

Bhutan and the Border Crisis with China

Amid rising tensions in the Himalayas, the kingdom of Bhutan is being drawn into an asymmetric border crisis with China, with implications for all South Asia. In the disputed Doklam and Pasamlung regions, China's presence is now visible within Bhutanese territory, and Beijing has upped the ante further recently, claiming Sakteng near the border with Arunachal Pradesh (in India). John Pollock argues that with Sino-Indian relations already damaged by other events, Bhutan is seeing its territory encroached on as Beijing seeks advantage over India.

In early April 2021, the [10th Expert Group Meeting \(EGM\)](#), a joint Sino-Bhutanese delegation which includes Bhutan's Ambassador to India, Major General Vetsop Namgyel, [met in Kuming](#), China. Their goal: to lay the groundwork for the 25th round of negotiations later in the year on the contested Sino-Bhutanese frontier. Reported in [Global Times](#) as having a 'warm and friendly atmosphere', behind the diplomatic pleasantries of this meeting lies a simmering border crisis, with implications for all South Asia. Beijing is altering the [territorial status quo](#) in Bhutan and there's little Thimphu can do to oppose it.

Bordering the glaciers and arid deserts of the Tibetan plateau, the border between Bhutan and China spans a length of 477 kilometres through some of the [most remote and hostile terrain](#) on the planet. Amid heavily forested ravines and barren, ice-capped summits, consensus on its precise location has been hard to reach and harder still to enforce. Ethnic Tibetan herdsman routinely cross into Bhutan and so have China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) patrols on [numerous occasions](#).. In September 2020, amid the Sino-Indian standoff at Pangong Tso, the PLA was seen to be more [aggressively patrolling](#) near the Pasamlung valley, and have been seen preventing the Bhutanese army from entering [Damalung](#).

The border dispute has a long history, and alongside India is China's sole remaining territorial dispute. Between 1984 and 2016 there have been 24 rounds of talks between Bhutan and China, conducted despite a lack of formal diplomatic ties. The 25th round has been delayed for almost five years, first by the [2017 Doklam standoff](#), and more recently the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). Within this time frame Beijing has shown itself to be increasingly aggressive in its conduct towards Bhutan, laying claim to new areas of Bhutanese territory at Sakteng, constructing new villages (such as [as Pangda](#) and [Gyalaphug](#)), and reinforcing the border [near Doklam](#) with dual-use infrastructure and military hardware.

The changing status quo in Bhutan

Writing in [Foreign Policy](#), Robert Barnett and his team of researchers have brought widespread attention to Beijing's moves in the Himalayas and highlighted the scale of the challenge now facing Bhutan. Historically, Beijing has [laid claim](#) to 764 sq. kms within Bhutan. This includes Sinchulung, Dramana, Shakhatoe and [Doklam](#) in the west (near the India-China-Bhutan tri-juncture, amounting to 269 sq. kms), and the [Jakarlung and Pasamlung](#) valleys, located north near the Tibet Administrative Region (TAR) — 495 sq km respectively.

Since 2014, satellite images from [Maxar Technologies](#) reveal that China has been steadily reinforcing its infrastructure along the TAR's border with Bhutan, constructing [600 new villages](#) within Tibet as well as highways and railway lines. Barnett's investigation has also shown the existence of a large Chinese village, [Gyalaphug](#), similar to Pangda near Doklam constructed five years earlier and located within the contested Pasamlung valley. Known to the Bhutanese as Beyul Khenpajong, the area is of enormous cultural and [religious significance](#) to both Bhutanese and Tibetan Buddhists. The investigation by Foreign Policy further reveals Gyalaphug is not simply an isolated village; rather it sits alongside a small hydropower station, two Chinese Communist Party (CCP) administrative centres, a communications facility, a large warehouse, and possibly five military outposts. This, along with a similar enclave under construction in the Menchuma Valley nearby, represents a low-level land grab by China in territory internationally recognised as belonging to Bhutan. Beijing, however, contends that Gyalaphug is in the TAR as per [comments](#) by Wu Yingjie, the CCP Party Secretary of Tibet.

As well as renewed pressure in the north, Beijing has upped the ante for Bhutan in the east. In June 2020, at the Council of the Global Environment Facility, China's delegation unexpectedly vetoed development assistance for the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in Bhutan, claiming that the region lay within Chinese territory. This sudden announcement amounts to an additional 740 sq. kms of Bhutanese territory claimed by Beijing in a highly sensitive region given it borders the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which itself is claimed by Beijing as 'South Tibet'. As Bhutanese journalist Tenzing Lamsang highlights [here](#), Sakteng represents an escalation as this is an entirely new claim. Maps [produced](#) by the CCP in 2014 (and even those dating back to 1977) have not featured Sakteng, nor has Eastern Bhutan been a subject of discussion in the 24 rounds of border talks, or when Vice-Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou [visited Bhutan](#) in 2018.

China's objectives at Doklam and Sakteng

All this comes amid continued movements by the PLA near Doklam five years since the stand-off in 2017. Unconfirmed reports suggest PLA units, which have undertaken frequent intrusions onto the plateau since the 1960s, remain to this day and have even been sighted warning Bhutanese herders away from the area. This comes amid a possible [further PLA penetration](#) at Shakhatoe and Dramana, north of the plateau itself. Owing to the region's remoteness and the [overt silence](#) coming from the Bhutanese government, the information coming from Doklam is limited. What we do know, courtesy of open access sources and satellite images via Maxar, is that since 2018 China [has constructed](#) new roads, fighting positions, helicopter landing pads and a communications tower on Doklam, in territory recognised as belonging to Bhutan. Surface to air [missile batteries](#) and possible ammunition storage bunkers have also been sighted on the Chinese side of the tri-juncture giving the PLA further reach.

China's encroachments at Doklam, Pasamlung and Sakteng are not independent incursions so often blamed on local commanders. Rather, there is a deliberate pattern developing that indicates an increasing willingness to [pressure Bhutan](#) to concede border territory, specifically territory politically sensitive to India. An insight can be gained via the controversial border package Beijing put forward for Thimphu's [consideration in 1996](#). In this deal, which technically remains on the table, China agreed to renounce its claims in northern Bhutan at the Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys. In return, Bhutan would concede Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana, and Shakhatoe in the west. In terms of territory to be exchanged, China would gain 100 sq. kms at Doklam whilst at the same time [renounce its claim](#) to 495 sq. kms in the north and a 269 sq. kms sector in the west. This seemingly continues a trend identified by [Sana Hashmi](#) of Beijing offering substantial concessions to resolve land border disputes and, in 2001, Bhutan came close to signing this agreement. Behind this large concession, however, is the importance India places on Doklam owing to its proximity to India's Siliguri Corridor. New Delhi views Chinese control of the plateau as a security threat, and pressured Thimphu to reject the 2001 deal and sent troops in 2017 to enforce the status quo.

Beijing's moves in Bhutan thus suggest the following: firstly, the Doklam plateau remains China's primary objective, as demonstrated by the PLA's activity in the region; secondly, there is a deliberate campaign underway by China to hold territory such as Pasamlung to force Thimphu towards a version of the agreement outlined in 1996, thus returning the land currently occupied; and finally, both Sakteng and Doklam reveal that Beijing views territorial claims in Bhutan through the prism of strategic competition with India. Given the poor state of relations post-Ladakh, Beijing will continue its low-level campaign of [eroding Bhutanese](#) territorial integrity, to seek tactical gains that alter the strategic balance in the Himalayas to New Delhi's disadvantage.

Doklam 2.0

Bhutan's long history has seen it constantly need to [balance ties](#) between India and China, with New Delhi having an outsized level of influence in Bhutan's internal affairs through the 1949 Treaty of Friendship. Despite a loosening of controls over Thimphu's foreign and defence policy in 2007, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, Indian military officials and the right-wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have made keeping Bhutan within New Delhi's embrace an article of faith.

As China's influence has risen in [neighbouring Nepal](#), even minor inroads made by Beijing into Bhutan, such as increasing tourist numbers or medical assistance for COVID-19, have been met with concern among Indian policymakers, fearing a [loss of influence](#) and hysteria among nationalist Indian media outlets for whom China is now a threat to be faced down. Further changes to the territorial status quo in Bhutan would likely constitute a red line for New Delhi, especially in the context of recent claims to Sakteng. Should it transpire in the coming years that Chinese villages or roads are being constructed in Sakteng, near Arunachal Pradesh in India, it is conceivable that once again Indian troops would intervene as at Doklam in 2017, thus placing Bhutan at the centre of a future Sino-Indian stand-offs. And even if such a stand-off does not occur, Beijing is already in the process of changing the status quo, and given the substantial pressure from India to prevent a border deal that yields Doklam, it is unlikely that there will be a breakthrough between Thimphu and Beijing, and certainly not one that reverses Chinese gains at Pasamlung. Bhutan thus faces a border crisis with China in the coming years.

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