

# Bhutan caught in big neighbour stand-off

## India-China row over border area highlights the tiny kingdom's dilemma

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For The Straits Times

While much of the world has remained engrossed in the United States-North Korea sabre-rattling, less attention has been focused on another important point of contention.

China and India – the world's two most populous nations – have been engaged in confrontational exchanges over a remote Himalayan border area for more than two months.

The Doklam plateau lies at the cross-junction of China, India and Bhutan. It is disputed by Bhutan and China. India supports Bhutan's claim, but as it lies adjacent to

China's border, China has effective control of the area.

Trouble brewed when Indian troops stopped a Chinese road construction crew on June 16 from extending a road on the narrow plateau. India seemingly ordered troops into the area without a request from Bhutan.

The Chinese reportedly reacted by rushing Indian positions and smashing two bunkers at the nearby Lalten outpost.

Both sides have since sent more troops to the area, raising tensions.

India's sensitivity towards the Chinese presence in the south of the Doklam plateau is understandable.

The disputed area slopes into a narrow Indian valley and is perilously close to Siliguri Corridor, about 20km at its narrowest, that

connects India's main landmass with its landlocked north-eastern states.

As the 1962 drubbing by China remains fresh in India's narrative, India fears that China could seize it in a war, cutting off 45 million Indians and an area the size of the United Kingdom.

Underlying the dispute over a small sliver of land is the deeper question of how China wants to relate to Bhutan.

Currently, Bhutan's relations are heavily tilted in India's favour, under a treaty to guide Bhutan's foreign policy.

China's interest lies in changing the status quo in their relations. India's former foreign secretary, Mr Shyam Saran, believes that the Chinese wants to weaken the Bhutan-India alliance and compel Bhutan to negotiate directly with China. Any incremental move by Bhutan towards an independent foreign policy position is a win for China.

### RIVALRY OVER ROLES

The dispute and how it is resolved is symptomatic of growing competition between China and India over their regional and global roles.

The special relationship between Bhutan and India started in the wake of the Chinese occupation of

Tibet during the 1950s.

As China's economic power has expanded, many in Bhutan resented India's attempts to block Bhutan's desire to establish diplomatic relations and trade with Beijing.

After decades of tilting almost exclusively south, Bhutan has begun looking north to China. Reports in the international media indicate that India's move has undermined the border negotiations and has again blocked Bhutan's way to closer economic co-operation with China.

A clearly unnerved Bhutan, a small state with little capacity to defend itself, does not want to be drawn into a row involving its two giant neighbours.

Part of the lure of better relations with China is money. In addition to the border trade, there is tourism, one of Bhutan's biggest money-spinners. Indians do not need visas to travel to Bhutan, but each Chinese must pay US\$250 (S\$340) a day in advance for vacation packages.

Still, for the first time last year, more visitors came from China than from any other country besides India.

Bhutan is in a bind. It is seemingly willing to negotiate the territorial dispute with China, but continues to be saddled with India's pressure to remain tough on China. And it

faces a difficult choice between India's virtual control over its foreign policy and China's insistence on dealing with it independently of India.

Opinion on dealing with China independently of India is gaining ground in Bhutan.

India is wary of the risks of allowing Bhutan to have a freer hand in dealing with China. It notes that within a decade, China has entrenched itself firmly as an influential player in neighbouring Nepal and fears Bhutan could be next.

While it is important that a solution to the current impasse is found soon, China has achieved a diplomatic victory by putting pressure on Bhutan-India relations. China's proximity to Siliguri is a threat, but weaning Bhutan away from India may be a bigger political gain.

Against this backdrop, India should be concerned that next year's parliamentary elections in Bhutan will allow its citizens to vent their concerns over how far their country can continue to be branded India's protectorate. In fact, China subtly promotes this debate through its economic clout and public diplomacy.

As India does not have legal standing to engage China on Doklam, the more this stand-off

drags on, the more the respective positions will harden, more likely to India's disadvantage.

Yet, unless the Chinese agree to withdraw under a mutual arrangement, India will be hard-pressed to accept the new Chinese presence further south in Doklam. Likewise, the extension of the road south will change the status quo to India's disadvantage.

Beijing might also settle for an understanding now if India acknowledges China's effective jurisdiction of the area, pending final settlement, in exchange for the restoration of the status quo as of June 16.

While tiny Bhutan is caught in a big neighbour stand-off, the only solution lies in mutual empathy and accommodation of one another's concerns and withdrawals to agreed positions. The parties will then need to muster the political will to resolve the contentious issues, shorn of external influences.

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