

Siliguri Corridor: Geostrategic Importance and Future Challenges

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Introduction

The political scenario of the South Asian region is becoming more complex and multidimensional, with a growing shift in focus regarding great powers and power politics. This makes South Asia a new frontier for great power competition. In addition to the ever-increasing geopolitical significance of South Asia, it also houses some of the locations and regions with crucial strategic importance. It is not just important in terms of regional politics but also has security implications as well. The Siliguri Corridor or the 'Chicken Neck' of India is a notable strategic location among them. With the current events in mind, its significance in the region has grown to an astronomical level.

Understanding the Siliguri Corridor

Before delving into the deep-seated importance of the Siliguri corridor, it is necessary to become familiarized with its geography. First of all, what's rather interesting is that the Corridor itself is merely a tiny stretch of land. It extends at around 60 kilometres in length and almost 22 kilometres in width, all the while even reducing to 17 kilometres in certain places of the corridor.¹ The corridor itself is called the 'chicken neck' due to its narrow resemblance to a chicken's neck. This very narrow stretch of land connects India and its north-eastern region containing the 7 north-eastern states. It is also believed to have several vital installations within its vicinity.



Source: (The Hans India, 2017)

¹ Panda, A., 2021. *Geography's Curse: India's Vulnerable 'Chicken's Neck'*. [online] Thedi diplomat.com. Available at: <<https://thedi diplomat.com/2013/11/geographys-curse-indias-vulnerable-chickens-neck/>> [Accessed 10 August 2021].

Geostrategic Importance of Siliguri Corridor

The Siliguri Corridor is located in a place encircled by three countries: Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Meanwhile, despite India being considered a massive collective landmass, the Northeast is slightly more complicated. The Northeast is mainly a region of turbulence due to its often unstable political scenarios and strings of insurgency movements. Thus, it makes Siliguri Corridor the only connecting link of India to its turbulent north-eastern region. The corridor is very much crucial to India, as there are major connectivity linkages such as roads and railway networks that run through the corridor. These networks are vital in connecting the northeast to India and sustaining the armed forces posted in the North East, which provides and will provide significant security assurance in terms of future growing tensions and hostilities between India and China.² China has enjoyed a considerable rise not just in terms of economy but also in terms of their soft and hard power implications. So, if under any circumstance, China ever blocks off the corridor, it will have a catastrophic impact on India. This will disconnect the region from India's entirety and cut off the supply lines and reinforcements reaching the area, impairing India in times of any form of confrontation. This will also cut-off India's supervision in the region and lay the ground for further insurgent and separatist movements. As a result, the geostrategic and geopolitical importance of the Siliguri Corridor is unmistakably significant in terms of India.³

Recent Developments around the region

The competition towards acquiring regional supremacy has recently raised tension and hostilities between the two powers. This has resulted in the introduction of a chain of back-and-forth between the two aspiring powers, which fortunately didn't necessarily boil over to an all-out physical confrontation. However, this whole scenario changed with the few skirmishes both the actors have engaged in the recent years. The first confrontation commenced in the year 2017, occurring in the Doklam plateau.

² Utkarsh, S., 2021. *Sikkim standoff: Strategic importance of Siliguri corridor and why India should be wary of China-India News*, Firstpost. [online] Firstpost. Available at: <<https://www.firstpost.com/india/sikkim-standoff-strategic-importance-of-siliguri-corridor-and-why-india-should-be-wary-of-china-3785967.html>> [Accessed 10 August 2021].

³ ibid

The whole crux of the conflict was the construction of a road to extend it to the southeast, all the way to the Doka La pass. There were allegations concerning the legitimacy of the road and violations of the international borderline. Eventually, China and India were both prompted to end this through negotiations, with China having halted the construction of the road. This finally led India to move in with its troops, thus commencing an almost two-month-long stand-off between the two countries, from June 16 2017, to August 28 2017. However, the whole situation didn't end there, as China has continued to construct military bases close to the area and increase its hard power presence. According to numerous sources, China has continued the construction of at least 13 new military positions, including five permanent air defence positions, three airbases and five heliports, alongside other critical military constructions to bolster their military presence and strategic positions near the Line of Actual Control (LAC).⁴

However, this hasn't been the only point where the two countries have butted heads against each other. The two have constantly been engaging in hostilities towards each other ever since the infamous Doklam standoff between these powers. Things have particularly started to go south since May 5, 2020, following China's objection this time to India's construction of foot-over bridges, with a clash commencing between the Indian and Chinese soldiers alongside the LAC. During this clash, both physical brawls and stone-pelting broke out.⁵ The conflict continued for quite a bit of time, starting from Pangong Lake, through Muguthang valley in Sikkim, all the way through to the most violent "face-off" on June 20, which took place in Galwan Valley. During this confrontation, there were casualties on both sides despite both parties refraining from the usage of firearms.⁶ Thus far, it can be said that the major powers are determined to lead in the Asian political dynamic by overtaking each other, while even considering going to extreme lengths towards preserving their national interest in the region.

⁴ The Economic Times. 2021. *China doubles air bases, air defence positions and heliports near LAC after 2017 Doklam standoff: Stratfor*. [online] Available at: <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-doubles-air-bases-air-defence-positions-and-heliports-near-lac-after-2017-doklam-standoff-stratfor/articleshow/78257962.cms?from=mdr>> [Accessed 13 August 2021].

⁵ Gilani, I., 2021. *TIMELINE - Clashes, standoffs between Chinese and Indian armies*. [online] Aa.com.tr. Available at: <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/timeline-clashes-standoffs-between-chinese-and-indian-armies/1879115>> [Accessed 13 August 2021].

⁶ *ibid*

Turbulence and Regional Implications



(Source: IAS Parliament)

China and India have had their fair share of turbulence hostilities, especially in recent years. What's even more frightening is that these confrontations, disputes and standoffs have taken place despite there being treaties in place such as the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement **(BPTA)** of 1993, Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs in 2012 and a border defence cooperation agreement in 2013.⁷ However, among the confrontations in the Galwan valley and Doklam, the continuation of militarization and growing tension surrounding Doklam in the region is especially something to pay much-needed attention to. China, which already claims 90,000 square kilometres of territory in India's northeast, has been a perennial threat to the Siliguri Corridor. The predominantly Buddhist Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh shares a 3488-kilometre border with China, claiming the state as a part of Tibet, which China occupied in 1951. Between Sikkim in India and Bhutan lies Chumbi valley, a small piece of Tibet, another disputed area.⁸

⁷ ibid

⁸ The Economic Times. 2021. *China doubles air bases, air defence positions and heliports near LAC after 2017 Doklam standoff: Stratfor*. [online] Available at: <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-doubles-air-bases-air-defence-positions-and-heliports-near-lac-after-2017-doklam-standoff-stratfor/articleshow/78257962.cms?from=mdr>> [Accessed 13 August 2021].

The Chinese presence in Arunachal Pradesh certainly stirs up the anxiety of India's defence establishment. Wedged between Bangladesh to the south and the west and China to the north, the Siliguri Corridor also links India to neighbouring Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan.⁹ Considering the presence of China in Chumbi valley and northern Doklam, the distance to the Siliguri corridor is so insignificant that it's basically at a range for the Chinese artillery to strike. By making the advancement of only 130 kilometres, the Chinese military can cut off Bhutan, West Bengal and the north-eastern states of India. About 50 million people in northeast India would be separated from the country.¹⁰ Suppose the area falls prey to an active confrontation involving guns and tanks. In that case, the turbulence in such a small piece of land can destabilise the entire South Asian region. It can also lead to spill over to bordering countries, especially Bangladesh. Although starting from a small scale, the damages will eventually have catastrophic implications for the whole region. The conflict could also lead towards the compromise of national integrity in terms of neighbouring states, presenting significant threats to their sovereignty. With China's capability to rapidly mobilize near the area and India unwilling to sacrifice its national integrity, the Siliguri border will continue to be an 'Achilles heel' in terms of regional peace.

Conclusion

Modern-day politics often emphasises upon negotiations and cooperation as the ideal way forward, which is expected from major powers like China and India. However, considering the complexities and ever-changing dynamics of the region, the possibility for a complete lack of escalating tensions can only be thought of as wishful thinking.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Ibid