

The Doklam Dilemma

Assessing the Impact of Bhutan–China Boundary Normalization on India's National Security

Krishnapal Singh¹ and Dr. Mohit Kalra²

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science

Shaheed Srimati Hansa Dhanai Govt. Degree College, Agrora

Sri Dev Suman University

Kumaun University, Nainital

krishnapal8474@gmail.com and polityscholar1995@gmail.com

Abstract: *The rapid normalization of Bhutan–China border relations is one of the most overlooked challenges to India's national security. This paper examines how China's ongoing advances into Bhutanese territory, including the creation of the Joint Technical Team (JTT) in 2023 and the building of at least 22 Chinese villages inside Bhutan by 2024, directly threaten India's key interests, especially around the Doklam plateau and the Siliguri Corridor. Using a defensive neorealist approach, the paper argues that China's actions with Bhutan are not just a bilateral matter but a deliberate effort to shift the balance of power in the Himalayas. India has responded by modernizing its military, improving infrastructure, and quietly managing its relationship with Thimphu to maintain deterrence and avoid direct conflict. The paper concludes that India must institutionalise a trilateral consultative mechanism and accelerate alternative connectivity to the Northeast to hedge against worst-case boundary outcomes*

Keywords: Doklam, Siliguri Corridor, Bhutan–China boundary, India's national security, Himalayan geopolitics, salami-slicing, defensive neorealism

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom, has had a special role in South Asian geopolitics. Sitting between India and China, the world's two most populous countries, Bhutan has often served as a buffer. Its foreign and security policies are closely tied to India's strategic interests. Since 1984, when Bhutan and China began boundary talks, their border remains unsettled, and Bhutan has tried to balance its ties with both neighbours.

Recently, this careful balance has become harder to maintain. In 2017, the Doklam standoff happened when Indian troops intervened to stop China from building a road on land claimed by Bhutan. This event showed how vulnerable India's strategic buffer can be. Since then, China has stepped up its activities by signing the Three-Step Roadmap MoU with Bhutan in 2021, holding the 25th round of boundary talks in 2023, forming the Joint Technical Team (JTT), and building at least 22 villages in disputed Bhutanese territory by 2024 (Barnett, as cited in Business Standard, 2024). These developments raise an important question: what could normalizing the Bhutan–China border mean for India's national security?

This paper argues that China's approach to boundary negotiations has two main goals. First, this paper argues that China's approach to boundary talks has two main aims. The first is to get legal recognition for land China already holds. The second is to use Bhutan's sovereignty to weaken India's strategic position. The analysis looks at three related areas: the Doklam plateau, the Siliguri Corridor, and India's worries about threats from both sides.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BHUTAN-CHINA BOUNDARY DISPUTE

The origins of the boundary dispute date to 1950, when China's incorporation of Tibet dissolved the traditional Tibetan-Bhutanese border arrangements and replaced them with the People's Republic of China's maximalist territorial claims (Borderlens, 2023). Bhutan's accession to the United Nations in 1971 facilitated a more independent foreign policy; however, the core of its border dispute with China remained closely linked to India's security interests.

Since the 1990s, China's primary objective has been to acquire the Doklam plateau through a territorial swap, offering to relinquish its claims to the larger but less strategically significant northern valleys of Pasamlung and Jakarlung (approximately 495 km²) in exchange for Bhutan ceding control of the 89 km² Doklam plateau in the west. This proposal nearly succeeded during the 11th round of negotiations in 1996, but Bhutan ultimately withdrew, reportedly due to Indian pressure. For Beijing, Doklam remains the strategic objective. Located at the intersection of Tibet, Bhutan, and India, control of the plateau by the People's Liberation Army would provide both offensive and defensive advantages in any future conflict with India (PACOM, 2024).

Table 1: Key Territorial Disputes Between Bhutan and China

Disputed Area	Claimant	Size (km ²)	Strategic Significance for India
Doklam Plateau	China & Bhutan	89	Overlooks Siliguri Corridor; PLA access to Chumbi Valley
Pasamlung Valley (North)	China	~270	Bhutan's cultural site; used as trade-space in 'swap' offer
Jakarlung Valley (North)	China	~225	Northern buffer; low direct threat to India
Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (East)	China (claimed 2020)	740	Borders Arunachal Pradesh; recent 2020 claim to expand leverage
Sinchulumpa / Langmarpo (West)	China	~180	Western sector near tri-junction; widens PLA's operational corridor

Source: Compiled from PACOM (2024); Vivekananda International Foundation (2023)

In June 2020, China claimed the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in eastern Bhutan, a territory that had never been part of earlier negotiations. China argued that the entire Bhutan–China border was still undemarcated. Most analysts see this move as a way to gain more leverage and pressure Bhutan to make concessions on Doklam (PACOM, 2024).

III. THE ACCELERATING NORMALISATION: A CHRONOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

The history of Bhutan–China boundary talks shows that China has followed a careful strategy of gradually increasing pressure, with occasional periods of heightened urgency. The 2017 Doklam standoff put negotiations on hold for a while, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing sped up its efforts to build infrastructure in the area while diplomatic discussions were paused.

Table 2: China–Bhutan Boundary Negotiation Timeline and Implications for India

Year	Event	Implication for India
1984	Boundary talks initiated	India's influence accepted as implicit guarantor of



		Bhutan
1996	China's 'package proposal' — 495 km ² north vs. 89 km ² Doklam	Bhutan refused under Indian pressure; deal would have given PLA Doklam
1998	Agreement on maintaining peace; PRC affirms Bhutanese sovereignty	China violated agreement by continuing road construction
2017	Doklam Standoff — 73-day India-China confrontation	India intervened militarily, halted PLA road; exposed tri-junction vulnerability
2021 (Oct)	Three-Step Roadmap MoU signed	India consulted but excluded; raised concerns about Doklam swap
2023 (Jan)	13th Expert Group Meeting (EGM), Kunming — 'positive consensus'	Bhutan PM's 'trilateral' remark sparked concern in New Delhi
2023 (Oct)	25th Round of Boundary Talks, Beijing; Joint Technical Team (JTT) formalised	Signals accelerating normalization; Indian red lines under pressure
2024	China builds 22 villages inside Bhutanese territory; 8 near Doklam	Salami slicing continues; physical facts on ground precede legal settlement

Source: Compiled from Vivekananda International Foundation (2023); Business Standard (2024)

The milestones reached in 2023 are especially important. At the January 2023 expert group meeting in Kunming, both sides agreed on a 'positive consensus'. Later, Bhutanese Prime Minister Lotay Tshering told the Belgian newspaper La Libre that he hoped the dispute could be resolved 'in one or two more meetings.' He also suggested that Doklam should be settled 'trilaterally, with India, Bhutan, and China as equal interlocutors,' which caused concern in New Delhi (Foreign Policy, 2023). Chinese state media, including the Global Times, highlighted these comments and described India as the 'main obstacle' to a settlement (Foreign Policy, 2023).

In October 2023, the two sides set up the Joint Technical Team (JTT) to handle field-level delimitation and demarcation. The JTT's mandate does not include the tri-junction area, following the 2012 India–China agreement that any decisions about tri-junction boundaries need all three parties to be involved (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2023). Despite this, China has continued building villages in the western sector, changing the situation on the ground before any legal settlement is reached.

IV. STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY: DOKLAM, THE CHUMBI VALLEY, AND THE SILIGURI CORRIDOR

To appreciate why India views any Bhutan–China territorial adjustment with existential concern, one must understand the strategic geography of the Doklam–Chumbi–Siliguri triangle.

4.1 The Siliguri Corridor

The Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the 'Chicken's Neck,' is a narrow strip of land in West Bengal, measuring approximately 60 km in length and only 17 to 22 km in width at its narrowest point. This corridor serves as the sole land connection between mainland India and its eight northeastern states, which are home to approximately 45 million



people (Wikipedia: Siliguri Corridor, 2026). A Chinese military advance of just 130 km could sever this link, effectively isolating northeast India an area comparable in size to the United Kingdom from the rest of the country (Lowy Institute, 2020).

India has made significant investments to secure the corridor. The Hasimara air base hosts a Rafale squadron, Panagarh houses a Mountain Strike Corps, and the S-400 missile defence system is operationally deployed in the region (The Print, 2024). However, geography remains the primary constraint, as no natural terrain feature can substitute for the corridor's strategic function.

4.2 Doklam's Military Geometry

Doklam sits directly above the corridor. From the Jampheri (Zompelri) ridge, which marks the southern end of the Doklam plateau, any military force can see the corridor's narrowest point. This explains why India stepped in during 2017: if the PLA had built a road toward Jampheri ridge, Chinese forces would have gained a strong tactical advantage over India's northeastern region (PACOM, 2024).

If China controlled Doklam, it would also expand the strategically tight Chumbi Valley, which is the narrow strip held by China between Sikkim (India) and Bhutan. This would give the PLA more room to maneuver and more ways to enter the area in any Himalayan conflict (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2023). PACOM's 2024 assessment confirms that PRC control of Doklam 'would provide it with both an offensive and defensive advantage' in conflict with India.

By 2024, China had built eight villages in the western sector near Doklam, set out in a 36-kilometre line running north to south. Several of these villages are on or near ridges that overlook the plateau (Business Standard, 2024). This physical presence marks a shift from simply making legal claims to actually exercising administrative control, a pattern China has used in both the South China Sea and along the Line of Actual Control (PACOM, 2024).

V. INDIA'S STRATEGIC RED LINES AND THEIR CURRENT STATUS

India's approach to Bhutan–China normalization is conditioned by a set of implicit and explicit red lines, informed by a defensive neorealist concern with preserving relative power position and territorial buffer.

Table 3: India's Security Red Lines vis-à-vis Bhutan–China Normalization (2025)

Red Line	Rationale	Status / Risk Level (2025)
No PLA presence on southern Doklam ridges	Direct line of sight onto Siliguri Corridor (Jampheri ridge)	HIGH: 8 villages now in western Bhutan near ridge
No bilateral China-Bhutan boundary deal excluding India on tri-junction	2012 India-China understanding: tri-junctions require trilateral consultation	MEDIUM: JTT excludes tri-junction formally, but de facto consolidation ongoing
No permanent Chinese diplomatic mission in Thimphu	Embassy would enable direct political pressure, bypassing India's traditional role	HIGH: Bhutan-China normalisation accelerating; embassy likely precondition
No Bhutanese entry into BRI	BRI connectivity = economic leverage = potential dual-use infrastructure	MEDIUM: No current BRI deal; China seeking economic engagement

Source: PACOM (2024); Vivekananda International Foundation (2023); Business Standard (2024).

India has made its boundaries clear by relying on both diplomatic assurances from Thimphu and its military presence. Bhutan's Prime Minister has told India that any border deal with China will not threaten India's interests. However, Bhutan depends on India economically while also facing more pressure from China, which leaves it in a vulnerable

position. Bhutan is also becoming uneasy with what it sees as India's 'big-brother' approach and past economic pressure, such as the 2013 fuel subsidy issue. This has caused tension in a relationship that New Delhi has long considered special.

VI. INDIA'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE: DETERRENCE, DIPLOMACY, AND CONNECTIVITY

India is responding to the changing relationship between Bhutan and China in three main ways: by modernising its military, investing in infrastructure, and managing diplomacy.

6.1 Military Modernisation

After the Galwan clash in 2020, India made major improvements to its military position in the Himalayas. By 2024, the Nyoma Advanced Landing Ground in Ladakh was almost finished, which helps India project air power toward its northern borders. India also sped up building border roads, completing several phases by 2024 and narrowing the infrastructure gap with the PLA. Stationing Rafale jets at Hasimara and S-400 systems near the Siliguri Corridor shows India's strong, integrated air defence.

6.2 Infrastructure and Connectivity

India has sought several alternate connectivity routes as strategic hedges to counter the structural vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor. These include railway lines through Nepal (Jogbani-Biratnagar corridor), a railway network through Bangladesh to reduce corridor dependence and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project through Myanmar, the latter has been complicated by ongoing conflict (Borderlens, 2024). With assistance from CORE, the corridor's existing rail route is being electrified. These investments reduce India's dependence on the corridor as the only logistical spine of its northeast.

6.3 Bhutan's Diplomatic Handling

India continues to use its position as Bhutan's biggest economic partner, with most of its FDI, aid, loans and energy trade to keep it on the same page on security-sensitive issues. The hydropower alliance, accounting for about 40% of Bhutan's revenue, provides India with significant economic leverage. But this leverage is a double-edged instrument: over-use risks turning off Thimphu and spurring Bhutan's diversification to China. The challenge for New Delhi is to maintain its special relationship while satisfying Bhutan's legitimate sovereign desire to resolve its boundary dispute.

VII. THEORETICAL EVALUATION: DEFENSIVE NEOREALISM AND HIMALAYAN BUFFER DYNAMICS

Through a Waltzian defensive neorealist lens, China's boundary diplomacy with Bhutan can be best understood as a structural response to the geographic constraints of Tibet's Chumbi Valley. The Chumbi Valley is a narrow salient with Indian controlled territory (Sikkim) and Bhutanese territory on either side. In a conflict scenario, India could execute a pincer movement into the valley and compromise China's Tibetan defence (PACOM, 2024). The acquisition of Doklam by the PLA is therefore defensive in nature; it increases China's operational depth and takes away India's flanking advantage.

At the same time, India's intervention at Doklam in 2017 and continued resistance to any settlement of the boundary that concedes Doklam reflects its own defensive imperative, preserving the structural conditions that afford India strategic leverage over China in the Himalayan sector. This logic of mutual defense leads to a security dilemma where the defensive moves of each side appear offensive to the other, making it very hard to resolve the dilemma without third-party assurance mechanisms.

Bhutan's dilemma is that of a small state seeking to exercise sovereign agency in the context of great-power competition. Its Three-Step Roadmap suggests a genuine desire to resolve the boundary, but the geopolitical context is such that any settlement will be judged as much by its implications for Indian and Chinese strategic interests as by its

impact on Bhutanese sovereignty.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Doklam dilemma highlights a key reality for Indian foreign policy in the Himalayas: India's national security is closely tied to the territorial sovereignty of its neighboring buffer states. As Bhutan and China move closer to settling their border issues, India may find that its usual tools such as economic ties, security promises, and diplomatic support, are not enough to stop changes that could weaken its strategic position.

This analysis leads to three recommendations. Firstly, India needs to institutionalise a formal trilateral consultative mechanism, which will provide it a legitimate voice in the tri-junction demarcation process in accordance with the 2012 India–China understanding. This would prevent Bhutan from being forced to take unilateral decisions with irreversible security implications for India. Second, India needs to enhance investments in alternative connectivity to the Northeast, especially the Bangladesh rail corridor and Biratnagar link to structurally reduce the strategic importance of the Siliguri chokepoint. Third, India must move beyond an asymmetric patron relationship with Bhutan to a genuine partnership, addressing Bhutanese concerns about sovereignty and economic diversification so that Thimphu's alignment with New Delhi on security-sensitive issues is based on shared interest, not dependent compliance.

The Doklam dilemma will not be resolved through deterrence alone. It requires a combination of military credibility, institutional innovation, and diplomatic imagination, the currency of a rising power confident enough in its position to engage rather than merely constrain.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Barnett, R. (2024, December 18). China in Doklam: Beijing builds 22 villages, takes 2% of Bhutan's territory. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/china-in-doklam-beijing-builds-22-villages-takes-2-of-bhutan-s-territory-124121800557_1.html
- [2]. Borderlens. (2023, October 25). Bhutan, China advance border negotiations, seek diplomatic resolution. <https://www.borderlens.com/2023/10/25/bhutan-china-advance-border-negotiations-seek-diplomatic-resolution/>
- [3]. Borderlens. (2024, October 17). The strategic lifeline: Securing the Siliguri Corridor amid escalating Chinese expansion. <https://www.borderlens.com/2024/10/17/the-strategic-lifeline-securing-the-siliguri-corridor-amid-escalating-chinese-expansion/>
- [4]. Foreign Policy. (2023, July 18). China's border talks with Bhutan are aimed at India. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/18/china-bhutan-border-talks-india-dispute-security/>
- [5]. Geopolitical Monitor. (2025, December 12). Siliguri Corridor: The Achilles' heel of India. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/siliguri-corridor-the-achilles-heel-of-india/>
- [6]. Gupta, S. (2024). Why Siliguri Corridor is strategically important for India and how it is being secured. The Print. <https://theprint.in/defence/why-siliguri-corridor-is-strategically-important-for-india-how-it-is-being-secured-cut-the-clutter/2905600/>
- [7]. Lowy Institute. (2020, July 15). Twisting India's Chicken's Neck. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/twisting-india-s-chicken-s-neck>
- [8]. Press Xpress. (2024, July 11). Siliguri Corridor: India's lifeline and the geopolitical chessboard. <https://pressxpress.org/2024/07/11/siliguri-corridor-indias-lifeline-and-the-geopolitical-chessboard/>
- [9]. United States Pacific Command (PACOM). (2024, March 11). Border dispute between China and Bhutan [TACAID]. [https://www.pacom.mil/Portals/55/Documents/Legal/J06%20TACAID%20-%20PRC-BHUTAN%20BORDER%20DISPUTE%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://www.pacom.mil/Portals/55/Documents/Legal/J06%20TACAID%20-%20PRC-BHUTAN%20BORDER%20DISPUTE%20(FINAL).pdf)
- [10]. Vivekananda International Foundation. (2023, November 17). China-Bhutan border talks: Indian stakes in the discussions. <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/november/17/china-bhutan-border-talks-indian-stakes-in-the-discussions>