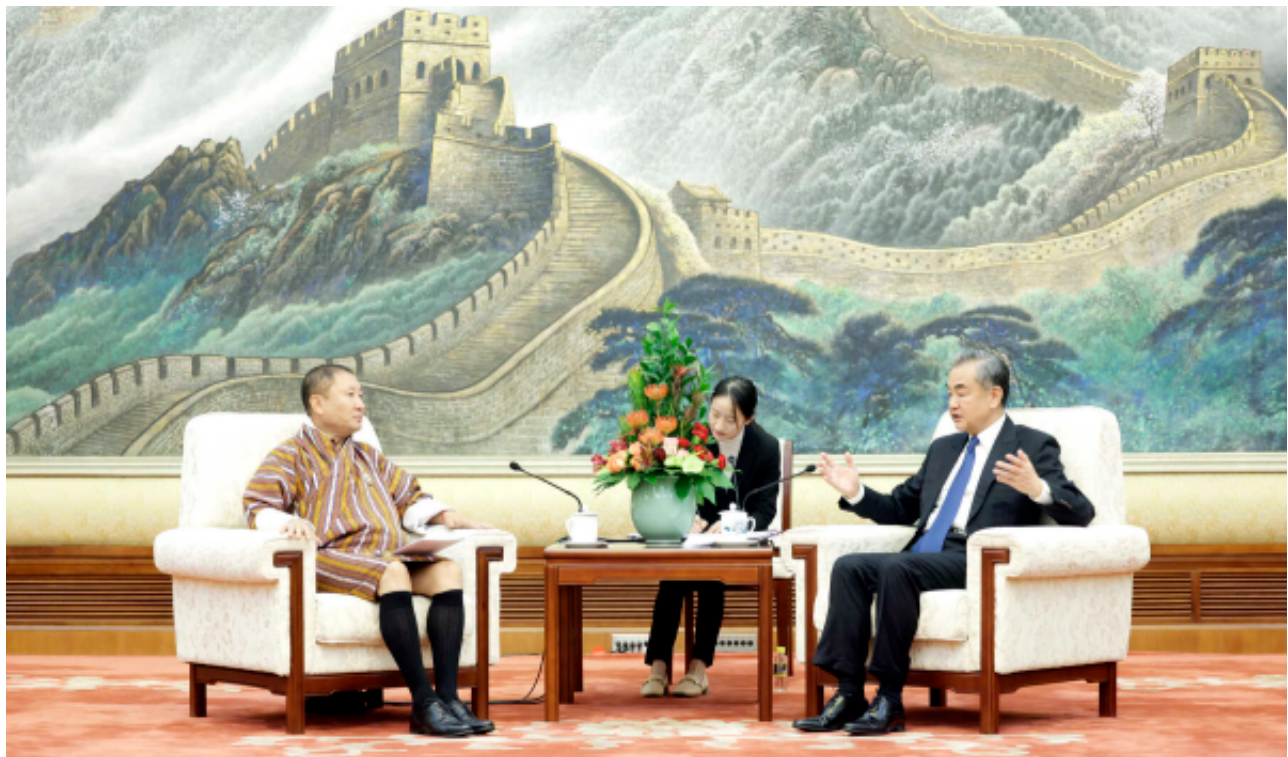


Navigating Bhutan-China Boundary Talks: An Examination of India's Concerns

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By IndraStra Global Editorial Team



Cover Image Attribute: Foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi, Holds a meeting with Bhutan's Foreign Minister, Dr. Tandi Dorji, on October 23, 2023. / Source: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in India

In the picturesque Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, nestled between the towering peaks of the world's mightiest mountain range, a delicate diplomatic dance is unfolding, capturing the attention of regional and global players as China has expressed an urgent intent to work closely with Bhutan to swiftly conclude the ongoing boundary negotiations and establish full-fledged diplomatic relations with the Kingdom. Bhutan, long seen as a strategic buffer between China and India, is taking steps to mend its relationship with the dragon next door, a move that has set New Delhi on edge.

Bhutan's Foreign Minister, Tandi Dorji, embarked on a diplomatic mission to Beijing on October 23, engaging in talks with China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi. During these discussions, the Chinese Foreign Ministry released a statement emphasizing the importance of reaching an expeditious resolution. The statement read, *"The conclusion of boundary negotiations and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Bhutan fully serve Bhutan's long-term and fundamental interests. China is ready to work with Bhutan in the same direction, seize the historic opportunity, complete this important process as soon as possible, and fix and develop China-Bhutan friendly relations in legal form."*

This development is a crucial one as it pertains to the ongoing border negotiations. Of the 14 countries that share borders with China, 12 have successfully settled their border issues, leaving Bhutan and India as the only two nations with unresolved disputes.

In his discussions with the Bhutanese counterpart, Wang Yi highlighted China's commitment to a diplomatic approach that values neighborly relations and equality among nations. He stated, *"China always prioritizes neighborhood diplomacy in its overall strategy and adheres to the principle that all countries, big or small, are equals. China respects all countries' sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and the legitimate aspirations and concerns of small and medium-sized countries."*

In response, the Bhutanese Foreign Minister expressed his country's traditional friendship with China, affirming Bhutan's commitment to the one-China principle. He also conveyed Bhutan's readiness to cooperate with China to resolve the border issue swiftly and advance diplomatic relations. The statement also acknowledged China's strong support and assistance to Bhutan.

Notably, last month, both nations established a *"Joint Technical Group"* (JTG) to expedite the delimitation of the China-Bhutan boundary, reflecting Beijing's keenness to resolve this long-standing issue. In an *"Expert Group Meeting"* held in Beijing in August, the two sides agreed to take *"simultaneous steps"* to implement a *"Three-step Roadmap"* designed to lead to the demarcation of the boundary.

India's Concern



Map Attribute: Bhutan-China Border Dispute / Source: StratNews Global

China's claims over approximately 765 square kilometers of territory in northwestern and central Bhutan have profound implications for India's regional security concerns. The territorial dispute initially emerged as part of negotiations between India and China, but direct dialogues between China and Bhutan commenced in 1984. Over the years, more than 24 border talks and 12 expert-level meetings have focused on Jakarlung and Pasamlung in northern Bhutan and the Doklam region in the west.

If we look chronologically, in 1988, the *"Guiding Principles"* were established to further facilitate the negotiations. The negotiations came closest to a breakthrough in 1996 when Beijing proposed relinquishing its claims of 495 square kilometers in Pasamlung and Jakarlung. In exchange, Bhutan would cede 269 square kilometers of land in Doklam and the nearby areas of Dromana, Sinchulung, and Shakhatoe. The main challenge in resolving the border issue with Beijing revolves around Doklam, a plateau with strategic views of the Chumbi Valley, located in close proximity to Sikkim (India) and the narrow 14-mile-wide Siliguri Corridor, a land bridge connecting the *"Seven Sisters"* states of Northeast India to mainland India.

A fundamental aspect of recent Bhutanese diplomacy involves the strategic use of silence to defuse border tensions, as vividly demonstrated during the Doklam crisis of 2017. In a delicate position, caught between the interests of both China and India, both of which had military forces stationed within the country, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay's government opted for a muted response. Instead of resorting to potentially inflammatory public statements that could provoke nationalist sentiments in New Delhi or Beijing, Bhutan issued a single statement. It pursued discreet back-channel diplomacy, closely coordinating with

India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval. Throughout the 72-day standoff, Bhutan only once publicly called for a return to the status quo without assigning blame to China. Reflecting this reserved approach, the Royal Bhutanese Army, even though they were the first to identify the PLA engineering works in Doklam, notably did not join Indian troops at the standoff location, as reported by journalist Tenzing Lamsang. They maintained their positions near the Jampheri ridge. Thimphu also adopted a deliberately ambiguous stance regarding whether Bhutan had invited Indian forces in the first place. A year later, in 2018, China's Vice Foreign Minister, Kong Xuanyou's visit to Bhutan appeared to support this low-key approach.

Further complicating matters, in June 2020, China asserted ownership over the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in eastern Bhutan, which also shares borders with India's Arunachal Pradesh. Reports also suggested that China had constructed several villages within Bhutanese territory. Bhutan's Prime Minister, Lotay Tshering, addressed these concerns in an interview with the Belgian newspaper *La Libre* in March, acknowledging that the demarcation of the Bhutan-China boundary would be settled in due course. However, he emphasized that the tri-junction point involving India must be addressed separately with the participation of all three nations. Tshering remarked, *"Doklam is a junction point between India, China, and Bhutan. It is not up to Bhutan alone to fix the problem. There are three of us. There is no big or small country; all are three equal countries, each counting for one-third."* Furthermore, Tshering indicated that discussions on the tri-junction could only commence once India and China resolved their border disputes, emphasizing the need to monitor how these two nations would handle their differences.

Five and half years after the Doklam crisis, there are ongoing Chinese activities in the Chumbi Valley and Doklam. In this scenario, we are witnessing a similar strategy being employed, but this time, the stakes for Thimphu are much higher. Based on the information provided by open-source intelligence analysts, China is breaching the 1988 and 1998 Sino-Bhutanese border agreements. Villages like Pangda near the Amo Chu River and Jiuluobu, Demalong, and Minjiuma in the Beyul Khenpajong region are situated on Bhutanese territory. Their locations are designed to provide Beijing with leverage in the border negotiations. Following the initial discovery of Pangda in November 2020, Bhutan's ambassador to India, Major General V. Namgyel, stated that there were no Chinese villages in Bhutan. Since that statement, Thimphu has refrained from making further comments despite growing evidence to the contrary. This quiet approach is also notable within Bhutanese journalism, where there have been limited disclosures from sources within the Bhutanese government concerning their views on the villages. Moreover, regarding the *"Three-Step Roadmap,"* the Bhutanese Embassy in India has declined to provide specific information about the negotiations, citing sensitivities as the reason for their reticence.

China's heightened urgency in addressing border negotiations with Bhutan should be understood within a broader context. The resolution of the Doklam dispute is intricately tied to the larger conflict along the shared border of China and India, particularly concerning the

status of Arunachal Pradesh, which China asserts as an extension of South Tibet. Gaining control over Doklam could enable China to exert more significant influence on India, allowing Chinese forces to more readily disrupt India's connection to the eastern segment of their disputed border.

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