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Doklam and Darjeeling: A Double-edged Dagger

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The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, left, and Chinese President Xi Jinping listen to a speech during the BRICS Leaders Meeting with the BRICS Business Council on October 16, 2016, in Goa, India. Photo: AP

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*The standoff at the Doklam Plateau and the ongoing violent movement for Statehood in Darjeeling present a clear threat to India's 'Chicken's Neck', a 24-km corridor near the north Bengal town, Siliguri, which connects the seven north-eastern States to the Indian mainland. **Subir Bhaumik**, journalist and Senior Fellow, Centre for Study in International Relations and Development (CSIRD), Kolkata, traces the origins of these two conflicts and points out the need to address these issues before they escalate into what could turn into multiple crises.*

Doklam in Bhutan on the eastern edge of Sikkim's Chumbi Valley sits opposite Yadong in Chinese-administered Tibet. If the road the Chinese were trying to build through Doklam in Bhutan to connect to their forward post opposite India's Lalten

post materialises, India faces the prospect of substantial Chinese deployment barely 35 km from Chicken's Neck.

Not only will any boost to Chinese military presence in Yadong potentially block a possible Indian counter-offensive into Tibet (in the footsteps of the British Colonel Younghusband who pushed into Lhasa through Chumbi valley) but the Chinese from Yadong can initiate a major thrust capable of cutting off 'Chicken's Neck'. The Indian army, even with its beefed up military deployments, does not have enough strategic depth in the area to counter a Chinese offensive, unless Bangladesh permits them to use its territory, the Rangpur-Chapai-Nawabganj zone, to fall-back, retreat and regroup. Defending without strategic depth is any army commander's nightmare, even a most determined one. The resistance may be intensified, but the conclusion is foregone.

Though Bangladesh, especially the Hasina government, values its friendship with India it is unwilling, like Bhutan or Myanmar, to be drawn into a Sino-Indian military confrontation. This is why the Bangladesh Prime Minister carefully batted away Indian pressure to sign a formal treaty on defence cooperation during her May 2017 India visit and restricted herself to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

Bhutan, to defend whose territory India moved its troops into Doklam, also responded in a rather lukewarm manner when the status quo violations in Doklam were first detected by Indian troops. They finally issued a demarche to the Chinese, asking them to withdraw their troops from Doklam, which both Bhutan and China claim.

Bhutanese officials have told this writer that the Chinese are keen to settle the disputed boundary in all other sectors but not at Doklam. That points to the strategic importance of Doklam to the Chinese, both for defensive and offensive reasons.

But the Chinese did not provoke the Doklam crisis by starting to build the road in Bhutanese territory merely to gain local terrain and tactical (T&T) advantage. They clearly wanted to kick-start a diplomatic offensive aimed at drawing out Bhutan from the Indian ambit of influence and torpedo the Indo-Bhutanese special relations that is the anchor of Indian influence in the Himalayas, especially after the huge loss of clout in Nepal as a result of India's disastrous backing of the Madhesi-driven economic blockade that hit the Kathmandu valley hard in many ways.

Just before the May 2017 Belt and Road conference in Beijing, which India boycotted and Bhutan followed suit, a Chinese diplomat from New Delhi visited Thimphu and lobbied extensively with ministers, lawmakers, civil society and business leaders (one top Bhutanese columnist subsequently pitched very hard for China and Bhutan to be left alone to solve the boundary issue) to push Thimphu to have 'balanced relations with all neighbours' (meaning China and India).

The Chinese have been wary of Indian efforts to reopen the Tibetan question, evident in New Delhi's help to organise the broad-based anti-Beijing dissident conference at McLeod Ganj in May 2016, which brought together Tibetans, Uighurs, Falun Gongs and pro-democracy activists on one platform. They are equally upset with India's ever-growing strategic relationship with the U.S. and the recent 2017 Malabar exercises involving India, U.S., and Japan, in which offensive drills using aircraft carriers and helicopter carriers were used, alongside defensive anti-submarine drills aimed at checking Chinese submarine forays in the Indian Ocean.

The nibbling at territory on the disputed Himalayan borders by the Chinese to militarily challenge India and pressure it by challenging the status quo plays out nicely alongside the diplomatic offensive to curb Indian influence in Nepal and Bhutan. Doklam was the latest throw of dice in that long-term game.

Darjeeling reignited

The Doklam stand-off provoked by the Chinese road-making in Bhutanese territory comes at a time when the tea-growing hills of Darjeeling are aflame. Darjeeling is called the 'Queen of the Hills' but for three months now, it is on fire. The movement for a separate Gorkhaland, which began soon after Independence and saw a violent uprising by the Nepali-speaking Gorkhas in the 1980s, was resurrected by Bimal Gurung-led Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) after the Mamata Banerjee-led West Bengal government made Bengali language compulsory in all schools in the State, including in the Darjeeling hills where Nepalis are in a majority.

The Nepali opposition to this Government Order reignited the movement, which has now entered a very violent phase, with a virtual shutdown of the hill district over the past two months. The GJM hardliners are slowly taking over the movement, attacking policemen, burning vehicles and vandalising government offices. Now they are even threatening self-immolation.

The Indian Intelligence Bureau has reportedly already unearthed evidence of considerable flow of covert Chinese funds to these Gorkha hardliners from two sources—Nepal-based and Chinese funded business establishments and Kolkata-based mining companies engaged in the export of ore with China. Chinese intelligence agencies appear to have adopted the modus operandi of over-invoicing used by U.S. and Russian intelligence agencies during the Cold War to fund their political allies and deep assets in India. There is also reason to believe that the Chinese are funding the importers of ore with explicit instructions to pay off their assets in India. This is said to be a convenient route for slush money funding to rebel groups from Maoists to Northeast rebels and now Gorkha hardliners.

The Chinese also reportedly have a presence in Nepal and among assets in the country's Maoist extremist fringe to help them radicalise the Gorkha Statehood movement that would have an impact on the Chicken's Neck. The manner in which many Gorkha veterans reacted by openly supporting the Statehood movement points to its enormous potential for destabilising the hill zone overlooking the Chicken's Neck alongside the emerging threat from Doklam.

If the movement develops into a full-fledged armed insurgency along the lines of those in the Northeast, India will be revisiting the late-1960s scenario, when the proliferation of guerrilla movements in Naga and Mizo hills, Manipur, and Tripura were compounded by a direct threat to the 'Chicken's Neck' in the shape of the violent Naxalbari uprising that led to the emergence of a powerful left radical movement threatening not just a strategic region but the Indian democratic polity.

That inspired the 'Agartala Doctrine' espoused by Tripura's first Chief Minister, Sachindralal Singha, and accepted by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi—a doctrine of appropriate response to secure Northeast by 'kicking Pakistan out of the East and creating a friendly Bengali nation-state sensitive to Indian security concerns'. The Indian support for the Bengali insurrection in East Pakistan in 1971 and finally the military intervention to create Bangladesh was inspired by the urge to secure the Northeast from Pakistani and Chinese-backed insurrections, and a Mao-inspired left radical uprising at Naxalbari on the narrow Siliguri Corridor. This was a counter to South Asia's cobweb of insurgencies supported by hostile rival nation-states, which I have detailed in my book, *Insurgent Crossfire*. India hit back by breaking up Pakistan through a hugely supported Bengali insurrection in East Pakistan in response to Pakistan's repeated attempts to seize Kashmir through sponsored uprisings like Operation Gibraltar in 1965 and before that in 1947-48. The Indian backing, with U.S. support, of the Tibetan uprising also provoked China into the 1962 war and later a coordinated support for the Northeast Indian

rebel groups with Pakistan. Even Bangladesh started backing the Northeast Indian rebel groups after the India-friendly regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was brought down in 1975 by a military coup. In retaliation, India started backing the rebel tribesmen of the Shanti Bahini in the country's south-eastern Chittagong Hill Tracts.

At Doklam, the Chinese violated Bhutan's sovereignty by starting to build a road inside the Kingdom's territory. This forced India to react militarily by moving troops to oppose and successfully stop the road building. With much loss of face, the Chinese have now started a campaign claiming that the Indian army has pulled back troops and suggesting that the move has helped ease the standoff. However, this writer found during a recent visit to Lalten-Nathang area that nearly three companies (300 troops) of the 164 Brigade have stayed put in the Doklam area and New Delhi has insisted on a mutual pull-out plan that National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, put forward to his Chinese counterpart, State Councillor Yang Jiechi, during the border negotiations in the course of his recent visit to Beijing.

The proposal was simple and unambiguous even as the Chinese propaganda, invoking the 1890 treaty demarcating the border between Sikkim and Tibet, unfolded through its defence commentators. Doval said India will pull back its troops from Doklam only when the Chinese pull back from there and stop building the road. The government has stuck to that. Now the Chinese have stopped building the road, though they are yet to pull back their heavy machinery from the area. They are claiming an Indian pull out perhaps to justify their own and at the same time placating the hawks back home.

President Xi Jinping, who, like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is possibly compelled to live up to his image of a muscular nationalist leader, cannot afford to look weak and blinking as he prepares to mow down the Opposition in the run-up to the Communist Party of China (CPC) Congress this October. He needs the support of the military-security establishment—so military spending is up and the projected threat of an Indo-U.S.-Japanese military coalition comes useful to woo the hawks in the military, intelligence, party, and other opinion-making layers of Chinese society.

No wonder, Xi has been alerting the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) of threats and asking them to prepare for short wars to protect Chinese sovereignty. He is also all praise for the PLA, reminding them repeatedly in multiple events of their success in defending China. They seem to suffer from a perceived threat of multi-nation gang-up to check China's rise, drawing heavily from China's century of humiliations.

Key to China's ruling CPC's success in averting a regime change and a transition to democracy is not only the ability to maintain a high rate of economic growth but also to project military strength as a means to exert pressure on its neighbours, including India, the only country in Asia capable of taking on China. The high-voltage coverage of Doklam in the state-controlled Chinese press is evidence of how much is at stake in such a border stand-off.

From the Indian point of view, the key issues involved in the Doklam standoff, even as it seems to be easing, are:

- (1) New Delhi's capacity to stand firm without much drum-beating against Chinese bullying,
- (2) adequate military preparations to ward off the Chinese challenge not merely at Doklam but elsewhere in the high Himalayas,
- (3) the diplomatic capacity to keep Bhutan and other South Asian neighbours on India's side,
- (4) to generally hold fire in the media but augmenting the capacity to match the Chinese in psy-ops,
- (5) the ability to normalise relations with China first by de-escalating the standoff at Doklam and then by being able to get on track efforts to find a long-standing solution to the border dispute,
- (6) to be able to thwart possible Chinese efforts to work up trouble in conflict zones like Darjeeling, the Northeast, and Kashmir but also to ensure avoiding too much provocation to the Chinese on Tibet,
- (7) to be able to attract Chinese capital for making a success of 'Make in India',
- (8) to be able to bring down the trade deficit and address the balance of payments,
- (9) to augment India's capacity to fight a two-front war with China and Pakistan, and
- (10) to get all major powers, specially Russia, the U.S., and the EU, to support India on issues like declaring Masood Azhar as a terrorist in the UN.

It is still unclear if India will be able to achieve these ends, and if so, to what extent. The huge time lag and cost escalation in modernising the Indian military and the lack of adequate logistics infrastructure on ground still gives the PLA a significant edge over the Indian army.

It is true that the Indian army is not the same demoralised force as it was in 1962, but it should also be noted that it is called upon to engage itself in internal security situations constantly. One may argue that this keeps them ready for war, but the challenges of fighting a counter-insurgency and a conventional war are as different from each other as dealing with snowfall and a heat wave. The longer the Indian army remains engaged in counter-insurgency operations, the lesser it is likely to be prepared and oriented for a conventional war and with

far fewer troops available for plugging gnawing gaps in defences, especially in the high Himalayas.

The twin threats of Doklam and Darjeeling

It is important to read the threats emanating from Doklam and Darjeeling together. India needs to not just prepare for a two-front war with Pakistan and China but actually for a two-and-half front war involving simultaneous combat with enemies at the gates and insurgents in the rear—fighting the Chinese and Pakistanis and all the rebel groups they sponsor or seek to sponsor. The Indian army needs to be prepared for handling such situations—fighting a foreign enemy at Doklam and the one within at Darjeeling.

When the 4th army corps in the 1990s unleashed the counter insurgency campaign in Assam in the form of 'Operation Bajrang' and 'Operation Rhino' against the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and Bodo rebels, it started to prepare for a war against an enemy facing it frontally and an enemy within threatening its lines of communication. With the likes of ULFA's Paresh Barua now closer to China in intent and location (read ULFA's statement attacking Dalai Lama for a recent visit to Arunachal Pradesh [**Reference number 14**]), the Indian army needs to prepare for wars looking both ways. D&D (Doklam and Darjeeling) is no fancy phrase but a serious emerging threat pattern, which India can ignore at its own peril.

Gorkhaland Revived

It was a TV reality show that changed the destiny of Bimal Gurung, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) leader blamed for the recent turmoil in Darjeeling hills in the eastern Indian State of West Bengal.

Gurung could have remained a rebellious foot-soldier of the late Subhash Ghising, the leader who spearheaded a violent Gorkha agitation for a separate homeland for the Nepali-speaking people of hill districts of West Bengal in the 1980s. His return to the spotlight was on the back of a TV reality show which a police constable in Kolkata aspired to win. Prashant Tamang, the constable who hails from the Darjeeling hills, captured the popular imagination by qualifying for the final rounds of the Indian Idol singing contest.

It was then that Gurung stumbled upon a new strategy to recapture the popular imagination and his own relevance as a Gorkhaland foot-soldier. He reached out to the Nepali-speaking

residents of Darjeeling hills and the neighbouring areas to vote for Tamang via SMS. This propaganda offensive paid dividends and Tamang won the 2007 contest.

Gurung broke away from Ghising's Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and formed the GJM in 2007. The point of discord was the proposed setting up of a new Gorkha Hill Council with Sixth Schedule status for the region that the GNLF chief was trying to work out with the Government of India. The GJM termed it a 'compromise' and said that they would not back out of the separate Gorkhaland demand.

The fall out led to frequent skirmishes, often violent, between the two rebel groups for supremacy in the hills. Ghising was forced to live in exile for over two years., enabling Gurung to emerge as the single most popular leader in the region.

The lone challenger to Gurung's popularity was the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League leader Madan Tamang who stitched together a seven-party anti-GJM coalition. Tamang was stabbed to death in broad daylight allegedly by GJM supporters in May 2010. Gurung and 47 others were charged by the CBI with the murder of Tamang. However, on August 17, 2017-two months after the agitation began in the hills, -a Kolkata court discharged Gurung from the Madan Tamang murder case.

The latest round of violence erupted in the hills after the West Bengal government headed by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee proposed to make Bengali compulsory in schools. Gurung has since been on the run from the police, which raided his house and office on June 15.

Yet, paradoxically, Gurung finds himself on a strong wicket. The imposition of Bengali language has given him fresh political ammunition. Although the government has since clarified that Bengali is optional and not compulsory in schools, the agitation showed no signs of relenting.

The origins

The earliest demand for a separate homeland can be traced to 1907 when the demand for a separate administrative unit in the Darjeeling hills was raised for the first time by the Darjeeling Hillmen's Association that submitted a memorandum to Minto-Morley Reforms panel, demanding a separate administrative unit.

The then undivided Communist Party of India also fanned the separate homeland demand, when leaders like Ratanlal Brahman—the first elected parliamentarian from the Darjeeling hills—first petitioned the Constituent Assembly of India in 1947 for a separate homeland of “Gorkhastan” for the Nepali-speaking population.

The trend continued through the 1950s when NB Gurung, president of All India Gorkha League, met Prime Minister Nehru with similar demands.

But the first mass movement calling for a separate homeland of Gorkhaland, led by a former Indian army soldier-turned-writer Ghising of the GNLF, took place in 1986-88. More than 1,200 people were killed in the violent agitation. The movement came to an end with a semi-autonomous governing body known as the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) being created in 1988.

But after two decades, the separate homeland demand was revived by Gurung who formed the GJM and banished his former boss Ghising from the hills before drawing himself close to the then opposition leader in West Bengal Mamata Banerjee and contributed his bit to the downfall of the Marxist rule in the State.

In 2011, the GJM signed a tripartite accord with the Union government and the West Bengal State government, paving the way for the formation of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration replacing the DGHC in 2013.

Having signed the tripartite agreement and settled for an autonomous administrative council instead of a full-fledged homeland, Gurung was faced with the real possibility of losing both the plot and his personal popularity. The latest turmoil, however, has given him a fresh lifeline. The Indian Gorkhas routinely face discrimination in Indian cities, where they seek education and employment. Although there is scepticism about the credibility of the political leadership of the Gorkhas, the popular sentiment in Darjeeling is overwhelmingly in favour of a separate Gorkha homeland.

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