

China and India on the brink of war on the Himalaya

Depicted as the happiest place in the world, the small Himalayan state of Bhutan got stuck in an extremely dangerous arm-wrestling between the two Asian giants. Everything started on the 16th of June, when the Chinese army began building a road able to connect Dokala to the Bhutanese army camp in Zompelri (Doklam), whose sovereignty has been claimed by both China and Bhutan for many decades.

The Himalayan kingdom is an Indian ally but this condition did not stop Bhutan from trying to engage China. In fact, although the two countries do not have official diplomatic relations, the small kingdom maintains economic and commercial interactions with China. This ambiguous *status quo* has never created serious problems destabilizing the area. This year, the precarious equilibrium was broken by the Chinese decision to invest on the maxi infrastructural project known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since the launch of the BRI, every new initiative promoted in the region is regarded with suspicion.

India has not joined the BRI, considering it a direct threat to its strategic position in South Asia. According to the original plan, the BRI is to cross portions of Pakistani Kashmir, a detail that clearly bothers New Delhi. In line with India, Bhutan also considers the BRI a violation of the agreements signed with Beijing in 1988 and 1988. These agreements established that both countries would commit themselves to “keep peace and tranquillity in the border areas while waiting for a final resolution” of the dispute and to “avoid unilateral actions or the use of force to alter the *status quo*”.

It is a fact that China is trying to strengthen its position in South Asia – in particular in the foothills of Himalaya – without consulting the affected countries, even the ones who might be indirectly affected by Chinese political moves. This approach triggers serious concerns among local powers. For this reason, when China started building the new road, Bhutan asked India for help, and India responded by sending its troops to stop Chinese works and safeguard its own national security.¹ China has in turn immediately condemned Indian intervention as a violation of the borders between the Indian state of Sikkim and Tibet, established by the 1890 Convention signed by the UK and China. Beijing has then deployed troops in order to defend its rights.

Harsh words were used by both contenders. Beijing reminded India about the “lesson” learnt in 1962 and New Delhi answered stressing how it is no more the country that was defeated by China in the blitzkrieg taking place 55 years ago. Media have done the rest, portraying Chinese initiative as yet another attempt of encirclement by Beijing, referring to a precise strategic plan elaborated by China to contain India.

In order to have a better insight into the current escalation of tensions, it is necessary to look at the dispute through three different perspectives: the Chinese one, the Indian one and the Bhutanese one. Despite it was Bhutan to ask India to take a clear position, the firm reaction of New Delhi became a new source of concerns and instability.

1 The immediate Indian reaction is to be connected to the evolution of the equilibrium in the South China Sea. In the Spratly and Paracelsus archipelagos – whose sovereignty is contented by China, Malaysia, Philippines and Taiwan and between China, Taiwan and Vietnam, respectively - Beijing has tried to consolidate its position to alter the *status quo* in its favour through the building of basic infrastructures. Besides these infrastructures, China has later built military bases, cinemas, hotels and reception halls. Moving slowly and ignoring the verbal pressures from the international community – vainly trying to contain this brazenly aggressive approach – China ended up controlling both archipelagos. In so doing, China forced the international community to accept the new *status quo*, given the impossibility to dismantle it. In the light of the Asian experience, it is evident how India feels today forced to intervene immediately to avoid being embroiled within an infrastructural net made by Beijing, certainly limiting Indian moves and interests in South Asia.

Indian press describes the contended narrow valley leading to North-East India as the “Neck of the Chicken”. The area is considered as a “dagger” turned to India, clearly referring to the Chinese strategic intentions. In fact, as it often happens when we investigate the reasons behind unsolved long-term land disputes, the matter does not strictly concern the border, and certainly it does not concern the one between China and India. The Doklam area – between Bhutan and Tibet – has never been officially given to none of the contending countries.

Before the Chinese annexation of Tibet, nomads living on the highland were free to move across these territories. In the 1950s, China negotiated and defined the great majority of its land borders but it has never concluded the negotiations with Bhutan. These never-ending talks were mainly an indirect consequence of India’s attempt to negotiate on behalf of Bhutan, a claim that has always been rejected by China. New Delhi took more than 30 years to take a step back on this matter: since 1984, Bhutan and China held 24 rounds of talks, where the main points discussed have always remained secret. Both parties stressed how the difficulties faced and the long-time taken by the negotiations were to be interpreted as signs of great disagreement. On the one hand, India accepted that China and Bhutan would autonomously solve the problem of Himalayan borders, hoping that these negotiations would follow in the footsteps of previous agreements reached with other countries, such as Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar. On the other hand, China turned the tables again, showing hardness and intransigence that were read by Bhutan as an answer directed to Indian interference in the border matter.

In 1996, after the 10th round of talks, Bhutan and China seemed closed to an agreement: China accepted Bhutan claims concerning the Northern part of the border, and Bhutan accepted Chinese claims regarding its Southern section. When, 15 months later, the two parties met again for the 11th round of talks, everyone was expecting a formal agreement to be signed. With China’s great surprise, Bhutan changed its demands in the South, claiming a bigger territory than the one defined in the previous round of talks, hence paralyzing the negotiations. China immediately imagined India to be behind the new claims advanced by Bhutan and consequently hardened its positions.

The areas contended by the two countries are seven. The great majority of these territories is not particularly relevant for China, except Dromo, a valley so known by Tibetans. During the Dalai Lama’s regime in Tibet, the area has been administrated by Phari Dzong – clearly within Tibet – and it was divided between Upper and Lower Dromo. After the British invasion in 1904, Dromo was classified as a dzong (county) and county-administrators started being directly nominated by Lhasa government. The strong Tibetan influence in this valley strengthens the Chinese game: while Bhutan claims are not consistent over times, China was able to present a significant amount of historical Tibetan documents linked to the Dalai Lama’s government demonstrating that these territories have always been under the jurisdiction on Lhasa, therefore of Beijing today.

The Dromo valley is very important because it represents one of the main trade routes between India and Tibet, a stop-over for all those goods entering and exiting Tibet. It was such an important route that it has four different names, according to the specific population travelling across the territory. It was the Chumbi Valley for British India, Sher zingma for the Newar tradesmen from Nepal and Yatung – today written as Yadong – for Chinese. The Dromo county is also the strip of land separating the Indian state of Sikkim from Bhutan. A valley crossed by what Tibetans call Drok Lam, the “Nomads’ Path” for Doklam Indians, extending across 600 square kilometres. Even if until 1913 Drok Lam was under the jurisdiction of Lhasa, an enclave was then given to Kazi Ugyen Dorje, one of the most important political figures of Bhutan, then operating as an intermediary between British India and Tibet.

In 1911, when the 13th Dalai Lama escaped from the Qing army, looking for a shelter in Kalimpong, he was hosted by Ugyen Dorje. Nevertheless, the area in which he was hosted was an enclave within Drok Lam, a small portion of the whole territory extending across 600 square kilometres. Many people in China and also in Bhutan suspect that the exaggerated claim from Bhutan was supported by New Delhi, which considers this strip of land essential for defending Sikkim. If this suspect is true, Indian was certainly attempting to sabotage the agreement between Bhutan and China. Finally, Chinese new initiative in the area risks to weaken Indian control on Siliguri corridor, i.e. the strip of land allowing New Delhi to keep a direct access to North-Eastern States.

The hard line taken by Indian media, stressing the need to defend Bhutan from Chinese expansionism, can be useful to raise nationalistic feelings but it does not find enough space in Bhutanese rhetoric. The ideal solution for this small Buddhist Tibetan reign is keeping a *status quo* able to guarantee peaceful borders and economic investments. The building of a Chinese road and the harsh Indian reaction to stop the Chinese project have eliminated this chance once for all. Therefore, what still needs to be understood is how big Chinese ambitions on the Himalaya are and how intransigently India is ready to face its biggest Asian competitor.

According to Brahma Chellaney – one of the most famous Indian strategic analysts – the military impasse with China in Doklam offers India important lessons going much further than the Chinese intrusion in the Bhutanese highland. *“Unless India understands the long-term threat presented by a strong China and is able to adequately respond to it, India will have to face much bigger problems than Doklam”*, Chellaney wrote on the Hindustan Times. The expert also added *“unfortunately, Indian institutions seem to have a short-term memory, preferring to think about current problems leaving behind bigger future perspectives”*. Among these, the Indian analyst mentioned the recent declarations of Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti who considers Chinese “interference” in his state as a clear sign of a new trend.

China has been using Kashmir to confront India for years, first occupying one fifth of the original state of Jammu and Kashmir and now expanding its presence across the territory occupied by Pakistan.² To increase the pressure, Beijing has implicitly doubted on Indian sovereignty on 45% of Jammu and Kashmir, officially reducing even more the border separating Indian Jammu and Kashmir from the Chinese territories. Chinese influence on Kashmir will certainly increase after the creation of the so-called economic corridor crossing the Pakistani side of Jammu and Kashmir (The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor - CPEC), where Chinese military presence is growing, given the possibility of an armistice with India. Therefore, India is now surrounded by Chinese troops on both sides of its portion of Jammu and Kashmir.

At the same time, Chellaney continues, *“India has reasons not to trust China, a country which taught Pakistan how to manage a proxy war in India. Furthermore, China takes every chance to rekindle tensions in North-East India. For instance, Paresh Barua – a commander wanted by ULFA for a long time – was seen in Ruili, in the Chinese province of Yunnan. Some other Indian rebel leaders have been welcomed in the areas on Myanmar bordering Yunnan, mostly controlled by the Kachin Independence Army, in turn supported by China”*. In 2015, Hindustan Times also reported that Chinese secret services played “an active role” in assisting 9 groups of Indian rebels in North-East in order to build one united front. *“The presence of Chinese illegal arms sales towards India – also arriving to Maoists – was confirmed by the Home Secretary G.K. Pillai in 2010. Meanwhile, the strengthening of China-Pakistan axis allows the possibility of a conflict on two fronts, in case a war involving one of the two countries should take place.”*

Chellaney is convinced that China is aiming at keeping India on a leash, attacking its weaknesses, striking where India is not prepared and challenging its stability as hard as possible.

2 In 2010, China has adopted a restrictive policy concerning visas for residents of Jammu-Kashmir.

Within the scope of this strategy, China would be in the process of conducting a multi-level non-conventional war, without firing a shot. Furthermore, China seems willing to surround India on multiple sides, from Nepal to the Indian Ocean. *“Sixty-five years after devouring Tibet as a buffer state and establishing its threatening presence on Himalaya, China started to challenge India at sea, having the most fast-growing submarine fleet in the world. The naval base recently opened in Gibuti – the North-West end of Indian Ocean – marks the first step towards a full domination of the region. For India, whose energetic and strategic infrastructures are located on a very vulnerable part of the coast long 7.600 km, this step represents a significant change concerning the threats India should be alerted on. In addition, the Chinese commercial war is aimed at subjugating Indian economic power in various ways, including the suppression on Indian productive capacities through large-scale dumping. The artificially low prices of Chinese products also impact India, reporting significant losses for not collecting custom duties and taxes worth billions of dollars each year. In 2015, China (including Hong Kong) represented 22% of imports from India, the USA only 5%, followed by Japan 2%.”*

According to Chellaney, Beijing has triggered a psychological war around Doklam to paralyze India. Deception and lies are Chinese weapons and, if India will ever give up, the country would always be in a position of strategic subordination. To avoid that, New Delhi should fight hard in the psychological war. Instead of being always ready to dialogue, India should urge China to withdraw its troops and renegotiate its conditions. In so doing, India would send a clear message to Beijing. In order to stop Chinese encroachments and assure peace in the Himalayan region, India should be ready to confront Beijing even if China will ever decide to transform the actual impasse into a real conflict. Being able to confront China, even in case of a military conflict like the one of 1967, is essential to destabilize Chinese expansionist approach.

As effective as it may appear to stop Chinese advance in South Asia, Chellaney’s strategy is easier said than done. Over the years, China built on the Himalaya very sophisticated infrastructures, establishing Chinese clear superiority over the other protagonists of the region. New Delhi is now in the difficult position of being obliged to make the first move to stop Beijing. When Bhutan asked India to intervene, the only thing New Delhi could do was to move the troops on the border in order to stop the road construction works. China answered mobilizing its army and officially asking New Delhi to take a step back - withdrawing the troops - to prove its intention to avoid a war in South Asia. If India was to waver, China would have immediately completed the disputed road works. This would have marked the second Chinese exertion of power in the area, following the establishment of the Chinese-Pakistani corridor through Pakistani controlled Kashmir without consulting New Delhi.³

When, in mid-August, the Chinese and Indian troops started throwing stones at each other in Ladakh – a border area between Chinese and the Indian administrated Kashmir – the conflict seemed unavoidable. Fortunately, diplomats on both sides have been able to collaborate and create a space for dialogue. When India accepted to withdraw its troops (from both Ladakh and Doklam), China responded by stopping the road works in Bhutan, still making clear that the same road works would be continued in spring. Some experts interpreted Indian move as a defeat. However, it is important to stress that New Delhi has achieved its desired goals: inducing Beijing to withdraw its army and to stop the road works. At the moment, there is no certainty that the road works will be continued in spring. As a result - given that China has never taken a step back in situations similar to this - India should consider the most recent evolution on the Himalaya more as a victory rather than as a defeat.

3 The Chinese choice to let the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor go across Pakistani Kashmir is extremely destabilizing because it weakens the Pakistani sovereignty on an area where Islamabad and New Delhi have not yet reached a compromise.