The China-India Border Issue in 2013: Point and Counter-Point

Summary

On 15 April around thirty Chinese soldiers crossed an unguarded section of the China-India border – the Line of Actual Control (LAC) – and set up camp, reportedly nineteen kilometres inside territory India claims. In itself this was not an unheard of incident; one Indian newspaper reported that in 2012 there were ‘over four hundred incursions’, ninety per cent of which occurred in the Ladakh region, where the latest incident took place. This time, though, the Chinese troops set up a camp in the disputed territory, the first time they had done so since 1986.

A flag meeting was held by military representatives of the Indian and Chinese armies but to no avail. At subsequent meetings and through diplomatic channels, and amid much pressure from the mass media and the public, India asked China to withdraw to previously-held positions. China, in turn, asked India to remove the “fortified positions” its troops had constructed along the LAC.

The issue created a good deal of debate in China, India and the rest of the world, where it was reported upon and studied so as to deduce China’s motivations for the “transgression” and India’s strength and diplomatic maturity in how it dealt with it.

It is in this spirit of debate that Future Directions International presents this Associate Paper. Two noted analysts present the perspectives of China and India respectively. Dr Liu Zongyi is a visiting fellow at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and a research fellow at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS). Acknowledging the complexity of the border issue, Dr Liu emphasises the symbiotic relationship between the two countries and observes India stands to gain more by allying with China rather than with the United States of America, with which country it is developing fast-growing ties.

Dr Jabin Jacob is the Assistant Director & Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi. Whilst not denying the complexity of the border issue, Dr Jacob points out that incursions of this type will become the new norm and confidence-building measures will need to acknowledge this fact. He also notes that China, while acknowledging India’s rise, appears to be unable to cast off its misgivings in relation to the growing India-US relationship.
Sino-Indian Border Dispute and Their Competitive Symbiotic Relationship

Liu Zongyi

Key Points

- Sino-Indian relations are extremely important, but are complicated by a number of issues, especially the ongoing border dispute that was highlighted by the recent confrontation between Chinese and Indian troops.

- China and India have never reached a consensus on the position of the LAC since the boundary conflict in 1962. They have never delimited the LAC, let alone a formal border.

- India is moving towards closer relations with the US, because of the mistrust of China brought about by the Indian mass-media and some strategic Indian scholars.

- China and India are developing, both economically and strategically, and they have developed a symbiotic relationship. The US is moving closer to India in an effort to counterbalance China’s growing influence.

- Despite some areas of complaint, the two economies complement one another. There is ample scope for cooperation in areas such as finance and the construction of infrastructure.

- India’s defence budget is being heavily slanted towards the Navy and its role in the Indian Ocean.

Analysis

Recently, the Sino-Indian border dispute once again became a focus of for the world’s mass media. A “tent confrontation” between the Chinese and Indian armies took place and continued near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) for several days. From the Indian point of view, the Chinese army invaded Indian territory, and this incident was “the most serious one in the past 25 years”. Level-headed analysis will indicate, however, that China would not wish to provoke simultaneous conflicts with Japan and India, two major Asian powers. In fact, the Indian mass media’s reports about Chinese incursions have been heard continually in recent years. Some reports that the Chinese have invaded India for more than 600 times in the past three years are ridiculous.
The Sino-Indian border issue is very complicated. It was left over from the time of British rule in India and has never been resolved. In the 1960s, a military conflict broke out between China and India over territorial boundaries. That conflict became the excuse for India to develop its armed forces vigorously, to get ready for battle, and to make nuclear weapons. The root reason cause of many of the “incursion” incidents reported by India is that the two sides have never reached a consensus on the position of the LAC since the boundary conflict in 1962. They have never delimited the LAC, let alone a formal border. It is therefore debatable to say the Chinese army invaded Indian territory.

Since 1993, however, China and India have signed two agreements and one protocol on the maintenance of peace and tranquility and the establishment of confidence-building measures in the border areas. They have set up a working mechanism for consultation and coordination on border affairs. These efforts have helped ensure a durable peace and stability in the border areas. The possibility that China and India will come to serious conflict is very small.

Bilateral relations between China and India are very subtle; apart from the boundary problem, the issues of China-Pakistan relations, the Dalai Lama and water resources also hinder the promotion of China-India relations. These problems have given India a deep-seated distrust of China. Some Indians are gradually losing self-confidence as they observe the growing economic gap between China and India. The Indian mass media and some Indian strategic scholars frequently refer to a “Chinese incursion” and the “China threat” and propagate an attitude of no confidence in China’s intentions. This situation provides opportunities for some Western countries to undermine Sino-India relations.

With the US “rebalancing” toward the Asia-Pacific, the Sino-Indian relationship is undergoing subtle changes these days. Some Indian scholars promote an alliance under the US leadership to counterbalance China. For example, Harsh V. Pant, a professor of defence studies at King’s College London, argues that India’s strategic interests can only be realised by an Asia-Pacific arrangement in which the US retains its predominant status. The Indian Express columnist C. Raja Mohan similarly urges India to shift its policy of strategic autonomy and strategically cooperate with the US.

So far, India has concentrated on strengthening its "Look East" Policy to enhance strategic and security cooperation with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam. It has also taken a high profile in the South China Sea disputes. In December 2011, the first trilateral dialogue between the US, Japan and India was presided over by the US. One of the discussion topics was China’s growing military and political global position. It is no wonder that many think that India may abandon strategic autonomy to ally itself with the US and contain China.

Currently, Indian policymakers have a relatively clear view of Sino-Indian and India-US relations. India doesn’t yet have the ability to directly confront China, and, as a country prioritising economic development, it is in need of a peaceful neighbouring environment. History shows that the US is not a reliable ally for India. Because of the effect of the economic crisis, the US is heavily burdened by its domestic economic problems, and there are doubts about how much money can be invested in counterbalancing China. The US
anchors its hope on the strategy of "offshore balancing" to achieve balance with, or even contain, China by stirring up tensions between it and its Asian strategic partners. It is just taking advantage of India’s strength to balance China, which, in effect, should kill two birds with one stone.

So, at present, we have the ironic spectacle of articles in both the US and Indian media trying to provoke each other into tensions with China. The Indian media highlights the idea that Uncle Sam is well-prepared to battle China, while the US media points out that India is engaging in military expansion in preparation for possible Sino-Indian boundary conflicts. India still maintains its status as a “swing state” in the international system. Although it has recently become more pro-US, since the US recognised India as a nuclear power despite it not being a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), India will not abandon its strategic autonomy to ally with the US.

I have published articles that arguing that the Sino-Indian relationship is, in essence, a competitive symbiotic relationship. I say that for the following reasons: First of all, there really are some areas of competitions between China and India, mainly in geopolitics, trade and energy, etc. But that competition is not necessarily cutthroat and zero sum. China and India can cooperate if they have mutual trust. In fact, they do cooperate in fields such as energy and anti-terrorism.

In addition to the aspect of competition, the Sino-Indian symbiotic relationship can be divided into four areas: First, as two big powers that are rising simultaneously, China and India are in similar positions in the current international system. They are beneficiaries of that system, but at the same time, they are constrained by it and also suppressed by the dominant power in the system. They want to gradually advance the reform of this system. So, China and India have common interests on many global issues, such as the reform of the international financial system, climate change, and the WTO negotiations. China, India, Brazil and South Africa have organised the BRICS and BASIC groups, which promote the reform of the international order. If China, India and other countries cannot consolidate their views on these global issues, they could be crushed one by one by the dominant power in the system and lose forever the chance to rise again.

Secondly, in the trilateral relations between China, India and the United States, India’s status will benefit from China’s rise. China’s growth is a prerequisite for India’s rise. If India really becomes embroiled in conflicts with China, it’s hard to say whether the US will stretch out a hand to help it. But if India surpasses China, it will definitely replace its neighbour as the target of the US.

Thirdly, as two neighbouring powers in Asia, both China and India need a peaceful and stable periphery to develop their economies. Statesmen in both countries know clearly that development is their primary task, and that development needs stable circumstances. So, China and India have a common task to maintain the stability of the region. This is the determining factor that encourages China and India to keep their border areas stable for at least 10 years.
At least, the Chinese and Indian economies are complementary. Since they are in symbiosis, they could, theoretically, nourish and assist each other’s survival and development. Sino-Indian bilateral trade has developed quickly in the past ten years, and the trade volume has risen 20 fold. Although India complains that there are some problems in the bilateral trade structure, and the Indian trade deficit is too large, it is evident that Chinese goods, which are of good quality and cheap, raise Indian people’s living standards. China and India have ample room to cooperate, especially in infrastructure construction. China has large amounts of capital and extensive experience in the construction of infrastructure; India on the other hand needs to improve its infrastructure facilities, but lacks finance. Sino-Indian cooperation in this field will benefit both sides.

Within India, the so-called “China threat” is a trick of Indian political figures to pull the wool over the eyes of their people and Western countries. From the aspect of domestic politics, by making waves in relations with China, Indian politicians can obscure domestic contradictions, bolster up national morale, pull votes, and the military can get an increasing budget. From the aspect of international politics, India can obtain advanced weaponry and technologies from Western countries. In fact, the major direction of Indian military expansion is the Indian Ocean - the Navy received the largest part of India’s rapidly growing defence budget. India’s military strategy on land is defensive in nature but in the Indian Ocean, India has another competitor that is much stronger than China. The so-called “China threat” is just a cover.

The direction of Sino-Indian relations is determined for the medium-term at least, but the border issue is still a hindrance to bilateral relations. India did undertake some domestic reflection on the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962 and Nehru’s policy towards China at that time, but no consensus was achieved. The Indian government never released publicly the Henderson-Brooks report that summarised the reasons why India was defeated. Taking a coherent view of this history will play a decisive role in the peaceful resolution of the Sino-Indian border problem. We should not neglect the negative role of the Indian multiparty system, in which foreign policy is often hijacked by domestic affairs. The role of the opposition parties and mass media in the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 is a case in point. It is necessary for the Indian government to reveal the truth about the Sino-Indian boundary conflict to the Indian people, and for Chinese and Indian scholars to conduct joint research projects on some historical problems, to alter the longstanding misconceptions held by both sides.

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The Ladakh Stand-off: The New Norm in Sino-Indian Relations?
Jabin T. Jacob

Key Points

- Ladakh-type ‘incursions’ and stand-offs will constitute the new norm along the disputed Sino-Indian boundary.
- Improved bilateral military confidence-building measures (CBMs) and more frequent diplomatic interaction will therefore, be needed to deal with the new reality.
- China’s India policy is beginning to acknowledge India’s rise, but seems as yet unable to shake off suspicions created by the Indo-US relationship.
- India’s China policy is increasingly confident and geared to meet the challenges posed by its northern neighbour.

Analysis

At the end of the 1962 conflict between China and India, the two sides failed to agree on where the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on their disputed boundary actually lay. This has resulted, in recent years, in a series of reports of so-called ‘incursions’ by the Chinese into what India perceives as its territory. The most serious incursion in some 25 years, took place recently in the Depsang Plains of Ladakh, in the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, which is part of the Western Sector of the boundary dispute. In mid-April, Chinese border troops pitched tents well inside the area claimed by India, resulting in a three-week stand-off between the two sides. Coming on the eve of the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to India in mid-May, the incident has raised questions about the efficacy of current military CBMs and both the state of communications between the two sides on the boundary and the fundamental nature of the Sino-Indian relationship.

If there is just one lesson to be drawn from the recent stand-off between China and India, it is that the two sides have a long way to go to in establishing mutual trust. While the Ladakh incident was eventually resolved by a combination of military-to-military meetings and diplomatic interactions, three aspects stand out.

One, the Chinese incursion was of a qualitatively different nature from previous such incidents. Hitherto, such ‘incursions’ meant soldiers marking their presence in their disputed areas by frequent patrols, painting on rocks, littering and so on. The recent escalation and
the intruders’ willingness to stay put for a considerable length of time, despite the
difficulties of terrain and logistics, very likely marks the beginning of a new trend along the
LAC. It also puts pressure on existing bilateral mechanisms of diplomatic and military contact
and procedure. There are several formal mechanisms for inter-military and inter-
government interactions, including clear stipulations laid out by treaty, about the nature of
military presence in the border areas and the kind of responses that the two sides are to
employ if they run into each other in disputed territory. This time, however, there was
clearly a degree of unwillingness to compromise or to follow those formal mechanisms and
obligations. Indeed, it is possible that this has been the case for some time now.

It is in this context that reports of a Chinese desire for a new border agreement – involving
freezing of current troop levels and the exchange of advance information of each other’s
patrols, infrastructure development and related activities along the LAC – assume
significance. Reports indicate that New Delhi baulked at this proposal and understandably
so. Given superior Chinese infrastructure development and the advantage of terrain on their
side of the LAC, such an agreement would have meant that a similar infrastructure build-up
by India would constantly have to be reported to the Chinese, and therefore, possibly
stymied or objected to by them. With the rapid infrastructure build-up of recent years in
India’s border areas, Indian troops have only now begun accessing many remote areas
regularly and are therefore, possibly, becoming more aware of Chinese locations, positional
advantages and ‘incursions’.

During the stand-off, therefore, the Chinese would have been hoping that India would blink
first and come to the table on the new agreement. Chinese calculations may possibly have
involved a general impression that the Indian government was easily put under pressure by
aggressive media reporting and opposition attacks, and would seek to resolve the matter as
soon as possible, before public attention built up. Thus, even as the Chinese government
and its media have frequently criticised the Indian media for its tendency to blow things out
of proportion, it could well be that Beijing was relying on that propensity to pressure Indian
authorities into making quick concessions in the latest incident. In the event, the Indian
military and the government did not blink; they decided to ride out the pressure of public
opinion at home, as well as that of the Chinese along the LAC. That said, both sides might
need to gear up for such incidents becoming the new norm along their disputed boundary.

As a result, with the first foreign visit by their Premier Li Keqiang facing derailment – or at
the very least confronting bad atmospherics in India – the Chinese probably decided that it
was time to back down and break camp. Reports indicate that despite concerns within the
Chinese bureaucracy about the timing of the visit – summer in India, a government in its
final year in office, and the fact that it was the Indian Prime Minister’s turn to visit – Li, for a
variety of reasons, made it clear that he wanted to undertake his first overseas visit as
Premier to India. Therefore, a resolution of the standoff was always on the cards; the only
real challenge was to keep the two sides talking, instead of increasing their military
deployments.

The question then is why did the Chinese initiate such a major and new type of ‘incursion’ in
the first place? This is the second aspect of the incident that needs examination. What
exactly is the nature of China’s India policy and what does it say about China’s foreign and security policy-making in general? How does picking a quarrel with India make diplomatic and security sense when China has on-going tensions with Japan and a number of Southeast Asian nations? Even, if Beijing calculated that there was no danger of an actual conflict on multiple fronts at the same time, surely it must now realise that it has incurred huge costs in goodwill and diplomatic manoeuvrability? Or does China simply see itself as capable of bearing the costs? As the engine of Asia’s growth, it perhaps knows that the neighbours it is quarrelling with at the moment are not in a position to drastically alter the pattern of their economic ties with China. Further, if Chinese leaders have decided that increasing domestic consumption is the current top priority then, perhaps, they see the costs of such external bellicosity as falling in relative terms. China’s actions therefore, leave a puzzle for its neighbours, analysts, military planners, and also for its detractors and well-wishers.

The third aspect that requires attention is the nature of India’s China policy. If one were to go by the reams of analyses produced by India’s strategic community, it would seem that this policy has always been a reactive, pusillanimous one. On the surface, the China policy appears to operate in the same opaque manner it always has; run by a small, select group of government leaders, bureaucrats and military officials. Nevertheless, some of the fundamentals of this policy have seen substantial change.

While mistrust of China is largely the case at the popular level, within the government the situation seems to have evolved into a more nuanced and sophisticated view, which suggests that the two countries can both cooperate and compete at the same time. In other words, India can, and should, be confident enough to engage with China on multiple levels. This level of confidence is the result of India’s own rapid economic growth and consequent international political importance. It is also a result of the US and other powers courting India as a viable, if not yet, effective, counter to China. At the same time, there is greater knowledge of and exposure to China, at least among the bureaucratic, military, political and intellectual elite in India. This has resulted in an increasing awareness of the flipside of China’s rapid economic growth; notably its huge domestic problems, including the instability and dissatisfaction in minority-dominated areas. It has also revealed the many fissures within the Chinese governing system, in marked contrast to the hitherto widely circulated refrain of a united, unitary and powerful China.

While this increase in confidence and greater awareness of China has still to percolate to large sections of the government, the media and the general public in India, the circles that drive the China policy in India are clearly well-informed. They do not operate any longer under the shadow of the defeat of 1962, nor are they overly concerned with the lead that China has over India in a variety of economic indicators. India’s unique political system and historical circumstances have given its governing class much greater experience in discussing and dealing with a developing country’s many and complicated problems than the Chinese have. More importantly, it is able to do so in a fairly open and transparent manner, both supported and constrained by electoral democracy. Consequently, the undue importance that the Chinese authorities and media give to Indian media reports, which are often inflammatory and misinformed, ends up presenting a false or skewed picture of what the Indian Government is really thinking or doing.
Specifically, the Parliamentary resolution demanding the return of Chinese-occupied territory, or the non-release of the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report that apparently castigates the Nehru government for the failure of 1962, are not necessarily constraints on the government’s ability to negotiate a settlement; nor are they signs that India is not able to look ahead and deal with current military reality and challenges.

Similarly, India’s Look East Policy might have a strong China angle to it, but it is just as importantly and genuinely a tool of outreach to the rest of East Asia along economic and cultural axes. To view, as many Chinese scholars do, that the LEP and India’s burgeoning ties with the US are aimed at China, is to miss seeing the woods for the trees. But on one point, at least, a section of Chinese analysts are absolutely right – India pursues an independent foreign policy. The Indo-US partnership is not a sign that New Delhi is in an undeclared alliance relationship with Washington, or that it is seeking to contain China. But it is natural that China’s inability to communicate reassurance to its neighbours will create its own dynamic. All international relations are about socialisation; therefore, India’s interactions with East Asia is about pushing the socialisation of China towards accepting international rules and norms and, equally, about itself being socialised to the realities and dynamics of East Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region.

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