Doklam Face-off

What is the issue?

- Earlier in June, Indian troops intervened to block the path of Chinese People’s Liberation Army soldiers engaged in building road-works on the Doklam plateau of Bhutan’s territory that Beijing laid claim.
- Beijing responded by closing access to Indian pilgrims seeking to proceed through the Nathu La pass on to Kailash-Mansarovar.

What is the history of standoff?

- Bhutan shares a 470 km border with China in the north.
- Since 1984, it has been in talks with the Chinese and has succeeded in reducing its disputed territory from 1128 sq kms to just 269 sq kms.
- This, however, was done by Bhutan voluntarily ceding territory. But China continues to maintain its claims over seven areas and is pushing the hardest in the Doka La area.
- In 1998, the two sides signed an Agreement for the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity in the Bhutan-China Border Area.
- The treaty explicitly says that prior to the final solution of the problem, the two countries should maintain “the status quo of the boundary prior to March 1959.”
- This, is what the Bhutanese say is being violated in China’s action in constructing a road in the Doklam region.
What must be the Chinese motives?

- First, it would like to promote the development of the Yadong region, which is connected to Lhasa with a highway.
- This is linked to China’s aim of re-establishing Tibet’s geopolitical centrality in the trans-Himalayan region.
- Second, China would like to establish formal ties with Bhutan, set up an embassy in Thimphu and develop direct trade connections with it.
- Third, it would like to adopt a military posture in the area which will ensure that it can defeat India in any military contest.
- Given the strong Indian positions in Sikkim and adjacent areas, control of the Doklam plateau would allow China’s military to cut through Bhutan to the Siliguri corridor, thus, to cut off India’s North-eastern states from the rest of the mainland.
- So, China is mixing military coercion with diplomatic and economic inducements and at the same time it is seeking to check India’s efforts to help Bhutan.

For India, how this issue assumes importance?

- Opening up Nathu La to traffic in 2006 was an important part of the effort to normalise Sino-Indian relations since this old route offers Lhasa the closest access to a port.
- By blocking the pilgrims, the Chinese are slowly turning the clock back on Sino-Indian relations.
- India’s military presence in Doklam gives it the ability to snap vital road links between Lhasa and the Nathu-La region in the event of war.
- For a China wary of India’s growing military infrastructure on the LAC, this is a substantial concern. Because, Sikkim is the only part of the where
India has a tactical advantage.

- Equally, New Delhi has reasons to assert a muscular presence, as it seeks to reassure the kingdom that it will not allow Chinese encroachment.

Source: The Indian Express