



## Another front: On India, Bhutan and China



### Context:

- For the third time since early June 2020, China has repeated its territorial claims in the eastern sector of Bhutan's Trashigang district.

### What is China's Territorial claim?

- According to China, the **Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary** is located in the China-Bhutan disputed areas which is on the agenda of China-Bhutan boundary talk.
- China's first claim was at a **UNDP-led Global Environment Facility (GEF)** conference on June 2-3, when the Chinese representative tried to stop funding for the Sakteng forest reserve in Bhutan's eastern district of Trashigang.
- China claims that the boundary between China and Bhutan has never been delimited and that it has had disputes over the eastern, central and western sectors of Bhutan.



## Why is the claim by China surprising?

- China has not objected earlier to funding provided to the sanctuary at the GEF.
- The Trashigang area, where Sakteng is based, does not share a boundary with China.
- Chinese officials have **not raised the eastern boundary** in 24 rounds of talks with Bhutan, that began in 1984. Thus far, talks have been only about the Bhutan's north – Pasamlung and Jakarlung valley.
- Bhutan's West: Doklam and other pasturelands that come up to the trijunction point with India.

## What is Bhutan's position?

- Bhutan totally rejected the claim made by China and was able to secure the funding from GEP.
- Bhutan said that Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary is an integral and sovereign territory of Bhutan.
- Bhutan has conveyed its position to China through its embassy in New Delhi, as Bhutan and China do not have any formal diplomatic relation.
- After repeated claims by China in past two months, Bhutan has now appeared to take a sober view of China's claims by saying that all disputes would be taken up in the next round of China-Bhutan talks.

## What are the concerns for India?

- Sakteng is situated along the border with Arunachal Pradesh, some part of which is also claimed by China.
- Even after the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 2007, Indian military is virtually responsible for protecting Bhutan from the kind of external threat that the Chinese military poses.

## What is the Strategy behind Chinese claims?

### For Bhutan

- It is an attempt by China to hurry the scheduling of the next meeting, or to gain leverage in the boundary talks.

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- Boundary talks between China & Bhutan — the last round was in 2016 — have been put off due to the Doklam stand-off in 2017, elections in 2018, and pandemic in 2020.
- **Reiteration of a “package solution”** by China during these period as a solution for China-Bhutan boundary dispute.
- It refers to a deal offered by Chinese in 1990s whereby China was ready to give up its claims on 495 km<sup>2</sup> in the norther region in exchange for control of 269 km<sup>2</sup> in the western region (Doklam & Chumbi Valley).

### For India:

- China's new territorial claim is a part of the larger Chinese tactics of putting pressure on India's smaller neighbours, to punish them for any closeness to India.
- India which is already dealing with Chinese aggression across the Line of Actual Control, the Sakteng claim could be a diversionary tactic.
- By claiming Bhutan's eastern boundary, China is attempting to double down on its claims over Arunachal Pradesh, neither of which it has lien on or control of.
- **To gain Control of Doklam region** located near Strategically important Siliguri corridor of India.
- The repetition of its “package” offer is worrying as it implies that Beijing is not giving up its push for the Doklam plateau, located near trijunction of China, India & Bhutan.
- China has consolidated its military infrastructure in Doklam Plateau -and would like to inch towards India's Chumbi valley, a strategically sensitive location.

### Conclusion:

- No matter what Beijing's designs are behind its new claims, India & Bhutan must stay the course, with the close cooperation and complete understanding they have shared for decades, in order to respond to them purposively.