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**BHUTAN, DOKLAM AND INDIA'S NORTHERN SECURITY
ARCHITECTURE
BY
LT GEN VINOD BHATIA, FORMER DGMO**

**ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
06 AUG 2026**

BHUTAN, DOKLAM AND INDIA'S NORTHERN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

LT GEN VINOD BHATIA, FORMER DIRECTOR GENERAL OF MILITARY OPERATIONS

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Overview

The Centre for Joint Warfare Studies hosted a comprehensive lecture by Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, former Director General of Military Operations, addressing the multifaceted dynamics of the India-China border, China's strategic ambitions, and India's defence preparedness. The address was followed by an extensive question-and-answer session with CENJOWS members and attendees.

Border Overview and the LAC

Lt Gen Bhatia opened by outlining the approximately 3,480-kilometre India-China border across its eastern, middle, and western sectors, emphasising that the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is not a fixed demarcation but a "line of perceptions", with four distinct interpretations held by the two sides. Despite the complexities of high-altitude terrain, he noted that peace and tranquillity have largely been preserved through the sustained efforts of both the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

China's Strategic Ambitions

The speaker examined China's emergence as a global power pursuing a new world order, underpinned by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), both of which deliberately exclude India. He observed that China has resolved boundary disputes with 12 of its 14 neighbours, often conceding substantial territorial claims, while disputes with India and Bhutan remain unresolved, indicating a sustained long-term challenge.

Doklam and Bhutan's Security Architecture

A significant segment addressed the Doklam (Dolam) plateau, clarifying misconceptions about its strategic weight within the India-Bhutan-China security triangle. Lt Gen Bhatia detailed China's incremental infrastructure expansion and temporary encampments aimed at dominating key ridgelines to threaten Indian

logistics, while affirming India's continued dominance over critical high ground through diplomatic and military intervention.

Military Modernisation and Emerging Warfare

The lecture assessed China's rapid advances in unmanned systems, autonomous combat platforms, and multi-domain warfare, noting that Chinese R&D capabilities now approach parity with the United States. He characterised future conflict as increasingly "unmanned, invisible, and silent", underscoring the imperative for India to recalibrate its military modernisation accordingly.

Conflict Scenarios and Strategic Outlook

Addressing the likelihood of conflict, Lt Gen Bhatia assessed that border disputes remain the principal trigger, with no broader war anticipated in the near term. He argued that China requires at least a neutral, if not cooperative, India to effectively contest US global dominance, a calculus that shapes Beijing's border strategy. He cautioned against underestimating China and stressed preparedness for potential shifts in the global power balance.

India's Military Preparedness and Infrastructure

While affirming that India maintains adequate combat power along the border, the speaker highlighted persistent logistical and infrastructural constraints in fractured terrain. He noted that the raising of specialised mountain strike formations, initiated in 2013, has been hampered by funding and implementation delays and called for optimal operational readiness alongside greater technology integration.

The Siliguri Corridor

Particular emphasis was placed on the Siliguri Corridor, the narrow land link connecting the northeast to mainland India, which serves over 5.5 crore people across eight and a half states. The speaker warned that Chinese territorial claims and infrastructure development in surrounding regions heighten the corridor's strategic vulnerability, with any disruption risking the isolation of the northeast.

Incremental Expansion Tactics and Regional Economic Influence

Lt Gen Bhatia outlined China's characteristic pattern of claim, occupy, legalise, exploit, and integrate in contested areas, citing the 2017 Doklam standoff as an instance of

successful Indian intervention. He further detailed China's extensive economic penetration of South Asia through CPEC and infrastructure investments in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, which complicates India's neighbourhood-first policy.

Cognitive Warfare and Water Security

During the Q&A, the speaker addressed the United Front Work Department's role in psychological, public opinion, and legal warfare designed to impede Indian development, noting India's current deficit in national-level counter-disinformation structures. He also flagged water security as an emerging strategic concern, given Chinese dam construction near the border and the potential for water to be leveraged as a coercive instrument against downstream regions.

Recommendations

The lecture concluded with a call for optimal defence preparedness, technology as a force multiplier, improved inter-agency coordination, and accelerated infrastructure development. Lt Gen Bhatia recommended reconsidering the Inner Line Permit regime to spur local economic development and tourism, alongside sustained investment in border-area education, healthcare, and employment to prevent depopulation. He advocated a clear, calibrated China policy balancing assertiveness with diplomatic engagement.

Conclusion

The lecture offered a comprehensive strategic assessment of the India-China border relationship, reinforcing the necessity for sustained vigilance, integrated preparedness, and proactive policy responses across military, infrastructural, economic, and cognitive domains.