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India–China Boundary Negotiations and the 'Early Harvest': A Critical Assessment

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Executive Summary

In its talks with India on the boundary question, China has periodically pressed an 'early harvest' proposal: settling the boundary in the Sikkim Sector on its own, ahead of and detached from the Western, Middle and Eastern Sectors. The idea surfaced publicly on the eve of the 2017 Doklam standoff, and India consistently resisted it. The Special Representatives' statement of 19 August 2025, recording an agreement to set up an Expert Group to "explore an early harvest in boundary delimitation", marks an apparent softening of that long-held position and is the reason this question now demands fresh scrutiny. This paper examines the proposal, the arguments advanced for and against it, and what India's response should be. Its central conclusion is that an early harvest confined to Sikkim would be a strategic error: it offers India no genuine harvest, while delivering China a concrete gain and a lever over Bhutan and the Siliguri Corridor.

The case made for an early harvest, and why it fails

Four arguments are commonly made in its favour. First, a Sikkim settlement would demonstrate progress and generate goodwill. But the progress would be contrived and the exchange asymmetric: a settlement on China's terms in the one sector closest to settled gives Beijing a concrete gain, while India gets nothing comparable; the goodwill is ephemeral and the legal consequences permanent. Second, the Sikkim boundary is essentially settled and a harvest would merely formalise it. This conflates an informal understanding on the basis of an alignment with a formal, final delimitation, and it ignores the trijunction, which remains disputed, as also significant differences on the interpretation of the watershed boundary at Nathula and Chola as well as at Nakula and the Cairns in North Sikkim. Third, the move is low risk because Sikkim is not really contested; in fact, China's pressure there has been persistent, and any delimitation grounded in the 1890 Convention would open the door to the Chinese claim at Gipmochi. Fourth, refusing forecloses the only available pathway; in fact the 2005 Agreement remains valid, and the impasse stems from China's unwillingness to engage on its terms, not from India's adherence to them. India's own counter-proposal for an "Early and Substantial Harvest", covering the entire Middle Sector along the watershed alongside Sikkim, exposed China's motive: Beijing rejected it, confirming that what it seeks is not early progress as such but the specific strategic prize available in Sikkim.

Why an early harvest is not in India's interest

The decisive objection rests on the package principle, that is, the very architecture of the negotiating framework. Article III of the Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles of April 2005 provides that the two sides should make "meaningful and mutually acceptable adjustments to their respective positions" so as to arrive at "a package settlement to the boundary question", and that the settlement "must be final, covering all sectors". This was not incidental draftsmanship but a deliberate safeguard. China's interests across the sectors are not uniform, and the package requirement was negotiated precisely to prevent their disaggregation, so that the easy and the hard are settled together and each side

concedes something of value. To carve out Sikkim is to dismantle that architecture: it would let China bank the one near-settled sector while keeping Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh as live leverage, settling the segment where India is strongest in exchange for no reciprocal movement where China is strong. As former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal observed in 2019, since the Sikkim border is the segment closest to settled, there is no early harvest in it for India, while China would seek to settle the trijunction in its own favour.

The risk is compounded by a latent contradiction in the instrument on which China relies. Article I of the 1890 Anglo-Chinese Convention contains two stipulations that are mutually contradictory. Its first sentence makes the watershed crest the primary rule, defining the boundary as the line separating the waters flowing into the Teesta from those flowing into the Mochu. Its second sentence then names Mount Gipmochi as the starting point on the Bhutan frontier. Yet, British Indian maps of 1907 and 1913 placed the trijunction not at Gipmochi but roughly 6 km to its north at Batang La, which lies on the true watershed crest along with Merug La, which is higher than Gipmochi. The discrepancy, almost certainly an artefact of imprecise nineteenth-century survey work, is the cartographic root of the dispute. India and Bhutan read the watershed principle as controlling and place the trijunction at Batang La; China seizes on the literal naming of Gipmochi to push the trijunction some six and a half kilometres south, onto the Jampheri (Zompelri) ridge that overlooks the Amo Chu valley and, beyond it, the Siliguri Corridor. A Sikkim delimitation, built on the 1890 text, unless it actively repudiates Gipmochi, would be read by Beijing as conceding the southern trijunction. It would thereby legitimise the Chinese claim, expose the Corridor, and hand China the instrument to press Bhutan toward ceding Doklam, the western sector being precisely what Beijing has long sought in its package offer to Thimphu. There is, in short, no harvest for India in the proposal; there is only risk.

Main recommendations

The paper recommends that India decline both forms in which the proposal is likely to appear. The first, a harvest confined to the Sikkim Sector, fails for every reason above. The second, subtler and more dangerous, is an "agreement with holes", covering Sikkim and the Middle Sector but limited to stretches where the two sides already agree and leaving the contested portions, including the trijunction, for later. This must not be confused with India's own proposal, which required the Middle Sector in its entirety: an agreement with holes would let China pocket the uncontested segments while keeping every contested claim as leverage, converting the package into a sequence in which the easy is banked and the hard is left open indefinitely. It fails the test of Chinese good faith by design.

Beyond declining both variants, the paper sets out four principles to guide India's conduct in the resumed Special Representatives process. First, the Expert Group's terms of reference must be settled clearly and in writing before it convenes, confined to exploratory discussion of delimitation rather than delimitation or demarcation, kept strictly within the 2005 package framework, and without prejudice to the trijunction; any reading of its mandate as sanctioning a standalone Sikkim delimitation or demarcation or as settling the trijunction at Gipmochi must be challenged at the outset.

Second, India should treat peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control as the non-negotiable condition of progress, resisting China's attempts to delink border management from the broader relationship and refusing to let the post-2020 buffer zones harden into a revised baseline.

Third, India should press for genuine political engagement on a comprehensive settlement rather than allow working groups to paper over the absence of progress; the test of Chinese seriousness is whether it will engage on the framework for a final settlement and hold the LAC stable while it does.

Fourth, India must tend the Bhutan dimension with particular care, since it is through Bhutan that the early harvest does its real damage. That means anchoring the relationship in economic partnership, including faster delivery on hydropower and the Gelephu Mindfulness City initiative, and making clear that the 2012 understanding on trilateral consultation over trijunction points remains in force, so that no Bhutan-China settlement touching the Doklam trijunction can bind India without its participation.

Simultaneously, India must improve its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability along this frontier. The next time China seeks road access or connectivity to Gyemochen and the Jampheri ridge, the reaction time available will be very short: the 2017 intervention was possible because the Chinese road ran close to the Indian post at Doka La, whereas the alternative route now being developed through the Amo Chu valley lies much further away. India's intelligence-gathering fell short before both the 2017 standoff and the 2020 transgressions in Eastern Ladakh, and strengthening it is essential to restore reaction time. The bottom line is that India cannot allow China to occupy Gipmochi (Gyemochen) and the Jampheri Ridge; should Bhutan prove unable or unwilling to prevent it, India would have no option but to take pre-emptive action.

The underlying judgement is that the decisive variable at Doklam is no longer only territory but also time. China is steadily compressing India's decision windows through roads, settlements, surveillance and forward deployments. India's interest lies in holding firm to the package principle, keeping the negotiating space intact, and refusing a shortcut whose destination suits China. There is no early harvest for India in a Sikkim-only deal; there is only a reversal of a sound policy dressed up as progress.

India-China Boundary Negotiations and the 'Early Harvest': A Critical Assessment[1]

1. The Process and the Current Moment

The Special Representatives (SR) mechanism on the India-China boundary question was constituted during Prime Minister AB Vajpayee's visit to China in June 2003, when "The two sides agreed to each appoint a Special Representative to explore, from the political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship, the framework of a boundary settlement".[1]

It was a bold decision to rescue decades-long boundary talks from the sterile territory of legalese, where the two sides were unlikely to reconcile their widely divergent narratives and instead tasking empowered representatives to seek a political settlement, treating the boundary question as a strategic rather than a purely cartographic or legal issue. A breakthrough was made in the dialogue on 11 April 2005 when the two sides concluded the Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Boundary Settlement. However, further substantive progress has eluded the SRs over the past two decades.[2]

Twenty-four rounds of SR talks have been held between October 2003 and August 2025, with a five-year freeze after Galwan separating the twenty-second round (December 2019) from the twenty-third (December 2024). The most recent phase, mandated by the Modi-Xi meeting at Kazan in October 2024, produced the twenty-third round in Beijing and the twenty-fourth in New Delhi in August 2025. At the latter, the two sides agreed to set up an Expert Group, under the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), to "explore" what the readout of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) called "Early Harvest in boundary delimitation."[3]

It is interesting that China has used different formulations to describe what was agreed upon. A Xinhua report dated 19-20 August 2025 spoke of the two sides agreeing to "establish a demarcation expert group under the framework of (the WMCC) to explore the possibility of advancing demarcation negotiations in areas where conditions are ripe."[4] The second Xinhua report dated 20 August 2025 on "10-point consensus reached during China-India boundary meeting" essentially reiterated the above formulation under Point 4.[5] Thus, Xinhua reports spoke of "demarcation" (rather than "delimitation" used in the MEA statement) in areas "where conditions are ripe". Neither Xinhua report referred to "Early Harvest".

However, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) ten-point document (Point 4) says that both sides "agreed to set up an Expert Group, under (the WMCC) framework, to explore Early Harvest of boundary delimitation on appropriate Sectors."[6] This is notable: China's own formal readout adopts the Indian/bilateral nomenclature, while Xinhua's more accessible English-language report quietly substitutes "demarcation negotiations in areas where conditions are ripe," which is the standard Chinese formulation from 2017 and carries a different meaning entirely. However, in the Chinese version of the Chinese MFA's ten-

1 An earlier version of this paper has been published on the website of the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi

point consensus, "where conditions are ripe" is back and the reference to "early harvest" is dropped. Point 4 of the Chinese language document reads, "Both sides agreed to establish, under the framework of (the WMCC), a **boundary delimitation expert group** (划界专家小组), to explore the advancement of **boundary delimitation negotiations** (划界谈判) in sectors **where conditions are ripe** (条件成熟的地段)."[7]

The most analytically important finding is that "Early Harvest" (早期收获) does not appear in the Chinese original text or in Xinhua reports. It was introduced only in the MFA's own English translation — suggesting it was inserted to signal to the Indian and international audience that this was the "early harvest" concept. Meanwhile, the Chinese domestic audience received the formulation of "delimitation negotiations in sectors where conditions are ripe." This is a precise, documented instance of China using its bilingual readouts to convey different messages to different audiences.

We have always found the formulation "when conditions are ripe" problematic in boundary negotiations because this phraseology has been deployed by China since the early 1950s to exercise unilateral control over what is "ripe" for discussion. China has consistently found conditions "ripe" in Sikkim — specifically because a Sikkim settlement on China's terms would validate Gipmochi as the trijunction, furnish legal cover for controlling the Jampheri Ridge, and create pressure on Bhutan to conclude the western boundary bilaterally. "Conditions are ripe" is therefore not a neutral empirical observation but a strategic instrument pointing at a specific geographical and legal outcome.

The cornerstone of the ongoing SR negotiations is the Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles of April 2005. It establishes a three-step process: first, political parameters; second, a framework for a final settlement; and finally, the delineation of the boundary on maps and demarcation. Demarcation — placing physical markers on the ground — comes last, not first. The Agreement does not use the term "delimitation" at all. Chinese formulations describe a process that begins at the end, whether delimitation or demarcation of the boundary, selectively in "ripe" sectors.

The MEA press release on the 35th Meeting of the WMCC, held in Beijing on 27 May 2026, mentions that the two sides "discussed issues pertaining to delimitation, border management, mechanism building and cross-border cooperation" and "agreed to work together to make substantive preparation for the next meeting of the Special Representatives". The reference to "delimitation" is significant as it suggests follow-up discussions on the understanding "to explore Early Harvest in boundary delimitation".[8] The Chinese readout specifically refers to "boundary delimitation". It offers an explicit explanation: the discussions were held "in order to implement the consensus reached during the 24th Round of SR Talks" — meaning the 划界专家小组 (delimitation expert group) agreed at the 24th SR round is currently the operative framework.[9]

2. Origins and Evolution of the Idea

The early harvest, settling the Sikkim Sector while leaving the Western, Middle and Eastern Sectors unresolved, rests on the claim that Sikkim is the most tractable sector because the two sides have agreed that the 1890 Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet provides for "the basis of the alignment" in this sector. The idea surfaced publicly in 2017, when Ambassador Luo Zhaohui aired it at a New Delhi think-tank months before the Doklam standoff.[10] Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhou clarified during the same year that the proposal sought to replace the 1890 Convention, signed between Great Britain and Qing China, with a fresh agreement signed directly between China and India.[11]

It is worth recalling precisely how each side cast the idea in 2017, because the early harvest entered the public record not through a negotiating text but through the documents the two governments produced at the height of the Doklam standoff. The clearest Chinese articulation is in the fact-sheet issued by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 2 August 2017, titled "The Facts and China's Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops' Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory". Its paragraph 12 records that the Special Representatives had "been in discussion on making the boundary in the Sikkim Sector an 'early harvest' in the settlement of the entire boundary question", and then sets out the Chinese rationale: because the Sikkim boundary "has long been delimited by the 1890 Convention, which was signed between then China and Great Britain", the two countries "ought to sign a new boundary convention in their own names to replace the 1890 Convention". The same paragraph insists that signing such a fresh convention would "in no way alter the nature of the boundary in the Sikkim Sector as having already been delimited". This is the heart of the Chinese position. The early harvest is presented not as a negotiation over where the line runs, but as a technical formality that merely re-papers an allegedly settled boundary in bilateral form, with the Gipmochi (or Gyemochen) trijunction smuggled in as a fact rather than a claim. [12]

The Chinese fact-sheet also reveals the purpose the harvest was meant to serve. Its first paragraph asserts that the Dong Lang (Doklam) area "is located on the Chinese side of the boundary" and is "indisputably Chinese territory"; paragraph 11 names Mount Gipmochi, rendered as Mount Ji Mu Ma Zhen, as both "the eastern starting point" of the Sikkim Sector boundary and "the boundary tri-junction between China, India and Bhutan"; and paragraph 13 maintains that the China-Bhutan boundary "has nothing to do with India". Read together, these passages show the early harvest and the Doklam claim to be parts of a single design: fix the trijunction at Gipmochi through a bilateral Sikkim convention, then settle the western Bhutan boundary with Thimphu alone, presenting India with a fait accompli at Doklam.

It was against this backdrop that then-Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj told the Rajya Sabha on 3 August 2017 that China's very recourse to the term early harvest, "as we say 'low hanging fruit'", was a confession that the Sikkim boundary was "not yet finalised", for a settled boundary offers nothing to harvest. She coupled this with the trijunction point that anchors India's legal case: that since the 2012 Common Understanding, no discussion on the trijunction had been held with Bhutan, which was "why the Chinese action in the Doklam

area" was of such concern, trijunction points being reserved for finalisation in consultation with all the countries concerned. The exchange of August 2017, the Chinese fact-sheet and the Indian reply, remains the most candid statement on the record of what the early harvest is for and why India resisted it.[13]

Beijing reportedly submitted the proposal to External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar at his meeting with Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing in August 2019.[14] The idea then surfaced at the twenty-second round of Special Representatives' talks in December 2019: the Chinese readout recorded that the two sides had exchanged views on an early harvest of the boundary negotiations, while the Indian readout made no mention of it. [15]

The crucial and often-missed point is India's counter-proposal. To China's offer of a harvest confined to Sikkim, India responded with an "Early and Substantial Harvest" that would cover the Sikkim Sector together with the Middle Sector in its entirety. By insisting that Sikkim and the whole of the Middle Sector be harvested together, India tested whether China genuinely wanted early, mutually agreed progress, or only the segments that yielded it strategic advantage. China found the counter-proposal unacceptable. The refusal was revealing: Beijing's interest was never in early progress as such, but in a Sikkim settlement that delivers the trijunction position and leverage over Bhutan. A harvest that also included the entire Middle Sector offered no comparable prize, and so it was declined.

The August 2025 round marks a departure from a decade of resistance. India agreed to an Expert Group to "explore" the proposal, which is not acceptance, but which concedes procedural ground held since 2017. The question is whether India can manage that exploration so it does not slide into the outcome China seeks, keeping the Expert Group within the 2005 package framework rather than letting it become a trojan horse for an isolated Sikkim delineation or demarcation.

3. The 2005 Agreement and the Package Principle

The Agreement of April 2005 is the most substantive document the SR process produced. Article III provides that the two sides should "make meaningful and mutually acceptable adjustments to their respective positions on the boundary question, so as to arrive at a package settlement to the boundary question. The boundary settlement must be final, covering all sectors of the India-China boundary." The Agreement also embeds the three-step sequence with delineation and demarcation coming last (Article X).[16]

The package requirement is the architecture's key feature, negotiated as a safeguard against the asymmetry of a sector-by-sector approach. China's interests across the sectors are not uniform. Why does the package settlement matter so much? Because the four sectors of the India-China boundary are strategically interlinked, requiring give and take across sectors. It also guards against China extracting concessions sector by sector. An early harvest in Sikkim, where India holds comparative geographical advantage, would let Beijing bank a settlement on its preferred terms while leaving the other three sectors unresolved. It is a classic asymmetric concession. In its proposal for "Early and Substantial Harvest", India was probing the Chinese response to a settlement along the watershed boundary in both the Sikkim

and Middle Sectors. The "harvest" for India in that case would have been the confirmation of the highest watershed as the boundary in the Middle Sector in its entirety, without which India would have nothing to gain from delimitation confined to the Sikkim Sector with its attendant risks.

In Sikkim, a settlement based on the 1890 Convention would open the door for China to claim the trijunction at Gipmochi (Gyemochen) and access to the Jampheri ridge overlooking the Siliguri Corridor. In the Eastern Sector, Arunachal Pradesh, China's maximalist claim on Tawang and other pockets, both inhabited and uninhabited, in "Monyul, Loyul and Lower Tsayul", is untenable and it knows this. In the Western Sector, Eastern Ladakh, its actions since 2020 have further shifted the facts on the ground. A piecemeal approach would let China bank gains in Sikkim, resist movement on Arunachal, and consolidate in Ladakh. The package framework prevents exactly this disaggregation. As former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal put it in 2019, the early harvest violates the 2005 Agreement because the settlement must be a package deal, and the Sikkim border is the one segment closest to settled, so there is no early harvest in it for India while China seeks to settle the trijunction in its own favour.[17]

4. The 1890 Convention: Text and Contradiction

Because China grounds the early harvest in the 1890 Convention, its operative provision deserves close reading. Article I states in full:

> "The boundary of Sikkim and Tibet shall be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta and its affluents from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other Rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier, and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nipal territory." [18]

The article contains a structural tension. Its first sentence sets the primary rule, the watershed crest; its second names Mount Gipmochi (or Gyemochen) as the starting point. British Indian maps of 1907 and 1913 showed the trijunction not at Gipmochi but approximately 6 km to its north at Batang La, suggesting that Gipmochi lies not on the main watershed crest but below it, the true crest running through Batang La and Merug La.[19] This discrepancy, almost certainly an artefact of imprecise survey work at the time of the 1890 Calcutta Convention, is the cartographic basis for the Indian and Bhutanese position that the trijunction lies at Batang La rather than Gipmochi. India and Bhutan read the watershed principle as controlling, placing the trijunction at Batang La; China reads the named point, Gipmochi, as controlling. As treaty interpretation, the Indian reading is the stronger, a primary definitional rule prevailing over a contradictory named reference.

Crucially, the Convention was concluded between Great Britain and Qing China; Bhutan was not a party and did not sign it. Article III binds only the two signatory governments to respect the Article I boundary and prevent acts of aggression along the frontier. The Convention defines the Sikkim-Tibet boundary, not the Tibet-Bhutan boundary, so China's use of it to fix the India-China-Bhutan trijunction lacks adequate treaty foundation. China's road-building and village construction on the Doklam plateau, across territory whose alignment is

precisely what Article I leaves contested, also sit in plain tension with the Article III obligation to prevent aggression along the frontier.[20]

5. The Trijunction, the Jampheri Ridge, and the Siliguri Corridor

The significance of the Gipmochi–Batang La gap lies in the geography to its south. Gipmochi (or Gyemochen) anchors the northern end of the Zompelri, or Jampheri Ridge, which runs south and curves east, overlooking the Doklam plateau and the Siliguri Corridor, the roughly 22-km-wide "Chicken's Neck" that is India's only overland link to its northeastern states, carrying the road and rail arteries, pipelines and power lines on which the region depends. Indian security assessments at the time of the 2017 standoff held that PLA control of the Jampheri Ridge would bring the Corridor under direct observation and fire and could sever the logistic supply of Indian formations in the northeast. A former Chief of Army Staff, as reported by The Wire, warned that a Sikkim settlement would let China expand its Chumbi Valley presence and increase pressure on the Corridor. [21]

An early harvest, even implicitly endorsing the Gipmochi trijunction, would deliver to China by agreement what its 2017 road project was meant to seize by construction, furnishing a legal basis to claim the Jampheri Ridge and to develop and garrison it. The 1967 clashes at Nathu La and Cho La, with heavy casualties, arose from disagreements over the very watershed alignment now in question, a reminder that the "largely settled" description of the Sikkim boundary overstates the agreement. [22]

The 2012 Common Understanding, initialled by the Joint Secretary, MEA (India) and the Director General, MFA (China), during the course of the SR talks, recognised the 1890 Convention as the "basis of the alignment" — not a settled boundary in the Sikkim sector; it neither delimited the boundary nor fixed the trijunction (Point 12). Indeed, Point 13 of the 2012 Common Understanding provided that trijunction boundary points between India, China and third countries would be finalised in consultation with the countries concerned, that is, trilaterally. Formalising an informal understanding on China's terms is a wholly different act from acknowledging that the basis of an alignment exists. Indeed, even that "basis of the alignment" is tenuous since it derives from Article I of the 1890 Convention, which lends itself to contradictory interpretations, as discussed above. [23] [24]

6. Bhutan, Doklam and the Trilateral Dimension

India's position on Doklam is inseparable from the trijunction. The stipulation that the trijunctions will be finalised "in consultations with the concerned countries" is India's legal backstop. As Sushma Swaraj noted in 2017, no trijunction discussion had been held with Bhutan since 2012, which was why the Chinese action at Doklam was of such concern. Since 2017, China has systematically consolidated its position in western Bhutan — building roads and military facilities, constructing villages including Pangda on the Amo Chu river, and roads approaching the Jampheri Ridge by routes bypassing the 2017 standoff site. Meanwhile, its 2020 claim to Bhutan's Sakteng sanctuary, never raised in earlier rounds, is widely read as a manufactured bargaining chip to extract a concession at Doklam. [25]

Bhutan has no diplomatic relations with China and communicates through the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi. Bhutan and China signed two foundational agreements in 1988 and 1998 — respectively, the Guiding Principles on the Settlement of the Boundary Issues and the Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Border Areas.[26] Under Article 3 of the 1998 agreement, the two countries agreed to "refrain from taking any unilateral action to change the status quo of the boundary." This commitment has been blatantly violated by China, including in Doklam, to create new facts on the ground and present Bhutan (and India) with a fait accompli.

Beginning with the seventh round of China-Bhutan boundary talks in 1990, China advanced a "package proposal" linking the northern and western sectors of the Bhutan–China boundary. Beijing offered to relinquish its claims to roughly 495 km^2 in the northern or "central" sector in exchange for Bhutan recognising about 269 km^2 of Chinese claims in the north west, including Doklam, Sinchulumpa, Dramana and Shakhatoe.[27] Bhutan declined the proposal and the offer has remained formally on the table but effectively dormant; subsequent rounds of talks have not bridged the gap, even as the 2021 Three Step Roadmap revived negotiations without altering the underlying Chinese position on the package. [28]

The Chumbi Valley—China's narrow, dagger shaped wedge between Sikkim and Bhutan—is a strategic vulnerability for Beijing and a pressure point against India. Its geography exposes the PLA to envelopment from both flanks while offering no operational depth. Control over the adjoining Bhutanese uplands, especially Doklam and the ridgelines running toward Sinchulumpa and Dramana, would allow China to widen and deepen the valley, secure the approaches to the Chumbi axis, and gain observation and potential fire control advantages over India's Siliguri Corridor. This corridor, a 20–22 km wide land bridge linking mainland India to the Northeast, is India's most critical strategic choke point. As Shivshankar Menon and Bertil Lintner note, Chinese efforts to push southward are driven by the desire to mitigate the PLA's geographic disadvantage in the Chumbi Valley and to acquire leverage over India's most sensitive logistical artery.[29]

A Sikkim settlement would be leveraged by Beijing immediately to step up pressure on a vulnerable Bhutan to settle its boundary with China. If India itself is settling the Sikkim Sector out of turn disregarding the package settlement principle, it will be in no position to advise Bhutan to hold back on its boundary settlement with China. Even if India were to leave out the trijunction point while agreeing to delimit the boundary in the Sikkim Sector, China would force Bhutan to settle the rest of the disputed boundary on its own terms and present India with a fait accompli in Doklam. The likely sequence would be: Sikkim settled, the western Bhutan boundary concluded bilaterally, Doklam conceded, and the Jampheri Ridge within China's claim line.

It should be noted here that a significant strand of Bhutanese opinion, driven by economic urgency, favours an early settlement of the boundary dispute with China. Bhutan faces a mounting demographic and economic crisis — youth unemployment touching 29 per cent in 2023, a mass emigration of educated professionals, and an acute need for foreign investment and connectivity — that has generated elite-level pressure to normalise relations with China, including through boundary settlement, to unlock diplomatic and economic space beyond

India. Prime Minister Lotay Tshering acknowledged in early 2023 that the boundary talks with China were at an advanced stage and that a settlement might require only a few more rounds; and his successor, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, while limiting the formal scope of boundary negotiations to "boundary demarcation only," has pursued high-level engagement with Beijing in parallel with Gelephu Mindfulness City investment outreach. For Beijing, this economic vulnerability is leverage: Bhutan's willingness to accelerate talks has grown in direct proportion to the pressure exerted through Chinese village-building on its claimed territory, the 2020 Sakteng claim, and Bhutan's exclusion from Chinese development financing. [30]

China is actively denying Bhutanese access to disputed areas. A March 2024 USINDOPACOM legal team analysis states that, despite formally agreeing to recognise Bhutanese sovereignty and territorial integrity, the PRC is continuing to build infrastructure in Bhutan while "denying Bhutanese civilians and security forces access to disputed areas."[1] Bhutanese security forces are themselves being kept out of the intrusion zones, presumably through a combination of physical obstruction and diplomatic pressure.[31]

China is testing Bhutan's resistance and wants to see how long until it caves in. It has no military force capable of confronting the PLA. Its protest must be calibrated against the risk that China will simply accelerate its construction programme in response to any public challenge — as it did after 2017. Bhutan has been able to do little to prevent the relentless expansion of China's footprint in Doklam alongside the parallel China-Bhutan diplomatic track and boundary negotiations, as can be seen from the following chart.

(i) Chart 1: Chinese Construction and Encroachment in the Doklam Sector since 2017

India prevailed tactically in the 2017 standoff, but it has turned out to be a short-lived victory, because China has steadily altered the strategic geometry around Doklam in the years since by building roads, villages and military facilities. The chart below tracks that consolidation, in the Amo Chu valley adjoining the 2017 standoff site and across western Bhutan, alongside the parallel China-Bhutan diplomatic track.

Year	Development on the ground / in the talks	Strategic significance
2017	Seventy-three-day standoff at Doklam after the PLA attempts to extend a road toward the Jampheri (Zompelri) Ridge. India and China disengage in August; the road project is halted at the friction point.	A tactical Indian success at the original site, but not a strategic one. China retains the broader Doklam bowl and shifts to consolidation by construction rather than confrontation.

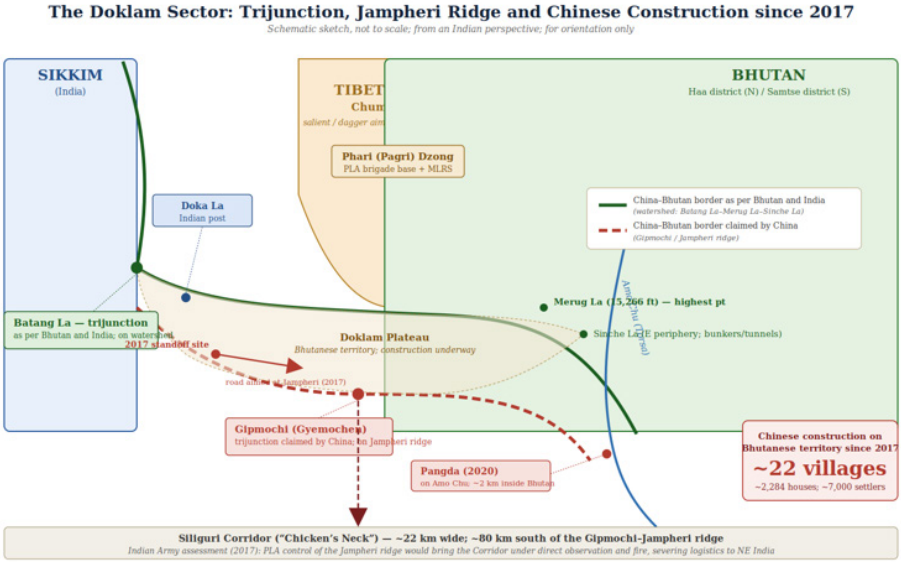
2020	Pangda village built on the west bank of the Amo Chu, approximately 2 km inside Bhutanese territory; some 124 settlers relocated from Yadong. China additionally claims Bhutan's Sakteng sanctuary — a dispute not raised in 37 years of earlier boundary rounds.	First permanent civilian presence on Bhutanese territory. The Amo Chu axis opens a flanking route toward Jampheri, bypassing the 2017 site. The Sakteng claim reads as a manufactured chip to extract a concession at Doklam.
2021	Satellite imagery shows multiple new settlements across roughly 100 sq km of western Bhutan. China and Bhutan sign a Memorandum of Understanding on a Three-Step Roadmap (14 October 2021). The full text of the MoU is not published.	Settlement becomes a programme, not a single site. The Roadmap gives Beijing the optics of progress while construction continues; its unpublished text raises the prospect that Doklam is handled outside the bilateral track — implicitly trilateral with India.
2022	All-weather road from Yadong to Pangda completed, capable of supporting 8x8 wheeled trucks. Pangda reported fully occupied. China's Land Border Law takes effect (1 January 2022), mandating integrated border settlement and defence.	Hardened logistics compress PLA reaction time along the Amo Chu to hours. The Land Border Law converts every settled village into a domestic legal obligation — a ratchet that makes each slice functionally irreversible.
2023	A Joint Technical Team (JTT) on delimitation is established at the 13th Expert Group Meeting (August); its Cooperation Agreement is signed at the 25th Round of China-Bhutan talks in Beijing (23–24 October 2023). Tamalung village doubles in size.	The JTT creates machinery that could generate facts on paper to match those on the ground. A JTT survey of the trijunction-adjacent plateau without India would contradict the 2012 understanding that trijunctions are settled trilaterally.
2024	Independent OSINT mapping counts approximately 22 villages on Bhutanese territory, covering roughly 2,284 housing units for some 7,000 settlers. The 14th Expert Group Meeting (Thimphu, August 2024) reviews JTT inputs; no public delimitation map is shared.	Civilian settlement is the most irreversible encroachment. Once populated and covered by the Land Border Law, the land is hardest to concede. Seven thousand settlers across 22 sites mean a permanent claim, not a bargaining position.

2025–26	OSINT reporting confirms new ridge-line observation posts overlooking Doka La, expanded helipads, small-arms storage, and Wuzhuang (armed militia) presence formalised at Pangda and Gyalaphug. Air, missile and surveillance infrastructure across the Chumbi salient continues to expand.	The decisive shift is in time, not territory. What required a strategic-level decision in 2016 is now operational. Infrastructure is steadily compressing Indian decision-windows. The trijunction remains outside every formal diplomatic track.

Data sources: Brigadier Anshuman Narang (Retd.), "Present Status of Doka La and the Way Forward" (Atma Nirbhar Soch, 2026), using: open-source satellite imagery by Maxar Technologies, Planet Labs and The Intel Lab; NDTV investigative reporting on Pangda village and the Amo Chu axis (2020–22); Chatham House independent mapping of Xiaokang settlements (2024); official press releases of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bhutan (2021–24); Carnegie Endowment for International Peace analysis of the China–Bhutan Three-Step Roadmap (May 2024); Jamestown Foundation research on Xiaokang border villages; and the Vivekananda International Foundation. Village counts (~22 villages; ~2,284 houses; ~7,000 settlers) are independent analyst estimates and are not officially confirmed by China or Bhutan.

The sketch below (not to scale) shows how China has created facts on the ground in the Doklam Sector and in the vicinity of the Jampheri Ridge.

(ii) Sketch 1: Doklam Sector-Trijunction, Jampheri Ridge and Chinese Construction



Schematic sketch, not to scale; for orientation only; geographic positions are approximate. The solid green line is the China–Bhutan boundary as held by Bhutan and India, running along the watershed through Batang La (the trijunction on their reckoning), Merug La and Sinche La; the dashed red line is the boundary claimed by China, running some 6.5 km further south along the Jampheri (Zompelri) ridge through Mount Gipmochi (Gyemochen), where China places the trijunction. The Doklam plateau is the Bhutanese ground between the two lines.

7. Doklam Revisited: the 2017 Standoff, Positions of Two Sides, and Present Status

Because the early harvest first surfaced publicly on the eve of the Doklam standoff, and because the standoff produced the two governments' most candid statements of where the boundary in the Sikkim Sector actually stands, the episode repays a closer look. The trigger was narrow. On 16 June 2017, the People's Liberation Army began extending, using construction vehicles, an existing track southward from the Doka La pass towards the Bhutan Army post at Zompelri on the Jampheri Ridge. On 18 June, consistent with India's treaty obligations, some 270 Indian troops crossed the Sikkim border into the Doklam plateau to halt the work. The road, had it reached the Jampheri Ridge, would have brought the PLA to the ledge overlooking the Amo Chu basin and, beyond it, the Siliguri Corridor. What followed was a seventy-three-day confrontation, resolved by mutual disengagement on 28 August 2017.[32] The Doklam Standoff was all about China seeking to connect the Plateau to Gyemochen: tactical in nature but strategic in resonance.

(i) Positions of the Two Sides

China set out its case at length in the fact-sheet issued by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 2 August 2017. The argument ran as follows: the boundary in the Sikkim Sector was "already delimited" by the 1890 Convention; the Doklam area, lying on the Chinese side of that line, was "indisputably Chinese territory"; Mount Gipmochi, rendered as Mount Ji Mu Ma Zhen, was both the eastern starting point of the Sikkim boundary and the China-India-Bhutan trijunction; the place where Indian troops crossed lay more than two thousand metres from Gipmochi, so that "matters concerning the boundary tri-junction have nothing to do with this incident"; and the China-Bhutan boundary was a bilateral matter in which India had no standing. The same document demanded that India withdraw "immediately and unconditionally" as the precondition for any talks, and it confirmed, in its paragraph 12, that the two sides had been discussing making the Sikkim boundary an early harvest, adding that China and India "ought to sign a new boundary convention in their own names to replace the 1890 Convention" in a manner that would "in no way alter the nature of the boundary in the Sikkim Sector as having already been delimited." [33]

That last sentence is the giveaway. If the boundary were genuinely settled, there would be no need for a new convention to replace the old one, and no reason to call the exercise a harvest. As then-External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj told the Rajya Sabha on 3 August 2017, China's very recourse to the term, "as we say 'low hanging fruit'", was a self-defeating confirmation "that the boundary in the Sikkim sector is not yet finalised. Otherwise, they would not have used this term." India's position rested on three propositions. First, China's road-building unilaterally altered the status quo at the trijunction and so engaged India's security directly. Second, under the 2012 Common Understanding reached by the Special Representatives, trijunction boundary points involving a third country were to be finalised only in consultation with that country, and that no such consultation had been held with Bhutan since 2012, which was "why the Chinese action in the Doklam area" was of concern.

Third, China's construction violated its own 1988 and 1998 agreements with Bhutan to maintain the status quo pending a settlement. Bhutan, for its part, issued a press statement on 29 June 2017 protesting the road construction as a breach of those agreements and calling for restoration of the status quo ante — and it never accepted the Chinese claim, advanced during the standoff, that it had conceded the area to be Chinese. [34]

It is worth setting down what India and Bhutan actually said at the time, because the contemporaneous texts are sharper than the summaries that have since circulated. India's formal position was put out in the Ministry of External Affairs press statement of 30 June 2017. It recorded that China had been "constructing a road in the Doklam area in the direction of the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri," that the Royal Government of Bhutan had already protested, and that such construction "would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India." On the trijunction, the statement recalled that "in 2012 the Special Representatives of India and China had reached an agreement that the tri-junction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalized in consultation with the concerned countries," and warned that "any attempt, therefore, to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding."[35]

Speaking in the Rajya Sabha on 3 August 2017, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj made the point that China's own terminology gave the game away: the Chinese side, she said, had made "the proposal for finalising the boundary in Sikkim sector terming it as an early harvest of the SR process, thus clearly confirming that the boundary in the Sikkim sector is not yet finalised. Otherwise, they would not have used this term 'early harvest' as we say 'low hanging fruit'." She added that "since 2012, we have not held any discussion on the tri-junction with Bhutan," which was why the Chinese action in the Doklam area was of concern, and counselled restraint in terms that have aged well: "No solution will be gained out of war because even after war, talks are required." [36]

Bhutan's statement, issued by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 29 June 2017, was brief and unambiguous. It recorded that "on 16th June 2017, the Chinese Army started constructing a motorable road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri," and that Bhutan had "issued a demarche to the Chinese government through the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi." The construction, it said, was "in violation of an agreement between Bhutan and China" — the 1988 and 1998 accords under which the two sides had "agreed to maintain peace and tranquillity in their border areas pending a final settlement on the boundary question, and to maintain status quo on the boundary as before March 1959," and "to refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo on the boundary." Thimphu's stated demand was that "the status quo in the Doklam area" be "maintained as before 16 June 2017." Bhutan publicly named the road, protested it as a breach of an agreement, and called for the status quo ante is the documentary answer to the Chinese assertion, made repeatedly during and after the standoff, that Bhutan had conceded Doklam to be Chinese. [37]

Earlier, on 20 June 2017, Bhutan's Ambassador to India, Major General Vetsop Namgyel, had issued a formal demarche to the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi to the same effect.[38] When China subsequently asserted that Bhutan had privately conceded the area to be Chinese,

Thimphu pointedly refused to endorse that characterisation, directing enquirers back to its 29 June statement as the authoritative expression of its position. [39]

The forthright position of June 2017 has not, however, been sustained with equal vigour. As Chinese construction on the plateau and in the adjoining valleys accelerated, Thimphu grew markedly reluctant to reiterate it. When China asserted during the standoff that Bhutan had privately conceded the area to be Chinese, Bhutanese officials did rebut the claim, directing enquirers back to the 29 June statement as the authoritative expression of their position.[40]

In the years that followed, however, Bhutan has proved markedly reluctant to reiterate this position with comparable force, even as Chinese construction on the plateau and in adjoining valleys has accelerated. The shift is visible in the statements of its political leadership. In June 2019, Prime Minister Lotay Tshering still held a defensible line, calling on all parties to maintain the status quo and insisting that the "existing tri-junction point should not be disturbed unilaterally".[41] By 2023, that position had softened conspicuously. In an interview with the Belgian daily La Libre, Tshering recast Doklam not as a violation of Bhutanese territory but as a shared problem among equals: "Doklam is a tri-junction between India, China and Bhutan. It is not up to Bhutan alone to solve the problem. We are three equal countries. There is no big or small country." In the same interview he went further, dismissing reports of Chinese construction on Bhutanese soil altogether: "We don't make a deal of it because it's not in Bhutan. This is an international border and we know exactly what belongs to us." The effect was to suggest that there had been no Chinese transgression at all, a marked retreat from the 2017 charge of a direct violation.[42]

The same reticence was evident at the level of Bhutan's mission in New Delhi. When the construction of Pangda village on the west bank of the Amo Chu came to light in November 2020, after a Chinese state-media producer posted, then deleted, images of permanent residents in the newly established settlement, Bhutan's Ambassador to India, Major General Vetsop Namgyel, responded not with a protest but with a denial: "There is no Chinese village inside Bhutan." The denial was difficult to reconcile with independent satellite analysis placing Pangda roughly two to two-and-a-half kilometres inside Bhutan's own claim line, and it carried the unmistakable implication that the settlement did not stand on Bhutanese territory, an implicit acquiescence in a fait accompli that the 2017 statement would have branded a violation.[43]

The trajectory, in short, runs from the forthright legal assertion of June 2017 to a studied ambiguity by 2020 to 2023, in which a sitting Prime Minister could deny that any intrusion had occurred and a serving Ambassador could deny the existence of a village that open-source imagery placed inside his own country. For India, the drift is consequential, since the strength of its legal case at the trijunction rests in part on Bhutan's own characterisation of the ground; a Thimphu unwilling to call a transgression a transgression weakens the very position on which India relies.[44]

(ii) A Tactical Success, Not a Strategic One

The disengagement of August 2017 blocked the specific road at the specific point, and India was right to act. But it is now clear that the victory was tactical, not strategic. The Indian intervention had been feasible precisely because the 2017 face-off site lay only about a hundred metres below an Indian post, close enough to interdict on foot. China drew the obvious lesson. Within months, working through the winter, it began developing an alternative approach to southern Doklam and the Jampheri Ridge that bypasses the 2017 site entirely and runs deep inside Bhutanese territory, where Indian interdiction is far harder. The lesson of Doklam, in other words, was learned more thoroughly in Beijing than in New Delhi: having been stopped from seizing the ground by confrontation, China set about taking it by construction.

(iii) Present Status: A Systematic Fait Accompli

As the chart above records, the years since 2017 have seen a qualitative escalation. China has built a chain of settlements across western Bhutan — by independent open-source estimates, some twenty-two villages, around 2,284 housing units and roughly 7,000 settlers — with a cluster of eight sited near the Doklam plateau since 2020. Pangda, built in 2020 on the west bank of the Amo Chu about 2 km inside Bhutan's boundary with China, anchors a flanking axis toward the Jampheri Ridge. An all-weather road from Yadong to Pangda, completed in 2022, compresses the PLA's reaction time along the valley to hours; ridge-line observation posts, helipads and forward militia barracks have followed. The plateau itself has been opened to Chinese tourism, a form of sovereignty signalling. The 2022 Land Border Law converts each of these settled facts into a domestic legal obligation, making every slice progressively harder to reverse. China has populated or established facilities in bulk of the disputed ground in Doklam.[45]

The decisive change, however, is not only in territory but also in time. What in 2017 required a strategic-level decision in Beijing — moving forces forward across a winter wilderness — is today a tactical one, executed from settled villages, hardened roads, helipads and a forward combined-arms presence. India retains formidable assets in proximity — the corps headquartered near Siliguri, a strike corps at Panagarh, and Rafale and air-defence units at Hasimara — and has raised new garrisons to secure the corridor. But India's posture on the Bhutanese side of the line remains, of necessity, defensive and reactive: it cannot build on Bhutanese soil without Bhutanese consent, whereas China, treating the ground as its own, faces no such constraint. The asymmetry is structural, and it widens each year. The honest reading is that the status quo at Doka La has shifted in China's favour, and that infrastructure is steadily compressing India's decision windows even as the trijunction stays outside every formal diplomatic track. [46]

It is against this picture — a trijunction quietly being reshaped on the ground — that the early harvest must be assessed. Both India and Bhutan are faced with a classic case of China's grey zone operations playbook – Changing facts on the ground incrementally in a manner that creates a qualitatively new situation.

The sketch below sets out the competing trijunction claims, the watershed crest on which India and Bhutan rely, and the China-claimed line through Gipmochi (Gyemochen) and the Jampheri Ridge.

(iv) Sketch 2: The Trijunction — Batang La Versus Gipmochi

Schematic sketch on a lat/long grid; positions plotted to approximate scale, but this is not a survey document and is for orientation only; geography after the open-source map of Doklam (Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA). The solid green line is the China-Bhutan border as held by Bhutan and India, running along the watershed through Batang La, Merug La and Sinche La, with the trijunction at Batang La (about 27°19′48″N, 88°54′43″E). The dashed red line is the China-Bhutan border as claimed by China, running some 6.5 km further south along the Jampheri (Zompelri) ridge through Mount Gipmochi (Gyemochen, about 27°16′N, 88°56′E), where China places the trijunction. The Amo Chu (Torsa) flows south down the eastern side of the plateau past Pangda, the Chinese village built in 2020 about two kilometres inside Bhutan. The arrow marks the direction of the Siliguri Corridor, roughly 80 km south of the Gipmochi–Jampheri Ridge.

8. The Proposal Weighed: For and Against

The principal arguments for exploring the early harvest, and the reasons each fails, may be taken in turn. First, it is said the move would demonstrate progress and generate goodwill. But the progress would be contrived and asymmetric: a Sikkim settlement on China's terms delivers Beijing a concrete gain and India nothing comparable, the goodwill ephemeral and the legal consequences permanent. India's own "Early and Substantial Harvest" counter-proposal proved the point when China rejected the inclusion of the entire Middle Sector.

Second, it is argued that the Sikkim boundary is essentially settled and the harvest merely formalises it; this conflates an informal understanding on "the basis of the alignment" with a formal delimitation and ignores the trijunction, which the 2012 understanding expressly reserved for trilateral treatment. Sushma Swaraj's statement in the Rajya Sabha on 3 August 2017, cited earlier, effectively rebutted the claim that the boundary in the Sikkim Sector is settled and delimited. The foregoing discussion has identified major differences among the three countries on the location of the India-Bhutan-China trijunction. There are also significant differences between India and China on the interpretation of the watershed boundary elsewhere; clashes at Nathula and Chola in 1967, with heavy casualties, showed how sharp these differences are.

In recent years, China's pressure on the Sikkim boundary has not been confined to diplomacy. In May 2020, even as the Galwan crisis was gathering in Ladakh, PLA troops attempted an intrusion at Naku La in North Sikkim at an altitude of over 16,000 feet; the resulting physical clash involved some 150 soldiers on both sides and left casualties in both contingents. A second clash at the same location followed in January 2021. These incidents were not isolated: Chinese troops have periodically contested India's patrolling rights in the finger-shaped

spurs of North Sikkim east of Naku La, an area where differing perceptions of the LAC have produced recurring face-offs over many years. The pattern underlines that China's interest in the Sikkim sector is operational as well as diplomatic. [47]

Third, it is suggested that India's dependence on Chinese rare earths and equipment, and Beijing's reported easing of export controls around the 2025 talks, justify flexibility; but administrative export measures are reversible while a boundary settlement is not, and the remedy for supply-chain vulnerability is domestic capability, not the surrender of permanent positions for temporary relief.

Fourth, it is claimed that refusal forecloses the only pathway; in fact, the 2005 Agreement remains valid, and the impasse stems from China's refusal to engage on its terms, not from India's adherence to them.

Fifth, it is suggested that India can have its harvest and ringfence the danger — agreeing to delimit the Sikkim Sector while expressly reserving the trijunction for trilateral treatment, so that Doklam is left untouched. This is the argument that deserves the most careful answer, because it sounds prudent. It fails for two reasons. The first is legal-cartographic: any delimitation of the Sikkim boundary grounded in the 1890 Convention must take a position, explicit or implicit, on where the line begins, and the Convention's named starting point is Gipmochi. Beijing will read a delimitation that does not actively repudiate Gipmochi as conceding it, whatever the accompanying reservation says. The second is sequential: even a trijunction-reserved Sikkim settlement would strip India of the standing to counsel Bhutan against a bilateral western-sector deal, since India would itself have settled out of turn. The reservation on paper would not survive the pressure the settlement generates on the ground. As the present status of Doklam shows, the facts are being created precisely in the zone the reservation purports to protect.

9. Why China is Not Interested in an Early Boundary Settlement

A clear-eyed assessment of the SR process must reckon with a structural reality that the language of "progress" and "momentum" tends to obscure: China does not, in fact, want an early comprehensive boundary settlement. Understanding why this is so is important because it changes the nature of what India is being asked to engage with.

The most fundamental reason is that an unresolved boundary and an unclarified Line of Actual Control serve China's strategic interests far better than a settled one. An agreed boundary would fix the line permanently, constraining China's ability to press forward incrementally. An unclarified LAC, by contrast, gives Beijing a permanently available instrument of pressure — to be tightened or relaxed in calibrated response to India's behaviour on other issues, whether Tibet, Taiwan, India's strategic alignments or its trade policy. The oscillation since 2020 — military pressure followed by tactical disengagement and diplomatic engagement — is not the behaviour of a party seeking resolution; it is the behaviour of a party managing the level of pressure it applies.

An unresolved boundary also keeps India pinned along its land frontier, consuming defence

resources, diplomatic bandwidth and political attention that might otherwise be directed elsewhere. The chronic border problem functions as a strategic drag on India, an anchor that China can choose to weigh more or less heavily at moments of its choosing. Besides, China believes that time is on its side and that with its growing superiority in economic and military capabilities vis-à-vis India, the latter will be more inclined to make concessions in future boundary negotiations.

The specific posture at the boundary negotiations reinforces this reading. There has been no breakthrough in SR talks on the boundary question since the Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles was concluded in April 2005 — over two decades of talks without substantive movement. The Chinese negotiating position demands that India make "meaningful adjustments" in the Eastern Sector, including Tawang and other areas, both inhabited and uninhabited, in "Monyul, Loyul and Lower Tsayul", before Beijing considers "corresponding concessions" in the Western Sector. This formulation — rendered in Chinese as '东调西让' (dōng tiāo xī ràng), "adjustments in the east and concessions in the west" — is designed to be unacceptable to any Indian government. No government in India can consider such territorial adjustments in Arunachal Pradesh; China knows this. The demand, therefore, functions not as a serious negotiating position but as a device to ensure talks produce no agreement while maintaining the appearance of engagement. This stance is also at variance with the more flexible position conveyed by Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, which appeared to suggest a package solution largely based on recognition of the status quo in the border areas — a position China has quietly retired.

The early harvest must be read in this light. It is not an offer of progress within the framework of a comprehensive settlement; it is an offer to settle selectively — the one sector where a settlement, on Chinese terms, delivers a specific strategic prize: the Gipmochi trijunction, leverage over Bhutan, and a legal basis for the Jampheri Ridge. Beijing's position that India's counter-proposal — an "Early and Substantial Harvest" covering the entire Middle Sector alongside Sikkim — is unacceptable confirms the point. If China genuinely sought early progress, it would have engaged with that counter-proposal. Its refusal demonstrated that what it sought was not early progress as such but the specific strategic gains available in Sikkim.

10. Recommendations

(i) Neither a Sikkim-Only Deal nor an Agreement with Holes

Two variants of the early harvest are likely to be placed before India, and both should be declined. The first is a harvest limited to the Sikkim Sector. It is unacceptable for every reason above: it dismantles the package architecture of Article III, surrenders the sector where India is strongest for no reciprocal movement where China is strong, risks endorsing the Gipmochi (Gyemochen) trijunction and exposing the vital Siliguri Corridor, and hands Beijing the instrument to press Bhutan toward conceding Doklam. There is no "early harvest" for India in it, only a reversal of policy disguised as progress.

The second variant is subtler and more dangerous: an "agreement with holes" covering both the Sikkim and Middle Sectors but limited to the stretches where the two sides already agree, leaving the contested portions, including the trijunction and the disputed Middle Sector pockets, for later. This must not be confused with India's "Early and Substantial Harvest" proposal, which required settlement of the boundary in the Middle Sector in its entirety, along with the Sikkim Sector. An agreement confined to areas of existing accord would allow China to pocket the uncontested segments while leaving every contested claim as live leverage. That would convert a package—where hard and easy issues are settled together and each side concedes something—into a sequence in which the easy is banked and the hard is left open indefinitely, precisely the disaggregation the 2005 Agreement was designed to prevent. Such a partial Sikkim-plus-Middle deal would still leave the trijunction unresolved or implicitly tilted toward Gipmochi, carrying the same strategic dangers as the Sikkim-only version under the more reassuring appearance of covering two sectors. India's insistence on the Middle Sector in its entirety was the test of Chinese good faith; an agreement with holes fails that test by design. India should decline both and use the SR mechanism as follows.

(ii) Engaging the SR Mechanism with Strategic Clarity

Since the Eastern Ladakh transgressions of 2020, China has pursued multiple pressure tracks simultaneously: military consolidation along the LAC, steady resurrection of the "Zangnan" (South Tibet) narrative to describe Arunachal Pradesh, renaming of places in Arunachal Pradesh, and expansion of "border defence villages" close to the India-China LAC. These are the actions of a neighbour seeking to improve its ground position while talks continue.

What should India do? The resumption of SR talks is welcome, but dialogue must be conducted with strategic clarity, not under diplomatic pressure or for the optics of progress. A clear set of principles should guide India's approach.

A prior question must be settled before the Expert Group convenes at all: whether the matters now referred to it are within its competence. They are not, and India must be clear about this from the outset.

The Special Representatives mechanism was created to seek, from the political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship, the framework of a boundary settlement. That mandate — a political settlement conducted at the level of empowered representatives — cannot be discharged by delegating substantive boundary questions to a working-level expert group. The 2003 Joint Declaration and the 2005 Agreement are explicit that delineation and demarcation follow only after a framework for a final settlement has been worked out on the basis of the agreed political parameters and guiding principles. Passing the boundary question down to a Delimitation Expert Group inverts this sequence. It substitutes a cartographic and technical exercise for the political engagement the SR mechanism was constituted to deliver, at a stage when the political framework remains unbuilt, even for the Sikkim Sector.

The nomenclature is itself telling. China's designation of the proposed body as a 划界专家小组 — a boundary delimitation expert group — presupposes that the alignment in the Sikkim Sector has been agreed and that the parties are ready to proceed to delineation on maps. As Sushma Swaraj told the Rajya Sabha on 3 August 2017, that presupposition is false. The Sikkim boundary has not been delimited. The 2012 Common Understanding recognised the 1890 Convention as the "basis of the alignment" — a starting point for discussion, not a settled line. The trijunction at Gipmochi versus Batang La remains in active dispute. The watershed interpretation of Article I of the 1890 Convention is contested. Indian and Chinese troops clashed at Naku La in 2020 and 2021 precisely because the LAC in North Sikkim is not agreed upon on the ground. There is no cartographic or legal basis on which a delimitation exercise could proceed as though the prior questions of alignment had been resolved.

What the Expert Group would encounter the moment it attempted to define its working map is therefore not a technical problem but a political one: whose baseline does it accept? If it accepts the Chinese baseline — Gipmochi as trijunction, the 1890 Convention as a full and settled delimitation — it has foreclosed the central dispute before the SRs have addressed it politically. If it accepts the Indian baseline — Batang La as trijunction, the watershed as the controlling principle, the trijunction reserved for trilateral treatment — China will not proceed. The group would stall at its first substantive meeting on a question that only the SRs, with full political authority, have the mandate to resolve.

India must therefore insist, before the Expert Group convenes, on two prior conditions being met in writing. First, the Terms of Reference must specify that the group's discussions are exploratory only, without prejudice to any party's position on the alignment of the boundary, the location of the trijunction, or the applicable treaty framework. Second, any attempt by the group to treat existing Chinese positions — on Gipmochi, on the 1890 Convention as a complete delimitation, or on India's exclusion from Bhutan-related discussions — as agreed baselines must be challenged and referred upward to the SRs. The Expert Group may legitimately identify where the two sides' understandings converge and where gaps remain. It may not delimit. Delimitation is the outcome of a political framework agreement; that framework has not been reached. To convene a group with a delimitation mandate, in the absence of that prior agreement, would be to accept in practice China's characterisation of the Sikkim Sector as already agreed and ready for the next technical step — which is precisely the concession the early harvest is designed to extract.

Within these constraints, four principles should guide India's broader conduct in the SR process.

First, the Expert Group's Terms of Reference must be defined clearly and in writing before it convenes, confined to exploratory discussion of delimitation — not demarcation — strictly within the 2005 package framework and without prejudice to the trijunction. Any attempt to read the mandate as sanctioning a standalone Sikkim demarcation, or as settling the trijunction at Gipmochi, must be challenged at the outset. In the unlikely event that China accepts India's "Early and Substantial Harvest" proposal covering both Sikkim and the entire Middle Sector along the watershed boundary, with trijunction points reserved for trilateral discussion, the outcome would represent a major step toward the package settlement. But any such movement involving political decisions well above the competence of an expert group and negotiations would need to revert to the Special Representatives.

Second, India should hold peace and tranquillity on the LAC as a non-negotiable condition of progress. The buffer zones in Eastern Ladakh, restricting Indian patrolling since 2020, must not harden into a revised baseline, and the restoration of patrolling rights and access to traditional pastures must remain an active objective. China has repeatedly tried to delink border management from the broader relationship and treat atmospheric improvement as grounds for regarding outstanding obligations as settled; India must resist such delinking.

Third, India should press for genuine political engagement on a comprehensive settlement. Decades of talks have shown that the respective narratives cannot be reconciled through legal arguments. The 2005 Agreement recognised this: it called for a political settlement that would "safeguard the vital interests of both countries" and set out principles like the two sides "safeguard(ing) due interests of their settled populations in the border areas". Any breakthrough requires political will on both sides. The border issue has now returned to the centre of India-China relations, and India should seek meaningful boundary negotiations, not paper over the lack of progress with working groups. The test of China's seriousness will be whether it is prepared to engage on the framework for a comprehensive settlement — and whether it is prepared to hold the LAC stable while that engagement proceeds. Absent those conditions, the SR process risks becoming what it has sometimes been before: a forum for managing appearances while China improves its position on the ground. India should also plainly convey that normalisation cannot proceed alongside the continued 'Zangnan' narrative on Arunachal Pradesh, the renaming of places there, and the expansion of Chinese settlement in western Bhutan. [48]

Fourth, India must tend the Bhutan dimension with care, because it is through Bhutan that the early harvest does its real damage. The relationship should be anchored less in the language of security guarantee than in the substance of economic partnership: faster delivery on the hydropower projects, deeper investment, and the connectivity and Gelephu Mindfulness City initiatives that give Thimphu a tangible alternative to Chinese inducements. India should make clear, and Bhutan should be able to invoke, that the 2012 understanding requiring trilateral consultation on trijunction points remains in force, and that no Bhutan-China settlement touching the Doklam trijunction can be treated as binding on India without its participation. The asymmetry whereby China builds freely while India defers to

Bhutanese sensitivities on its own side of the line cannot be sustained indefinitely; closing it, in coordination with Thimphu, is a strategic necessity rather than an optional courtesy. A significant strand of Bhutanese opinion now favours an early settlement with China, and the temptation of a swap — ceding the strategically vital but sparsely peopled west, including Doklam, in return for the culturally resonant north — is precisely the outcome India that has itself settled Sikkim out of turn, would be powerless to discourage.

Finally, the reaction time available to us the next time China seeks to build a road or achieve connectivity to Gyemochen/Jampheri Ridge will be very short. Our response to the Chinese road-building exercise connecting the Doklam Plateau with Gyemochen in 2017 was immediate, made possible by decisive action at the Army Command level. We also had the advantage of the Chinese road passing through an area in the immediate vicinity of our post at Doka La. The alternative route being developed through the Amo Chu valley is much further away. Here, the importance of improved intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability comes in. In this context, we must not lose sight of our less-than-noteworthy intelligence-gathering capability, before both the Doklam standoff in 2017 and Chinese transgressions in Eastern Ladakh in 2020. This needs to be strengthened to give us greater reaction time. The bottom line is that India cannot let China occupy the Jampheri Ridge. If Bhutan is unable or unwilling to stop the Chinese from doing so, we would have no option but to take pre-emptive action.

11. Conclusion

The 2005 Agreement was a hard-won achievement, resting on a shared recognition that a fair resolution required a political framework safeguarding the vital interests of both sides — not a piecemeal approach whose gains accrue asymmetrically to one party. The early harvest signifies this very approach. Its trijunction, Jampheri and Bhutan consequences are sufficient grounds for India to hold firm.

Two decades of talks without a breakthrough show not that the 2005 framework has failed, but that the Chinese side simply does not have the political will to implement it. The right response is not to lower the bar by accepting a partial settlement, whether a Sikkim-only deal or an agreement with holes, but to maintain the framework while pressing for the political engagement it requires. India has nothing to gain from an early harvest limited to Sikkim, and little more from one that adds the agreed pockets of the Middle Sector while leaving the hard questions open. The SRs' dialogue must be conducted with strategic clarity, not under diplomatic pressure or for the optics of progress. India cannot afford a shortcut to a destination that suits China.

About the Author

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Annex I: Text of the 1890 Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet

Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet, signed at Calcutta, 17 March 1890; ratifications exchanged at London, 27 August 1890. The operative articles are reproduced below from the British Parliamentary Paper, Treaty Series No. 11 (Command Paper C.6208). The Trade, Communication and Pasturage Regulations appended at Darjeeling on 5 December 1893 are omitted as not material to the boundary question.

Whereas Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India, and His Majesty the Emperor of China, are sincerely desirous to maintain and perpetuate the relations of friendship and good understanding which now exist between their respective Empires; and whereas recent occurrences have tended towards a disturbance of the said relations, and it is desirable to clearly define and permanently settle certain matters connected with the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet, Her Britannic Majesty and His Majesty the Emperor of China have resolved to conclude a Convention on this subject, and have, for this purpose, named Plenipotentiaries… who, having met and communicated to each other their full powers, and finding these to be in proper form, have agreed upon the following Convention in eight Articles:—

Article I.

The boundary of Sikkim and Tibet shall be the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta and its affluents from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other Rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier, and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets Nipal territory.

Article II.

It is admitted that the British Government, whose Protectorate over the Sikkim State is hereby recognized, has direct and exclusive control over the internal administration and

foreign relations of that State, and except through and with the permission of the British Government, neither the Ruler of the State nor any of its officers shall have official relations of any kind, formal or informal, with any other country.

Article III.

The Government of Great Britain and Ireland and the Government of China engage reciprocally to respect the boundary as defined in Article I, and to prevent acts of aggression from their respective sides of the frontier.

Article IV.

The question of providing increased facilities for trade across the Sikkim-Tibet frontier will hereafter be discussed with a view to a mutually satisfactory arrangement by the High Contracting Powers.

Article V.

The question of pasturage on the Sikkim side of the frontier is reserved for further examination and future adjustment.

Article VI.

The High Contracting Powers reserve for discussion and arrangement the method in which official communications between the British authorities in India and the authorities in Tibet shall be conducted.

Article VII.

Two joint Commissioners shall, within six months from the ratification of this Convention, be appointed, one by the British Government in India, the other by the Chinese Resident in Tibet. The said Commissioners shall meet and discuss questions which, by the last three preceding Articles, have been reserved.

Article VIII.

The present Convention shall be ratified, and the ratifications shall be exchanged in London as soon as possible after the date of the signature thereof.

Done in quadruplicate at Calcutta, this 17th day of March, in the year of our Lord 1890, corresponding with the Chinese date, the 27th day of the 2nd moon of the 16th year of Kuang Hsii. Signed, Lansdowne (Viceroy and Governor-General of India), and the Chinese Plenipotentiary, Sheng Tai (Imperial Associate Resident in Tibet).

Note: The internal tension within Article I — between the watershed crest set as the primary rule in its first sentence and the naming of Mount Gipmochi as the starting point in its second — is discussed in the section "The 1890 Convention: Text and Contradiction" above. Bhutan was not a party to the Convention, which defines only the Sikkim-Tibet boundary and not the Tibet-Bhutan boundary or the trijunction.

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