northeastern states, making it a critical point of vulnerability. India's intervention involved sending troops across the border into Doklam to halt the road construction, leading to a standoff with Chinese forces. This move was a clear demonstration of India's strategic priorities, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the status quo in disputed areas that have direct implications for its national security. By intervening, India also reaffirmed its longstanding commitment to Bhutan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, reflecting the close and strategic partnership between the two countries. Throughout the standoff, India engaged in diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation peacefully, while maintaining a firm stance on the ground. The intervention underscored India's broader strategic objective of countering Chinese influence in South Asia and protecting its own strategic interests. It also highlighted the importance of India-Bhutan security cooperation, as Bhutan relied on India's support to manage the territorial dispute with China. Ultimately, India's intervention in the Doklam dispute reinforced its role as a key regional power committed to upholding the security and stability of its neighboring countries, while also protecting its own strategic interests in a volatile regional environment.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: The 1949 Treaty of Friendship and its Evolution

The 1949 Treaty of Friendship between India and Bhutan marked the beginning of formal diplomatic relations, establishing a framework for perpetual peace and mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs. This treaty was significant as it laid the groundwork for future cooperation in defense, economic development, and cultural exchange. Over the decades, the treaty evolved to reflect changing geopolitical realities, most notably with the 2007 update that allowed Bhutan greater autonomy in its foreign policy while reaffirming India's commitment to Bhutan's security. This case study highlights how historical agreements have adapted to maintain the strategic partnership between India and Bhutan, ensuring mutual benefits and regional stability.

Case Study 2: The 1962 Sino-Indian War and Bhutan's Strategic Alignment

The 1962 Sino-Indian War was a pivotal moment for Bhutan, as it underscored the need for a reliable ally in the face of regional conflicts. Although Bhutan remained neutral during the war, the conflict's proximity to its borders and the potential threat from China prompted Bhutan to strengthen its strategic alignment with India. Following the war, India and Bhutan deepened their defense cooperation, with India providing military training and assistance to Bhutan. This case study illustrates the importance of strategic alignment in safeguarding national sovereignty and security in a volatile regional environment.

Case Study 3: The Doklam Standoff of 2017

The Doklam standoff in 2017 was a direct confrontation between India and China over territory claimed by Bhutan, which placed Bhutan at the center of a significant geopolitical conflict. During this standoff, Bhutan's strategic decisions and diplomatic maneuvers were critical. Bhutan issued a formal statement asserting its claim over the disputed territory and called for a peaceful resolution through dialogue. Meanwhile, India intervened militarily to prevent Chinese road construction, citing security concerns for both India and Bhutan. This case study demonstrates Bhutan's diplomatic balancing act and the importance of its alliance with India in managing external threats and maintaining regional stability.

Case Study 4: Post-Doklam Economic Agreements

In the aftermath of the Doklam standoff, India and Bhutan sought to reinforce their economic ties as a means of strengthening their strategic partnership. Several significant economic agreements were signed, focusing on hydropower projects, trade, and infrastructure development. These agreements not only bolstered Bhutan's economy but also reinforced the interdependence between the two nations. This case study explores how economic cooperation can serve as a tool for diplomatic resilience, enhancing bilateral relations and contributing to regional stability.

Case Study 5: Cultural and Educational Exchanges Post-Doklam

Following the Doklam standoff, both India and Bhutan recognized the need to strengthen people-to-people connections to mitigate diplomatic tensions and enhance mutual understanding. Initiatives such as increased scholarships for Bhutanese students to study in India, cultural exchange programs, and joint academic research projects were implemented. These efforts aimed to build a foundation of trust and collaboration at the grassroots level. This case study highlights the role of cultural and educational exchanges in reinforcing diplomatic ties and fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose between the two nations.

Conclusion

The Doklam standoff of 2017 underscored the strategic importance of Bhutan in the India-China dynamic, highlighting the enduring and resilient nature of Indo-Bhutan relations. India's intervention to support Bhutan against Chinese encroachment reaffirmed its commitment to Bhutan's sovereignty and regional stability. This event has reinforced the need for continued strategic dialogue and cooperation between India and Bhutan to navigate regional challenges and ensure mutual security. The analysis of historical precedents, diplomatic strategies, and the

broader geopolitical implications provides valuable insights into the complexities of managing such trilateral relationships in South Asia.

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