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## Issue Brief

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*

# The Sino-Indian Stand-off: A Novel Solution

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## Introduction

China and India over the past seven decades to the present day have had intricate ties with the sole exception of the small episode of the *Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai* (Indians-Chinese brothers) bonhomie, a slogan raised in the 1950s. Both nations went into a border clash in 1962. However, trading relations have improved to a large extent and today, China is the largest trading partner of India. Over the recent years, bilateral trade has increased above US\$ 70.8 billion<sup>1</sup> However, the overall diplomatic trajectory remained at the lowest ebb resulting in periodic brawl from time to time. The diplomatic and political situation has been deteriorating over the past couple of months and there is fear of severe clash between the two nuclear-armed nations. This issue brief analyses the present military stand-off between the two nations and offers a probable solution.

## The Escalation

Since June 2017 there has been a stand-off between the Chinese and Indian armies at the tri-junction of China, Bhutan, and India, at Donglang (in Chinese) Doklam (Indian name) at Chumbi Valley in the Himalayan mountains. Bhutan claimed Donglang/Doklam as its territory. China however claims otherwise. It claims Donglang as its part. The Government of Bhutan 'requested' India under the 2007 treaty to intervene on its behalf to stop the Chinese interference in its territory. As a result, Chinese and Indian sides brought over 3,000 soldiers each in the disputed area.<sup>2</sup> In retaliation, China cut-off access to a group of Indian pilgrims trying to cross a Chinese pass on their way to Mount Kailash, a sacred site in Tibet for Hindus and Buddhists.<sup>3</sup> Historically, China and India also counter-claimed over Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Aksai Chin, besides at a number of other border points from east to the west over a disputed territory of over 3,500 km, the world's largest disputed territory.

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<sup>1</sup> "India's trade deficit with China climbs to \$46.56 billion", *The Economic Times* (Delhi), January 13, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Lau, "How a road on China and India's border led to the two powers' worst stand-off in decades", *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), July 6, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

### Map of Donglang/Doklam



Source: *Global Times* (Beijing), August 2, 2017.

The main reason behind the military deadlock is the construction of the road by China in the region that is claimed by both the sides. The dispute erupted after India found that China is building a road to connect Lahsa and Tibet with Donglang/Doklam. Both Bhutan and India categorically objected.

The present stand-off is in the larger context of the Sino-Indian border dispute over an area of 3500 km that has remained disputed for centuries. The British authorities also could not demarcate the border and the tussle continued between China and India. Both fought a border war in 1962. The present stand-off is the most severe one. China has even hinted at a limited war with India over this territory<sup>4</sup> but it is hard to envisage a limited war when both the states are armed with nuclear weapons.

The Chumbi Valley with Donglang/Doklam at its core used to be a multi-ethnic trading point used by a number of groups like Tibetan, Ladakhi, Sikkimese, Bhutanese, Uyghur, Nepali, Indian, and Chinese traders in the region.<sup>5</sup> Even Central Asian States were linked to this trade.<sup>6</sup> The Tibetan Muslim traders

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Osbrone, "China may conduct 'small-scale military operation' to remove Indian troops from Bhutan border region", *The Independent* (London), 7 August 2017.

<sup>5</sup> AadilBrar, "The Hidden History Behind the Doklam Standoff: Superhighways of Tibetan Trade", *The Diplomat* (Tokyo), August 12, 2017.

were the pioneers of trade on trans-Himalayan highways.<sup>7</sup> Differences emerged between China and India and the trans-Himalayan trade was discouraged and disconnected by the 1960s.

India wrongly perceived Chinese presence in the region and viewed it from a strategic perspective. The Chinese road initiative in Donglang/Doklam should be seen in re-connecting the old trans-Himalayan trade and the renaissance of cross-cultural and multi-ethnic groups and nations in the high-Himalaya. The road initiative should be not seen in the context of geo-political supremacy by India or Bhutan. The initiative should be seen in the context of trade connectivity and in the larger perspective of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

### The Solution

There are conflicting points of national security between China and India. China believes that India interferes in Tibetan affairs as it has hosted the Dalai Lama over the past six decades. On the contrary, India is more concerned about its eight north eastern states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura) with an area of 262,230 km and 45 million population bifurcated with the tiny passage of the Siliguri known as “Chicken Neck” and it perceives potential threat from China.

India fears that China might cut-off its access to the north eastern states at the Chicken Neck. Additionally, there are separatist movements as well in these states. Sikkim is used as a buffer between India and China. It is in India’s own interest to honour the *status-quo* in Sikkim and at the tri-junction of Daonglang/Doklam. The stand-off questions that position.

The tri-junction between China, India, and Bhutan could be turned into a win-win for all. India should be looking at the possibility of providing a new economic corridor for trade and connectivity in the region. There is a need to initiate a potential Tibet-Bhutan-India-Bangladesh Economic Corridor (TBIB-EC) from Tibet to the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean..

China could export and import oil and gas via this route giving transit facility of new revenue generation for the impoverished Indian States and also to Bangladesh and Bhutan. This new corridor can considerably transform the economies of eight Indian north eastern states along with Bhutan and Bangladesh. The corridor will also bring an end to separatist tendencies in Tibet and the eight Indian

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

North Eastern states. China and India can sign a specific anti-separatism treaty. The TBIB-EC would provide additional benefits to India and Bangladesh besides the BCIM, if work on it is initiated.

### **Conclusion**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) does not discriminate any nation or region. It is all inclusive and offers a solution to trade, poverty eradication, and conflict diffusion. The tri-junction conflict at Donglang/Doklam should also be seen from this angle. The on-going stand-off could be translated into economic opportunity for both China and India and converting the impoverished Himalayan region for common prosperity and a win-win cooperation.