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Sino-Indian Border Dispute: A Brief Introduction

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/26/sino-indian-border-dispute-a-brief-introduction/

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The year 2020 marked the 70th anniversary of Sino-Indian relations and also became one of the watershed years in the history of bilateral ties between India and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Following disagreements between the two countries over territorial delineation and their armies setting up military posts in or near disputed areas, Chinese and Indian troops clashed fiercely at Galwan Valley near Ladakh on 15 June 2020, leading to the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unidentified number of Chinese troops (BBC 2020). The localized conflict escalated rapidly into a full-blown crisis, with both sides deploying additional troops, missile launchers, and armed helicopters. By all appearances, China and India were on the brink of another war. Further escalation was prevented by a timely intervention by political and military officials, however, the brutality and magnitude of the violence witnessed during the few days that the crisis lasted has complicated the disengagement process, since neither country wanted to be seen as compromising on its national interests (Peri 2021). The Galwan Valley clash was significant for two reasons; first because it shattered the 1988 consensus of keeping the border dispute divorced from the broader relationship and repositioned the border dispute at the centre of bilateral ties, making diplomatic and economic relations contingent upon developments on the border (Vasudeva 2020). Second, the animosity exhibited by the two sides reversed years of hard-won diplomatic and political improvements that had strengthened cooperative structures, setting bilateral ties back years and placing the Sino-India relationship at crossroads where prospects for a major reset appear bleak. The first attribute is perhaps more damaging because the border dispute was already a major driving factor in Sino-Indian rivalry, and its increased prominence is likely to intensify feelings of hostility in New Delhi and Beijing. Moreover, as the existing bilateral border management framework appears to be severely compromised, the rise of border tensions portend a new era of uncertainty where bilateral interaction will be more adversarial, conflict-prone, and volatile.

This chapter examines the origin of the border dispute, its colonial legacy, and the factors that have contributed to its recent entrenchment. It will then discuss the divergent positions held by the two countries on the border issue, and the various bilateral dialogues and confidence-building measures adopted by the two countries. It concludes with an assessment of the effectiveness of these bilateral endeavours toward effective border management, addressing the trust deficit, and finding a final resolution of the border dispute, followed by policy recommendations the two countries can contemplate.

Genesis of Sino-Indian Border Dispute

Over its seven decades, the Sino-Indian border dispute has become an intractable disagreement, with no resolution in sight. The question of a disputed border emerged in the early 1950s when the PRC effected its occupation of Tibet, a move which created for China and India one of the longest undemarcated borders of the world. The proximity of the Chinese military presence so close to the undemarcated frontier created considerable consternation in New Delhi. Factions of Indian policy elites led by India's first home minister and also its first deputy prime minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and then-Bombay Governor Girija Shankar Bajpai urged the government of then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to enhance the military and administrative presence along India's north-east region (Raghavan 2012, 80). However, both Nehru and India's ambassador to China, K.M. Pannikar, were reluctant to annoy their

powerful northern neighbour and decided that India would not actively pursue the border question with Beijing, but would explicitly announce their endorsement of the McMahon Line as India's border (Luthi and Das Gupta 2017, 8–10). Beijing, on the other hand, was less perturbed by the status of the common border as the new communist regime was more engaged in consolidating its authority at home, supressing rebellions, dealing with poverty, agrarian crises, and fears of invasion by the United States and the exiled nationalist government of the Republic of China, then in exile in Taiwan. Accordingly, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) saw fit to put the boundary issue on the backburner until they were well-prepared to address it (Chaowu 2017, 70).

The border dispute came to the fore in 1958, when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, responding to Nehru's protests against the Aksai Chin Road – 179 kilometres of which ran through the Aksai Chin region claimed by India – as well as acquisitive Chinese maps, denied for the first time the presence of any formalised border between China and India. Central to the border dispute was two flanks of territories lying at the two extremities of the vast border; the Aksai Chin region in the western sector, and the India-controlled and administered North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh, in the eastern sector. While New Delhi extended its claims on the basis of maps inherited from the British, Beijing claimed that these territories were historically part of Tibet. Over the next few years, the territorial disagreements between the two countries only deepened as the Tibet crisis, Dalai Lama's refuge in India, and New Delhi's Forward Policy only intensified the mutual distrust and led to the 1962 war (Shankar 2018, 29–34).

The Border Dispute: A Colonial Legacy

Ambiguity about the Indian frontier with China dates back to the colonial era, and can be attributed as one of the foremost causes of the territorial conundrum facing the two countries (Sidhu and Yuan 2001, 11). The British initiatives to demarcate the Himalayan frontiers were guided primarily by its strategic competition with Russia. Accordingly, the urgency to delineate the boundaries of the British Empire arose only when the Great Game intensified between the two superpowers. British administrators up until then held no clear view of India's territorial limits along the massive Indo-Tibetan boundary. In the western sector, the first attempt to fix a boundary line was taken in 1865. Then-Surveyor General of India Sir W. H. Johnson, in a bid to impress the Dogra ruler, produced expansive boundary claims stretching the Dogra state border to the Kunlun Mountains and including all of Aksai Chin (Chakravarty 2020). Since other British officials were sceptical about Johnson's claims, the boundary proposition died a natural death, until it was revived in 1897 by the director of the British military intelligence Sir John Ardagh, who believed that implementation of the forward positions in Johnson's line would secure strategic leverage against Russia in the event of an Anglo-Russian confrontation. This boundary came to be known as the Ardagh-Johnson line, and later formed the basis of India's claims to Aksai Chin.

It is noteworthy that between 1865 and 1897, colonial administrators depicted different versions of the northern and north-eastern boundary of Kashmir, the line fluctuating according to the degree of perceived threat from Russia (Palit 1991, 32). Also, China never acquiesced to any of the boundary propositions made during this period. The 1899 Macartney-MacDonald Line, which was the only formal boundary proposition ever presented to Beijing, was never officially acknowledged by the Manchu dynasty then ruling China (Palit 1991, 32).

The urgency to secure British India's northern boundaries was lost with the removal of threat of invasion due to fall of Tsarist Russia in 1917. Post-1945, a map published by Survey of India did imply claims to the Aksai Chin region, but the British military remained non-committal on that boundary (Chakravarty 2020). In effect, the British administration exercised such benign neglect that sometimes the Macartney-MacDonald or the Ardagh-Johnson Line were treated as informal boundaries, depending on the administration's inclination. Therefore, when the British left in 1947, there was no clear indication of exactly where the northern boundaries were. Major General D.K. Palit, who was a brigade commander during the 1962 war with China, opined that, had the British suggested that the newly formed Indian government follow the 1899 boundary proposition that left out the north-eastern Aksai Chin (through which the strategic Chinese road runs), the Nehru government would have certainly accepted the suggestion, and consequently the whole confrontation could have been avoided (Palit 1991, 34–36).

A similar reticence was displayed by colonial administrators in the eastern sector as well. The British had long been

content to occupy the Brahmaputra plains, and did not extend their jurisdiction to the mountains, for these mountains were neither of commercial nor strategic value. However, in order to delineate the limit of British responsibility, the foothills were divided by an Outer Line representing the external territorial frontier of the British Empire, and an Inner line which was forbidden to cross without a permit. In the absence of any perceived threat from Russia or China, the vague demarcation continued.

The British began consolidating India's eastern boundaries with Tibet in the early 1900s, as the administration became paranoid about Russia's increasing influence in that country. A military expedition under Francis Younghusband was sent to Lhasa in 1903 to secure British India's diplomatic and economic rights, which in turn triggered the perception of a threat by China, which responded with an expedition of its own to assert control over Lhasa. The operation's leader Zhao Erfeng, who had earned the nickname 'the Butcher of Kham' for his actions extending Chinese rule into that Tibetan province, reached Lhasa in 1910 with 2,000 troops, securing the city and spurring the 13th Dalai Lama to flee toward India.

Britain, sensing the potential of a threat from China's counter-moves, for the first time ordered a series of surveys to determine the extent of the tribal areas and to bring the area of Assam Himalaya (later NEFA) under British jurisdiction. Although, the sudden collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1911 eased some of the pressure, the new republican government appeared equally assertive toward Tibet. At this point, the British government began to contemplate a tripartite conference to settle such issues as the eastern borders of Inner and Outer Tibet, China's degree of control in Inner Tibet, and alignment of the Indo-Tibetan border.

A tripartite conference which ultimately convened at Simla in October 1913 was fraught with controversy from the very beginning. For instance, the Chinese objected to Tibet's equal representation, and were adamant about pushing Tibet's Inner Line as the Outer Boundary. After negotiations dragged on, eventually in March 1914 the Chinese representative reluctantly agreed to a line drawn by McMahon on the map that ran along the highest crest of the Assam Himalayas and included Tawang within British Indian territory.

The Simla Conference ultimately failed to align the Indo-Tibetan border: the Chinese government never ratified the McMahon line, and since the Assam government was never informed about the Simla Conference proceedings, areas of Dirang and Tawang claimed by the McMahon Line remained under Tibetan control. In 1938, the Assam government attempted to occupy Tawang, but it back-pedalled after vehement protests from Lhasa, as well as when the British government during World War II excluded Tawang from its defensive efforts against a Japanese invasion, despite fortifying nearby Walong and Dirang. China too, its hands full fighting both the Second Sino-Japanese War (the Chinese theatre of World War II) as well as the Chinese Civil War against communist revolutionaries, paid scant attention to the Indo-Tibetan border issue. Therefore, the British left the Indian subcontinent without making any definite provisions for either NEFA or Tawang (Palit 1991, 38–44).

The Entrenchment of the Border Dispute

After India's independence, three major factors contributed to the entrenchment of the border dispute. First was the reluctance of both India and China to broach the subject in the initial phase from 1950 to 1957, when Sino-Indian ties were peaceful and amicable and the two countries had many high-level diplomatic exchanges, which provided the leaders with ample opportunities to settle the ambiguities left over from the colonial period. However, the two countries not only circumvented the boundary issue but also followed unilateral policies. The Indian government failed to consult China before declaring the forward-most posts in the eastern and western sectors (EPW 2020); it annexed Tawang in 1951; and it published new maps reflecting India's unilateral demarcation, interpreted China's silence as tacit consent. Nehru himself admitted in 1953 that even while India inherited the McMahon Line from the British, he was not willing to raise the subject lest it awaken sleeping dogs (Luthi 2017, 32). Similarly, Mao Zedong's instructions, the PRC followed a delaying strategy, with China deciding to refrain from formally protesting against New Delhi's unilateral moves until they had consolidated their administrative and military position in Tibet, as China had begun building the Xinjiang National Highway in 1951 – a road that would not be completed until 1957 (Chaowu 2017, 69–71). Moreover, during 1954 negotiations on Tibet, China chose not to raise the issue of border alignment despite having the opportunity, and in 1956, when Nehru for the first time referred to the boundary issue, Zhou Enlai

suggested that the Chinese government would be willing to recognize the McMahon Line (Das Gupta 2017, 53).

Later scholarly works reveal that a combination of domestic and international factors influenced the policy choices of both countries. For instance, New Delhi's trauma from previous territorial losses due to Partition and also Nehru's desire to maintain friendly relations with China weighed heavily on Indian decision-makers. Simultaneously, Beijing, too embroiled in China's internal struggles and facing international diplomatic isolation, was reluctant to immediately open another confrontational front with India. In retrospect, however, the deferral policy followed by both countries proved to be disastrous, because as suspicion and misperceptions mounted on both sides, the window of opportunity to settle the border dispute only became narrower.

Tibet is the second factor which contributed to the entrenchment of the border dispute. From the very beginning, Tibet had become a point of contention between India and China. China's military occupation of Tibet in 1950 was seen as a security threat in New Delhi and led to massive public outcry against China. Similarly, India's close ties with the Dalai Lama and Nehru's attempts to mediate between Lhasa and Beijing was perceived by the Communist regime as interference in China's internal matters. The 1954 Panchsheel Agreement provided only partial relaxation of tensions as China's coercive practices to Sinicize Tibet, and India's clandestine aid to the unarmed Tibetan resistance, kept suspicions lingering on both sides. In this context, the spontaneous 1959 Lhasa uprising further aggravated mutual misgivings, which in turn hardened their positions on the border dispute (Sikri 2011).

At the outbreak of the insurgency, Beijing immediately held India responsible for inciting the violence. Although the People's Liberation Army (PLA) quickly crushed the rebellion, the 14th Dalai Lama's flight to India and his subsequent granting of political asylum by New Delhi infuriated the CCP and strengthened its conviction about Indian malfeasance. An internal intelligence report even suggested that India had been complicit in fomenting rebellion in Tibet to compel China into accepting India's territorial claims. Accordingly, Beijing directed intense criticism against Nehru, accusing him of continuing imperial policies in Tibet. The polemical attack not only shocked Nehru but also created trepidation in New Delhi that China might now try to push through the disputed areas (Westcott 2017). Evidently, an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion surrounding events in Tibet strained bilateral political and military ties. At the operational level, the PLA and the Indian army began to clash quickly since both militaries had begun conducting forward patrols, primarily in the eastern sector, and in August 1959, the first exchange of fire took place at Longju, NEFA, which significantly impacted relations (Raghavan 2012, 126). Concurrently, an exchange of letters between Zhou Enlai and Jawaharlal Nehru in September demonstrated significant hostility between the two leaders over the border dispute: China retracted its earlier willingness to accept the McMahon Line and accused the government of India of pressuring China, and Nehru replied by demanding the withdrawal of Chinese forces from posts on the Indian side as a precondition to border talks. Over the next few months, as bilateral ties continued to deteriorate following more clashes, deaths of Indian soldiers, rhetorical statements, and unfriendly correspondence, both China and India increasingly developed unyielding and aggressive attitudes toward the border question (Raghavan 2012, 132–149). Therefore, even though the original incident sparking the Tibet uprising had subsided, the resultant bitterness persisted to such an extent that in 1960, when representatives from the two countries met for final talks before the fateful war, there was little room left to manoeuvre.

Compounding the impact of the first two factors discussed above, the post-imperial ideology harboured by the two countries contributed to the entrenchment of the border dispute. While the deferral policy and the Tibet crisis both underscore how the border dispute had attained such complexity by 1960, the post-imperial ideology helps understand why the 1960 negotiations failed, ultimately leading to a deadlock.

Due to the intense trauma and violence suffered during colonization, China and India operated under a post-imperial ideology after their independence, which was aimed at gaining recognition of their victimhood and maximizing their prestige due to the humiliations suffered in the past (Chatterjee 2013, 253–260). This tendency was observed at the 1955 Bandung conference, at which the leadership of both newly decolonized countries highlighted their intense suffering and anti-colonial struggle. However, it also resulted in a simmering competition between India and China that intensified in the months following the Tibetan crisis, due to China's negative publicity and India's loss of territory and military casualties (Chatterjee 2013, 261). Accordingly, establishing their claims of victimhood over the other and resistance to further humiliation in the form of territorial loss heavily informed China and India's attitude when their

delegates met again in 1960 to try to resolve the boundary question.

Both Zhou Enlai and the Indian leaders were insistent on securing acknowledgement of their victimhood and acceptance of the disputed territories as historically significant and integral to their respective countries. For instance, the Chinese premier emphasised in the aforementioned meetings that Tibet – which he averred had been part of China since the Manchu dynasty – was made a protectorate by the British government of India through the signing of the Anglo-Tibetan Treaty in 1904 and the Simla Convention, where the McMahon Line was determined. This, Zhou maintained, was essentially a humiliation imposed on China. With regard to Aksai Chin, Zhou asserted that the region was under the jurisdiction of Xinjiang province, and therefore indisputably part of China. It is noteworthy here that one of the major national goals of the CCP was to restore China's former glory, and therefore regaining control of Xinjiang and Tibet was seen as essential to this restoration (Chatterjee 2013, 266–267). On the Indian side, Nehru and other Indian leaders argued along similar lines, stating that the British Raj merely formalised boundaries that had been in place for centuries. In the case of Ladakh-Tibet, the boundary was historically accepted and recognised, and did not require any formal delimitation, and for the western sector the McMahon Line established a boundary that had been administered by Indian rulers since even before the Christian era. In other words, the government of India proclaimed a civilizational glory on the basis of timeless borders which were only concretised during colonial rule (Chatterjee 2013, 268–269). Following the logic of post-imperial ideology, the 1960 border talks failed on two accounts; first, neither party made any new territorial claims but simply reiterated what was rightfully theirs; and second, both were eager to establish that they had been victimised in the past and were being victimised again (Chatterjee 2013, 270).

Divergent Positions on the Border Dispute

The negotiations between Zhou and Nehru continued for five days and ended in complete failure. Nehru rejected the Chinese premier's package deal that offered Beijing's acceptance of the Indian position in the eastern sector in return for New Delhi's acceptance of the Chinese position in the western sector. The Chinese delegation returned to Beijing with the conviction that the Indians were not interested in negotiating. Tensions escalated over the next two years, with the Indian army pushing northward via the controversial Forward Policy, and PLA units responding tit-for-tat, resulting in small skirmishes. War erupted on October 20, 1962, when the PLA launched a massive offensive across the entire disputed border. It was a short and swift campaign that lasted a month and resulted in the complete defeat of the Indian army (Sidhu and Yuan 2003, 15). However, the war failed to ensure a permanent solution to the border dispute. Instead, the political rift that was created continues to dampen bilateral ties, especially as regards border negotiations. Indeed, the divergent positions adopted by India and China on the border dispute have seen their differences evolve and widen in the post-war years.

India argues that the western sector was demarcated by the 1842 agreement between Tibet and Kashmir and that the eastern sector was finalised by the Simla Agreement in 1913–1914. Therefore, no further demarcation is required. China in turn states that no formal treaty or agreement has ever been signed between the Indian and Chinese governments, for China neither sent any representative to the India-Tibet negotiations nor ratified the McMahon Line. In this context, China views the establishment of the state of Arunachal Pradesh as a unilateral step by India, and that this amounts to an illegal occupation of China's Tibet (Fang 2014, 88; Panda 2017, 35).

From a broader perspective, the two countries disagree first on the size of the border and the locations which are disputed. The Indian position is that the Sino-Indian boundary is a total of 3,488 kilometres in length (including 523 km of what India calls the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir-China section), with the western sector being 1,597 kilometres, the middle sector 545 kilometres, and the eastern sector 1,346 kilometres in length (Kumar 2020). Here, India accuses China of occupying 38,000 square kilometres of land in the Kashmir region, along with 5,180 square kilometres of land in the Kashmir region which was ceded to it by Pakistan. Also, India claims Aksai Chin to be part of India's Ladakh region, and India has no dispute as far as the eastern sector is concerned (Panda 2017, 35).

The Chinese position is that the Sino-Indian border is not more than 2,000 kilometres, the western sector roughly covers Karakoram Mountain and is about 600 kilometres long, the disputed area in this sector is 33,000 square kilometres and currently lies under Chinese control. The middle sector is roughly 450 kilometres long and has a

disputed area of 2,000 square kilometres, and the eastern sector is 650 kilometres and has a disputed area of 90,000 square kilometres occupied by India (Lin 2020). Contrary to India's position, China asserts that the eastern sector of the border is the most contentious part as the McMahon line is illegitimate and China therefore claims the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In the western sector, China contends that Ladakh is a disputed region (Panda 2017, 35).

Another major area of contention between the two countries is the determination of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). India rejects the Chinese version of the LAC, describing it as a series of disconnected points on the map. New Delhi also claims that the LAC should be based on military positions before China's 1962 attack, discounting any gains made during that war (Menon 2016, 14). China on the other hand insists that the LAC should be the *status quo* attained after the 1962 war; which is incidentally the territorial arrangement suggested by Zhou Enlai during the 1960 negotiations. On the eastern side, it coincides mostly with the McMahon Line, while in the western and middle sectors, the LAC follows the traditional customary line pointed out by China. However, China only describes it in general terms without precise scales on the map (Menon 2016, 15–16). Owing to such disagreements between the two countries, the LAC, even after fifty years of conflict, remains undemarcated.

The demarcation and implementation of the LAC is intrinsically associated with the larger process of negotiations on border alignment. The Chinese leadership and officials hold the determination of the LAC to be a critical matter, and have usually followed an extremely reserved approach. In 1999, the issue of demarcation of the LAC gained momentum, during the visit of India's then-External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh. The two sides also formally exchanged their respective maps of the middle sector in 2001, however one-year later, an Indian proposal to set a time frame for exchanging maps and addressing the clarification of the western and eastern sectors failed to elicit a cogent response from China, and the matter stagnated (Yuan 2007, 133).

Indian experts observe that the Chinese lack of interest in providing clarification on the LAC is related to Beijing's shift in policy on the border dispute. In the post-war period, China has withdrawn the package deal originally proposed by Zhou Enlai and now claims the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. Although initially, Chinese interests in Arunachal Pradesh were limited only to Tawang, in recent years their claims have expanded to include the entire state. For instance, in 2006, before the visit to India by China's then-President Hu Jintao, the PRC ambassador to India Sun Yuxi declared all of Arunachal Pradesh to be Chinese territory, and that Tawang was merely a small portion of it. Chinese commentators lament that it was a great political mistake on China's part to give up NEFA or modern day Arunachal Pradesh (Chaudhury 2006; Panda 2017, 39). In 2007, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stated that mere presence in populated areas would not affect China's claims: a stance that is problematic because it is a clear reversal of Beijing's earlier agreement to abide by the principle to safeguard the interests of the settled populations in the border areas. It also suggests that, in the future, China might unilaterally reject any principle that is inconvenient to its national interests (Panda 2017, 40). In response to Indian allegations, China argues that there are two reasons why China is reluctant to demarcate the LAC; first because such a process will take both countries back to the historical disputes and once again entrap bilateral ties within the historical and legal approach, which in turn will inhibit the overall development of Sino-Indian relations. Second, China is charging New Delhi with taking advantage of the clarification process to increase the disputed area into places where no dispute existed before, although Beijing is unable to provide any concrete evidence to support this claim (Lin 2020, 83).

Managing the Border Dispute

After 1962 war it took India and China ten years to restore diplomatic ties, and post-normalisation, the two countries were faced with the dual challenge of resolving the border dispute while simultaneously maintaining peace along the undemarcated border. The Indian foreign minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, visited China in 1979, helping to ease tensions in bilateral ties, and Sino-Indian talks on the border dispute started in the 1980s. However, confidence-building measures were initiated only in the 1990s when border patrols of the two countries had begun to clash again (Hussain 2019, 262).

In 1981, border talks commenced at the vice-ministerial level, and were followed by seven more separate rounds of meetings. Although bilateral ties deteriorated due to the military standoff during the Sumdorong Chu crisis, however,

Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit turned out to be a definitive moment. The two countries agreed to set up the Joint Working Group for settlement of the boundary question with a twin mandate of ensuring peace and tranquillity along the LAC and working toward a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement of the boundary question (Scott 2012, 204; Sidhu and Yuan 2003, 23–24).[1] A major breakthrough was achieved in 1993, during P.V. Narasimha Rao's visit to Beijing. The two leaders penned the *Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity*, which called for a renunciation of the use of force, recognition of and respect for the LAC, and the resolution of the border issue through negotiations (Stimson Centre 1993). Another high point of border dispute management was reached with 1996 signing of the *Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas* (United Nations 1996). The agreement laid down pledges on non-aggression, prior notification of large troop movements, and exchange of maps to resolve disagreements over the LAC. The two documents remain significant in the context of Sino-Indian border negotiations, because both countries finally acknowledged that certain problems exist in their border regions and that there is need for institutional mechanisms to manage these problems.

Following the successful conclusion of these two agreements, China and India in June 2003 adopted the *Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Co-operation between India and China,* whereby each side agreed to appoint special representatives to explore ways for settlement of the boundary dispute keeping in view the political perspectives of both countries (Sidhu and Yuan 2001). It should be noted that the Special Representative Dialogue[2] mechanism has become one of the crucial negotiation strategies in recent years, and through the Special Representative talks the two countries have reached a broad consensus on outlining guidelines for the settling of the boundary dispute. A supporting mechanism for the Special Representative Talks was established in 2012 in the form of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Co-ordination on India-China Border Affairs. This apparatus was specially tasked to address and manage issues arising out of tensions in the border regions (Panda 2017, 43–45).

A more concrete framework for settlement of the territorial dispute was instituted in 2005 with the signing of *The Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of India-China Boundary Questions.* According to this protocol, the two countries recognised the need to initiate the process of early clarification and confirmation of the alignment of the LAC along with undertaking meaningful and mutually acceptable adjustments to their respective positions on the boundary question. The most recent document inked between the two countries, the Border Defence Co-operation Agreement (2013), was signed following the Depsang Valley incident (Panda 2017, 43–45).

Assessing the success of Border Dispute Management Talks and Confidence-Building Measures

The success of the bilateral dialogue mechanisms and confidence-building measures described above needs to be assessed according to three aspects; management of border conflict, addressing the bilateral trust deficit, and resolution of the border dispute.

A cursory review of the state of affairs indicates that, in all three aspects, both countries have achieved minimal success. For instance, in the matter of border conflict management, the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the LAC has been one of the most important stated objectives. Although China and India have been able to avert a major 1962-style confrontation, the number of military incursions by China has risen sharply, from 334 in 2014 to 606 in 2019 (Bhonsale 2018). Also, military standoffs between the two countries have grown longer and more difficult to resolve; the 1987 Sumdorong Chu standoff continued for eight months, the 2013 Daulat Beg Oldi incident continued for a full month, the Doklam crisis in 2017 lasted for 70 days, and the Galwan Valley military standoff led to severe military clashes; and the stalemate continues. Simultaneously, local feuds between the armies have inclined toward more violence, that is from fist fights and throwing stones, the armies of the two sides have resorted to more violent measures including the use of clubs studded with nails or wrapped with metal barbed wire (Gettleman, Kumar, and Yasir 2020). These instances point toward a lack of local-level communication and understanding, which persists amid the backdrop of diplomatic proclamations of friendship and cooperation.

Likewise, despite high level political and diplomatic exchanges and frequent meetings of the top leadership, the trust deficit between the two countries has only widened. There exists the perception of a considerable security threat on both sides as India and China have moved rapidly to upgrade their border infrastructure and military capabilities

along the disputed border on the sidelines of the Special Representative Talks and Joint Working Group meetings. In recent years, a vigorous border infrastructure race has developed between the two countries, wherein both sides have engaged in building extensive road and railway connections on their respective sides of the border, upgrading military facilities, and increasing overall troop deployments for quick mobilisation. This in turn has aggravated insecurities in both countries and is considered one of the primary reasons for the frequent border skirmishes along the LAC. In particular, the Doklam (2017) and Galwan Valley (2020) clashes were triggered by road-building activities undertaken by China and India, respectively (Jakhar 2020). Apart from upgrading military infrastructure along the border, both sides have also invested heavily in modernising their conventional and non-conventional combat forces as an indication of battle preparedness to the other (Ramachandran 2016). In view of increasing military capabilities, assertive behaviour and intense distrust, the notion of peace along the LAC seems dependent on the political wisdom of their respective governments.

Even after fifteen rounds of Joint Working Group meetings and eighteen rounds of Special Representative Dialogues, the border dispute is far from being resolved. Even though the negotiation process follows a generous principle of package settlement through a sectoral approach, the two countries have failed to go beyond routine delegation meetings and joint declarations. The ascent to power of Xi Jinping in China and Narendra Modi in India, known for their strong leadership and corporate style of politics, had raised hopes for a final settlement of the border dispute, but domestic political considerations and strategic threat perceptions continue to severely constrain the ability of these political leaders to undertake sweeping decisions to resolve the dispute.

Conclusion: The Road Ahead

The border dispute undeniably remains one of the major issues impinging on Sino-Indian bilateral ties. Experts contend that there are multiple factors today which sustain the border dispute. The first is the geographical constitution of the disputed areas: The rugged, featureless terrain and extreme weather conditions make determination of the precise alignment challenging. Subsequently, implementation of border agreements on the ground also remains elusive. Second, there is asymmetry in the level of urgency for the settlement of the border dispute. In contrast to New Delhi's endeavours seeking a quick settlement, Beijing has staunchly resisted any fast-tracking of the resolution process, arguing that the border dispute is a complicated question and should be negotiated only when conditions are favourable. The primary reason for this difference in approaches is that the disputed border does not pose a security threat to China, and therefore Beijing is willing to wait for a more beneficial resolution. In contrast, New Delhi sees the border dispute as source of instability and worries and that China would use the unresolved border to bully India. The third factor inhibiting the resolution of the border dispute is intense nationalism in both countries. For China, the border dispute is intrinsically linked to Tibet and the Dalai Lama, and since the CCP has always projected the Tibetan government-in-exile in a negative light, territorial concessions involving Tawang will not only endanger China's own rule in Tibet but will also be seen domestically as sign of weakness; a terrifying prospect for the Chinese leadership. As for India, no political party would be able to propose a territorial exchange with China without seriously jeopardising its electoral prospects, as the memories of 1962 war continue to haunt the Indian national psyche. Lastly, along with the boundary dispute, new issues have begun to stir trouble in Sino-Indian bilateral ties. India's concerns regarding China's diversion of the Yarlung-Tsangpo/Brahmaputra river water, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and China's growing influence in South Asia have emerged as new irritants for Indian policy makers. Similarly, Beijing too is annoyed by India's increasing proximity with Southeast Asian countries and its diplomatic-military exchanges with the United States, Japan, and Australia. These issues further erode political will in both countries and in this context territorial exchange by swap or political settlement appears a daunting task.

As evinced by the recent Galwan Valley clashes, managing the border dispute is both a political and an economic exigency for India and China because any major confrontation between the two countries will not only hurt the long-term prospects for development of both, but will also have significant repercussions on Asian stability and prosperity. Therefore, the policy-making elites of both countries need to frame innovative solutions like creating soft borders through civilian, cultural, and economic exchanges, and involving local communities in managing the border (Ranjan 2021). Such an approach can help reduce the number of military encounters between the two countries and create an enduring peace in the border region. The two countries should also aim toward building strategic trust through

open dialogue, exchange of information, and verification mechanisms along the disputed border. Enhancing military-to-military communication, technological collaboration and engagement on multilateral platforms remain indispensible toward building trust. Public perception is another key area that needs to be urgently addressed through civilian exchanges. This would go a long way toward dispelling stereotypes and negative perceptions. Track-II dialogue involving strategic-affairs experts and academics from the two countries could also be organized to identify new areas for cooperation. For the foreseeable future, the border dispute will remain a pressing challenge in Sino-Indian ties, however, it is in the national interest of both countries to prioritise their larger bilateral relationship, while at the same time erecting confidence-building measures and dialogue mechanisms to better preserve the benefits accruing from the relationship.

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[1] From 1989–2005, India and China have held 15 Joint Working Group Meetings, addressing issues relating to maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the border, review of confidence-building measures, and exchange of maps.

[2] From 2003–2015, there have been eighteen rounds of Special Representative meetings, addressing formulation of guidelines and a framework to resolve the border dispute.

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