

China-India Boundary Dispute: Locating the Deadlock

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ABSTRACT

China-India boundary dispute continues to exist from last 60 years. Following the 1962 Sino-Indian war on the boundary question, fresh attempts to resolve this dispute began in the year 1988. By 2005 Beijing and New Delhi agreed on the political parameters to resolve the boundary dispute. Now locating the LAC (Line of Actual Control) is the immediate task of the leaders from both the countries. China is however taking a delaying strategy in this regard and using the boundary issue as a bargain chip in increasing the chances of final boundary settlement in its favor. Divergent interpretation of the boundary question by the two countries, the role of media and nationalism, and the Chinese CPEC project passing through POK is further complicating the dispute. Since negotiations have helped China-India in building better understanding on this question through time, it is the only way out in untangling the boundary puzzle.

Key words: *China-India Boundary Dispute, Doklam, CPEC.*

Introduction:

The relation between two rising powers of Asia, China and India suffers from a serious dead lock, an unresolved boundary dispute from last 60 years. Except India and Bhutan PRC has negotiated and settled its land boundary disputes with all its neighbours. Since Bhutan's foreign and defense policy is also under the Indian aegis through a 1949 India-Bhutan treaty, resolution of Sino-Indian boundary dispute will act as a precursor to the settling of the Sino-Bhutanese boundary dispute as well. The recent standoff between the Chinese and Indian militaries in Doklam, Bhutan highlights this complexity very well.

It is natural to ask therefore as to what prevents China and India from settling their boundary. Answering this question is all the more relevant when Beijing and New Delhi's inimical relations are detrimental to Asian security and can jeopardize regional and world peace and growth.

Beginning with a historical prism the retrospection of the China-India boundary negotiations since 1950s will unravel the key areas of differences between the two countries on this issue. Next the major divergences in China-India bilateral relations will be analysed. Based on these findings the stumbling blocks in China-India boundary dispute resolution will be located.

China-India Boundary Negotiations: Delineation through Time

In 1950s India-China boundary dispute was marred by two concomitant claims by Beijing. First were China's claims that existing boundary between India and China is unjustified as it represents imperial legacy. Secondly, in its boundary claims the "independent Government of India are seeking to reap a benefit from the British aggression against China."ⁱ Nehru the then Prime Minister of India argued these Chinese claims as futile on the ground that the "boundaries of India were, settled for centuries by history, geography, custom and tradition."ⁱⁱ These Sino-Indian contestations in 1950s and 1960s aggravated to the level of war between the two in 1962.

With this war India-China relations received temporary setback and could not be resumed for more than a decade. In 1976 with exchange of ambassadors between New Delhi and Beijing the diplomatic relations recommenced between the two nations.

A new cornerstone in India-China boundary negotiations came in the year 1988 when Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited China. In this visit a Joint Working Group was established to build a consensus on the boundary dispute. Indian Prime Minister's visit to China was soon reciprocated by a similar high level Chinese visit to India. To note "in 1991, Li Peng, (the Chinese Premier) visited India."ⁱⁱⁱ Since then, the years 1993, 1996, 2003 and 2005 mark special importance in terms of boundary negotiation outcomes

between them. Through each of these landmark agreements Beijing and New Delhi have moved a step forward towards resolving their boundary dispute.

In 1993 China-India signed first agreement concerning their boundary dispute. Through this agreement it was mutually agreed that “pending an ultimate solution to the boundary question between the two countries, the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the actual line of control.”^{iv} Since sharing of information and understanding between defence personnel of the two countries is a prerequisite for maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC, New Delhi and Beijing began working on this issue. From 1993 therefore institutional exchanges began between India and China. Under this new initiative at least one officer is to attend each other's training courses. In December 1993 Vice Chief of China's People's Liberation Army, Lt. General Xu Hui-zi, visited India. From the Indian side, Chief of the Army Staff, General B.C. Joshi and Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral V.S. Shekhawat paid reciprocal visits to various defence facilities in China during July 1994 and March 1996 respectively.

Beijing and New Delhi reached another landmark consensus on the boundary question in the year 1996 when the confidence building measures on the boundary issue was extended in the military field too. Through an agreement both the sides agreed in this year to mutually reduce or limit their respective military forces along the LAC. From now neither country will hold military exercise of more than a battalion (15,000 troops) near the LAC.

The year 2003 witnessed another significant achievement in the China-India boundary negotiations. Through the establishment of Special Representative (SRs) mechanism in this year both the countries began “exploring from the political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship the framework of a boundary settlement.”^v Through this initiative a major breakthrough could be achieved in the year 2005 when both the countries signed the “Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question.”^{vi} In this agreement Beijing and New Delhi accepted that boundary dispute should be resolved “as a strategic objective”^{vii} and should follow “package settlement”^{viii} as a method to resolve dispute on “all sectors of the India-China boundary.”^{ix} Another noteworthy part of the agreement is that “the two sides will take into account, inter alia, historical evidence, national sentiments, practical difficulties and reasonable concerns and sensitivities of both sides, and the actual state of border areas”^x in settling the boundary dispute. These factors also highlight the inert difficulties in resolving this dispute that will be analysed in detail now.

The Deadlocks in India-China boundary Dispute:

The first major deadlock in the resolution of India-China boundary dispute is the selective representation of the historical facts by Beijing and New Delhi to establish the validity of their respective boundary claims. For example while India refers to the Shimla Accord (1914) as an important historical reference point on the India-China boundary dispute, Beijing questions the very validity of the agreement based on an argument that Chinese government did not accept this accord when it was initiated under the British aegis. It is just one of the various contradictory historical claims by these two countries on the boundary question. Such contradictory historical claim further entangles the boundary puzzle.

Secondly, nationalism in the masses often makes concessions on the boundary question a costly affair for the state leaders. Since boundary settlement often involves a give and take process, even a minor concession by the state leaders leads to their representation in the national media as a traitor that can threaten the regime security of the concerned political party. This limits the will on the part of the political leaders to reach an early consensus on the boundary dispute. The case of India-China boundary dispute also bears the cost of this calculus by the national leaders.

Thirdly, China has also been pursuing a delaying strategy on the issue of demarcating the LAC, the first required step for resolving the boundary dispute with India. In 2015 for example, “during his May 14-16 visit to China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for both sides to resume the stalled process of clarifying the LAC”^{xi} In 2016 Manohar Parrikar, the then Indian Defence Minister again reiterated this need to his Chinese counterpart. In response to these Indian insistences the Deputy Director General of the Asian Affairs at the Foreign Ministry of China Huang Xilian pointed that Beijing looks for “a pact with India on a Code of Conduct to maintain peace along the border rather than clarification of Line of Actual Control.”^{xii} Since China also claims Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh on which Beijing exercises no jurisdiction demarcation of LAC will take away China’s right over large part of claimed territory. Therefore China is pursuing a delaying strategy on demarcating the LAC with India. Such an approach has thwarted resolution of India-China boundary dispute.

Fourthly, Beijing’s long strategy of supporting Islamabad against New Delhi to maintain balance of Power in South Asia in its favour has also forestalled China-India boundary dispute resolution. For example in 1962,

in a provisional boundary agreement with China, Pakistan gave large part of its disputed territory with New Delhi to Beijing. Pakistan's support to terrorist activities in India has also not been criticised by China. On the contrary, "China, a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, has repeatedly blocked moves to sanction (Masood) Azhar under the Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee."^{xiii} Masood, the chief of Jaish-e-Mohammad, to note, leads one of the Pakistan sponsored terrorist groups against India. China in collaboration with Pakistan is also building CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) through POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir). Such steps on the part of Beijing have hampered the positive environment in India-China bilateral relations and it negatively impacts the India-China boundary negotiation process.

In conclusion therefore it can be argued that along with some major bilateral differences, lack of political will on the part of China to locate the LAC is acting as major stumbling block in the resolution of India-China boundary dispute. Since both the countries have already reached a consensus in 2005 that the resolution will be based on LAC and agreement will be reached in one go including all the parts of the disputed territory, signing an agreement on the LAC will bring a major breakthrough in the boundary dispute.

The recent "Doklam stand-off"^{xiv} between China and India shows the urgency of resolving this dispute all the more as such incidents have happened in the past too. These clashes create further discord in China-India relations. Keeping away from the public domain, a close door bargain between the leaders of the two countries, based on mutual concessions and respect to each other's interest, is the only key to the resolution of this long drawn boundary dispute.

ⁱ "PRIME MINISTER NEHRU'S LETTER TO PREMIER CHOU EN-LAI" New Delhi September 26, 1959, at http://www.pib.nic.in/archive/docs/DVD_18/ACC%20NO%20291-BR/EXT-1959-10-04_8160.pdf (accessed on 12 November 2017)

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Fravel, M.Taylor (2008), *Strong Borders Secure Nations Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (U.K.): Princeton University Press, PP- 169.

^{iv} Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas September 7, 1993, at

https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_930907_Agreement%20on%20India-China%20Border%20Areas.pdf (accessed on 1 December 2017)

^v Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation Between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China, June 23, 2003, at [http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-](http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?7679/Declaration+on+Principles+for+Relations+and+Comprehensive+Cooperation+Between+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China)

[article.htm?7679/Declaration+on+Principles+for+Relations+and+Comprehensive+Cooperation+Between+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China](http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?7679/Declaration+on+Principles+for+Relations+and+Comprehensive+Cooperation+Between+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China) (accessed on 2 December 2017)

^{vi} Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question

April 11, 2005, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6534/Agreement+between+the+Government+of+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Government+of+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China+on+the+Political+Parameters+and+Guiding+Principles+for+the+Settlement+of+the+India+China+Boundary+Question> (accessed on 12 November 2017)

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Ibid

^x Ibid

^{xi} "China cool on LAC clarification, wants border code of conduct" *India Today*, 4 June 2015, at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/China-lac-narendra-modi-pok-south-China-sea--karakoram-highway/1/442085.html> (accessed on 19 November 2017)

^{xii} "China prefers border pact with India on 'Code of Conduct', differs with PM Modi's LAC clarification" 4 June 2015, *India Today*, at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/China-lac-narendra-modi-pok-south-China-sea--karakoram-highway/1/442085.html> (accessed on 22 November 2017)

^{xiii} "China blocks US-backed move to sanction JeM chief Masood Azhar at UN, India disappointed" *world-news*, 2 November 2017, at <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/China-blocks-us-backed-move-to-sanction-jem-chief-masood-azhar-at-un-india-disappointed-world-new.526545/> (accessed on 27 November 2017)

^{xiv} Official Spokesperson's Response on Chinese MFA's document released on Aug 2, 2017 on Doklam issue, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28766/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+a+question+on+Chinese+MFAs+document+released+on+Aug+2+2017+on+Doklam+issue>