



TAKSHASHILA
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China, India and Doklam in 2020

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Executive Summary

India's conciliatory stance towards China in the aftermath of the 2017 Doklam crisis has led to a deterioration of the strategic situation at the India-Bhutan-China trijunction. Our analysis uses satellite imagery to show that:

- With China being prevented from extending its constructions westward following the 2017 crisis, the axis of Chinese activity has shifted towards Southeast Doklam.
- From 2019 onwards, China began to build roads and permanent structures along the Amo Chu River in Bhutan. This is a clear repetition of China's South China Sea strategy of occupying territory through unilateral constructions.
- The new sites are strategically significant, allowing China to potentially outflank Indian positions and threaten the Siliguri Corridor, acting as a permanent "threat in being" to India's political leadership.
- In the absence of a more decisive stance, India risks even more territorial incursions by China, which will further alienate traditional allies such as Bhutan.

Introduction

In 2017, a standoff between India and China on the Doklam Plateau high in the Himalayas captured international attention. India was initially [praised](#) for “standing up” to China, but soon after, began to adopt an increasingly conciliatory tone. Indeed, despite official Indian silence on the issue, China continued to unilaterally advance into disputed territory by building up its military fortifications, as we predicted in our 2018 [analysis](#) of the Doklam issue.

In an [update](#) in July 2020, in the aftermath of the Galwan Valley incident, we argued that “A trend of unilateral Chinese actions to modify the status quo, Indian official silence, and simmering border tensions – as we predicted in September 2018 – appears to have become the norm in Sino-Indian relations”. The latest manifestation of this new norm is evident in China’s activities along the Amo Chu river, which flows from China into Bhutan’s Haa district, a few kilometres to the east of Doklam.

First, a note on the Doklam dispute. As per the Anglo-Chinese convention of 1890, “The boundary of Sikkim and Tibet shall be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta and its affluents from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other Rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier, and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nipal [sic] territory.”

The legality of this treaty has been discussed in our 2018 analysis; suffice it to note here that China accepts the treaty, but disputes its interpretation. As per India and Bhutan, who adhere to the spirit of the treaty, the India-China-Bhutan trijunction is actually at Batang La, labelled as “Actual Trijunction” in Figure 1, whereas China, adhering to the letter of the treaty, holds that it is at Mount Gipmochi/Gymochen (refer to the [map](#) released by its spokesperson Lu Kang during the 2017 crisis). As a result, China also claims a large swathe of territory that according to India and Bhutan, is Bhutanese. Negotiations on the issue have been held between Bhutan and China in previous years, but have proven inconclusive. These differing interpretations are shown in Figure 2.



Figure 1. The India-China-Bhutan trijunction. The area shaded in red and bounded by a dotted red line is China's interpretation of the border and the territorial claims implied thereby.

The 2017 Doklam crisis ended after an agreement between India and China on withdrawal from the faceoff site. The Indian side claimed that “expeditious disengagement” had begun; the Chinese side maintained that “Chinese border troops continue with their patrols and stationing in the Dong Lang area”. Soon after, a widely-publicised “unofficial summit” took place between the Chinese and Indian premiers in Wuhan, China.

Despite a great deal of triumphalism in the Indian media and the Indian government adopting a policy of silence and extreme sensitivity to Chinese sentiments, China continued to fortify Doklam, as we [pointed out](#) in our 2018 study. India continued with this policy of silence despite the immense strategic significance of the Doklam Plateau. Figure 3 below highlights its orientation towards India's Siliguri corridor, the so-called “Chicken's Neck” connecting India's northeastern states to the rest of the country. The pins to the east of the Plateau will be discussed later.

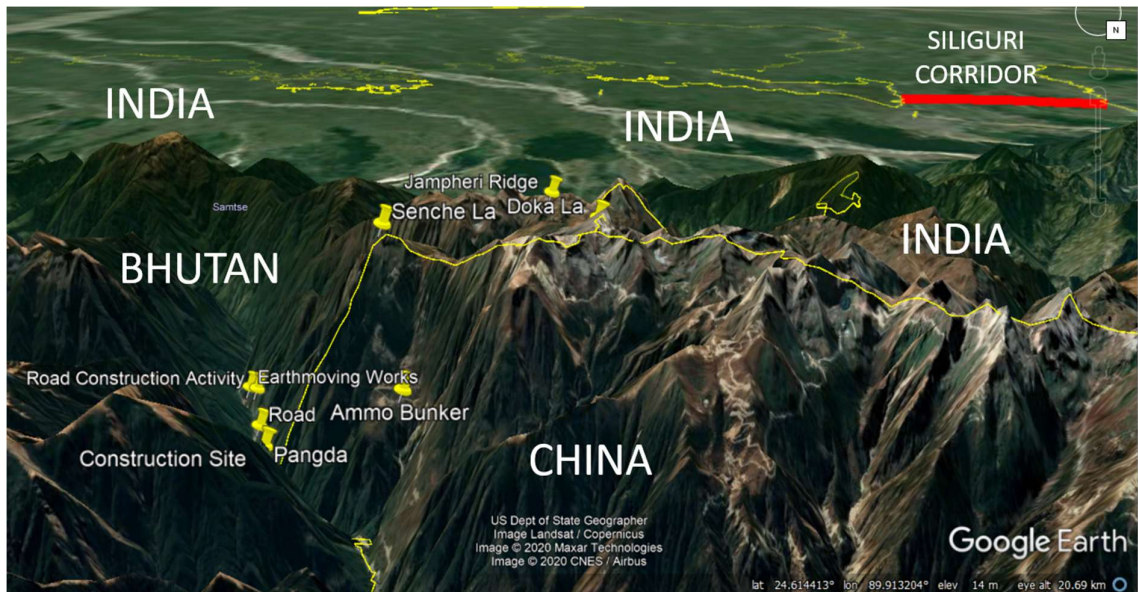


Figure 2. The strategic orientation of the Doklam Plateau, with the Siliguri Corridor highlighted.

Figure 3 shows the Chinese road from Yadong, in Tibet, to the Doklam Plateau in November 2018. Note the area marked “Construction Site” in the southeast – clearly, there is no activity evident in 2018.



Figure 3. The road from Yadong in China to the disputed Doklam Plateau.

However, the situation began to change in late 2019. A new fork emerges in the Yadong-Doklam route following the Amu Chu river, as shown in Figure 4. A number of new sites also show evidence of extensive Chinese activity.

New Activities

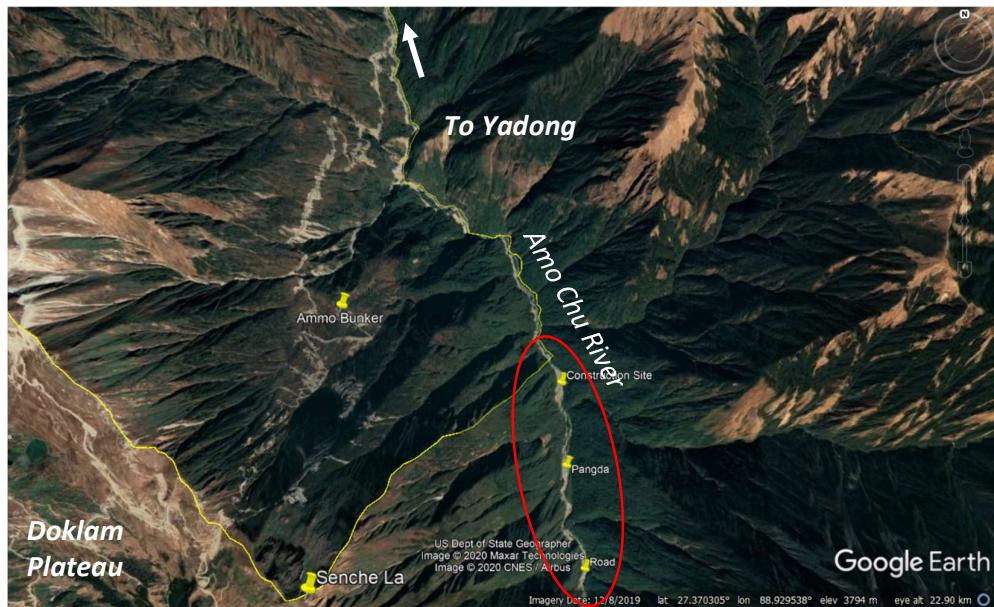


Figure 4. Imagery from 2019, showing the orientation of new sites of Chinese activity in relation to the road in Figure 4 and the construction site in Figure 5.

Though China was prevented from moving further west on the Doklam plateau in 2017, the following analysis will show that the axis of their activity shifted southeast, highlighted in red in Figure 4. From 2019 onwards, a road, earthmoving equipment, and a wall between the construction sites and the Amo Chu river can be observed at a number of sites, shown in the images below.



Figure 5. The relation of China's new construction sites to the Doklam Plateau and the India-China-Bhutan border.

A December 2020 report by Col Vinayak Bhat for India Today confirmed that China has [continued](#) building to the edge of its claim line. These sites are within the white ellipsis in Figure 5. Many of these sites clearly show walls being built between the site and the Amo Chu River as well as signs of extensive construction activity.

China also began construction of permanent structures – their foundations are clearly visible in the site marked “Pangda” in Figure 6. While Chinese media claim that these are for civilians, it will be shown later that they appear to be more military in nature.

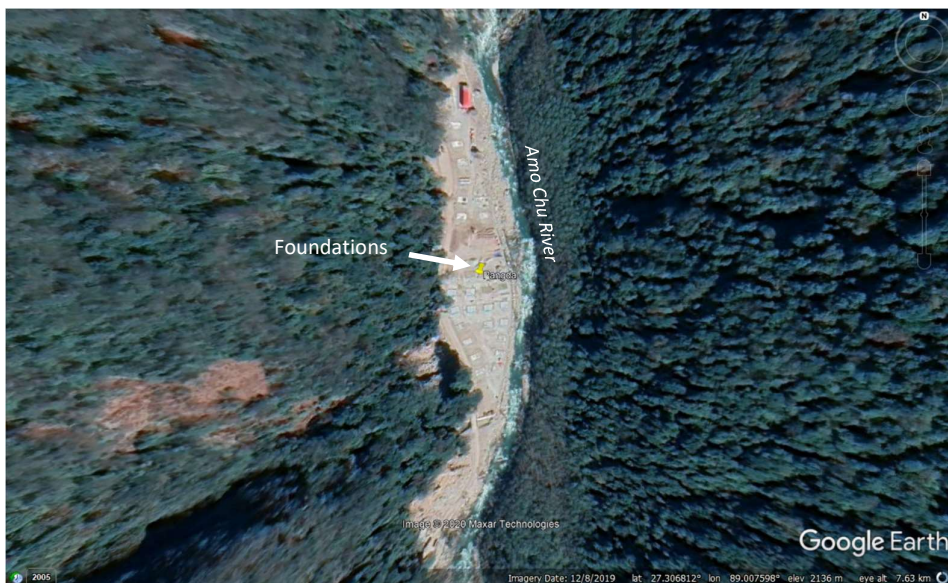


Figure 6. The Pangda site, showing the foundations of permanent structures.

At a road construction site further along the river, earthmoving equipment and residences for workers are visible, highlighted in Figure 7 below.



Figure 7. Earthmoving equipment and residences at a site along the Amo Chu River.

As seen in Col Vinayak Bhat's [images](#) in India Today, dated October 28th 2020, the buildings which were under construction in Figure 6 have been successfully completed. Chinese media [insisted](#) that this so-called "Pangda village" was within Chinese territory, citing maps released by China during the 2017 Doklam conflict. However, the lack of any potential sources of livelihood nearby strongly suggests that the structures are meant for military purposes, and not civilian use, as claimed by CGTN producer Shen Shiwei in a [now-deleted](#) tweet featuring a photo op with the "residents" of Pangda. However, satellite imagery [from CNN](#) (shown below) show that the site has a boundary wall, a single entry and exit point, and a satellite dish, implying that this is actually a military installation.



Figure 8. The Pangda site in 2020. Features suggesting that it is meant for military purposes are highlighted in the above image. The image was taken from [CNN](#), copyright Maxar Technologies.

It needs to be emphasised that China's claims regarding the legality of its constructions are totally facetious; as discussed above, this area is disputed by Bhutan. The constructions are an attempt to claim territory through infrastructure building, a military assertion of territorial claims. This is an echo of China's [South China Sea strategy](#) and an obvious attempt to change the status quo and present Bhutan with a *fait accompli*. The strategic consequences of this are discussed in the next section.

Implications

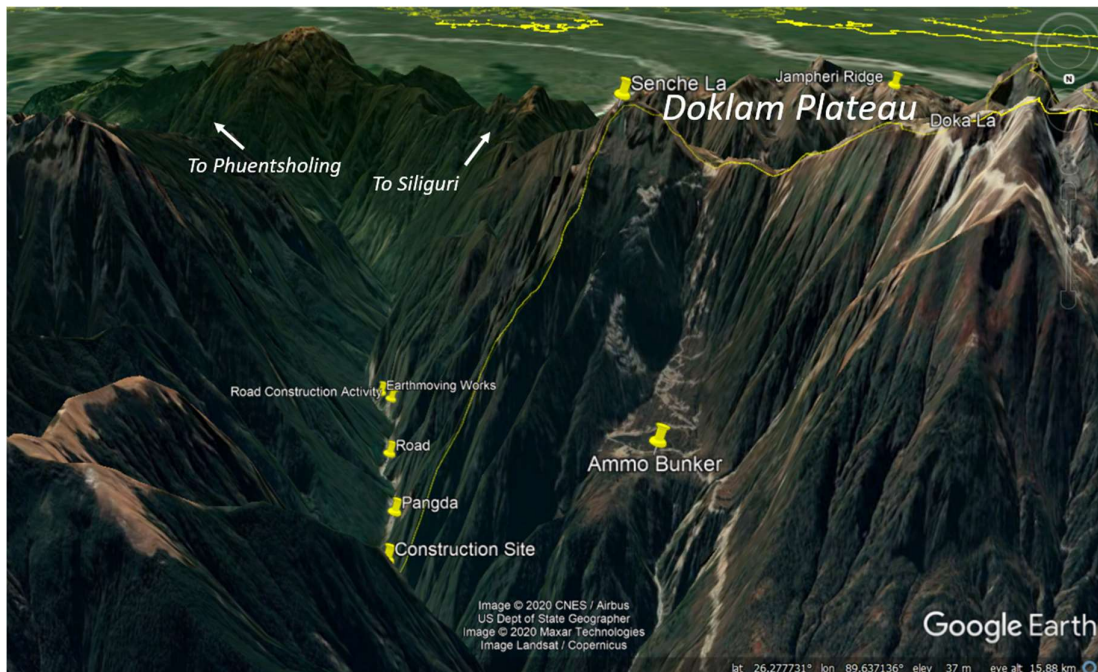


Figure 9. The strategic orientation of China's new constructions along the Amo Chu River.

The implications of China's new activities are strategically significant. At a tactical level, [as established](#) in our previous reports, China has entrenched itself and taken effective control of the western part of the Doklam Plateau. Figure 9 shows that it has now seized southeast Doklam and the Amo Chu River valley. Figure 10 below also highlights an earlier intrusion into Bhutanese territory north of the valley. China is thus unilaterally enforcing its claim over the entire disputed region with blatant disregard for Bhutanese sovereignty and Indian concerns. China's military constructions through the areas they claim as theirs suggest that it is only a matter of time before they resume moving towards the Jampheri ridge.



Figure 10. The orientation of China's new road and sites with relation to the India-China-Bhutan border. The borders as per India and Bhutan are shown as a yellow line, China's claim line is shown as a dotted red line.

However, the new constructions are already a matter of concern as they are at a point where the Amo Chu valley widens as the river flows southeast. This allows China to outflank Indian positions along the Doka La-Batang La axis and the Jampheri Ridge, as shown in Figure 11. By advancing through Bhutan, China could threaten the Siliguri Corridor and potentially jeopardise India's connectivity to its northeastern states. Whether or not China actually chooses to take such an aggressive course of action, the strategic implications of this occupation are still grave.



Figure 11. The strategic significance of China's new constructions – marked “Pangda” above – lies in the fact that they allow it to effectively outflank India's positions along the Doka La-Batang La axis, potentially threatening the Siliguri Corridor.

As it has previously done in the South China Sea, China has gradually used illegal constructions to strengthen its position and capture progressively larger swathes of disputed territory with a complete disregard for international norms, sovereignty, and negotiations. It should be a matter of concern to India that China is also repeating this strategy elsewhere along the over 3,000-kilometre border: after the Galwan Valley incident in 2020, it has now come to light that China has also begun to [relocate](#) villages towards the Arunachal Pradesh border.

The objectives of such territorial microaggressions are twofold. As discussed above, they can be used to gradually change the status quo in disputed territory to China's advantage. More importantly, they increase the effectiveness of the potential pressure point that China could apply on India's political leadership – a “threat in being” that can be used to secure favourable outcomes.

For example, in our 2018 report, we [noted](#) how in the months following the Doklam crisis, India became extremely sensitive about hurting Chinese sentiments, warning officials not to attend Tibetan celebrations. In 2019, even as the Indian and Chinese premiers participated in a carefully-choreographed show of bonhomie at Mamallapuram, China was constructing and occupying territory in the Amo Chu River Valley and on the Doklam Plateau, enhancing its capability to interdict the Siliguri Corridor. This fact

would have been known to Indian intelligence agencies, and yet did not provoke any comment or reaction from Indian authorities, implying *de facto* acquiescence.

Bhutan's claim to Doklam was linked to Indian interests and was cemented by the Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, a bond which was clearly on display in the early stages of the 2017 Doklam crisis. But since then, Bhutan has come under immense pressure from China on its east, with the People's Republic claiming the Sakteng Nature Reserve in eastern Bhutan, which was hitherto undisputed Bhutanese territory bordering the sensitive Tawang area of Arunachal Pradesh.

The lack of protest from Bhutan on China's occupation of the Amo Chu river valley indicates that India has lost its ability to influence Bhutan, as it has probably taken note of India's ineffective role in managing Chinese aggression. India's policy of treating China with extreme deference, focussing on the show of bonhomie, while allowing Chinese territorial aggression to continue undisputed, has clearly been noted by Bhutan, which is why it now refuses to acknowledge that China has occupied its territory along the Amo Chu River.

Bhutan's ambassador to India [claimed](#) that "There is no Chinese village inside Bhutan". This might be technically correct as the new constructions are probably military installations. Such a statement, despite satellite imagery proving otherwise, seems to indicate that Bhutan has either given up its claims to the region over the last three years, or that it believes that public statements will lead to a backlash from China which India will be unable to attenuate. Either way, it appears that the lack of decisive action from India's leadership has *de facto* conceded the initiative on its Himalayan border to China and jeopardised its ties to its closest ally.

Conclusions

The constructions inside Bhutanese territory along the Amo Chu river are in all probability military in nature, and could act as logistics bases for military offensives through Bhutan, aimed to cut the Siliguri corridor. This exacerbates India's existing strategic vulnerability and deepens the Chinese wedge in Indo-Bhutan relations.

India's passive response on the issue conveys to China that the latter has succeeded in acquiring the psychological ascendancy over the Indian political leadership that it meant to, with the message that Chinese military supremacy cannot be contested. Such a stance also makes it easier for China to establish and signal to other regional actors that it is already the Asian hegemon and is unstoppable in its quest for supremacy.

With the Ladakh situation on ice and the possibility of further territorial grabs in the future, India's acquiescence does not augur well for effective contestation of China's continued assertive claims and blatant aggression against Bhutan. Worse, it seems to repeat the mistakes of the past when China occupied significant parts of the Doklam plateau. India's silence will echo in the myriad tunnels of discord in Sino-Indian relations. For India, sacrificing the future for short term gains is imprudent strategy.

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