

Chinese Grand Strategy and the Exacerbation of the Sino-Indian Territorial Dispute

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SRINI SITARAMAN, AUG 21 2013

On the morning of 15th April 2013 the People's Liberation Army (PLA) crept into a disputed border territory with India at Daulat Beg Oldi sector in Depsang Valley in *Ladakh*, which is in the eastern portion of Kashmir, and erected several temporary structures reigniting military tensions.[1] The news of the Chinese incursion did not get a mention in the Indian media until the morning of April 21st. As soon as this news hit the headlines, the India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was quick to admit to "problems in this area because the boundary with China is not sharply defined." [2] The MEA spokesperson assured that as in "all previous cases over the past two decades, these issues had been resolved peacefully through mechanisms in confidence-building agreements." [3] India was particularly careful in not escalating this border encroachment because the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was scheduled to visit India later in May. The Premier's visit was officially announced on April 16th as the border tensions were heating up.

In this paper, following Swaine and Tellis, I argue that China's foray along the contentious Indo-Tibet border should be viewed in terms of China's grand strategy which has historically evolved to achieve the highly correlated goals of (1) preserving domestic political and economic order, and enabling smooth political transitions; (2) protecting its interests, territory, and sovereignty at all costs; (3) and the achievement of global influence and the ability to dictate policies from a position of primacy.[4] Aggressive patrolling and assertions of Chinese territorial claims along the Indo-Tibet border and elsewhere should be viewed through these three grand strategic objectives. Beijing wants to maintain tight control over Tibet since PLA troops occupied Tibet in 1959 and forced the Dalai Lama to exile in India. The spate of recent high-profile self-immolation suicides by Tibetan monks has led Beijing to clamp down heavily on dissent and opposition. Control and management over the contentious border areas of Tibet that abuts India is absolutely pivotal to the Chinese project of imposing its authority over Tibet. Since Tibet is considered to be a part of the greater Chinese territorial realm and a core strategic interest, Beijing is in the process of asserting its perception of how the 4,057km border with India should be defined. The frequent and sustained border tussles and the larger strategic competition suggests that Beijing's conception of the border clearly diverges from those commonly depicted in Indian maps. What Beijing is attempting to establish with these assertive border patrols is that it has the ability to make incursions across the LOAC undetected and at will and it is not going to allow India to determine the shape and structure of border according to its interpretation.

Border Incursions: Why Now and for What Purpose

Chinese President Xi Jinping's comment to the Indian Prime Manmohan Singh in the sidelines of the Durban BRICS Summit in March that they should "arrive at a mutually acceptable solution to the border dispute as soon as possible" and that "China and India should broaden exchanges and cooperation between their armed forces and deepen mutual military and security trust," was taken very seriously by the Indian external affairs ministry as a signal that the border issue would be addressed at the Politburo level and a suitable solution would emerge soon.[5] There was no expectation that the PLA would do anything to undermine the statement made by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Moreover, the Manmohan Singh administration was particularly keen on downplaying the incursion and settling the matter bilaterally between the two military commands through a series of flag meetings rather than have this matter debated in the rambunctious Indian media.[6] But as the meetings remained deadlocked and the Indian and Chinese mountain military patrols stood eye-to-eye in the Daulat Beg Oldi sector in Ladakh, substantial pressure was put on

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New Delhi to respond adequately and forcefully. The Indian media caught wind of the story and they began non-stop coverage of “China Invades India” and this theme was also picked up by the international media.[7]

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh characterized the border standoff as a “localized problem” and the Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid described the border incursion as mere “acne that can be addressed by simply applying an ointment.”[8] Foreign Minister Khurshid further added that India’s position should not be “considered as surrender or admission of defeat.”[9] But the 10 km or 6-mile border incursion (official Indian claim was 19km or roughly 11 miles) was reported as Chinese invasion that whipped popular opinion against China and whipped up nationalist rhetoric. This rhetoric reached fever pitch in the context of Indian domestic politics because of the upcoming 2014 national elections in which the current UPA administration of Prime Minister Singh is encountering sustained challenges from the nationalist challenger BJP.[10] BJP President Rajnath Singh blasted the UPA administration as weak and feckless and blamed them for surrendering Indian security and demanded that the Prime Minister resign immediately.

The Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony came out swinging when he retorted that India is “taking every action to protect our interest.”[11] Some Indian analysts wondered if there was any disconnect between the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese foreign ministry because why would the PLA launch a major incursion across the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the same day a good will visit by Premier Li Keqiang’s was announced, but a leading Chinese strategic thinker Shen Dingli dismissed such claims, which gave credence to the argument that this was a coordinated move to prod and unhinge the Indian foreign policy establishment; a proxy war to get India to come around to the Chinese position on the border.[12] This was not the first time such a strategy (simultaneous hit them hard and shake hands softly) has been employed by China to rattle other states.[13] In 2008, China refused to attend the European Union Summit because the former French President Nicholas Sarkozy met with Dalai Lama. And more recently Beijing was furious with the British Prime Minister David Cameron and his deputy David Clegg’s meeting with Dalai Lama and in retaliation they cancelled Wu Bangguo’s (Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress) protocol visit to London, and demanded a public apology from the Prime Minister.[14] Beijing is ready and primed to play hardball when it comes to its core interests and it has demonstrated that it is not averse to relying on aggressive postures as it has in East and South China Sea.

Beijing Plays Hard Ball, but Shows Deft Hands

After tense negotiations between the heads of Indian and Chinese militaries, the PLA agreed to withdraw on 6th May 2013, but only after some concessions were made by India such as dismantling Indian bases, listening posts, and temporary tents erected along Indian side of the border. Smashed Indian cameras and other equipment were subsequently returned to the Indian military on 3rd July during a regularly scheduled meeting. The Indian government threatened to cancel the Foreign Minister’s trip on 9th May and postpone Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to India on 20th May to force the PLA to ease the standoff at the border. Following the subdued bonhomie of Premier Keqiang’s visit, Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony visited Beijing to workout a new understanding under the framework of *Border Defense Cooperation Agreement* (BDCA).[15]

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying asserted that China did not transgress any border and that no unilateral changes should be made to “the situation on the line of actual control.”[16] As the Indian Defense Minister Anthony was due in China for a meeting with his counterparts, Major General Luo Yuan, the Deputy-Director General of the World Military Research Department of the PLA Academy cautioned India against provoking new problems by making additional deployments and stirring up unneeded trouble[17]. General Luo Yuan acknowledged serious tensions between India and China on border issues and he also asserted Chinese claims over Arunachal Pradesh [18] Chinese border forces made another incursion on 17th June in Chumar region of Ladakh, further south of the previous location, just as the Indian Defense Minister was arriving in Beijing.[19] Although the India’s Ministry of Defense (MOD) was aware of this incursion, the MOD did not raise this issue because it was concerned that it would jeopardize the delicate nature of Defense Minister’s visit to Beijing.

Beijing seems to be following a complex script to provoke India and demonstrate Chinese power, but simultaneously assuring India that it is ready to negotiate a settlement based on “fair and rational solution acceptable to both

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sides.”[20] Since the establishment of the India-China Joint Working Group [JWG] in the early 1990s, India and China have held 16 bilateral meetings, but beyond banal statements on cooperation and mutual understanding these meetings has not brought both parties closer to a settlement.

There is fundamental disagreement over the length of the boundary that is under dispute. To India, the entire 4,057km (2500 miles) of boundary has to be demarcated and defined according to India’s understanding of the border line, which means from the point at which India-Pakistan meets (western sector) through Aksai Chin (currently under China’s control) ending near the Sino-Indian-Burmese border (Arunachal Pradesh), including the area that lies in between Nepal and Bhutan, which was thought to be settled. Beijing only wants to discuss the 2000km boundary in the far eastern sector that it regards as disputed because it considers the western sector (Aksai Chin) to be “settled” or that is what PRC’s actions indicate.

The Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector is now referred to as “Southern Tibet,” by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but this has drawn vociferous protests from India.[21] Although the borders in Sikkim between Nepal and Bhutan are generally considered to be agreed upon, but periodic issues have flared up in this area. In 2008 the Finger Lake area of Sikkim became highly tense as the Indian military commanders requested authorization from New Delhi to fire against encroaching Chinese troops.[22]

Border Conflict Morphs into Broader Diplomatic Jujitsu

New Delhi has experienced diplomatic stare-downs over other issues such as Beijing’s decision to issue stapled visas to Indians residing in certain parts of Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh; states that border the contested Sino-Indian boundary. Stapled visas are not stamped on passport pages, but they are separately stapled on to the Indian passports. The message that the Chinese government is trying to deliver is that such visas are only issued to residents of Indian regions that are claimed by Beijing.[23] In September 2010, General B.S. Jaswal of the Indian Army, who was based in the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir, was denied a Chinese visa. General Jaswal was to join an Indian army delegation visiting China as a part of bilateral dialogue. In response, India cancelled the military exchange with China that year.[24]

Again in January 2012, India cancelled a 30-member military delegation’s visit to China because a visa was denied to a delegation member belonging to the Indian Air Officer from Arunachal Pradesh, a state that borders Tibet.[25] In November 2012, Indian along with several Asian countries reacted alarmingly to the new design of the Chinese passport watermarks that show nearly “90 percent of the South China Sea, Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin, as well as famous tourist attractions in Taiwan” as part of People’s Republic of China.”[26] India countered sharply by “stamping a round seal of the map of India” depicting the “correct external boundaries on visas stamped on such passports.”[27] Beijing’s move was intended to be a clever ploy to force rest of the Asian states with which China has outstanding territorial disputes to acknowledge Beijing’s territorial claim by stamping such passports with entry and exit stamps.[28] In a testy exchange in New Delhi, the Former Chinese Ambassador to India, Zhang Yan, told an Indian journalist to “shut-up” at an official reception, when he was repeatedly questioned about Indian territory being depicted as belonging to China in a map enclosed in a folder that was included along with a bilateral business agreement.[29]

India is not the only state that has felt the power of coercive and clever strategies employed by Beijing; several other Asian states, particularly Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, have been impacted by these aggressive strategies. Japan in its Annual Defense White Paper has pointed out that the People’s Republic of China is using aggressive strategies to change the status-quo of the territorial disputes with Japan and other countries in the Asian sphere. Japan has identified specific activities such as intrusion into Japanese territorial waters, violation of its airspace, and instances when the Chinese Navy has locked its weapons radar on Japanese vessels in East China Sea.[30] Even the United States has not been immune to Chinese military assertiveness. In April 2001, Chinese Air Force forced an American EP-3 spy plane to force land in the island of Hainan.[31] The plane and the crew were only released after sustained negotiations between both countries. In 2009, Chinese warships forced an Indian submarine that was trailing them in the Gulf of Aden to surface.[32] In August 2011 an Indian Warship *INS Airavat* that was completing a scheduled port call in Vietnam was challenged by the Chinese Navy and asked to identify itself when it was about 45

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nautical miles from the Vietnamese coast.[33]

New Delhi and Beijing's competition is not limited to the border issue; both have also become serious competitors in the economic and diplomatic arena. Beijing has engaged in diplomatic moves to keep India out of ASEAN, the UN Security Council, Shanghai Cooperation Group (SCO), Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and sought to deny bank loans from Asian Development Bank (ADB) that was targeted for projects in Arunachal Pradesh that the Chinese claim as their own.[34]

Border and Territorial Issues Remain Dominant

Fifty years since Chairman Mao's decision to teach India a lesson during the 1962 war, India and China's position on the border issue has significantly hardened and become more unyielding. India also become highly reluctant to cede to China any bit of pride or territory already in its possession; it has decided to challenge China at multiple levels despite the enormous asymmetry in power between them.[35] Mutual unwillingness to compromise on certain core territorial claims and particularly the inability of the Indian government to sell any such compromise to its domestic audience, PLA's acceleration of the military budget, and the growing Sino-Pakistan military collaboration has elevated the fear of Chinese invasion and increased the real probability of sudden military thrust by China across the border.

In an effort to counter China's growing assertiveness, India has started to engage in multipronged diplomatic and military strategy. It has started making big-ticket military purchases from the United States, Israel, France, United Kingdom, and Russia (which still remains India's largest military benefactor).[36] More recently, India has embarked on a diplomacy campaign to engage with Japan, Vietnam, Philippines, and even Mongolia operating on the principle of potential *enemy of my enemy is my friend* as a part of its "Look East" policy.[37] All of these moves by India are aimed at deterring Beijing from engaging in actions, including the use of force, to alter the status quo on the border in such a manner that it is irreversible.

India's moves haven't gone unnoticed in Beijing, which for a long time ignored its equally populous neighbor. A highly influential article published in the official English news outlet—Xinhua—argued that India should pause its Look East policy and not seek to "estrangle and antagonize its neighbor by taking it as an imaginary enemy and get unwisely involved in affairs which fall within others' backyards, it would hold its national strategies as hostage and put at stake its own national interests." [38] Li Hongmei's article warns India against unwisely getting entangled in the foreign policies of other East Asian states in the hopes of deterring China.

Although India has managed to defend the status quo on the border despite repeated parries by the PLA, it has also ominously heightened Indian insecurities of large-scale military action across the border by the People's Republic. Now China looms as a larger threat across the horizon than India's primordial adversary—Pakistan.[39] This is not beyond the realm of imagination when viewed in the context of 1962 war for which India was poorly prepared and completely surprised. The scars from the loss of 1962 war initiated by Chairman Mao's diktat of teaching "India a lesson" and the fear and awe (or power asymmetry) produced by China's breathtaking growth, infrastructural development, soft power, and the expansion of military capacity in all areas (land, sea, air, cyber, and space) has made India extraordinarily weary and wary.[40]

New Delhi has struggled to define its relations with China and it is shying away from treating China as "enemy number one," but clearly China is not a frenemy either; it is less than an enemy, but surely more than a frenemy. Or more simply, to India, China represents a regional power and a very real security threat and in the near future a superpower that it has to be perpetually concerned about because of the outstanding territorial dispute and economic power differentials.[41] What China has done through this regular border incursions is establish that the undemarcated border areas are disputed and more importantly the Chinese have defined the shape and structure of the border all that is left to do for India is to politically agree to that boundary. All of this neatly fits with the three core objectives of the Chinese grand strategy.

The long history of repeated border clashes or border intrusions or transgressions as India has chosen to describe

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them since the Sumdorong Chu Valley Incident in 1986 to the latest incidents in Ladakh shows that the border dispute has been a major flashpoint in Sino-Indian Relations that has carried over from the days of British India. According to the Union Ministry of India (which is responsible for internal security and border management) there have been over 600 border incursions by the PLA since 2010.[42] Moreover, the Chinese have successfully managed to prevent India from building any major infrastructure on the Indian side of the border, while they have built extensive array of military infrastructure (railway lines for troop movements, fortified bunkers, airfields positioned with modern Sukhoi-27 fighter jets) on the Chinese side. Enormously concerned about Chinese military capabilities, India's "Cabinet Committee on Security's (CCS) has given the final nod for raising a new mountain strike corps (50,000 soldiers), apart from two "independent" infantry brigades and two "independent" armoured brigades, to plug operational gaps along the LAC as well as to acquire "some ground offensive capabilities" against China." [43] The Indian army has also agreed to secure 145 ultra-light 155mm howitzers from the American firm BAE Systems in a deal worth \$660 million; these howitzers are to be positioned along the rugged Indo-Tibetan mountain terrain.[44]

Conclusion

Sino-Indian relations are delicately poised, as the weaker power, India is highly insecure because two heavily armed nuclear rivals (Pakistan and China) abut its border in the West and North in Kashmir. Any misperception, miscalculation, or error along the tense border could easily escalate into a full-blown conflict. China and India are nuclear powers, as is Pakistan with which India fought a battle in the high mountains of Kargil along the tri-junction of India, Pakistan, and China in 1999, a year after both India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in 1998. So, a military conflict between India and China is not beyond the realm of possibility.[45] Beijing and New Delhi are preparing for such an eventuality and hoping that it does not come to that, but India for sure does not want a repeat of 1962. India will remain panicky and jittery and this is surely part of China's grand strategy to keep India pegged and encircled within the subcontinent. Beijing's decision to aggressively patrol along the Indo-Tibet border should be seen from the perspective of China's grand strategy^[46] that primarily aims at protecting its interests, territory, and sovereignty.

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