

2 | Putting the Border Dispute in Historical Context

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The Sino-Indian border dispute is left over from history, both the legacy of colonial period and the more recent history of Sino-Indian relations. Since the 1950s, the border dispute has always shadowed the ebb and flow of the Sino-Indian relations. Looking back at the twists and turns of their bilateral relations for the past 70 years, it is clear that the

simmering border disputes have existed along three dimensions: legal arguments, international circumstance, and domestic politics. The interplay of these three dimensions has complicated the efforts to settle the territorial disputes between China and India.

The Chinese and Indian governments have attempted to resolve their border disputes through diplomatic negotiations since the 1980s. The border negotiations have been institutionalized and have generated several meaningful agreements—not least of all, several effective dialogue mechanisms for maintaining peace and tranquility along the border areas. However, the respective positions of the Indian and Chinese governments have never changed.

Although both governments have made efforts to clarify and affirm the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the ground, the disputes over the LAC have often led to violent clashes. The recent bloody clashes in the Galwan Valley and Pangong Lake areas have constituted the gravest flare-up in recent times, with dozens of soldiers losing their lives on both sides. These skirmishes worsened the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship and further eroded mutual strategic trust.

Lessons Learned from History

The Sino-Indian border has never been defined and demarcated by any bilateral boundary agreement through diplomatic negotiations. No mutually recognized boundary has existed between the two countries. As a researcher on Sino-Indian border dispute and Sino-Indian relations, I prefer to use the term “border dispute” rather than “boundary dispute,” and I also prefer to discuss “management” of the border dispute rather than “settlement” of the border dispute. Furthermore, I refer to “clarification and affirmation” of the LAC, rather than the “definition and demarcation” of the Sino-Indian boundary. Under the current circumstances, my judgment is that any approach to “settle” the border dispute would be premature.

Violent clashes along the Sino-Indian border started in May 2020, continuing into June. Partial disengagement from Galwan, Hot Springs, and Gogra occurred in June-July 2020, while complete disengagement from Pangong Lake’s north and south bank took place in February 2021. The border areas returned to the pre-clash status quo by around March 2021. Overall, what happened in the western sector of the Sino-Indian border proved that military

maneuvering and confrontation cannot solve the fundamental problems that mar Sino-Indian relations. Diplomatic negotiation is the right way forward. Border disputes can be managed only through friendly dialogue and sincere consultation, with occasional resort to the various management mechanisms that have been established to jointly maintain peace and tranquility in the border area.

Looking back at the road the two countries have walked along, the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) emergence as India’s ruling party in 2014 seems to have been a turning point—that is, the juncture at which India and China walked off the normal and constructive track. In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese leaders had always talked about the traditional customary lines transformed from history. India, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of historical lines drawn or unilaterally imposed by British diplomats. The eight rounds of negotiations held in the 1980s led to an agreement to establish a joint working group on the border question and to maintain peace and tranquility along the LAC (even though there was no agreement on the demarcation of the LAC).

With the signing of the 1993

Agreement on Maintaining Peace and Tranquility in the Border Areas along the LAC, the Sino-Indian joint working group made some efforts to clarify and affirm the LAC in the disputed border areas. Under this agreement, both sides appointed diplomatic and military experts charged with advising the joint working group on how to resolve differences regarding the alignment of the LAC, as well as how to address issues relating to military redeployments in the border areas along the LAC. With the conflicting versions of the LAC unresolved, however, attempts to clarify and affirm the LAC were put onto the back burner in the late 1990s.

Since the start of this century, the failure to clarify the LAC has led the two governments to shift their attention to exploring the possibility of border dispute settlement as opposed to mere management. Two new dialogue mechanisms were created: (1) the Special Representative mechanism on the India-China boundary question (SR/SRM) was constituted in 2003 to promote negotiations on a framework for border settlement, including the establishment of political parameters and guiding principles, a framework for arriving at a final settlement, with a view to delineating and

demarcating the boundary; (2) the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination was set up in 2012, during the 15th round of the SR talks. During this period, however, the two sides failed to make progress in pushing forward the border-settlement approach. Meanwhile, border skirmishes erupted frequently in the disputed areas along the LAC.

These border clashes have persisted in recent years. On Indian social media, the disputes and clashes are sometimes manipulated, portrayed as Chinese intrusions into India's territory in a way that stirs up anti-China sentiment among the Indian public. In some cases, Indian officials have had to come out and clarify the facts to the citizenry. Overshadowing the frequent border clashes is the problem of an unsettled LAC. This problem can be managed to an extent using mechanisms such as the China-India Corps Commander-Level Meeting, which has played an important role in facilitating communication between the two sides. Frontline military commanders are committed to maintaining communication and working toward mutually acceptable preventive measures that are conducive to the reduction of tension and the avoidance of any possible incidents in the disputed areas. These

frontline commanders have also jointly agreed to maintain peace and stability on the ground by refraining from taking any provocative moves along the LAC in the border areas.

Development Partners or Geopolitical Rivals

The wider context is that China and India are the largest developing countries in the world. Their combined population is 2.8 billion. India has been regarded as the world's office while China is cast as the world's factory. Their joined hands could multiply their already huge potential for development. China and India are member states in global, regional, multilateral institutions such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping of rising powers, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the East Asia Summit Meeting. All these institutions are focused on cooperative development. When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India, he agreed with his Indian counterpart to the China-India Plus Approach in jointly developing trade and investment projects in third countries. All these dialogues and cooperative mechanisms have been working toward the partnership for shared

development.

On several occasions, both China and India have agreed that they would commit themselves to expanding and enhancing cooperation and coordination in other fields, while simultaneously seeking the settlement of border disputes through diplomatic negotiations. This is the right approach. It is almost certain that the Sino-Indian border dispute cannot be settled in the immediate years to come. The two countries need to manage the dispute properly and at the same time, expand and enhance their bilateral diplomatic consultations and military coordination so that they might prevent costly incidents in the disputed areas along the LAC. In time, this cooperative approach might create favorable conditions for the settlement of the territorial disputes at some point in the future.

Since the end of the Cold War, the top leaders of the two countries have always stressed that India and China share more common interests than differences and that each will not constitute a threat to the other. With reference to international and regional affairs, the two countries share the same or close positions on a wide range of issues due. China and India can be each other's friends and partners,

not threats or rivals. The two countries should help each other succeed instead of undercutting each other.

The border dispute is one component of the Sino-Indian relationship. In recent years, unwanted skirmishes and clashes along the LAC have been highly politicized, exacerbating antagonistic domestic dynamics as well as furthering the perception of an international competition. To continue intensifying cooperation among China, India, and the rest of Asia, leaders would do well to remember that “divide and rule” remains a powerful strategy in world politics. Indian and Chinese leaders should each avoid falling into that trap. ■

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