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Why are the China-Bhutan boundary talks significant?

PREMIUM

How can Bhutan ensure that its decisions consider both India's interests and its own sovereignty? What is the significance of the Doklam plateau in the context of regional geopolitics?

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Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets his Bhutanese counterpart Tandi Dorji in Beijing on October 23, 2023.
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The story so far: China and Bhutan held their 25th round of boundary talks in Beijing and signed a Cooperation Agreement on the “Responsibilities and Functions of the Joint Technical Team (JTT) on the Delimitation and Demarcation of the Bhutan-China Boundary.” This advances their 3-Step Roadmap initiated in 2021 for border resolution, building on the positive momentum since their last talks in 2016.



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Why are the talks this week significant?

The Boundary talks between Bhutan and China were held after a gap of seven years and indicate significant progress has been made. Bhutan and the Tibetan Autonomous Region share a contiguous border to Bhutan's north and west of about 470 km. Since 1984, Bhutan and China had held 24 rounds of talks to resolve the disputes until 2016, but the 25th round appeared to have been held up after the Doklam Standoff between Indian and Chinese armies in 2017, and then the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019-2021. However, the two sides used the pause to hold talks at other levels in rapid succession, especially after China threatened to open a new front for a border dispute to Bhutan's east. Since then, the Expert Group of diplomats on both sides met in 2021 to agree on a 3-step roadmap, and the first boundary delimitation technical talks were held in August 2023.

Editorial | Warming ties: On Bhutan-China relations and India's concerns

In an interview with *The Hindu* this month, Bhutan's Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering said that the two sides were “inching towards” completing the roadmap even before his government demits office ahead of Bhutanese elections in 2024, and Foreign Minister Tandi Dorji's visit to Beijing indicates that further progress has indeed been made.

What is the 3-Step Roadmap?

The 3-Step roadmap MoU signed by the Bhutanese Foreign Minister and Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister in 2021, and the JTT established to implement the roadmap by

the Expert Group in August are hoping to draw a line clearly delineating Bhutanese and Chinese territory for the first time. Bhutan and China don't have diplomatic ties, as Bhutan has avoided diplomatic relations with all the United Nations Security Council permanent members. The 3-Step Roadmap involves first, agreeing to the border "on the table"; then visiting the sites on the ground; and then formally demarcating the boundary.

Why is India watching closely?

For India, given the breakdown in its ties with China over the standoff at the Line of Actual Control from 2020, any hint of closer ties between China and one of its closest neighbours is a cause for worry. More specifically, New Delhi is watching the demarcation discussions over Doklam, as amongst the proposals China has placed on the table is an agreement to "swap" areas in Doklam under Bhutanese control with areas in Jakarlung and Pasamlung which China claims. The Doklam trijunction cuts very close to India's Siliguri corridor a narrow area that connects the North Eastern States to the rest of India and India would not like to see China gain access to any area closer to it. Since the Doklam standoff in 2017, China has doubled down on its control of the Doklam plateau and, according to a recent Pentagon report, has continued to build "underground storage facilities [], new roads [], and new villages in disputed areas in neighbouring Bhutan," erasing many of the strategic gains that New Delhi had hoped for after China agreed to step back from the standoff point in 2017. Finally, India's worry is over China's demand for full diplomatic relations with Bhutan, and opening an Embassy in Thimphu. Given India's challenges with Chinese projects and funding in other neighbouring countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, any Chinese presence in a small country like Bhutan would be problematic. However, Bhutan's leadership has thus far said that all decisions would consider India's interests and has always consulted India on issues of concern.

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