



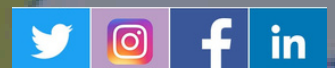
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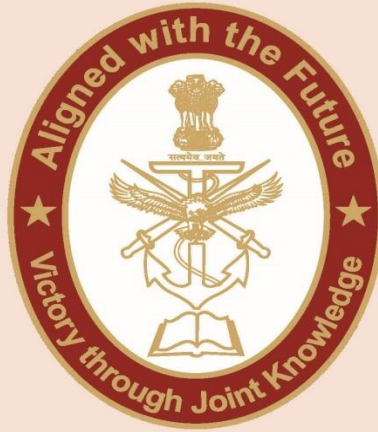
INDIA–CHINA BORDER ISSUES: CHALLENGES & PROGNOSIS

COL KAMALDEEP PANWAR

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Col Kamaldeep Panwar, is an alumnus of DSSC, Wellington and is presently attending Higher Command Course at AWC, Mhow.

Introduction

Bordered by a staggering fourteen land neighbours – highest in the world, it must certainly go to China's credit that she has been able to resolve disputes with twelve of them. But then, the Shangri La remains mystically elusive to Indian entreaties towards even defining the border, let alone resolution. From reiterating its claims on Arunachal Pradesh in 2006 to bombastic iterations such as sharing of a mere 2000 kms of borders with India (and not 3488 kms as maintained by India), the Chinese state media and apparatus seems to be signaling an oddity along the continuum that hardly resonates with a solution centric approach.^{1,2}

The Chinese obduracy, partly as a consequence of the 5th generation of assertive leadership and rising levels of booming prosperity have only exacerbated the situation in the contemporary times. Alongside, the Indian vista is also washed in the monochromatic shades of public antipathy, media's blitzkrieg on virtual studio battlefields, intelligentsia's scathing assessment, polity's fading desire to scour for peace and loosing political currency due to nationalist territorial assertions. In such a scenario, a solution looks despairingly out of sight, but more worryingly, the winds are not headed in the right directions as ominous narratives gain permanence. A few

fundamental differences are squarely responsible for this logjam which is rooted in history and merit a contextual evaluation.

History as the Bane: Contrasting Approaches

When Mao Zedong established PRC in 1949, he made proclamations on *Start Anew, putting the house in order before inviting guests* and *Leaning to One Side (Communism Vs Imperialism)* as the core pillars of Chinese Policy.³ While India gravitated towards Non-alignment, Mao's China declared and adapted the principle of *Leaning to One Side* i.e. in favor of Communism. Amongst the other two professed principles, China renounced all the diplomatic relations that the KMT government had established with foreign nations and looked beyond at reviewing all the agreements Old China had concluded. The Chinese stance on *forced unequal treaties and century of humiliation (1839-1949)* are well too known and has been a core driving agenda in terms of ideology. Thus, the starting point for any discussion on borders for the Chinese has naturally entailed eschewing of perceived unequal treaties.

This comes in stark contrast to Indian approach which dwells ad nauseum on the 1914 Shimla treaty i.e. McMahon Line and the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar in the Western Sector. Ironically, India's ambiguous Tibet policy only puts her in an uncomfortable position of claiming validity for a border agreement signed by a Tibetan government whose status and competence it declined to support on the eve of China's annexation.⁴ Quite often, an argument of the Chinese border resolution with Myanmar is cited as an endorsement of the McMahon line. However, even while settling the border with Myanmar in 1960, the Chinese did not acknowledge the veracity of McMahon line. It is a matter of conjecture that the customary line based on the watershed principle eventually aligned with the McMahon Line. Presenting relatively larger and more authentic documentary evidence therefore, does not cut ice with the Chinese. To them, it remains an anathema to make a public acknowledgment of the past 'unjust' treaties. It did not matter then in 1960 when border negotiations failed, and it does not, now.

Political Asylum to Dalai Lama

Tibet has been mentioned as a core concern by the Chinese leadership and Dalai Lama's refuge remains a pestering thorn in Indo-China relations.⁵ In fact, it has been

identified as one of the key reasons for the 1962 confrontation.⁶ India's grant of asylum to Dalai Lama since the 1959 Tibetan revolt has never been looked at dispassionately by China. Dalai Lama and India's support to Buddhism has been at the core of China's suspicion of Indian intentions. So much so that once Nehru's wife had dressed in Buddhist attire while receiving Zhou Enlai, it was wildly insinuated that India covets Tibet very dearly. The presence of a government in exile and worldly attention that the Tibetan movement has generated irks China to the hilt. The fact that it is not only stationed in India but an unfettered freedom has been perpetually granted to Dalai Lama by the Indian officious establishment, does not let that suspicion die. The rapprochement would remain elusive as long as Dalai Lama and CTA continues to be operative from India.⁷

Missing the 'Trigger'

One of the key fundamental drivers for border resolution for the Chinese has been the fear of internal unrest along the peripheries of its kingdom. This is reflected in resolution of border dispute with Central Asian neighbours wherein a key tenet of the agreement was premised on rooting out any support to the ethnically connected population across the borders. Border settlement and consequent stability at the borders with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has ensured zero support to Turk separatist movement in Xinjiang despite ethnic similarities across the border.⁸ Thus, the driving force for border resolution does not necessarily lie at the borders alone but is more often couched in the frailties of Chinese internal insecurity. However, India's Tibet policy and recurring unilateral concessions have effectively put paid to any hopes for a leverage on this aspect. Harsh Pant emphatically avers that 'The real problem is that India has no bargaining leverage vis-à-vis China and negotiations rarely succeed in the absence of leverage'.⁹

Status Quo Suits the Dragon

A lot of water has flown down the 'roof of the world' since the transition from 'Bide Your Time, Hide Your Strengths' to 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. In the contemporary times, an ambivalent posturing along the borders grants enormous advantages and flexibility to the Chinese leadership, while highlighting a comparable sense of vulnerability for India. Apart from constricting Indian regional aspirations and influence, it grants time for

China to increase the asymmetrical gap further that would enable a better bargaining position vis-à-vis India.¹⁰

The Russian example may be more pertinent contextually as it mirrors the existing nature of capabilities between India and China. A long-standing love-hate relationship, ideological battle for the mantle of Communism and irreconcilable border tensions including skirmishes in 1969 were the defining contours of the USSR – China's intractable border issues. China waited and employed a *delaying strategy* with USSR resolving its border dispute not on the basis of historical treaties but on the stratagem of realpolitik once USSR waned and disintegrated in 1990s. In perhaps the only deal that was overtly in favor of Chinese, the Russians had to accede to Chinese pre-requisites for border resolution and also, make concessions in favor of China.

Intelligentsia's Misplaced Perspective on China

Mirror-imaging has been one of the underlying causes for a skewed perspective of majority of Indian intelligentsia on China. The propensity to paint democratic pressures on a communist leadership of China leads to misleading conclusions. Despite a recorded murder of millions of Chinese post the debauched experiment of *Great Leap Forward in 1959* or in the aftermath of the messy *cultural revolution in 1969* or high-profile purges all along, the Chinese society and leadership has not uttered a word against their founding paramount leader. Such massive misfortunes or chaos have not induced a hint of rebellion from CCP either, that quite emphatically establishes the paramountcy of CPC leader at the helm. To imagine that Xi Jinping would lose his credibility because of a minor border skirmish with India is at best, a ludicrous argument. Xi Jinping not only enjoys unprecedented popularity in the most prosperous new China since its establishment but has emerged as the only second paramount leader after Mao Zedong.¹¹ Therefore, Chinese leadership despite having made substantial concessions to 11 out of 12 states that it settled its boundary with, has not faced an ire of disapproval from the public.^{12 13}

Shrinking Political Leverages

Remarkably, many of the successful border settlements have been possible only in the shrouded world of secrecy i.e. N Korea, Russia (partly), Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Whereas any settlement against China, overt or covert, is a definitive political suicide in India. Traditionally, the Indian political and democratic system does not enjoy any leverage on the border issue. The approach to border settlement in India is held captive by political fortunes premised on territorial nationalism. During and after the Galwan face-off, the purported loss of land had every newsroom in India discrediting the Govt.

It may concurrently be argued that the rising wave of assertive nationalism in China reflected through changing cultural moorings and cinematic 'wolf warrior' indulgences, does infact lead to pressures on the Communist Government. A hitherto insensitive China was thus, forced to domestically acknowledge the loss of lives in Galwan despite Xi Jinping exercising a direct control over PLA. Notwithstanding, the present Chinese leadership has been revisionist and uninhibited in their celebration of the old Chinese civilizational prosperity and unity. As if to replicate the vast expanses of Qing and Ming Dynasties, the Chinese dream unfortunately craves for a competitive territorial nationalism. The construction of *xiaokang* villages along the border in TAR if anything, is not just a benign model to settle the population.

Such contemporary developments have led to shrunk political leverages for both the nations. The era of Westphalian nation states is still plagued by one third of land border disagreements around the world.¹⁴ Consequently, hardened and non-negotiable stances have only led to mutually destructive conflicts world over. On the contrary, settled and peaceful borders have ensured unprecedented progress and shared prosperity for the balance of the world. The goal of shared Asian century rooted in mutual prosperity thus beckons for introspection by both the sides.

External Factors: Pakistan and USA

Pakistan- The treaty of Friendship in 1963 between China and Pakistan unfolded as a rendition of an opportunist tale as China looked at countervailing India strategically. Pakistan till then had voted in favor of censuring China at the UN against the Tibetan rebellion of 1959. The bonhomie touted with hilarious metaphors today i.e. 'deeper than the oceans, sweeter than the honey', was simply borne out of Chanakya's treatise on *Mandala theory* i.e. enemy's enemy is your friend. The convergence on check-mating India and undermining its strategic space has taken a permanent shape as

China-Pakistan collusion is manifesting in nuclear, military and security domain today.¹⁵ Infact, China's whimpering and statements on India's dilution of Article 370 in JandK in 2020 – a completely internal matter of India, have been unprecedented and borne out of its proximity with Pakistan. China's execution of CPEC is a blatant violation of India's sovereignty. Seemingly, the strategic security apparatus is gaining currency in Chinese thought-process. Thus, China seems to be leveraging the border issue to check regional aspirations of India.

USA- Much of the Chinese fears flow from its competitive posture against the Americans. The India - USA rapprochement and growing closeness since the beginning of this millennium continues to have an impact on the Chinese leadership. India seems to be hands-in gloves with USA's pivot to Asia-Pacific policy, and is interpreted unfavorably by the Chinese.¹⁶ Germination of QUAD alliance is rooted in shared apprehensions of Chinese hegemony in the Asian landscape and may sooner assume security dimension in the times to come. USA continues to lend an unequivocal support to Taiwan, prop up Dalai Lama every now and chastise the Chinese on their human rights record in Xinjiang. Thus, India's proximity to USA would remain a continued point of friction with the Chinese.

Prognosis

Sana Hashmi in her illustrious book 'Chinese Approach towards Territorial Disputes – Lessons and Prospects' contextualizes Chinese thinking aptly as rooted in historical injustices but borne out of their well-known 'civilizational' existence when compared with the more recent Westphalian concept of nation states.¹⁷ Although, China has embraced the concept of national boundaries well, it still relishes the idea of 'Middle Kingdom' surrounded by *tertiary or tributary* states. A symmetrically capable India vying for strategic space in the neighborhood / South East Asia has therefore, led to a diffident approach in dealing with India, supposedly a tributary state of yester-years. Thus, a stark difference exists in the urgency of the resolution being sought by both the sides. For India, an early resolution means the way forward, however for the Chinese, *delaying* tactics much like they did to USSR seem to be a better option. No wonder then, despite large number of agreements in place, every high-profile visit by the Chinese leadership in the last decade has been preceded by a deliberate face-off at

the borders. Is that not a clear strategic signaling that China is unprepared for a border resolution?

It is a well-known fact that Deng Xiaoping's China had offered a package deal to seal the border by making concessions in the East to find reciprocity in the West in the 1980s, following the initial proposal in early 1960s.¹⁸ Having made concessions in majority of its settlements with smaller neighbors, the Chinese have always looked at settlements as a package much beyond the borders. This comes again in sharp contrast with India's repeated emphasis on Sector-by-Sector approach. Since then, the option seems to have foreclosed as the Chinese line of argument has changed with East gaining as much as love as the West.¹⁹ Notably, the idea of a package settlement has seemingly disappeared from the Chinese lexicon today.

Is there no hope for a resolution then? As brought out earlier in the paper, domestic upheavals have always played their part towards initiating rapprochement with neighbours: a damning failure of the 'Great Leap Forward' in 1959 followed by Indo-China War spurred the Chinese to go for a border settlement with Mongolia, N Korea, Nepal in the first phase. In the second phase of border settlements post 90s, 1989 Tiananmen Square incident initiated settlements with USSR and Central Asian Republics that lasted well into the first decade of 21st century.²⁰ This was also preceded by the wane of USSR's power that brought about an overture towards USSR. As Tibet provides the necessary leverage to spur China, should India revisit its ambiguous Tibet policy then? The arguments for and against are equally immersive. On one hand, revisiting the policy would help break the status quo, touch upon the sensitivity of 'One China' and may provide the required stimulus for China to look for a border resolution. However, the die may be cast for an escalation should the dragon respond with aggression. Notably, the succession issue of the Dalai Lama is poised to be an episodic event with significant bearing on both the countries. Who knows if the Galwan stand-off between India and China may have only been a ploy to test India's preparedness for a military confrontation?

Despite all the animosity, it is well known that International Relations are transactional, and thus, there's no permanent friend or foe. In our immediate neighborhood, Pakistan and Russia are key examples. Even in the present conflagration, both India and China were able to co-opt and continually engage in the diplomatic, geo-political and

economic spheres. While the prohibitive cost of wars is known to both the countries, the fact of *de-jure* occupation of land pertaining to respective sensitivities by both the Asian giants actually does offer hopes towards the possibility of a solution in the future.²¹

Conclusion

In its march towards realization of 2049 Chinese dream, the contemporary approach of the China has largely been indicative of ‘delaying’ strategy vis-à-vis India. This has been the least risky and most beneficial option for them. On the contrary, a democratic and raucous nation continues to hurt itself with rhetorical political sentiments that cash in on a sentiment laden population; creating a vicious cycle of self-strangulation. Sadly, for India, the institutional outreach crafted carefully over the years in terms of multilateral engagements and varied security protocols, have not been able to tide over the first stage of disputed border settlements – defining the LAC!

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author’s individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

Endnotes

¹ Maj Gen Ashok Kumar (retd), “India-China border dispute: Why current day LAC is a huge disadvantage to New Delhi”, Aug 16, 2022. <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/india-china-border-dispute-why-current-day-lac-disadvantage-new-delhi-opinion-1988456-2022-08-16>.

² PTI, “Sino-Indian border is only 2,000 km long”, Dec 19, 2010. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world/sino-indian-border-is-only-2-000-km-long/story-acDNgsO9L5OLCU0hN2pagP.html>

³ “Formulation of Foreign Policy of New China on the Eve of its Birth”, accessed at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/200011/t20001117_697897.html

⁴ Harsh V Pant “The Rise of China – Implication for India”, pp 229, chapter 9 ‘The Tibet Conundrum in Sino-Indian Ties’ by Elliot Sperling.

⁵ Sana Hashmi, “China’s Approach towards Territorial Disputes: Lessons and Prospects”, 2016. The writer concludes the following irritants that preclude resolution of the border dispute between the two giant neighbors:-

- a. China’s reliance and insistence on historical claims as the sole reasoning.

b. Political refuge to Dalai Lama.

c. Symmetric capabilities – competition for strategic space; China has not made concessions to Russia and remains equally obdurate in dealing with Japan.

d. Lack of Political will.

e. Absence of a catalyst – present arrangement suits China.

⁶ Sana Hashmi, “China’s Approach towards Territorial Disputes: Lessons and Prospects”, 2016. India’s Forward Policy, grant of political asylum to Dalai Lama, burgeoning Indo-US friendship and India’s influence (regional, NAM etc) leading to ideological differences between Nehru and Mao Zedong have been identified as four factors leading to the 1962 Border conflict.

⁷ Jeff M Smith “Cold Peace : China – India Rivalry in the Twenty – First Century’, 2014, pp 86-87, Chapter 6 titled ‘Tibet’.

⁸ Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share 1.4 % of the world’s Uigher population in their territories.

⁹ Harsh V Pant “The Rise of China – Implication for India”, pp 13.

¹⁰ Jeff M Smith “Cold Peace : China – India Rivalry in the Twenty – First Century’, 2014, pp 64-66, Chapter 4 titled ‘The Elusive Settlement’.

¹¹ Brigadier (Dr.) Rajeev Bhutani (Retd) , “PROFILE: CHINA’S PRESIDENT XI JINPING”, May 2018, <https://cenjows.in/pdf-view/?url=2022/03/Profile-China-President-Xi-Jinping-by-Brig-RK-Bhutani-Retd.pdf&id=12252>.

¹² M. Taylor Fravel, “Strong Borders, Secure Nations : Cooperation and Conflicts in China’s Territorial Disputes”. Fravel demonstrates that China pursued concessions in 17 of 23 conflicts and further clarifies that China has resorted to violence less and offered concessions in most of the conflicts vis-à-vis its boundary disputes.’ (As referred in Sana Hashmi’s book).

¹³ Jeff M Smith “Cold Peace : China – India Rivalry in the Twenty – First Century”.

¹⁴ Sana Hashmi, “China’s Approach towards Territorial Disputes: Lessons and Prospects”, 2016. The writer brings out that approximately one-third of the world’s land boundaries could be classified as unstable and trapped in overlapping claims, in chapter 1.

¹⁵ Jeff M Smith “Cold Peace : China – India Rivalry in the Twenty – First Century’, 2014, pp 129-130, Chapter 9 titled ‘Sweeter than Honey: The Pakistan Factor in Sino-Indian Relations’.

¹⁶ Jeff M Smith “Cold Peace : China – India Rivalry in the Twenty – First Century’, 2014, pp 115-118, Chapter 8 titled ‘The United States in Sino-Indian Relations’.

¹⁷ Sana Hashmi, “China’s Approach towards Territorial Disputes: Lessons and Prospects”, 2016. The writer avers ‘One may argue that old historical incidents are given preference over modern international laws in the Chinese conception of boundaries. Therefore, it may be said that at the conceptual level, the Chinese concept of unequal treaties contests the intellectual foundations of international law, by claiming that unequal treaties can be revoked, as China deems fit.....however, more interesting to note that even with the countries with which China has resolved its boundary disputes, the resolution is not in tandem with international law’, in chapter 1.

¹⁸ Harsh V Pant “The Rise of China – Implication for India”, pp 209, chapter 8 titled ‘Sino-Indian Territorial Disputes – The Razor’s Edge?’ by David Scott.

¹⁹ Jeff M Smith “Cold Peace : China – India Rivalry in the Twenty – First Century’, 2014, pp 59-60, Chapter 4 titled ‘The Elusive Settlement’.

²⁰ Sakshi Prashar, Ankita Sen and Rahul Aripaka, “A history of boorishness: Chronicling China’s border brawls in the neighbourhood”, July 2, 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/a-history-of-boorishness-chronicling-chinas-border-brawls-in-the-neighbourhood/articleshow/76732423.cms?from=mdr>.

²¹ Harsh V Pant “The Rise of China – Implication for India”, pp 209.