

On the edge of a territorial clash

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BY BUNN NAGARA



Sensitive spot: The age-old friction between India and China over their 3,500km border magnifies the stakes, making both sides apt to turn disagreements into disputes, and disputes into conflicts. — AFP

THERE are just two things wrong with the India-China face-off over Doklam in Bhutan – that it should happen at all, and that it has lasted for weeks on end and continues to fester.

Any of these two unlikely scenarios would have been bad enough. To have both at once is nothing less than a tragedy for China and India alike.

Not so very long ago, China was the much-touted rising global power, the vaunted new superpower of the 21st century. India was the proud and celebrated “other,” another Asian superpower in the making.

Together, they would remake the world in ways Asiana, reprising their historic roles as the prime movers and shakers of the ancient world. This was to be the Asian Century, if not the Asian Millennium.

India and China seemed to be serious about showing the developed West a thing or two. Then everything about that appeared to vanish.

And all, it would seem, over a tiny bit of land in a third country: Bhutan.

India reportedly found Chinese troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) building a road on the Doklam Plateau at the disputed tri-junction between the three countries.

But why build a road in the middle of nowhere all of a sudden? And why use soldiers at a sensitive spot?

Whatever the reasons, the spat has wounded relations between India and China. It has also transformed tranquil Bhutan, reputedly a perfect location for peaceful meditation, into a harried state on edge.

And like all tried and tested issues between major powers, there is even more to it. Between China and India, the age-old friction over their 3,500km border magnifies the stakes and multiplies the implications, making both sides apt to turn disagreements into disputes, and disputes into conflicts.

But apparently the core issue is occupation and control, if not also ownership and sovereignty, over a speck of land believed to be of strategic value. This consideration has been made more acute by the elevation of the territory over the surrounding landscape.

Thankfully, no exchange of gunfire or artillery has happened yet at the time of writing. Still, there have been unseemly scuffles between uniformed and armed Indian and Chinese soldiers.

So what are the options? Few or none, since both India and China reject talks and toning down their shrill rhetoric.

As expected, the diplomatic claims and political arguments have also raged on both sides. Through it all, tiny Bhutan squeezed between the bickering giants is not even being heard.

This Himalayan kingdom sought confidence if not protection from India half a century ago when China exerted itself over Tibet. Bhutan then became a de facto ally, if not a buffer, for India in regard to China.

But the rhetoric and bluster between New Delhi and Beijing would continue. Far from dying out, the war of words has spread to private individuals and references to historical documents.

India claims that Chinese forces literally bulldozed two army posts on the disputed land as part of their controversial road-building efforts. The posts might have been disused and abandoned, and China might have asked India for approval first, but India accepts no mitigating argument.

And therein lies a compromising point for China. If it had first asked India for approval that was later refused, it would prove that China had accepted the land to belong to another country or was at least in dispute.

But China invoked an 1890 treaty between the Qing Dynasty and British India to bolster its territorial claim. However, international law neither accepts nor validates historical claims.

Meanwhile, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj called for a multi-party meeting to help resolve this sore issue. But the parties are all Indian, none Chinese, signalling a hardening of India's position relative to China.

Nationalism and nationalist sentiment, however trite or trivial, seems so fashionable these days. So why should India or China be left out?

Both sides remain adamant and implacable. They are still stiff and inflexible because there is something else each feels it has to safeguard besides its political legacy – face.

To rub it in, some academic analysts in China have made the linkage between Doklam and Kashmir.

More than most references, that is almost guaranteed to deepen the rift and escalate the conflict.

Kashmir is the long and vexing dispute between India and Pakistan, similarly over strategic territory. It has also seen bloodshed, with an expiration date approximating to the end times.

The situation is so strange that either China is speaking, or India is hearing, on two different and contradictory wavelengths at once.

India heard China offering to mediate between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and rejected the offer.

It also heard some Chinese sources warning that in the armed face-off over Kashmir, a third country (meaning Pakistan's principal ally China) could well intervene to India's detriment.

The on-going verbal barrage between both principals is damaging enough without having to add to it.

But there will be those on both sides given to exacerbate tensions through "contributions" that turn up the heat.

For its part, India is launching some new initiatives to counter these challenges. Prime Minister Narendra Modi now plans to invite all 10 Asean heads of government to India's Republic Day Parade next year.

While that move is clearly of limited utility, Indian media are hyping it as if a symbolic one-day attendance at a ceremonial event one year from now will substantially change anything. It will not.

Of course, Modi has something else in mind – a more substantive and regular meeting of minds with Asean leaders on regional security. By keeping China out, it could send a powerful message to Beijing that India can also pull some cables.

It must be gratifying for Asean that India thinks it has the necessary gravitas to make a difference in such an arrangement. However, it is very unclear if all 10 Asean leaders – or even any of them – would endorse their being used in this way to alienate China.

India would be better advised to rely on its own devices to deal with its challenges than to entangle others like Asean. Involving other parties always runs the risk of enlarging disputes and conflicts.

The present dispute essentially concerns a patch of no-man's land between two national territories, on which China has made inroads from its side. It involves differing interpretations of the British-brokered 1890 Sikkim-Tibet Convention.

India and China could get together and find common cause by blaming Britain for today's mess to soothe the friction between them. But that seems an unlikely outcome.

Another move by India in relying on its own resources is the creation of a new intelligence agency for its Special Service Bureau (SSB) to monitor the border area. The SSB as an armed border police force has served to complement India's principal intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

Creating a new spy agency adds to India's defence assets. This should see more meaningful contributions to border defence on the ground than hosting foreign leaders at an annual event in New Delhi.

Meanwhile Bhutan, its famous idyll shattered and its reputation as "the world's happiest country" in tatters, is left quite helpless.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.