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How to Resolve the Sikkim Standoff?

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India and China share the world's largest disputed border of over 3,488 km with a number of territories counter claimed by each side along the Actual Line of Control. Most important of them are Aksai Chen, Kashmir, south Tibet or Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Doklam / Donglang. Of this border, around 220 km falls in Sikkim. The present standoff of Sikkim has been erupting a month or so on the tri-junction of Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan when India brought troops to prevent China from constructing road in Donglang / Doklam in June. The construction work was halted and troops from both sides took positions. Construction turned into a nuclearized military standoff.

Is China or India belligerent toward the present standoff is a vital question to be asked? The two nations went into war in 1962 and their positions have not been reconciled until yet until a major breakthrough could be made. The 2017 standoff, if it develops into a full-scale war, would be entirely different from that of 1962 border clash when both were not nuclearized.

The Sikkim standoff is a long-term confrontation and China takes it seriously something interfering in its sovereignty and rules out all possibilities including war to safeguard its interests. To China Indian action is the betrayal of the treaty in Sikkim. Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, endorsed the 1890 Sino-British Treaty on Sikkim in a letter to the Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai in 1959.

Successive Indian governments have also endorsed this," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang pointed out. Therefore, India is a violator of this treaty and an aggressor. The Chinese-Sikkim boundary is well defined and the Indian steps violated the treaty and trampling on the Panchsheel principles. India is also misleading the public opinion and the international community against the Chinese policy in Tibet and road construction in Donglang / Doklam.

The colonial attempts to demarcate the borders remained unfulfilled in the 19th centuries. China was fragile and India was under British imperialism. A sincere attempt to resolve disputes was not possible. Both nation relied on the 1890 Sino-Indian Treaty on Sikkim. China asserted its control over the entire mainland in 1949 and fought a border war with India over its dispute in 1962.

This was the first Chinese attempt to secure its vital interest. Major powers supported India's stance because of China's isolation and the Cold War that divided China with the West and also with the USSR at that time. Today, China position is reversed. The United States stands neutral over the Sikkim standoff and sees the amicable resolution between India and China. Russia also has not stepped up.

The annexation of Sikkim to India was unlawful in 1974 and a fake referendum was held. The story is no different from the so-called annexation of other Princely States by India. Indian authorities destroyed all documents to abolish evidence. It was the "murder of history". The Modi junta has been using the old Sikkim annexation mantra to dominate the tri-junction and keeps China away.

India is building airfields and roads in the region and it cannot simply protest that China cannot build the same. By building roads, how China violated the *status quo* of the tri-junction as told by Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj Indian troops occupied the area and until they withdrawn, China is not ready for any sort of negotiations. The visit of Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval to Beijing on 27-28 July would depend on this situation of Indian troops' withdrawal as Chinese preconditions for negotiations.

The Sikkim standoff could trigger all-out confrontation. India is not going to have an upper-hand in Sikkim if war broke. India's sovereignty would be at stake. It's time for India to reconcile with China and resolve all border disputes amicably under the spirit of the BRICS, SCO, G-20, AIIB, and BRI. India is more concerned about its 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 the “Chicken Neck” and wrongly perceives the potential Chinese manoeuvrings.

India fears that at the Chicken Neck, China might cut-off Indian access to the north eastern states. These are apprehensions and they are baseless. There are separatist movements in these states and China has not been interfering in these movements. Sikkim is used as a buffer by India and any Chinese move from there could be taken as offensive. It is in India’s own interest to honour the *status-quo* in Sikkim and at the tri-junction.

The tri-junction between China, India, and Bhutan should be explore who dominates and who defeats. The conflict 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; the Tibet-Bhutan-India-Bangladesh Economic Corridor (TBIBEC) to the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean.

China could exports and import oil and gas *etc* via this route. This new corridor will transform the economies of eight Indian north eastern states, Bhutan, Bangladesh. The region is relatively poor. The corridor will also make an end to separatist tendencies in Tibet and eight Indian north eastern states. China and India can sign a specific anti- separatism treaty. The TBIBEC would provide additional benefits to India and Bangladesh besides the BCIM, if work on it starts. The present tri-junction standoff could be translated into economic opportunity. Let’s see how Beijing and New Delhi would react to this proposal seriously and convert the centuries-long conflict-prone and impoverished Himalayan region in building common prosperity and a win-win situation.

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