

Security Concerns due to Chinese Village Construction near Bhutan's Territory

Introduction

In Feb 2024, reports emerged that China has completed the construction of at least 3 border villages inside the disputed area inside north central Bhutan's territory near the China-Bhutan border. Two of these villages, Gyalaphug and Tamalung are situated within the disputed area of around 495 Sq Km which are claimed by both China and Bhutan. In Tamalung, around 235 homes were built and in Gyalaphug around 150 houses were built by the Chinese administration to accommodate the villagers.^[1] This situation is concerning for India because as of now, Bhutan has not shown any reaction or protests for this Chinese construction activities within its sovereign territory.

The second concern for India will be that if Bhutan keeps quiet in this situation, then China will get more confidence and may look to start similar activities in the Doklam plateau which is also contested by both China and Bhutan. Previously in 2017, India and China got locked in a tense situation near the Doklam trijunction as China attempted to build a road near the trijunction which could have easily threatened India's security interests in the narrow Siliguri corridor, also known as the Chicken Neck.^[2] A few years after that in the year 2020 China also started claiming the areas of 'Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary' territory in Bhutan's eastern part.^[3] All these developments in the vicinity of Indian borders raise national security concerns for India and needs a strategy.

Objectives of Chinese border villages

These Chinese villages serve many objectives for the Chinese leadership. Firstly, they serve the vision of President Xi Jinping to govern the border areas and stabilise Tibet. Stabilising Tibet refers to the total control of the Tibetan border areas which remain far off from the mainland China. The Tibetan border alongside Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Arunachal and Bhutan is very crucial for China as It considers them their five fingers and Tibet as the palm of a hand. The role of Tibet in China's national security has been emphasised by President Xi in his 2013 parliamentary speech as the Chinese Communist Party chief.^[4] Also in the aftermath of the Galwan incident with India, President Xi instructed his party officials to "Solidify border defence and ensure frontier security" as well to ensure "National security and enduring peace and stability" in the Tibetan region.^[5]

The second purpose is to remove all forms of voices for separatism in Tibet and form an impregnable wall in maintaining peace. The Chinese are aware of the role of Dalai Lama to influence the local population inside Tibet. And China would look to plug that gap with more surveillance so that more people who return from India into Tibet don't carry out anti-national propaganda. President Xi had already wished to transform Tibetan Buddhism into 'Buddhism with Chinese and Socialist characteristics'.^[6] These border villages will have most probably People's Liberation Army soldiers in the guise of simple villagers who will man these border areas and provide sensitive information about Tibetan activities in the vicinity. Already Tibet has a massive surveillance grid system in place. From the Chinese perspective, they think that India would encourage and mobilise Tibetans towards independence from China. These villages can act as assets for counter espionage infrastructure to check those activities.^[7]

The third and final objective is to undermine India's national security through territorial gains and pressure Bhutan into formalising a border deal which has remained disputed for a long time. We must note that India and Bhutan are the two countries whose border issues are not resolved with China till now. Therefore, China would also like to pressure Bhutan into accepting China's demand for a deal which gives them access to the Doklam plateau.

Why is Bhutan not protesting?

An important observation here is that Bhutan is not protesting these Chinese constructions this time. There could be few reasons behind that. Bhutan has an ambiguous perception of China. This stems from the fact that Bhutan perceives its border to be shared by Tibet, which is by default under China's control and Tibet and Bhutan were never hostile towards each other. Hence by default, Bhutanese leadership don't consider China as too much of a threat. Historically, Tibetans and Bhutanese people shared cordial relations and Tibetans crossed over to Bhutan. But after the annexation of Tibet by China, the Bhutanese people still considered that area to be Tibet, and the Chinese domination didn't bother them much.[\[8\]](#)

Another surprising fact is that Bhutanese and Chinese political leadership has been supportive of each other's policies. This is reflected from the fact that Bhutan agrees to the One-China Principle which officially considers Taiwan and Tibet as parts of China. In the Bhutanese society also, there is a sense of admiration for China's phenomenal rise as an economic power and they want to reap the benefits of having economic relations with China. But lack of a formal diplomatic relationship and India's influence over Bhutanese foreign affairs come in between. As per experts, there is a possibility of a resentment over Bhutan having to be sensitive to India's security concerns.[\[9\]](#)

Finally, the role of societal aspirations seem to dwarf over matters of foreign policy or security. Bhutan is an underdeveloped country having problem of high unemployment among the youth. If we look at the past Chinese investments in Bhutan, there are several projects happening inside Bhutan. For example, The Chinese Power Corporation is involved in the Chukha and Punatsangchhu hydel projects. The Sino Hydro Corporation, China Gezhouba Group, China Road and Bridge Corporation and other Chinese state-owned companies are working on several projects. The China Railway Engineering Group is planning to build railway connections through the Lhasa-Gyantse route. Apart from these core infrastructure projects, there are several other industrial activities happening. Like the Chinese companies are involved in mining of gold and copper, fiber optic cables are being laid, helping to expand the mobile network of Bhutan. Huawei has set up 3G and 4G services since the year 2009.[\[10\]](#) We can expect Chinese 5G services also because the tech savvy Bhutanese youth would like their leaders to provide them with the latest telecommunication technology.

Way ahead for India

To tackle this upcoming challenge, India has to rely more on diplomatic tools and strategic policies and keep its military options ready in case of the worst-case scenario. To begin with, India already has plans to build a railway line to Bhutan.[\[11\]](#) In that case India should also try to improve connectivity towards Doklam plateau with either road or rail to boost Indian presence in that disputed area so as to prevent future Chinese incursions. Already

the Indian army is keeping a close eye on China's border talks with Bhutan. The role of domestic politics is also important. Just recently Tshering Tobgay has been sworn as the Prime Minister of Bhutan, succeeding Lotay Tshering. The previous PM was seen as eager to settle a border dispute with China and establish diplomatic relations with China.^[12] Therefore, with the arrival of new PM, India should play its cards carefully and let the new PM understand India's concerns and need to fortify Bhutan's territory. Finally, the issue of sovereignty should be magnified among Bhutanese masses through independent media in same manner like in Nepal where China tried to gobble up northern Nepalese territory and later the Nepalese political leadership ordered an investigation and common people protested against China.^[13]

Conclusion

The Chinese encroachment inside Bhutanese territory is part of China's expansionist policies. Bhutan being a small power is too weak to protest against China. If China's tries to successfully establish diplomatic ties with Bhutan, then India will lose a buffer state. The ties of Bhutan and India are old and trusted. Therefore, India must use this opportunity to request Bhutanese leadership to accept a better border surveillance mechanism and personnel with Indian support to protect their territory from future Chinese encroachments.

Endnotes:

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2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3251394/chinese-village-construction-disputed-zone-outpaces-china-bhutan-border-talks>

[2] Christopher Bodeen, 'China urges India withdrawal in standoff, stages drills', *Associated Press*, 19 July 2017, <https://apnews.com/general-news-376df6e4134a43c28792e46a624117ab>

[3] 'China claims Bhutan land in its 'bid to pressure India', *Times of India*, 6 July 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-claims-bhutan-land-in-its-bid-to-pressure-india/articleshow/76804573.cms>

[4] Jack Lau, *Ibid.*

[5] Wendy Wu, 'Chinese President Xi Jinping turns focus onto Tibet border security', *South China Morning Post*, 30 August

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[6] *Ibid.*

[7] 'Counter-espionage regulations force Tibetans to spy on China', *International Campaign For Tibet*, 15 March 2021, <https://savetibet.org/counter-espionage-regulations-force-tibetans-to-spy-on-tibetans/>

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<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/doklam-shadow-over-india-bhutan-relations-595541>

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[13] Vasudevan Sridharan, 'Nepal protesters burn Xi Jinping effigies over China's alleged border encroachment', *South China Morning Post*, 12 November 2019, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3037449/protesters-nepal-burn-effigies-chinas-xi-jinping-over-alleged?campaign=3037449&module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article

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Article uploaded on 12-03-2024

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