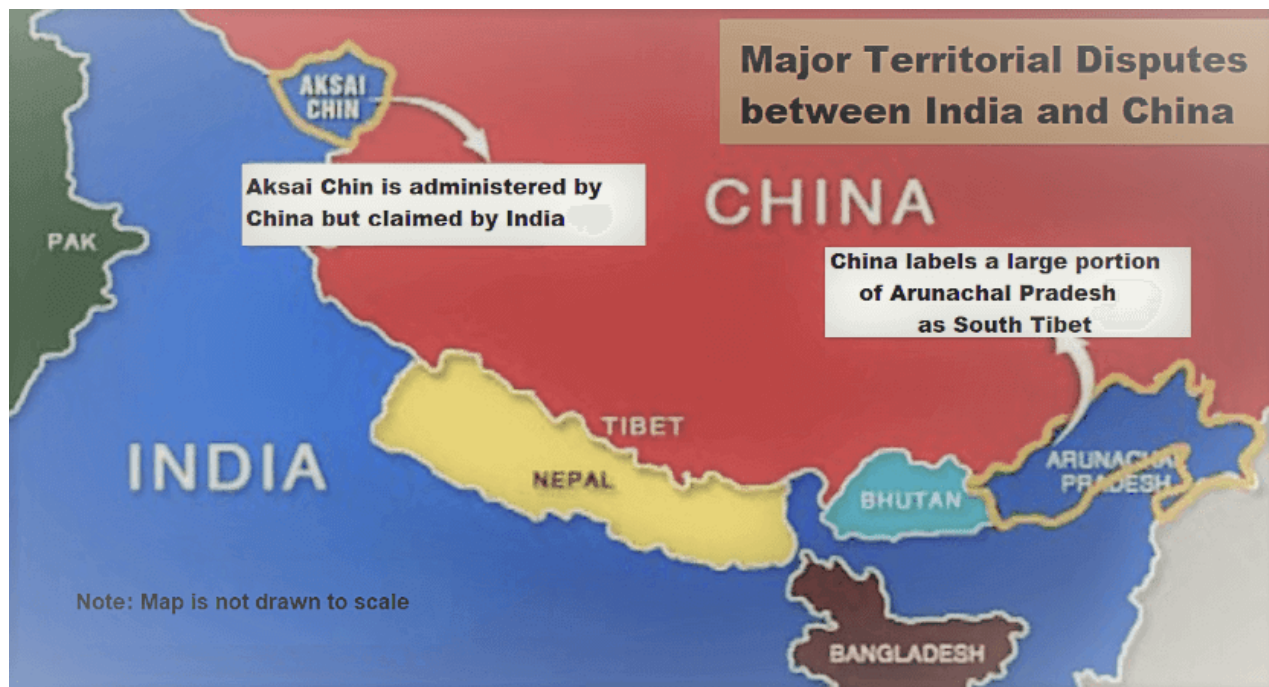


# India-China Border Disputes – What is the Doklam Issue?

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The recent standoff between India and China at the Doklam plateau which lies at a tri-junction between the India, China, and Bhutan has gained much attention. It has turned into the biggest military stand-off between the two armies in years. There are many who even fear a war. In this article, we discuss in detail the India-China border disputes, the recent Doklam issue, various India-China border agreements and some other issues between the two countries.

## Border disputes between India and China

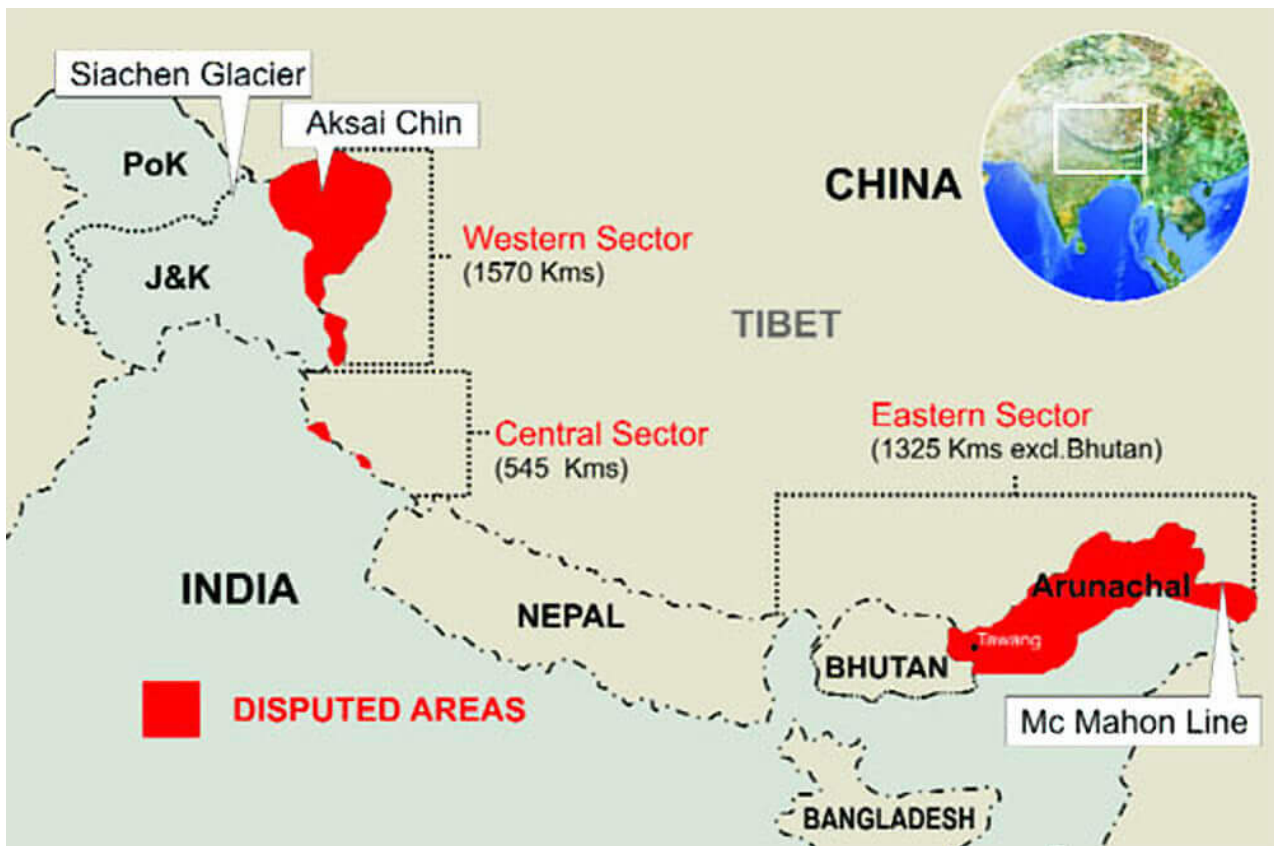
The India-China borders can be broken down into three sectors

1. **Western Sector – DISPUTED** – This comprises the Aksai Chin sector. This region which originally was a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir is claimed by China as part of its autonomous Xinjiang region. After the 1962 war, it is administered by China. It is the second largest Indo-China border area covering over 38000 sq. km. However, it is an uninhabited land. While India claims the entire **Aksai Chin territory** as well as the **Shaksgam valley** (Indian territory gifted to China by Pakistan), China contests Indian control over Daulat Beg Oldi (a tehsil in Leh, south of Aksai China-it is believed to host the world's highest airstrip)
2. **Central Sector – UNDISPUTED** – Although China has recognised India's sovereignty over Sikkim and had initiated the trade at Nathu La pass, the Doklam fiasco could mean trouble at all ends.

3. **Eastern Sector – DISPUTED** – The Arunachal Pradesh border that China still claims to be its own territory is the largest disputed area, covering around 90000 sq. km. It was formally called North East Frontier Agency. During the 1962 war, the People's Liberation Army occupied it but they announced a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew respecting the international boundary (McMahon Line). However, it has continued to assert its claim over the territory. Nowadays, almost the whole of Arunachal is claimed by China. *(Note: This is the reason why the recent visit of Dalai Lama to Tawang monastery had become such a contentious bilateral issue)*

## Johnson Line vs McDonald Line

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- The two nations have held on to their own stands even on the Johnson line and McDonald line which demarcates the territories of the two.
- Johnson Line – India's accepted demarcation – It marks Aksai Chin as an Indian territory
- McDonald Line – China's stance – It marks Aksai Chin as Chinese territory

## The India-China War of 1962

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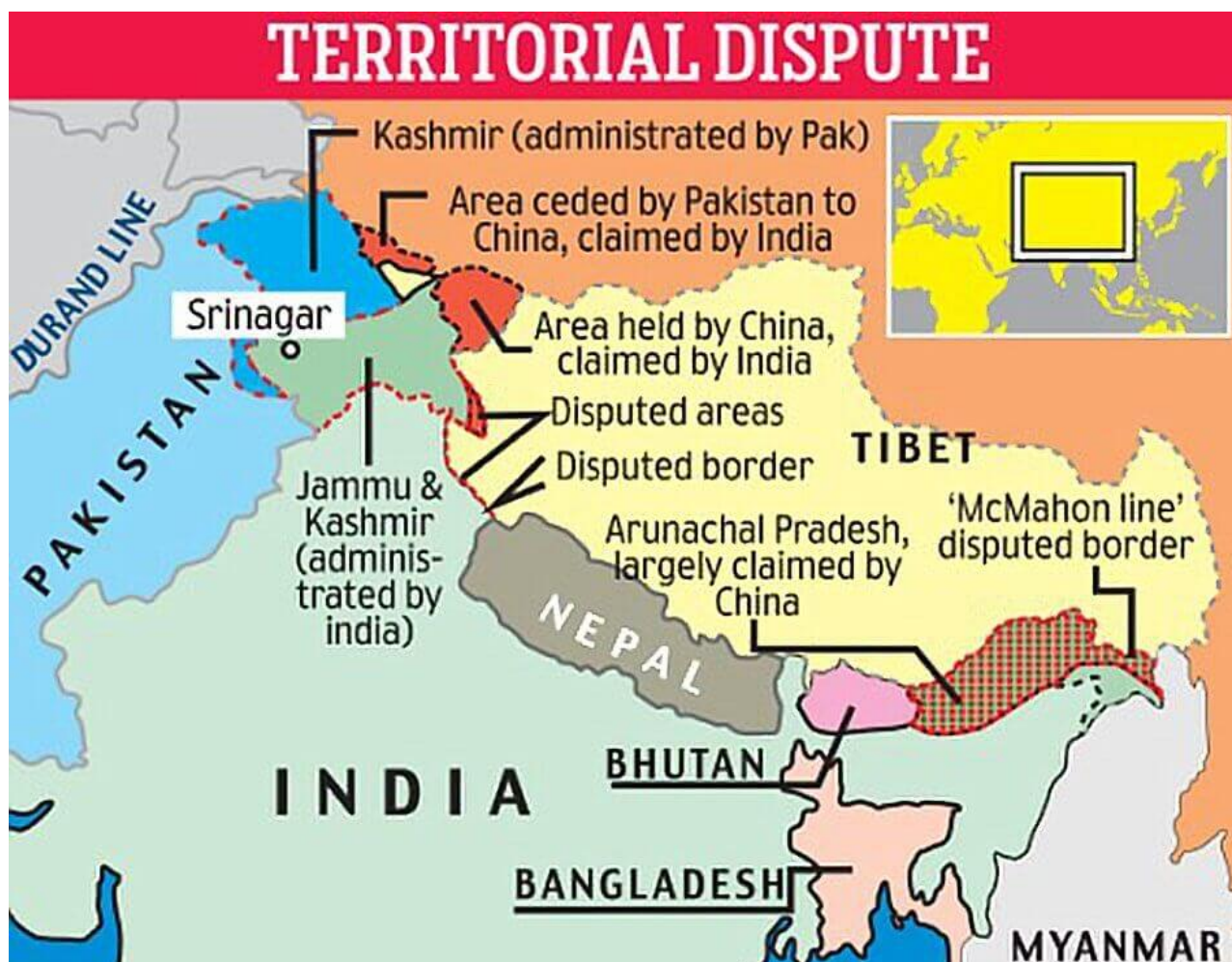
- The pretext of the war was a dispute over the sovereignty of the Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh.
- But, in reality, there were many reasons and the prominent one was China's perception of India as a threat to its rule of Tibet.
- The war was preceded by various conflicts and military incidents between India and China throughout the summer of 1962.

- Then on October 20, 1962, People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China invaded India in Ladakh and across the McMahon line in the Arunachal Pradesh.
- Until the start of the war, India was confident that a war would not happen and made little preparations.
- After a month long War, China unilaterally declared a ceasefire on 19 November 1962. By then China has made significant advances on both the fronts. India suffered a huge setback and was badly defeated.
- China achieved its objective of acquiring control in the Aksai chin. In the eastern sector, their troops went back to the north of the McMahon line.

## India-China border conflicts after the war

- There have been several instances of Chinese troops entering the Indian side and Indian troops entering the Chinese side.
- Still, the **Indo-China border has remained largely peaceful**, except in 1967 when there were two incidents of armed conflict first at Nathu La and then at Cho La.
- It started when the PLA launched an attack on Indian posts at Nathu La. The conflict at Nathu La lasted 5 days and the one at Cho La ended the same day.
- The outcome was more pleasing to India as they were able to send back the Chinese military and therefore the 1967 conflicts are seen as a success for India.

## Agreements and initiatives to resolve the border disputes





1. **Shimla agreement of 1914:** To demarcate the boundary between Tibet and North East India, a convention was held at Shimla in 1914, representatives of all three i.e. Tibet, China and British India. After the discussion, the agreement was signed by British India and Tibet but not by the Chinese officials. Presently India recognises the **Mcmahon line, as agreed by the Shimla convention**, as the legal boundary between India and China. However, China rejects the Shimla agreement and the McMahon line, contending that Tibet was not a sovereign state and therefore did not have the power to conclude treaties.
2. **Panchsheel Agreement of 1954:** The Panchsheel doctrine clearly indicated the willingness to 'Respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity'. Although we have come a long way since, from 1962 war to the cold peace era of 1962-1989, to the revived tensions of the present, the intent of the doctrine was well directed. It must have acted as a safeguard against any such disputes arising at the first place.
3. In **1989**, India-China formed a **Joint Working Group for Confidence building measures (CBMs)** and agreed to mutually settle all border disputes.
4. **India-China Agreements regarding the Line of Actual Control (LAC):** The LAC is the effective military border which separates Indian controlled areas of Jammu and Kashmir from Aksai Chin. It is to be noted that this border is not a legally recognised international boundary, but rather it is the practical boundary. Conventionally, India considers the Johnson line of 1865, marked by a civil servant W.H. Johnson, which put Aksai Chin in Jammu and Kashmir. On the other hand, China recognises the Macartney-Macdonald Line as the actual boundary which puts Aksai Chin in Xinjiang region of China. In **1993**, when the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited China, '**The Agreement for Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC**' has been signed between India and China. In **1996** an agreement took place on **Confidence Building Measures in the military field** along the LAC.
5. In **2003** India and China signed a **Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation** and also mutually decided to appoint **Special Representatives** to explore the framework of a boundary settlement from the political perspective. The India-China relations received a major boost in 2003. China **recognised India's sovereignty over Sikkim**. This was also followed by a framework of Guiding principles and political parameters to improve bilateral ties. It proposed a three-step resolution to the border disputes:
  - a. A bilateral agreement on the laid down principles.
  - b. This was to be followed by an exchange of maps between the two countries.
  - c. Once satisfied with the markings, the final demarcation of borders was to take place.
6. In **2005** a protocol was agreed on Modalities for the implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military field along the LAC.
7. In **2012** India and China agreed on the establishment of a working mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India China borders.

Clearly, the policies have not sufficed in realising a solution to the long-standing disputes. A status-quo exists owing to the face-off between differential aspirations of the two nations. While China's support for resolution of border disputes stands subservient to

Tibet issue, India would continue to hold on to the Tibet card unless the border-disputes are resolved. Besides, the changing global and regional picture – from China's move towards 'assertive regionalism', its strengthening ties with Pakistan and its complete disregard for counter-opinions on contentious issues like South-China sea – has only worsened the chances of a quick resolution.

## What is the recent Doklam issue?

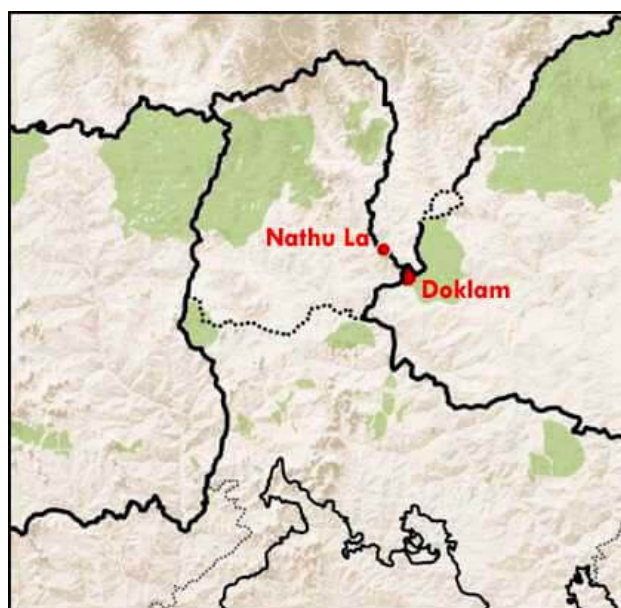


- The offensive stand of China on Doko La (Doklam) and India's strong warning in return, is the latest addition to the worries that spoil Indo-China relations.
- It started when India (Indian Army) objected a road construction by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China in the Doklam plateau which China claims to be a part of its Donglang region. However, India and Bhutan recognise it as Doklam, a Bhutan territory.
- Later, China accused Indian troops of entering in its territory and India accused the Chinese of destroying its bunkers (People's Liberation Army bulldozed an old bunker of the Indian army stationed in Doklam).
- Thereafter China stopped the passage pilgrims heading toward Kailash-Mansarovar through the Nathu La pass, Sikkim. The route is a better alternative to Lepu Lekh route via Uttarakhand and had been opened for pilgrims in 2015.



- Hereafter, both India and China increased the presence of their troops and since then there has been a war of words especially from the Chinese state media.
- Although a military standoff was averted, diplomatic negotiations have not yielded many results to cool-off the passions across the border.

### Why is Doklam so critical?



- Doklam (Zhoglam or Drokham or Donglang) is a narrow plateau lying in the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan.
- China believes Doklam to be a disputed territory between Bhutan and China.
- It, therefore, contests the presence of Indian army in the region as a transgression.
- The disputed region is very close to India's Siliguri Corridor which connects the seven north eastern states to the Indian mainland.

### Why is India supporting Bhutan in the Doklam issue?

- Bhutan and India have a very cordial relationship were as Bhutan and China do not have formal relations.
- Bhutan has a very strategic position considering India's geography.
- To foster the relationship, India and Bhutan signed a 'Friendship Treaty' in 2007 that commits India to protect Bhutan's interests and the close coordination between the two militaries.
- Also, India is worried that if the road is completed, it will give China greater access to India's strategically vulnerable "chicken's neck" (Siliguri Corridor) that links the seven north eastern states to the Indian mainland.

## Is Indian border ready to face challenges?

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- India clearly is far ahead of what it was in 1962, both militarily as well as infra-structurally. However, to undermine China would be to relive the fallacies that led to the 1962 war.
- The 'Theory of asymmetry' does not hold ground when dealing with China. Therefore, a rational policy of dialogue is essential. Along with that, seeking gains on the works which have already done must be the target. (Note: *Theory of Asymmetry is an approach of capitalising on the huge asymmetry in resources by the major party, followed by a show of magnanimity and conciliation. While this approach is a possibility when dealing with Pakistan, it can't be the way forward in case of China*)

## Negatives

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- Contrasting the border readiness of the two, for instance, we see stark distinctions, more often, revealing a Chinese upper-hand.
- As of now, only 21 of the proposed 73 roads have been developed by India for the Indo-China border (Also the revised target is now 2020 instead of the original target, 2012).
- China, on the other hand, developed and still developing their borders in the pretext of CPEC, OBOR or even otherwise (as in the case of Doklam). This exposes how we are lagging behind in connectivity of our border posts.
- The 'Mountain Strike Corps' of India, specifically proposed to be raised to check the Chinese influence, has a strength which is much less than the proposed strength. Along with that, the force is not yet equipped with advanced armouries that were envisioned for them.

## Positives

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- The recent initiatives including Dhola-Sadiya bridge (Bhupen Hazarika Setu-9.2km- Connects Assam with Arunachal Pradesh) are a welcome step as they help bring down the travel time and as such, a military response time as well.
- A Brahmos cruise missile regiment is being deployed in Arunachal Pradesh. This clearly signals Indian intentions to China, that finds every opportunity to reiterate its sanction over the territory.

- Many abandoned airstrips in India are also being reactivated. Though thought-provoking, it is a step towards the right direction.

## **Other issues between India and China**

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The recent standoff is seen as a culmination of a number of disagreements between India and China and the relations between the two sides has soured in the last 2-3 years. Few of them are:

### **1. India's entry into the UNSC and the NSG**

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China has been opposing India's entry into the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and in the Nuclear Supplier's Group (NSG).

### **2. India's opposition to the OBOR**

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India has been opposing China's flagship 'One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative', as the 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)', a part of OBOR, passes through the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and acceding to OBOR would mean undermining India's sovereignty.

### **3. Strengthening of India-USA relations**

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China is critical of India-USA relations and it is not merely a coincidence that the escalation at the tri-junction coincided with the Indian Prime Minister's visit to the United States. India supports the US and other countries in reaffirming the freedom of navigation in international waters, which includes the South China Sea. Along with this, the 'MALABAR Naval exercise' between India, Japan and USA is also a matter to worry for China.

### **4. Issue of Tibet and Dalai Lama**

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The fact that Tibet's spiritual leader Dalai Lama lives in India is a tension area in India-China relations. The recent visit of Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh has been a matter of conflict between the two sides.

### **5. Issue of Masood Azhar**

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India's bid to get Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar be declared as a UN-designated terrorist has been blocked by China again and again. In fact, China is the only country in the 15 members UNSC to have opposed to the ban. China is of the view that India is trying to pursue political gains in the name of counter-terrorism.

## **Way forward**

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From the recent incidents, although the possibility of an India-China armed conflict cannot be ruled out, any kind of military conflict is not in the interest of any country. The need of the hour is realising that our 'strategic partnership' could serve us both and help see Asia



emerge as the core of world economy. This dream of 'India-China Millennium of Exceptional Synergies' that our Prime Minister envisions, however, needs magnanimity and willingness on part of both the nations.

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