



# INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

## **ICS Conversation: Doklam Revisited**

**Panelists:** Lt. Gen Praveen Bakshi, Lt. Gen DS Hooda, Amb. VP Haran and Amb. Ashok. K. Kantha

**Moderator:** Mr. Sushant Singh

**Date:** 14 September 2018

**Venue:** Seminar Hall, IIC

The conversation was started by Mr. Sushant Singh who gave a brief introduction on the subject titled 'Doklam' and the various antecedents and proceedings that led to the event, thus bringing the audience up to date. He also brought out an interesting observation by denoting that Doklam was the general area where the episode took place but, 'Dollam' plateau region was the actual place of dispute. Some facts on ground brought forth by Mr. Singh were the date of actual face-off which was 16<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, the place of face-off which was the Dollam Plateau and the total rounds of negotiations which were thirteen in number, to resolve this issue.

Mr. Singh proceeded with the conversation by initiating a dialogue among the panel members. He questioned Lt. Gen Praveen Bakshi about what actually happened? Before answering, Lt. Gen Bakshi established certain geographical fact which was that most of the watershed peaks were occupied by India while China had a relatively comfortable terrain. He also quoted that when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) western theatre commander in one of his visits to India had said in passing that he wishes to be allowed to patrol the areas where he used to walk. Ever since this statement, there has been an aggressive military presence close to the northern Sikkim area. He claimed that on 24<sup>th</sup> April, last year the bilateral border personnel meetings were suspended (as Dalai Lama happened to visit Arunachal Pradesh during the time). The Indian

army was also quick to notice the increase in number of bunkers inching closer to the disputed borders. While the Bhutanese patrol officers tried to confront the Chinese intruders, they were shooed away. By the 16<sup>th</sup> of May when few of the Chinese border guard soldiers started with construction work, New Delhi was quick to respond to the erupting crisis, giving the army a free hand to act upon it. Lt. Gen Bakshi stressed on the strategic importance of the Jampheri Ridge, from both the defensive and offensive mindset. According to him, China wanted to create a buffer in the Chumbi Valley, which would have put the Indian army at a strategic disadvantage and expose their vulnerabilities. The Siliguri Corridor also is critically important due to its vulnerability factor. He mentioned that in 2012, India agreed to hold a tri-partite meeting with Bhutan and China but Beijing acted unilaterally by starting construction of roads in a disputed area, which compelled India to react equivocally. Amb. Ashok Kantha was 'closely observing' the unravelling of events. In his observation he was not much surprised because the Doklam incident should not be viewed as an isolated event but as a part of the larger plan of China's project of showcasing power (as seen with its behavior in the South China Sea).

Mr. Singh asked Lt. Gen DS Hooda about the Chumar and Demchok incidents and whether they fit the pattern. Lt. Gen Hooda replied that these three incidents (Chumar, Demchok and Doklam) were different from one another as the intentions behind them were different, but all three did have some common trends. All three incidents occurred on disputed border areas which Beijing chose to show 'use of force.' In Depsang, they constructed infrastructure which 'upped the ante.' The protocols were also completely ignored by the Chinese and they were prepared to use force. Thus the inferences that Lt Gen Hooda drew from these incidents were: more of such incidents should be expected. Also, in future if such incursions take place, it would happen in vulnerable areas such as Arunachal Pradesh where there is lack of infrastructure.

Mr Singh went on to ask Amb VP Haran as to what was Bhutan's role and interest and how did the Doklam incident affect Indian-Bhutan relations? To answer this, Amb Haran started with a brief introduction on Bhutanese political structure. He stated that Bhutan does not have a defence minister and that their constitution lays down provision for the Prime Minister, who advises the King on the state of affairs. The cabinet also aids the King in the matter of foreign affairs. The Bhutanese style of diplomacy is dictated by the fact that it is a small country which is sandwiched between two larger neighbours. According to him, when the border issue remained

unresolved for a long time, joint inspections involving the Indian and Bhutanese patrollers was carried out in 2013 wherein the Bhutanese found the ground arrangements altered. The respective governments of Bhutan and India were in constant touch at the highest levels (which remained unscathed by media coverage). For Bhutan as well, the Siliguri Corridor issue was deemed quite critical.

Mr. Singh then questioned Lt Gen Bakshi on what were the major lessons that could be gathered from the Doklam incident? According to Lt Gen Bakshi the major takeaway for the Indian army was that the entire episode was over within 100 hours and status quo was achieved by 25<sup>th</sup> August 2017. He also emphasized the importance of his senior Lt Gen Hooda's classification and research on the 'nature' and 'character' of warfare which gave numerous insights while dealing with the crisis. More so, with a number of border-guarding troops and agencies working under the ambit of different governmental departments there are chances of discrepancies over duties. The support of Indian media while the Chinese media went hyper-nationalist also helped in leveraging the actions taken by the Indian army. He also applauded the way the Indian government let the diplomatic front taking the lead in negotiating matters. The role of Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defence and Ministry for Home Affairs was appreciated as well. A candid confession made by Lt. Gen Bakshi was that the Doklam incident would have been a 'wrong place to initiate war.' According to him, the international atmosphere during that time was extremely crucial for the Chinese because of the scheduled 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the BRICS summit. Thus, any action taken otherwise by the Chinese would have been blown out of proportion by the international media. Based on theoretical aspects of military escalation, the Indian army was aware of the unraveling of the events and the consequences. Amb. Kantha at this point stressed the enhancement of deterrents vis-a-vis China. Although China was acting unilaterally in the beginning, based on mutual agreements, the issue simmered down. He also emphasized on the effective implementation of the Confidence Building Mechanisms (CBMs) and sorting the ambiguity with regards to the LACs. He argued that there needs to be thorough revision of the existing protocols and introduction of new protocols in case of major incursions. One of the interesting points made by Lt. Gen Bakshi was the 'coincidental' occurrence of the Darjeeling agitation, during the Doklam Crisis which signifies the clash of national politics and state politics. He opined that the 'character of warfare' needs to be enhanced manifold and there should also be an increased focus on non-kinetic warfare and in Science and

Technological developments in Outer Space, Artificial Intelligence (AI) etc. which will give an edge to the military as well.

With reference to Mr. Singh's question on where the 'next' Doklam could possibly be, Lt. Gen Hooda answered that based on the trends he has observed so far, the vulnerable areas are still disputed such as the skirmishes in Demchok and Chumar. He added that the lack of infrastructure in areas such as Arunachal Pradesh makes it more susceptible to attacks. He also highlighted that after the Chumar and Doklam incidents, the Chinese would probably avoid places where India would have advantage.

When asked about what could be done in order to mitigate the infrastructural deficits in vulnerable areas, Lt. Gen Bakshi emphasised the importance of border infrastructures, which are regarded as unrestricted modes of communication. All-weathered road structures, tunnelling in rough, difficult terrain such as across the Brahmaputra River: is also one of the ways to strengthen ones' strategic abilities. He discussed about the importance of the Border Road Organization (BRO) which is a maligned organization and is starved of funds. According to him, the quality of roads constructed by BRO is better and they are well-equipped in laying roads on uneven, mountainous terrain. There should be an increase in the construction of such infrastructure across the borders as the Chinese are doing the same at an alarming rate.

In conclusion, there were certain issues that were discussed by the panelists regarding the challenges to border management between India and China. One of the major points discussed was the disparity of border guarding forces and the allotment of respective duties to each. India has a large number of border security forces, like, the Special Security Police, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Border Security Force and the Assam rifles. Their areas of jurisdiction are undefined and often overlap. Thus there is an urgent need to increase their sense of responsibility and improve cooperation between the forces. A creation of a special 'border patrolling police' force needs to be enunciated as well. The Indian Army is a border guarding force and thus has a defensive character.

The panellists also discussed the PLA and the ongoing modernisation of the Chinese military. They agreed that there is an urgent need for India to invest in aviation and AI and also work

towards reducing its disadvantages vis-à-vis China. The conversation ended on a pertinent question whether the Indian Army or the ITBP was responsible for border security?

### **About the Speakers**

**Lt. Gen. Praveen Bakshi** retired as the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Eastern Command on 31 July 2017 after forty years of service in the Indian Army. He was responsible for the military response to the Doklam incident with China. He handled border defense and strategic military engagement with four countries (China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh), internal security tasks as also strategic logistics and infrastructure development of the area. In his earlier career, he commanded an Armored Brigade and a RAPID Division in the desert sector and a Corps in the plains of Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir. He also had a foreign tenure in Tanzania. He is currently accredited as a Distinguished Fellow with USI, New Delhi.

**Lt. Gen. DS Hooda** retired as the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Northern Command after forty years of service in the Indian Army. From 2012 to 2016, he was stationed in Jammu and Kashmir, first as a Corps commander and then as the Northern Army Commander when he handled numerous strategic challenges along the borders with China and Pakistan. He was the Army Commander during the Chumar and Demchok face-off situations along the India-China LAC in September 2014 and during the launch of surgical strikes against Pakistan in September 2016. As a Major General, he was responsible for counterinsurgency operations in Manipur and South Assam. His earlier assignments included serving as Chief Logistics Officer for the newly-raised United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea. He is currently accredited as a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi and also serves on the Advisory Boards of Cyber Peace Foundation (an NGO dealing with cyber protection and training) and Cyber Security Research Centre at Punjab Engineering College. He is a regular contributor to newspapers, on-line media portals and professional journals.

**Ambassador VP Haran** was the Ambassador of India to Syria (2009-13) and to Bhutan (2013-14). He joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1980 after working in the private sector in finance and accounts. He studied Russian in Moscow and was then posted in Kabul, Colombo, and Brussels, followed by his assignments as the Deputy Permanent Representative to WTO, Geneva

and Deputy Chief of Mission in Kathmandu. His interests include relations with neighbours, developments in West Asia, primarily Syria, and international trade. He writes on Syria and Bhutan.

**Ambassador Ashok K. Kantha** is currently the Director of the Institute of Chinese Studies. He was Ambassador of India to China until January 2016. Prior to this, he was Secretary (East) at Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. His previous assignments include High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka and Malaysia, Consul General in Hong Kong, Deputy Chief of Mission in Kathmandu, and Joint Secretary (East Asia) and Director (China) in Ministry of External Affairs.

**Mr. Sushant Singh** is the Deputy Editor of The Indian Express, covering national security, international relations, higher judiciary and other topical matters for the newspaper. Prior to becoming a journalist, he has served with the Indian Army for two decades, including a stint as United Nations Military Observer in Ivory Coast. He is also the author of 'Mission Overseas: Daring Operations by the Indian Military' (Juggernaut Books, 2017) and co-author of 'Note by Note: The India Story 1947-2017' (Harper Collins India, 2018).

*This report has been prepared by Prarthana Basu, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*