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+91 9940572462

+91 9940572462

ijarasem@gmail.com

www.ijarasem.com

# Doklam Issue: Geostrategic Importance of Siliguri Corridor

Sutapa Das

(Independent Scholar of Political Science Subject), West Bengal, India

**ABSTRACT:** China-India border standoff in 2017, also known as the Doklam issue, was a military standoff between the Indian armed forces and the people's liberation army of China over the Chinese construction of a route in Doklam. Doklam plateau located on the strategic tri-junction of China's Chumbi valley to the north, Bhutan's Ha district to the east and India's Sikkim state to the west. The standoff continued in the area for more than two months. After diplomatic talks between the two sides, both countries have agreed on the withdrawal of troops from the region. However, the whole situation did not finish there, China has continued to construct military bases close to the area and increase its hard power presence. India does not have a claim on Doklam but it supports Bhutan's claim on the territory. The Doklam tri-junction is considered vital to India's security interest due to its location near the Siliguri corridor. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explain the importance of the Doklam plateau from the Indian perspective and how India can protect the Siliguri corridor from the evil eye of China. This paper is written with the help of secondary data like books, journals, articles, newspapers etc..

**KEYWORDS:** Dispute, security, chicken's neck, relationship, diplomatic.

## I. INTRODUCTION

South Asia due to its strategic location and natural wealth, has acquired a very important position from a geo strategic points of view. The political scenario of South Asia region is becoming complex and multidimensional with a growing shift in focus regarding great power politics. Which has made South Asia new frontier for great competition. The growing geopolitical importance of South Asia has increased the strategic importance of some regions and also increased security requirements. Geostrategic importance has always played a significant role in determining the future of a nation. Bhutan is well renowned for having a wealth of natural resources and strategic location. It is a buffer state between two powerful countries, India and China. Due to its proximity to both countries, India being a close neighbor, has traditionally played an important role in Bhutan. Nowadays, China is constantly intervening in Bhutan, which also threatens India's security. Bhutan and China have a long standing border dispute, which China claiming a large part of Bhutanese territory. The areas China claims from Bhutan are Pasamlung and Jakarlung valley in the north and Doklam, Dramana, Shakhatoe, Yakchu Charithang Chu, Sinchulungpa and Langmapro valley in the west.<sup>1</sup> Among these places, Doklam is important for India as it is located in tri-junction region of Bhutan, China and India. After the 2017 Doklam crisis and China's continuous infrastructure establishment in the tri-junction area, the region became strategically and geo-politically important for India. Because this Doklam region is located near the Siliguri corridor of West Bengal, one of the constituent state of India, which has become a major security concern of India.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Karunathne, H. (2017) in his work, "The 'Doklam' Border Standoff Between Two Asian Giants", has stated a historical background of Doklam crisis. The reason for the Doklam crisis was the protest against the construction of a road by China at the tri-junction borders area. The Doklam issues was mainly a matter of China and Bhutan. India intervened in the matter only after Bhutan requested India to intervene in the situation. The friendly diplomatic relation between China and India have suffer after the Doklam issues. The situation is creating a 'cold war' atmosphere between India and China. A better South Asia and Asia can be built if China improves mutual trust and good interdependence with India.<sup>2</sup>

Menna, B. (2018), in research paper "India-China relations : an analysis of the Doklam dispute" has stated that, the road passing through Bhutanese territory has helped boost China's military supplies to the region. By building military bases in the region, China wants to ensure defeat of India in any military conflict. China wants to create diplomatic relations with Bhutan by putting pressure on Bhutan. Also, China seeking to check India's efforts to help Bhutan.<sup>3</sup>

Raj, N. (2023), in research paper "The consequences and future implications of the Doklam stand-off on India – China relations: an analytical study" has explained a overview of Doklam crisis and its background, highlighted the key events that lead to the standoff between India and China. The researcher has elaborately described the impact of Doklam standoff

on bilateral relations, economic ties, regional stability, cultural determination, diplomatic relations etc.. The researcher also stated the future implications of the doklam stand-off between India and China, in various areas such as – geopolitics, trade, border dispute, regional stability etc.. It is important for both countries to priorities dialogue, respect territorial integrity and maintain regional stability.<sup>4</sup>

Ranade, V.S. (2023) , has written the paper entitled “Slender is the corridor”, has emphasized that widening and strengthening the Siliguri corridor is necessary. Develop alternate road links through Nepal and Bangladesh and underground tunnel is very essential .<sup>5</sup>

Farhan, N. (2021), Wrote a paper “ Siliguri corridor: geostrategic importance and future challenges”. This paper gives an overview of Siliguri corridor and its importance. This region is important not only for India but also for maintain the status quo in the South Asia region. Conflict in Siliguri corridor will also destroy the sovereignty of neighbouring countries.<sup>6</sup>

### Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are -

- To analyse the importance of Siliguri corridor in the view of doklam crisis.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is a mixture of descriptive and analytical research based on secondary sources. The secondary data are collected from different journals, articles, newspaper reports, book etc.

#### Doklam issue

( Title – Doklam Tri-junction)



( Source – ForumIAS Blog, October 30, 2018)

Doklam is a region in Bhutan with a high plateau and a valley, situated between China’s Chumbi valley to the north, Bhutan’s Ha district to the east and Sikkim, the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of India, to the west. It has been shown as part of Bhutan in the Bhutanese maps since 1961, but it is also claimed by China. Doklam is a 269 sq. Km plateau in Bhutan.<sup>7</sup> It is a disputed area between China and Bhutan just like Jakarlung , Pasamlung and others. Despite multiple rounds of border talks between Bhutan and China, the dispute has not been settled. For all three nations, the region is strategically significant. Claiming Doklam area as a part of China, China illegally started building a road here in 2017, which violated Bhutan’s sovereignty. Bhutan opposes China's construction of road and sought India’s military help to stop the construction. After that, there was a military stand-off between the Indian armed force and people’s liberation military of China over Chinese construction of route in Doklam. India has no claim on Doklam, but India was a party to the crisis because, India has signed a friendship treaty with Bhutan (renewed in 2007) which drives India to intervene for the Goodwill of Bhutan.



Under the reverse agreement of 2007, India and Bhutan have pledged to cooperate with each other in matters of national security.<sup>8</sup>

Doklam region enjoy huge military advantages. China's construction of such road in the border areas will be a big fear for the security of not only Bhutan but also India. So, to prevent a group of Chinese Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers from building a road that would give the Chinese access to Indian territory, in 2017 the Indian army executed "Operation Juniper" and position 270 armed troops in the Doklam area of Bhutan, leading to a successful halting of PLAs road construction activities.<sup>9</sup> The stand-off continued in the area for more than two months. After diplomatic talk between the two sides, both country have agreed on the withdrawal of troops from the region. But the whole situation did not finish there, China has continued to built military bases close to the area and enhance its hard power presence. Numerous sources claim that , China has continued to built at least 13 new military positions, including five permanent air defence positions, three air bases and five heliports to strengthen their military presence close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC).<sup>10</sup> China builds two villages in the Amu Chu river valley and builds a bridge over the Amu Chu river. Widespread Chinese efforts at construction of villages along frontiers that essentially a manners of giving legitimacy to its territorial claims.<sup>11</sup> China's villages and road construction activity in the Amu Chu river valley and all of these settlements put pressure on Indian defense in Sikkim. A military barracks also constructed by China in the Amu Chu river valley in Bhutan.<sup>12</sup> It is a serious concerns for India. Amu Chu abuts the strategic Doklam plateau, from where India's Siliguri corridor is in the direct line of side of China's PLA. It is basically some distance from the India- China-Bhutan tri-junction.

#### Importance of Doklam to the Indian points of view

Doklam is an area on Bhutan's plateau which spread over less than 100 square kilometres.<sup>13</sup> It is surrounded by Chumbi valley of Tibet, Bhutan's Ha district and Sikkim. India does not have a claim on Doklam but it support Bhutan's claim on the territory. India considers the Doklam plateau as an undisputed part of Bhutanese territory but China considers it is an extension of its Chumbi valley. Doklam's geographical position makes it a strategically important area. The Doklam tri-junction is considered vital to India's security interest due to its location near the Siliguri corridor. The Siliguri corridor also known as the "chicken's neck", is a stretch of land around the city of Siliguri in West Bengal, India. 20-22 kilometers at the narrowest section, this geo-political and geo-economical corridor connects the eight States of North East India to the rest of India.<sup>14</sup> The corridor has borders connected to Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan - whereas it connects the north-east via Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Terai areas in West Bengal. This corridor has been strategically important and vulnerable region. The corridor is always guarding by defence force. The corridor has a significant road and rail network that connect West Bengal to eight north eastern states. Strategically the rail network in chicken's neck give a access to the LAC to the Indian armed force. Different rail links emerge from the New Jalpaiguri railway station which connects the three important military formations located opposite China. From the NJP station a rail link moves towards Guwahati and from here a road network moves towards the Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>15</sup>

( Title -Siliguri corridor)



(Source - Clear IAS, September 30, 2017)



The area of Doklam carries huge military advantage and if it falls into the hand of China it will not only compromise the security of Bhutan but also India. If Doklam comes in control of China, it will get the high ground which would enable to completely crush not only Bhutan but also India's Siliguri corridor in case of war. The roadways and railways near the LAC are connected by this corridor. All essentials are supplied to them through this corridor only. The access to the tri junction area would give China easy access to transportation of war machinery such as tanks and vehicle to the border of India. In this case, if a war situation arises China can enter the Siliguri corridor and cut off all communications with northeast India and It also can cut off all three primary military formation and their units, they can severely reduce the supply of equipment and power surges to them.

Siliguri corridor is not just a important trade route but also helps India to boost "Act East policy" by facilitating connectivity between Indian mainland, her north-eastern States and further ASEAN countries in South East Asia. The objective of Act East Policy is to promote economic cooperation, cultural ties and develop strategic relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific region through continuous engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels there by proving enhanced connectivity to the state of North eastern region. The northeast of India has been a most priority in our act East policy . This policy will suffer if China somehow enters the Siliguri corridor and create a hostile environment in northeast India or cut off communications. Comprehensive implementation of Act East Policy is relevant to the entire country but particularly important for the long term growth of the northeast . Northeast India is home more than 50 ethnic rebel groups – a few demanding complete secession from India.<sup>16</sup> In such a situation China can definitely use this political advantage to carve up India's north eastern states. Entering Doklam areas China put Bhutan under pressure to test India's ability to protect Bhutan. India's Siliguri corridor is becoming increasingly vulnerable as China uses its "Hexiao Gangda Policy" to encroach on smaller neighboring countries.

#### Way Forward

- To secure the Siliguri corridor and prevent Chinese access to Doklam India's relationship with Bhutan needs to be more strengthened by improving more Bhutan's infrastructure and military sector.
- India needs to strengthen military connectivity in the tri junction area at Doklam so that India can face China head-on in any scenario. All though India certainly does not want war but India's defence sector must always be alert to such situations. In order to defend its national interest and national security, India must extent its power projection capabilities both in an economic and military sense. China's aggressive policy cannot be tolerated in any way. Security, needs to enhance along the border in India's northeast as well as Siliguri corridor .
- Collaborative relations with small neighbouring countries around the Chicken's Neck are Essential.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

India and China, two neighbouring Asian countries have always been at odds with each other over the demarcation of the LAC boundary. Ongoing infiltration and clashes between forces of both sides are taking place every year as a result of divergent view points on the LAC. Doklam stand off is another chapter in such ongoing story. China has been steadily developing its border infrastructure over the past few decades, including railways, strategic airfields and roads that are capable of bearing the weight of the biggest vehicles all the way to the LAC. This is done to ensure prompt troops mobilization in the case of a potential war with India. Accepting China's demand on Doklam in compromise will reflect weakness of India and Bhutan and encourages China to take bolder steps in several border disputes. Negotiation and cooperation are often emphasized in modern politics as the best course of action, which is anticipated from large nations like China and India. In recent time to solve the conflict soft power is more important than hard power. Doklam issue should be resolved diplomatically not militarily. If these disputed area between Bhutan and China is resolved through dialogues neighbouring both countries would strive to improve of their relations and prosper trade in future.

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