



A Himalayan spat between China and India evokes memories of war - Economist

A Chinese road building project in the Himalayas has become the center of an escalating border dispute between India and China, with both sides accusing the other of territorial intrusions. For nearly six weeks, armed contingents of two of the biggest military forces in the world have faced off in a high-altitude game of chicken in the Himalayas. Roughly 300-400 Indian soldiers and an equal number of Chinese border guards are stuck glowering at one another over a scrubby patch of land at a “tri-junction”, where the two countries and the tiny kingdom of Bhutan all meet. Analysts cannot see how either side might easily stand down. Memories of a bloody border war fought between China and India in 1962 are all too easily evoked.



That war, which saw India humiliated, began after the Chinese built a road across disputed territory in the far west of the two countries’ 4,000km-long, disputed border. The latest problems began when Chinese border guards were spotted moving road-making equipment onto the Dolam plateau, a flat spot in the slightly larger region known as Doklam which all three sides patrol. On June 18th Indian troops moved onto the plateau to prevent the resurfacing of a dirt track. No shots were fired, though a shoving match was captured on video. Doklam is the subject of a long-standing territorial dispute, one of many in the region. What makes India’s actions extraordinary is that the dispute is not between India and China, but rather between China and Bhutan. India makes no claim to the plateau, which it says it has moved onto on Bhutan’s behalf. What is less clear is whether Bhutan, an ally which India has in the past treated as a vassal, really wanted Indian help.

The Chinese government claims that India’s incursion is a black-and-white instance of breach of sovereignty—and it has a case. Chinese officials cannot appear soft, for fear of ridicule at home. The more rabid parts of their media are already rattling sabres. The defence ministry has vowed to stand firm in Doklam, warning that it is “easier to move a mountain than to shake the People’s Liberation Army”. The government says the Indians must withdraw entirely before the matter can be discussed.

Some historical context is in order. The 1962 war was fought on multiple fronts all along the Himalayan range. Before it was over, the Chinese had surged through the eastern Himalayas down into India’s isolated north-east (they later withdrew). Now, as Chinese might grows, Indian strategists worry that the north-east is becoming

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ever more under threat. As it is, a jagged cartographic dagger from Tibet points southward, separating most of the Indian state of Sikkim, to the west, from Bhutan, to the east. Were China to extend a road system south to the full extent of its claim, it would reach a ridge that is just 100km north of a vulnerable point on the Indian plains below: the “chicken’s neck”, a 21km-wide corridor connecting mainland India to the eight states of its north-east. India has a metaphorical pinched nerve too: China’s annual defence spending dwarfs India’s, \$215bn to \$56bn.

A solution may be hiding in misty Bhutan, a Buddhist country that has far more in common culturally with the neighbouring Chinese region of Tibet than it does with India. It finds its relationship with its neighbour to the south increasingly embarrassing—a legacy of days when Bhutan was a protectorate of British India. Its foreign relations are still handled by diplomats in Delhi, albeit unofficially. That means it can get caught up in Indian spats with China that have nothing to do with it. In May, India decided to snub China by staying away from an international summit in Beijing to discuss China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”—a scheme to link China to its neighbours and countries beyond with a splurge of spending on infrastructure and power projects. The point of India’s gesture was to show its anger at China’s extension of the scheme into the part of Kashmir that is controlled by Pakistan but claimed by India. Struggles over Kashmir do not affect Bhutan’s gross national happiness index, its much-vaunted means of measuring its progress. But Bhutan, presumably under orders from India, stayed away from the gathering in Beijing, too.

Some politicians in Bhutan would like their country to pursue a more independent policy, and China is keen to encourage that. Having Bhutan as a friend would make it all the easier for China to control that strategic swathe of the Himalayas and cause India to squirm. Why then move troops into an area claimed by Bhutan? It could make sense, says Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, a historian at King’s College London and author of “Shadow States: India, China and the eastern Himalayas”. The message China may be trying to send to India’s protégé is: if you deal with us directly instead of through Delhi, we might be more sympathetic to your border claims and walk quietly out of Doklam.

Glacial change

But Bhutan cannot turn its back on India so easily. It is the biggest single recipient of Indian aid. India is the main market for its glacier-melt hydropower. India supports Bhutan’s puny army. And India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, is conscious of China’s designs: his first trip abroad after taking office in 2014 was to Bhutan. The kingdom’s fear of changing the status quo may explain why the stand-off in the Himalayas has persisted far longer than previous surges of tension between China and India along their border in recent years. It becomes all the more worrying when you consider that Mr Modi and China’s president, Xi Jinping, are nationalists who want to be seen as strongmen.

Fortunately, however, there is one thing that matters more to Mr Xi than praise for defending China’s border claims. That is stability. In the build-up to a sweeping reshuffle of the leadership expected this autumn, he is preoccupied with political struggles at home: a shooting match with India that risked escalating into war would be a dangerous distraction. As for Mr Modi, a conflict ending in the kind of defeat that India suffered in 1962 would be ruinous for his country and might finish his political career. Both countries are far more powerful than they were 55 years ago. It can only be hoped that they do not misjudge their strength.