

1 No End in Sight

Understanding the Sino-Indian Border Dispute

Dr. Peter Harris, editor



India and China compromise over a third of the world's population. Both maintain operable nuclear triads in addition to being the planet's second and third highest spenders on conventional military arms. When the two countries' militaries came to blows in May-June of last year, then, it is no surprise that the whole world took notice. Dozens of slain Indian and Chinese soldiers was a tragedy. A wider conflagration between the two

nuclear powers could easily have become a catastrophe.

At stake was disputed territory high in the Himalayan Mountains. For a variety of historical reasons, India and China have never been able to agree upon a border to separate their two states. In the east, China claims much of what is now governed as the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In the west, India claims the territory of Aksai Chin, governed by Beijing as part of Xinjiang and Tibet. In between those two disputed territories runs a 2,500-mile border (punctuated by the independent states of Nepal and Bhutan) that has never been demarcated. Even the so-called Line of Actual Control (LAC) that supposedly separates Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory is the subject of vigorous dispute. Both sides station troops along portions of the LAC and conduct regular patrols. They jockey for position by building infrastructure—camps, roads, lookout posts—and trying to occupy strategic points. But physical clashes are rare. Until last year, fatalities had not been recorded in decades.

In this roundtable, six scholars—some based in the region, the rest longtime analysts of Sino-Indian relations—put the recent border

clashes in context. Liu Xuecheng begins by lamenting the flareup in violence and calling for a return to diplomatic negotiations. Liu is frank that a resolution (or “settlement”) of the border dispute is unlikely to materialize any time soon. The best that China and India can hope for is to “manage” the situation and avoid further bloodshed. Liu encourages readers in China and India to put the border dispute in a wider perspective, urging that this singular issue not be allowed to blind either side to the manifest benefits of political and economic cooperation.

Offering a view from Pakistan, Maira Qaddos agrees with Liu that peaceful co-existence between India and China is both possible and essential for regional prosperity. Qaddos concedes that, in Pakistan, there had been little sympathy for India during the bloody clashes with China. As she explains, it is perhaps overdetermined that Pakistan will always tend to side with China in any conflict with India. Few readers will be surprised by this. But Qaddos warns that such zero-sum thinking can only lead to ruin in the long term. What is needed is for China, India, and Pakistan to all find common ground for the sake of peace and stability across South Asia and beyond. Qaddos is realistic about the

trilateral relationship’s future; she knows that the India-China and India-Pakistan sides of the triangle will remain fraught for the foreseeable future. But she is also hopeful, recognizing that a cycle of conflict, humiliation, resentment, and more conflict will bring nothing good for the people of South Asia.

Sripana Pathak offers a starkly different, less optimistic take on last year’s clashes. According to Pathak, it is unrealistic to expect Indians to subordinate their country’s border dispute to economic or strategic concerns, as Liu wants. There is too much anger. The killing of Indian soldiers—unjustified and unprovoked—will not easily be forgotten. Pathak represents a prominent strand of thought among Indians when she squarely lays the blame for last year’s deadly clashes at the feet of China’s leaders. She argues that it is China’s conception of sovereignty—one rooted in a unilateral concern for restoring China’s former glory rather than an understanding that rival powers each have conflicting claims that must be reconciled—that fuels the bilateral dispute. In the end, it is China that is at fault; it is China that must change for there to be peace.

Ashok Sharma expands on this view to suggest that China’s

actions along the Sino-Indian border did not just provoke a backlash among the Indian public and political class—they also spurred international-level pushback against perceived Chinese aggression. In this sense, Sharma explains, conflict along the LAC must be considered part of a larger Indo-Pacific struggle for mastery. In Sharma’s telling, international opinion seems to have firmly swung behind India and against China—especially among the Quad (and “Quad Plus”) states. Sharma’s analysis leaves little room for optimism that the Sino-Indian border dispute can be managed or resolved bilaterally; if the conflict truly does become regionalized—just another theater in the Indo-Pacific great game—then it surely will become unlikely that a grand bargain between India and China could ever be struck.

Selina Ho adds to the discussion of hope versus pessimism with her analysis of water security in the Sino-Indian borderlands. On the one hand, Ho explains that, against all the odds, both China and India have managed to desecuritize their relationship over water resources—even though access to water ought to be considered one of the highest stakes issues to define the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship. This raises the possibility, perhaps, that the two sides could

desecuritize other aspects of their relationship. Might the border itself be moved outside of the realm of security and into the realm of normal politics and diplomacy? Unfortunately, Ho argues, this might be wishful thinking. While it is promising that China and India have so far found ways to avoid securitizing water management issues, this bright spot in their relations does not provide much of a blueprint for desecuritizing other aspects of the relationship. On the contrary, the trend might well be in the opposite direction: that is, toward the eventual securitization of water rather than the desecuritization of other issues.

Finally, Jeff Smith offers yet another reason to be gloomy about the prospects of a peaceful resolution to the dispute: the fact that Chinese leaders seem to have adopted the position that the question of demarcating the international boundary cannot be divorced from the question of Indian “interference” in Tibetan affairs. From the Chinese perspective, this makes some sense. After all, what use is an agreed-upon international border if New Delhi persists in pursuing policies that meddle in affairs across that border? India, however, is unlikely to abandon the Tibetan exile community as the price of settling its border disputes;

to agree to China's demands in this respect would be nothing better than base appeasement. Viewed in this context, the border dispute is not so much about lines on a map as it is about mutual trust, respect, and toleration of each other's internal politics. Lines on a map would be hard enough. Adding the other issues to the mix makes the problem all but intractable.

These contributions make clear that just as China and India disagree on the border between their states, so too do they disagree over what the border dispute is truly about. As the old adage goes, where you stand depends on where you sit. The view from China looks precious little like the view from India. In many cases, the perspective of those living closest to the border seems to be distorted—quite understandably—by anger, distrust, and a burning sense of injustice. This spells danger ahead. The entire region—indeed, the whole world—has an interest in avoiding a return to violence along the Sino-Indian border. But efforts to manage the conflict failed badly last year. It is not obvious that the world can afford those efforts to break down again. ■

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