

Analysis No. 181, June 2013

SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTES

Hongzhou Zhang and Mingjiang Li

Sino-Indian relations have been marred by their territorial disputes in the past decades. Tensions and disputes in the border region are likely to continue to occur from time to time in the foreseeable future, but the two countries have demonstrated strong political will and incentives not to allow the disputes to hijack their bilateral ties.

Hongzhou Zhang and Mingjiang Li are senior research analyst and associate professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University respectively

Introduction

In April 2013, tensions erupted between India and China over their Himalayan border. India accused Chinese troops of having crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by setting up camp in Indian-claimed territory. In response, Indian forces set up their own camp 300 meters opposite the Chinese facility. Initially, China attempted to play down the tensions by denying the allegations. Beijing claimed that Chinese troops had observed the agreement between the two countries since they did not cross the LAC. Facing strong pressure from the opposition political parties and media, India's ruling government insisted on settling the incident peacefully through diplomatic means. Eventually, the dispute was peacefully resolved when both sides withdrew their troops.

The incident once again highlighted the volatility of Sino-Indian relations. Understanding its volatile nature requires an exploration of the interplay of various factors: geopolitical realities in Asia, the historical legacies in bilateral ties, trade and other economic interests, domestic politics in both countries, the pursuit of common global concerns, and of course, the border disputes.

India accused Chinese troops of having crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by setting up camp in Indian-claimed territory. In response, Indian forces set up their own camp 300 meters opposite the Chinese facility

Evolution of the Disputes

India is China's second largest neighbor, sharing about 2000 km land border¹. Currently, India and China dispute over a land area of about 125,000 km² which can be divided into the eastern, middle and western sectors as shown in Figure 1. The eastern sector includes the McMahon Line which runs from the tri-junction between India, China and Bhutan from the west to Brahmaputra River in the east, largely along the crest of the Himalayas. This sector is now called the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh. It occupies about an area of 90,000km² and has a population of over a million people.

The middle sector starts from the tri-junction between the Southwestern of Ngari Prefecture, Tibet, Ladwags and Punjab to the tri-junction between China, India and Nepal. Its border is about 450 km long, with about 2,000 km² of land under dispute. The disputed area in the middle sector on the other hand is much smaller, involving only several pockets. The western sector starts with the pass of Karakoram in the North to the tri-junction between Tibet's Ngari Prefecture, Ladwags and Himachal Pradesh, running along 600 km. The disputed area, known as Aksai Chin to the outsiders, occupies about 33,500 km² of land and is now controlled by China. India's claim to the area is largely based

¹ There appears to be disagreement existing between China and India over the length of the shared land border. Indian claims that two countries share over 4000 km land border, but China believes two countries only share 2000 km land border.

on the “Johnson Line”. In 1846, Great Britain annexed Kashmir which played a critical role in the British strategy for securing the northern frontiers of India. To advance its border claims, in 1865, W.H. Johnson, a civil servant with the Survey of India who was sent to survey the area, proposed the "Johnson Line", putting Aksai Chin in Kashmir². While Aksai Chin is a virtually uninhabited bleak barren plateau it is of high strategic value to China as it is a vital passage point between Tibet and Xingjiang³.

Figure - 1 Current and Claimed borders of both China and India



Source: The Economist 2012⁴

Sino-India border disputes are complex historical issues. As both countries cannot agree on border delimitation, the Sino-Indian border has never been officially drawn. When India came under British rule, it began to advance the two countries’ traditional border to the Chinese side⁵. During the 1913-1914 tripartite conference involving a Tibetan delegate, a representative of Chinese central government, and Sir Henry McMahon, a

² GANGESH VARMA, *Reading Between the Lines*, 18 November 2012, available at <http://www.fairobserver.com/article/reading-between-lines> .
³D. SCOTT, *Sino-Indian Territorial Issues: The “Razor's Edge”?*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
⁴ *Indian, Pakistani and Chinese border disputes: Fantasy frontiers*, «The Economist», 8 February 2012, available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/05/indian-pakistani-and-chinese-border-disputes> .
⁵M. NEVILLE, *Forty Years of Folly: What Caused the Sino-Indian Border War and Why the Dispute Is Unresolved*, «Critical Asian Studies», vol. 35, no. 1, 2003, pp. 99-112.

foreign secretary of the British Indian government, a secret bilateral agreement was signed with the Tibetan representative on a new border line (later known as the McMahon Line). The Chinese central government rejected the accord and their plenipotentiary, and the Tibetan government later disputed the legality of the McMahon Line. Furthermore, the McMahon Line was initially rejected by the British-run Indian government as incompatible with the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention. However, the British began using the McMahon Line on the Survey of India maps in 1937, and officially published the Simla Accord in 1938. During the World War II and immediately after that, the British made extensive effort to expand their control towards the claimed McMahon Line. By the time India gained independence in 1947, the McMahon Line had become India's Northeast border⁶.

The new government of independent India inherited the British territorial policy, including the McMahon Line as the legitimate border. After the newly established People's Republic of China took over Tibet in 1951, India felt threatened by the Chinese military presence in Tibet and quickly extended administrative and military control in the eastern sector. In the same year, it took control of the Tawang, a centre of Tibet's Buddhist culture, with one of the biggest Tibetan monasteries outside Lhasa. It is also a holy site as it was the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama in the seventeenth century. While the Tibetan government fiercely protested against India's move, the Chinese central government remained very quiet on the issue. China's silence was perceived by India as an indication that the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) was willing to accept the McMahon Line.

After India seized Tawang, the Sino-Indian border became quiet again. Nonetheless, both countries had undertaken substantial efforts in building infrastructure roads and check-posts, and sending out patrol and survey teams. In 1954, two countries signed an agreement on trade and intercourse across Tibetan borders. This was the first document whereby both India and China enunciated the so-called "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", which included mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence. In the agreement, India surrendered various rights and privileges over Tibet, which the British had induced Tibet to grant, without any mention of the border issue in the agreement. While China back then felt it was better to postpone discussions on the

In 1954, two countries signed an agreement on trade and intercourse across Tibetan borders. This was the first document whereby both India and China enunciated the so-called "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence"

⁶ M. NEVILLE, *Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered*, «Economic and Political Weekly», vol. 34, no. 15, 10-16 April 1999, pp. 905-918.

border issue, India's interpretation of the agreement was very different, believing that the two countries had agreed that there was no border dispute between them.

Later on, Nehru announced that the two countries' borders were drawn and there should be no further disputes on the border issue. He then circulated a memorandum asking for a system of check-posts to be set up spread along the entire border. Furthermore, after establishing a presence in the border areas, India claimed that certain sections of the McMahon line should be modified, placing it further north into China's side. This eventually led to first Sino-Indian military clash in August 1959 at Longju. Yet both countries' border dispute did not start in the eastern sector along the McMahon line. Instead, the first border dispute occurred in the middle sector in 1954 when India occupied several posts. In 1958 China's ambassador to India at the time sent two memos to the Foreign Ministry of India calling for an immediate withdrawal of Indian troops from the disputed areas and the resumption of negotiations. However, no progress was made⁷.

Greater tensions later occurred in the western sector. Between 1953 and 1957, China had undertaken massive projects for road construction to support its presence in Tibet. One important project started in 1953 to convert the old caravan route in Aksai Chin from Xinjiang into a motorable road. The road was finally completed in September 1957. India's then Prime Minister Nehru, claiming that the Indian side came to know of the road which intruded Indian border through a Chinese newspaper, sent two reconnaissance parties to Aksai Chin⁸. One of the reconnaissance parties was taken under custody by the Chinese patrol forces in the areas.

On 18 October 1958, India sent a memo to the Chinese government, officially claiming Aksai Chin as Indian territory. In this memo to Zhou Enlai, Nehru wrote, "There can be no question of these large parts of India [shown as within China on the Chinese map] being anything but India and there is no dispute about it". In January 1959, Zhou's reply highlighted several points:

- 1) both countries' borders had never been formally demarcated;
- 2) border disputes do exist between China and India;

after establishing a presence in the border areas, India claimed that certain sections of the McMahon line should be modified, placing it further north into China's side. This eventually led to first Sino-Indian military clash in August 1959 at Longju

⁷ Refer to Qiushi, available at: http://www.qstheory.cn/special/2011dd/20111009/3/1/201109/t20110927_113293.htm.

⁸ VERMA, VIRENDRA. "Aksaichin: Catalyst for Resolution of Sino-Indian Border Dispute", Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Town & Country Resort and Convention Center, San Diego, California, USA, 22 March 2006 <Not Available>. 2012-06-25 http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p99338_index.html.

- 3) the Aksai Chin was China's land and had always been under Chinese jurisdiction, and
- 4) though the McMahon line was illegal, China would consider accepting it if it could legitimize the McMahon line while India waived or sharply modified its claim to Akai Thin.

This proposal, however, was quickly rejected by Nehru who insisted on sending Indian troops into all territories claimed by India. After the Kongka Pass incident, Zhou visited India, hoping to solve the border disputes peacefully through negotiations. During the meeting, Zhou made China's proposal explicit for the first time: reciprocal acceptance of present actualities in both sectors and constitution of a boundary commission.

However, India rejected the proposal, claiming that there should be no compromise, no standstill agreement and no negotiations. After the failed summit, while India began to implement its Forward Policy between 1961 and 1962, China for its part attempted to increase its military forces in the disputed areas by setting up check-posts and enhancing border patrols. Tensions continued to rise in all sectors of the Sino-Indian border. On 20 October 1962, China launched a pre-emptive offensive marking the start of the Sino-Indo border war. The war ended with China's victory and an unilateral ceasefire on 22 November 1962. After the war, the borders became quiet, but India still refused to negotiate with China on border issues, and Sino-India relations remained frozen until the late 1970s. In 1971, India renamed NEFA (North East Frontier Agency-the disputed eastern sector). NEFA became the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh, which was subsequently granted full statehood on February 20, 1987. Indian Arunachal Pradesh on the other hand was never recognized by China. Despite various constraints, both sides undertook efforts to normalize bilateral relations. The countries restored ambassadorial relations in 1976 and India began to show willingness to resolve the border disputes through peaceful negotiations. In 1979, during India's foreign minister's visit to China, Deng Xiaoping made concessions putting forward a package plan for both countries – China in the East and India in the West. Yet again, India rejected the plan and insisted that the Chinese withdraw their troops from India's claimed territories as the precondition for mutual negotiations.

After Rajiv Gandhi took office, India's border policy changed slightly: India no longer insisted that the Chinese withdraw their troops from India's claimed territories as the precondition for both countries to negotiate. Then, in 1981, China's Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Huang Hua visited India, and this led to both countries making a decision to hold talks on border issues. From 1981 to 1987, eight rounds of such talks were held at the vice minister level.

However, these talks did not achieve any real progress, and between 1986

and 1987, a severe military standoff occurred between China and India at the Sumdorong Chu Valley.

Fortunately, this military conflict did not lead to another Sino-Indian war. Following Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China, the ongoing border talk between countries was raised to a higher level. With frequent visits from leaders of both countries, bilateral relations improved throughout the early 1990s. In 1993, both countries signed an agreement to ensure peace along the LAC, and three years later, in December 1996, a further agreement was signed to establish confidence-building measures in the military field along the LAC. However, the flourishing bilateral relationship was strained when India named China as its primary strategic enemy in a move to justify its nuclear tests in 1998. Despite this setback, however, bilateral talks on border issues continued.

Then Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee visited China in late June 2003. During that visit, the two governments signed an agreement. The most significant achievement of this agreement is India's formal acceptance of the Chinese claims on Tibet and the opening of the Nathu-La for trade, as well as the start of meetings between special representatives of China and India on the Boundary Issue. The 15th round of meeting between special representatives of China and India on the Boundary Issue was held on 16 January 2012 in New Delhi. Until today, Sino-India border talks are ongoing, and a general consensus has been achieved: both sides agree that border issues should be resolved through peaceful negotiations. However, no breakthrough on border disputes has been made through negotiations yet. The Sino-India border dispute is still the biggest obstacle to sustainably good and stable bilateral relations and also poses a threat to regional and also global peace and stability.

In recent years, there have been increasing media reports from both sides of incursion along the border. Both countries have been beefing up their military presence along the border. On the one hand, China has deployed 13 Border Defense Regiments totaling around 300,000 troops.

Furthermore, six divisions of China's Reaction Forces are stationed at the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu, with 24-hour operational readiness and support by airlift capability to transport the troops to the border area within 48 hours. India on the other hand has also upgraded its military presence near the eastern border. A five-year expansion plan to induct 90,000 more troops and deploy four more divisions in the eastern sector is underway. There are 120,000 Indian troops stationed in the eastern sector, supported by two Sukhoi-30 MKI squadrons from Tezpur in Assam⁹. Two more Sukhoi-30 MKI squadrons are in the process of being inducted into the air force structure in the eastern sector. In May 2013,

the flourishing bilateral relationship was strained when India named China as its primary strategic enemy in a move to justify its nuclear tests in 1998. Despite this setback, however, bilateral talks on border issues continued

Until today, Sino-India border talks are ongoing, and a general consensus has been achieved: both sides agree that border issues should be resolved through peaceful negotiations. However, no breakthrough on border disputes has been made through negotiations yet

⁹ NAMRATA GOSWAMI, *Ending Sino-Indian border dispute essential to continued prosperity*, 16 January 2012, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/>

right after Chinese Premier-Li Keqiang's visit to India, India decided to press ahead with the creation of a mountain strike corps along the China border. Indian Ministry of Finance has approved the proposal, signaling that India will not hold back on its military expansion effort¹⁰.

Border Disputes in the Larger Context of Sino-Indian Relations

It is positive that neither Beijing nor New Delhi has allowed the bilateral ties to be hijacked by the border disputes alone. In the post-Cold War era, political leaders in both countries realize that they share many common interests at the bilateral, regional and global levels. Firstly, both countries understand that they have a similar, if not completely identical task of sustaining strong economic growth and development in order to reduce poverty and improve the living standards of their respective gigantic populations. Having a stable and peaceful border region is regarded as the prerequisite for either party to focus on its internal socio-economic advancement. This is probably the reason why both countries have managed to set up various stabilization measures to handle their border disputes through negotiations. They have even initiated regular defense consultation meetings and joint military exercises, even though the exercises are small in scale and limited to low sensitivity areas. As a result of both sides' strategic thinking that prioritizes overall stability, trade has over recent years grown at a phenomenal rate, significantly benefitting bilateral ties in trade and other economic aspects in the past decades.

At the regional level, however, Beijing and Delhi are involved in a complex strategic rivalry, both sides have avoided actions that jeopardize the fundamental strategic interests of the other party. China, since the late 1990s, has attempted to adopt a more balanced policy towards India and Pakistan, two South Asian countries that have been embroiled in hostility for decades. China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, which many Indian analysts have described as Beijing's "string of pearls strategy", was above all aimed at protecting China's trade and energy interests in the region. On the other hand, India, partly because of its long tradition of non-alignment and the desire to sustain national autonomy in its relations with other major powers, has decided not to strategically align itself with the United States in what China fears is a US-driven containment policy against China. Neither has India actively responded to the calls from Japan to form an "arch of democracies" or a "diamond of democracies" among Japan, India, and Australia, which Beijing argues is

It is positive that neither Beijing nor New Delhi has allowed the bilateral ties to be hijacked by the border disputes alone. In the post-Cold War era, political leaders in both countries realize that they share many common interests at the bilateral, regional and global levels

At the regional level, however, Beijing and Delhi are involved in a complex strategic rivalry, both sides have avoided actions that jeopardize the fundamental strategic interests of the other party

[ID/756338/Ending-Sino-Indian-border-dispute-essential-to-continued-prosperity.aspx](http://www.ispi.org/ID/756338/Ending-Sino-Indian-border-dispute-essential-to-continued-prosperity.aspx) .

¹⁰ Refer to Indian Press, *Incursion effect: Strike corps on China border gets nod*, 26 May 2013, available at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/incursion-effect-strike-corps-on-china-border-gets-nod/1120823/>.

part of a policy of ‘encirclement’ against itself. To be sure, Beijing will continue to be wary of India’s strategic dominance in South Asia, and India will continue to seek to undermine any Chinese effort towards a Sino-centric regional order in East Asia. But there are currently no indications that the two Asian giants are heading towards a strategic contest that will dampen bilateral ties. On the contrary, both China and India have expressed interest in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative spearheaded by ASEAN. This implies that both sides seem to be interested in participating in regional integration in East Asia.

At the global level, the two countries share numerous very tangible and long-term common interests. Both sides agree that the world should become multi-polar and emerging powers should play a more important role in international affairs. The two countries also share very similar views on global policy responses on issues such as climate change, international trade and finance, and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries. In recent years, the two countries have strengthened their cooperation in the context of the G20 and the BRICS, and other newly emerging multilateral institutions, in order to contend with Western powers for global influence and decision-making power. Of course, Sino-Indian relations at the global level are not without problems. China’s ambivalent position on India’s bid for a permanent membership in the UN Security Council is an example. Another source of Sino-India competition in other parts of the world includes their competing interests in securing resources to meet their growing domestic energy demands.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out that the border dispute between China and India cannot and should not be understood on its own. Rather, the dispute has to be examined in conjunction with many other factors defining bilateral ties. No doubt, the relationship between Asia’s two giants will continue to be marred by the above mentioned unresolved border dispute, which in 1962 resulted in a brief border war between two countries. Very likely, tensions and even small skirmishes will recur in the coming years, but Beijing and Delhi will have sufficient incentives and political will to contain the negative impact of the border dispute, at least in the foreseeable future.

there are currently no indications that the two Asian giants are heading towards a strategic contest that will dampen bilateral ties. On the contrary, both China and India have expressed interest in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative spearheaded by ASEAN