
Where From, Where To? The Inveterate India-China Talks on the ‘Boundary Question’

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By publicly endorsing the practice of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), China has principally accepted CBMs to be employed cautiously for territorial safeguarding, while driving a regional security agenda, on both land and at sea. Nations that relate to their neighbours in zero-sum terms often tend to use CBMs sparingly, postponing resolution of contentious issues until the power balance has altered in their favour. The power balance, herein, would be driven by employing both the available, and potential, economic and military arms of power to drive the tools of statecraft. Chinese realists can be subdivided into “offensive” and “defensive” as well as “hard” and “soft” camps, with each strand arguing that the state has to build its own strength. The hard power realists argue for strengthening comprehensive national power (*zonghe guoli*), particularly the military and economic dimensions, while soft power realism emphasises diplomacy and cultural power.¹ The “offensive realists” put forth the argument that China should employ its modernising and robust military, economic, and diplomatic influence essentially to coerce others toward the ends that China desires.² Palpably, nations such as these are least

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Chinese realists can be sub-divided into “offensive” and “defensive” as well as “hard” and “soft” camps, with each strand arguing that the state has to build its own strength. The hard power realists argue for strengthening comprehensive national power (*zonghe guoli*) – particularly the military and economic dimensions, while soft power realism emphasises diplomacy and cultural power.

likely to employ CBMs extensively to enhance patterns of cooperative security. In recent years, Beijing has gradually and sporadically, begun accepting CBMs as an important means of safeguarding China’s security. Tracing the evolution of the Chinese approach to CBMs, Xia Liping notes that China’s negative attitude and approach toward CBMs changed significantly in the mid-1980s.³

India and China, the two major Asian players, display a peculiar case of “constrained cooperation,” in which the ostensible convergence of economic interests tends to

artificially mask the prevailing and deep-rooted strategic differences. The realist mode negates the understanding that the economic facet of Sino-Indian ties would constitute the key to the success of the future relationship. China and India seemingly have been converging on the economic front (heavily fashioned to favour China). The proponents of the economic convergences between New Delhi and Beijing need to note that India is largely exporting primary commodities to China and importing finished products. For example, China is known to have mineral deposits two-and-a-half times those of India, but it continues to import iron ore from India. The dumping of Chinese goods is also adversely affecting India’s local manufacturing industry. China maintains non-trade barriers and other mechanisms that keep out higher-value Indian exports such as information technology and pharmaceutical products. It exports to India double what it imports in value and continues to blithely

undercut Indian manufacturing despite a record number of anti-dumping cases against it by India in the World Trade Organisation.⁴

Further, while discussing divergences, the interminable Sino-Indian territorial and boundary dispute is paramount and holds the potential of upstaging ties at any point. The border dispute between India and China does not simply pertain to the definition of a boundary that can be marked physically on the ground, or on a military map. It also takes on

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board vast tracts of disputed territorial frontiers. China continues to be in physical occupation of large areas of land, which are claimed by India as its territory, starting with the Aksai Chin plateau in Ladakh, approximately 38,000 sq km, since the mid-1950s. In addition, India maintains that Pakistan illegally ceded to China in 1963, 5,180 sq km of Indian territory in the Shaksgam Valley of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), north of the Siachen Glacier, under a bilateral boundary agreement. Whereas, China continues to stake its claim to about 96,000 sq km of Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh, which it terms as ‘southern Tibet’—a term unknown before 2006. The statements regarding Arunachal Pradesh being “Chinese territory and part of southern Tibet” are a key instrument of the marked shift in China’s strategy and stance in the early 1980s when Beijing began signalling that the eastern sector was the larger part of the boundary dispute. China’s stated position is that reunification of Chinese territories is a ‘sacred duty’ of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). China shares 22,000 km of land borders with 14 adjacent states. It has resolved territorial disputes with twelve of them, but still needs to resolve the territorial and boundary

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dispute with India. While recognising the McMahon Line as its boundary with Myanmar, China refuses to do so with India and Bhutan.⁵ China agreed to accept the McMahon Line till Burma (Myanmar) on January 28, 1960. However, beyond it, China did not accept it, since it refuses to recognise the McMahon Line as a valid boundary, terming it “illegal”. The Chinese, conceivably, will never concede the legality of the McMahon Line as that it will imply that Tibet was once a sovereign state in 1914—a historical fact which

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While the classic realist perspective on clashing interests and power in an anarchic international system has not become entirely redundant, the growing coincidence of interests between the two “emerging powers” in an increasingly integrated system has not yet been fully recognised by either side. The India-China equation makes for a classic case of the realist vs idealist debate, which acknowledges that while conceding India’s rise as a regional power, China appears uneasy, while envisioning a multipolar Asia. According to Zhao Gancheng, Director of South Asia Studies at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies:

A strategically more autonomous South Asia would ... lead to less reliance of South Asia on foreign forces ... From the angle of long-term interests ... China should adopt a dialectic approach and follow a long-term South Asia policy ... As the construction of a new South Asian regional order progresses, it would be necessary for China to play a permanent role in establishing equilibrium and stability in South Asia.⁶

There appears to be growing consensus among the hardline conservatives and nationalists in China to toughen Beijing's policies and selectively make its presence felt.⁷ Notwithstanding the India-China relationship gradually shedding much of the baggage of the past decades, the political dialogue between Beijing and New Delhi has failed to yield any forward movement on a long-term resolution to the border dispute. Besides, China's ongoing campaign for military modernisation and its consequent impact on regional

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players, including India, at both the diplomatic and military levels, underscores the urgent need to resolve the border dispute tangibly. Of the numerous CBMs signed between India and China, they have majorly been related to the border dispute and finding a solution to what is officially called the "boundary question". What needs to be questioned is the necessity and usefulness of this protracted and tiring process that has failed in providing a breakthrough to the impasse. The CBMs with India, as discussed in detail in the following sub-sections, seek to improve lines of communication, reduce tensions, and disengage forces along 'disputed border areas', but do not seem to presage final accords, at least in the near-term.⁸ The border settlement negotiations between India and China began in 1981 and remain the longest such continuing process between any two nations in post-World War II history. The negotiations were rechristened in 1988 as those of a Joint Working Group and then again repackaged in 2003 as talks between Special Representatives.

- Phase 1 [1981 – 1987]: Total 8 rounds of border talks.
- Phase 2 [1988 – 2003]: Additional 14 Joint Working Group meetings.

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- Phase 3 [2003 – present] June 2003: Special Representatives appointed to lead discussions on the ‘boundary question’. The Special Representatives have held 19 rounds of talks till date, with the latest round being held in April 2016.

The Sino-Indian interactions between 1988 and 1996 were considered significant since they became the platform on which CBMs in the military field were set up between Beijing and New Delhi.⁹ Today, 35 years later,

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Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, September 07, 1993¹⁰

This agreement was hailed as the first major conventional CBM between Beijing and New Delhi, averring that the India-China boundary question should be resolved peacefully, through friendly consultations. Neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means. Article II asserted that each side shall keep its military forces in the areas along the Line of Actual Control (LAC/LOAC)) to a minimum level, and reduce the military forces along the LAC in conformity with the requirements of the principle of mutual and equal security. Ironically, today, the India-China border in both the western and eastern sectors remains the world’s most heavily militarised border. That apart, Article V stated that the two sides shall agree to take adequate measures to ensure that air intrusions across the Line of Actual Control do not take

place and shall undertake mutual consultations should intrusions occur. Additionally, it was also agreed that both sides shall consult on possible restrictions on air exercises in areas to be mutually agreed upon near the Line of Actual Control. Article VII agreed upon holding consultations on the “form, method, scale and content of effective verification measures” and supervision required for the reduction of military forces along the Line of Actual Control”. Lastly, it was also decided under Article VIII that each side of the India-China Joint Working Group on the boundary question shall appoint diplomatic and military experts to formulate implementation measures. The experts shall advise the Joint Working Group on the resolution of differences between the two sides on the alignment of the Line of Actual Control and address issues relating to redeployment with a view to reduction of military forces in the areas along the Line of Actual Control.

Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the China-India Border Areas, November 29, 1996 ¹¹

The second CBM in the military field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China border areas, signed in 1996, was primarily aimed at fulfilling the agenda of the first CBM agreement of 1993. Moving more specifically into expanding these CBMs in the sensitive areas in the military field, it was specified, “Neither side shall use its military capability against the other side”. The agreement affirmed the commitment of both sides to the LAC while fully recognising that both sides had “different perceptions” on certain segments for which the two agreed “to speed up the process of clarification” and *start “to exchange maps indicating their respective perceptions...as soon as possible”* (Article X).

It needs to be underlined here that since 1962, the LAC between India and China has not yet been physically demarcated/delineated on the ground or in the military maps – with continuing reluctance and official

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refusals by China to show its version of the LAC to India. Significantly, Henry McMahon has been quoted as saying in 1935: “‘Delimitation’ is determination of a boundary line by treaty or otherwise, and its definition in written, verbal terms; ‘Demarcation’ comprises the actual laying down of a boundary line on the ground, and its definition by boundary pillars or other physical means.”¹²

This, in effect, has led to both sides drawing their respective perceptions of the LAC, resulting in the often reported incidents of transgressions/intrusions. Exchanging maps indicating

the respective perceptions of the entire alignment of the LAC remains the trickiest challenge. On the “clarification and confirmation” of the LAC, each side has clarified, by an exchange of maps, its line in the middle sector. In the western and eastern sectors, there is no mutually agreed upon LAC. Despite Article X, Beijing has been so averse to clearly define the 4,057-km frontline that it suspended the exchange of maps with India decades ago.

In 2001, the Chinese and Indian sides exchanged maps showing each other’s military positions in the least controversial middle sector. Beijing then committed itself to an exchange of maps of the western sector in 2002 and the eastern sector in early 2003. However, China went back on its commitment, creating an impasse in the talks. Having broken its word, Beijing insisted that the two sides abandon years of laborious efforts to define the frontline and focus instead on finding an overall border settlement. If Beijing is not willing to take the elementary step of clarifying the frontline, why would it be willing to take far bigger action

to resolve the festering border problem through a package settlement.¹³

According to Article III of the 1996 agreement, all future ceilings are expected to be based on “parameters such as the nature of terrain, road communications and other infrastructure and time taken to induct/de-induct troops and armaments.” While clearly categorising the types of “offensive weapons”, withdrawal of which will be given priority, Article IV pronounced the inclusion of combat tanks, infantry combat vehicles, guns (including howitzers) with 75 mm or bigger calibre, mortars with 120 mm or bigger calibre, surface-to-surface missiles and surface-to-air missiles. Besides, the two sides also agreed to exchange data on the “military forces and armaments” that are to be reduced. The agreement urged both sides to “avoid holding large scale military exercises involving more than one division (15,000 troops) in close proximity to the LOAC” and to inform the other side about the “type, level, planned duration and areas of the exercise” in case it involves more than a brigade (5,000 troops), and about de-induction “within five days of completion,” and the other side shall be free to seek any number of clarifications as it deems necessary.¹⁴ De-induction of troops primarily refers to pulling back forces from the forward areas where they have been deployed, to their permanent peace-time locations, or to locations in the rear, thus, implying that the forces are no longer actively deployed for combat.

According to Article V, the two sides also agreed that no combat aircraft which include “fighter, bomber, reconnaissance, military trainer, armed helicopter and other armed aircraft” shall be allowed to fly “within ten kilometers” of the LOAC “except by prior permission” from the other side. Similarly, Article VI prohibits any use of “hazardous chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosives within two kilometers” of the LOAC unless it is “part of developmental activities” in which case the other side shall be informed “through diplomatic channels or by convening a border personnel meeting, preferably five days in advance.”

Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question, April 11, 2005

By reaffirming the Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between India and China, signed on June 23, 2003, and recalling that the two sides appointed Special Representatives to explore the framework of settlement of the India-China boundary question, both India and China noted that the two sides are seeking a political settlement of the boundary question in the context of their overall and long-term interests. An early settlement of the boundary question should be pursued as a strategic objective and the political parameters and guiding principles for a boundary settlement should ensure that differences on the boundary question should not be allowed to affect the overall development of bilateral relations (Article I). The two sides will take into account, *inter alia*, historical evidence, national sentiments, practical difficulties and reasonable concerns and sensitivities of both sides, and the actual state of border areas (Article V).

Perhaps the most crucial clause in this agreement came in the form of Article VII which stipulated that in the process of reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall “safeguard due interests of their settled populations” in the border areas. However, Chinese Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi stated in June 2007, “... the mere presence of populated areas in Arunachal Pradesh would not affect Chinese claims on the boundary.” This statement was a blatant renouncement of the aforementioned Article VII of the “Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles” signed during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to India in April 2005, which categorically stated, “In reaching a border settlement, the two sides shall safeguard populations in border areas.” Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, in a public lecture, outlined the Indian concerns over Arunachal Pradesh, “particularly the eastern sector where [Chinese] claims have been made on Tawang (in Arunachal Pradesh) which is totally in contravention

of accepted principles.” By virtue of this statement, Doval has reiterated Article VII pertaining to ‘settled population’ in these areas, particularly in Tawang – which apparently is fast elapsing Beijing’s strategic memory.

Within the agreed framework of the final boundary settlement, the delineation of the boundary will be carried out utilising means such as modern cartographic and surveying practices and joint surveys (Article VIII). The Joint Working Group (JWG) on the boundary issue has held regular meetings between military commanders from both sides at Bum La and Dichu in the eastern sector, Lipulekh (near Pithoragarh) in the middle sector, and Spanggur (near Chushul) in the western sector. These meetings are organised and conducted by the military area commanders from the two sides to establish facts on the ground. During the fourth round of the Annual Defence Dialogue between Beijing and New Delhi in December 2011, India had proposed setting up a new Border Personnel Meeting (BPM) venue along the Uttarakhand-Himachal Pradesh stretch of the Sino-Indian border.¹⁵ Thus far, border personnel meetings at regular intervals have been held at Spanggur Gap (Chushul, Ladakh), Bum La (Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh) and Nathu La (Sikkim). Two additional venues for border personnel meetings between the respective military commanders have been established in Kibithoo (in Anjaw district, Arunachal Pradesh) in May 2015 and at Daulat Beg Oldie (Chushul sector, Eastern Ladakh) in August 2015.

India-China Agreement on the Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs, January 17, 2012

According to Dai Bingguo, State Councillor of the People’s Republic of China, both India and China should put aside their differences and seize “a golden period to grow...” While on the face of it, the optimism helped in setting a positive tone to the talks, it did not really translate into any substantial shift in the Chinese policy on the issue. The mechanism

tended to reiterate mere symbolism, submitting no tangible progress on the ground. It merely offered a “desire to materialise the spirit” of similar endeavours inked previously, including the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement of 1993, the CBMs in the Military Field of 1996, and the Protocol on Modalities for the Implementation of these CBMs of 2005, coupled with numerous meetings of the Joint Working Group.

Seeking to “consult” and “coordinate” the border affairs, the Working Mechanism aimed to facilitate timely communication of information on the border situation, thereby, holding little hope with respect to bringing about any substantial shift in the Chinese thinking, or policy, on the border issue. Owing to this, the efficacy of the Working Mechanism as a plausible means of achieving any sort of breakthrough was placed under a critical scanner. Interestingly, Article V of the Working Mechanism stated that it “will not discuss resolution of the Boundary Question or affect the Special Representatives Mechanism”. The latest Working Mechanism aims to only facilitate timely communication of information on the border situation, for appropriately handling of border incidents, thus, putting an ominous question mark over the eventual future of India’s boundary settlement with the People’s Republic of China.¹⁶

A significant concern that China holds is that a border settlement, without major Indian territorial concessions, could potentially augment India’s power position, in turn, proving detrimental for China’s rise in Asia. Consequentially, it is among the prime causes that seem to have goaded Beijing in pressing its claim on over 96,000 sq km of Indian territory, namely, the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, beginning in the early 1980s. It was certainly a visible shift in the Chinese strategy as Beijing began to emphasise the eastern sector as the larger and more critical part of the boundary dispute, thereby moving away from its earlier stand during the 1960s when Zhou Enlai stated in New Delhi that “there exists a relatively bigger dispute” in the western sector.¹⁷ Premier Zhou Enlai, at a press conference during his visit to India in April 1960, made a statement which

tends to hold relevance till date wherein he noted that in Aksai Chin, “there exists a relatively bigger dispute”. The strategic value of eastern Aksai Chin to China stems from its unique position, which links the highway between Xinjiang with western Tibet. Zhou further stated:

As China was prepared to accommodate the Indian point of view in the eastern sector, India should accommodate China in the western sector... We hope that the Indian government will take towards the western sector an attitude similar to that which the Chinese government had taken towards the eastern sector... an attitude of mutual consideration.¹⁸

Beijing equates the situation in the east (where the Chinese claim the entire Arunachal Pradesh, including Tawang) to the west (India’s claims over Aksai Chin). China holds the position that the Indian claim to Ladakh must be treated on exactly on the same basis as the Chinese claim to the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). Beijing is not ready for “a swap” any more, as it has added Tawang and the “populated area” around, to its claims – in complete contradiction to the 2005 Guidelines.

In a clear violation of all these CBM measures, India was pushed into a diplomatic and military tizzy, when the India-China border dispute unpleasantly recurred on April 15, 2013, with a platoon-strength contingent approximating 50 soldiers of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) intruding 19 km inside the Indian-claimed territory in Burthe, in the Daulat Beg Oldie sector in eastern Ladakh (a region of J&K that shares a border with China) and establishing their presence by pitching tent posts. The magnitude of the stand-off in Burthe mirrored the images of the 1986 Sumdorong Chu incident, which witnessed deep intrusions by the PLA into the Sumdorong Chu Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, thereby forcing the Indian Army to launch Operation Falcon in late 1986, by air-lifting an infantry brigade to Zimithang, close to Sumdorong Chu. It was only in mid-1987 that the face-off came to an end following intense diplomatic engagement. In the wake

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of the Chinese intrusion in Burthe, Xi Jinping's leadership appeared to be testing the waters of political decision-making in New Delhi.¹⁹

Further, another intrusion by the Chinese PLA into Chumar (located 300 km northeast of Ladakh) in September 2014, prior to President Xi Jinping's trip to India, remains one of its biggest incursions ever. This was in response to India constructing a hut with a surveillance camera on the border, and the digging of a canal. What perhaps is most distressing is

that all these offensives launched by China took place despite numerous meetings of the India-China Joint Working Group, sweeping away the spirit of the four prior border-peace arrangements signed in 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2012. Border guards of the PLA have repeatedly intruded into the eastern sector of Arunachal Pradesh, and the northern Ladakh sector.

The writing on the wall is clear. China has the political and military will, and capability, to covertly notch up tensions in the Himalayas with India, at any time and place of its choosing, and the stealthily recurring transgressions/incursions are aiding China in strengthening its leverage against India, both by means of hardening its diplomatic stand during negotiations and stepping up military pressure. Given that China and India have not mutually agreed upon a Line of Actual Control, sporadic incidents of border transgressions increasingly appear to be becoming a covert Chinese strategy of asserting its claims in India's western sector, especially in northeastern Ladakh and in Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector. By bringing in the conceptual construct of Chinese territorial sovereignty, rights and interests in the case of Arunachal Pradesh, China

accuses India of “violating the consensus to appropriately handle the border issue”.

Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation (BDCA), October 23, 2013

China and India reiterated in the latest Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) that neither side would use its military capability against the other. However, in the event of China launching another underhand operation in Arunachal Pradesh or the Ladakh sector, what is the picture that would emerge?

In what indubitably was a Chinese plot to subvert the debate surrounding its strategic offensive behaviour in the recent past, Beijing successfully engineered the signing of a BDCA with India on October 23, 2013. Termed as a strategic benchmark, the BDCA was yet another attempt to arrive at a mutually acceptable settlement to the India-China ‘Boundary Question’. While the agreement seems to have set a positive tone for future talks between New Delhi and Beijing, it does not translate into any substantial shift in Chinese policy. The latest mechanism is a mere token agreement, only buttressing Beijing’s intent at keeping the border dispute alive as a tactical pressure point against India.

Following the Depsang incident, India announced that both sides would pull back troops to their earlier positions along the LAC. But China haggled with India, agreeing to withdraw its troops from Indian territory provided that New Delhi tore down a line of defensive fortifications in an area called Chumar. China also managed to get India to restrict its forward patrols in the area and unflinchingly negotiated for a BDCA.²⁰ At this stage, India cannot afford to give in to China’s demands, such as suspending infrastructure development in its own territory near the LAC. Has China ever offered an explanation for the blizzard in infrastructure construction it is carrying out in the Tibet Autonomous Region adjoining India? China’s cross-frontier

incursions undermine the spirit of every confidence-building measure relating to the border areas that New Delhi and Beijing have undertaken.

A Toothless Agreement

The banality of the text of the BDCA is proof that India is losing to China in terms of strategic leverage. China has successfully managed to call the shots in the drafting of the BDCA by skirting the primary issue of resolving the boundary dispute. The BDCA is loaded in China's favour. There are no lucid answers as to how exactly the BDCA stands apart from the other confidence-building measures that India already shares with China vis-à-vis the border question. For instance, Article II of the BDCA stipulates that the two countries should share strategic information, but it does not elaborate on what specifically constitutes "information about military exercises, aircraft, demolition operations and unmarked mines." It is doubtful that China will be transparent enough to provide information about its military and cargo flights to forward landing strips near the borders. Article II also appears to be so drafted as to provide a cover for the Chinese Air Force in "locating aerial vehicles that may have crossed or are possibly in the process of crossing the Line of Actual Control" in the border areas. Is China upping the ante and securing the possibility of launching an air offensive in these areas to build pressure on India?²¹ Article III elaborates the process through which the BDCA shall be implemented, through meetings between border personnel, military officers, and other departments of the Military Regions of China and Army Commands of India.

There is nothing novel in these announcements, as they have been in place for decades. The BDCA remains a commitment-deficient agreement. It contains no binding assurance that the Indian and Chinese military headquarters will set up a hotline, merely stating that the two sides "may consider" the move. Article VI states that there would be "no tailing" of each other's patrols in disputed forward areas. An important point to be noted is that these forward areas need to be mutually identified and accepted.

However, Indian border guards placed to check and prevent such incursions have been met with an antagonistic Chinese PLA. Despite the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement signed by the two countries in 1993 and the Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field signed in 1996, border guards of the PLA have intruded repeatedly into Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh and have even objected to Indian road construction efforts in these areas. The periodic, yet not so intermittent any more, intrusions/transgressions have widely been reported and debated in the Indian press and discussed at length in the Indian Parliament as well.

During the 18th round of talks between the Special Representatives on the Boundary Question in New Delhi on March 23, 2015, Ajit Doval, India's National Security Adviser and Yang Jiechi, State Councillor of China, both expressed "satisfaction on the progress made in the negotiations" while emphasising commitment to the three-step process of seeking a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution to the border question at an early date. It needs to be pondered over as to what exact contours of "progress" achieved till date have been referred to? It has been 35 years since India and China began engagement to peacefully resolve the 'boundary question' through talks, albeit they have failed at reaching even the bare minimum – a mutually defined frontline, the LAC. While delivering the annual K.F. Rustamji lecture on May 22, 2015, Doval pointed towards India's 3,488-km-long border, acknowledging that the border is a critical and vital issue in bilateral relations with China. Doval stated, "... advancement made in the relationship with China is centred around the settlement of the border ... making the 'partnership' all the more unstable." This can be interpreted as a tacit acceptance that the Special Representative talks have not made path-breaking headway as yet.

Conclusion

India and China remain the only countries in the world which are not separated by a mutually defined frontline. The detailing carried out through the numerous agreements makes little sense since there is no

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agreed frontline, till date, on the maps, let alone on the ground. The Chinese position of freezing an obdurate problem to be resolved “once the conditions are ripe,” in the words of Premier Zhou Enlai, has lucidly been put into practice in the border resolution talks – which, regrettably, India’s statecraft and political wandering on strategic issues, especially pertaining to China, fails to comprehend.

Beijing remains ardently intent at keeping alive the border dispute as a tactical pressure point against India. Demonstrating politico-military belligerence and stealth on various fronts appears to have become a defining feature of the Chinese strategy – one in which the existing and widening military asymmetry with India would be perfectly positioned at the opportune moment to launch a strike, seeing ‘the window of vulnerability’ and bring the dispute to a closure on Chinese terms and conditions.

The recurrent and tiring rounds of border talks have revealed that Beijing is not willing for a settlement on the basis of maintaining status quo. Beijing brazenly challenges even the total length of the Indo-China International Land Border, which runs 3,488 km according to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, and also acknowledged by Prime Minister Modi while addressing the India-China Business Forum in Shanghai on May 16, 2015. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that the unresolved state of the border suits the Chinese scheme of things.

Even during the recently concluded 19th round of talks on the boundary question between the Special Representatives from India and China, held in Beijing on April 20, 2016, the road ahead to resolve the dispute was “discussed”. Besides the border issue, the Representatives

had a “larger mandate to discuss all contentious bilateral, regional and international issues” according to a Press Trust of India release from Beijing. As has been underlined throughout the course of this paper, the focus and intent of resolving the border issue is totally absent from the Chinese side, and the Indian side too, appears to be playing along since it has not found success in creating adequate pressure on the Chinese to draw them in for a serious discussion. Beijing is unlikely

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to release the pressure by going in for an amicable border resolution and allow India space for greater strategic manoeuvrability as its Asian competitor. The Sino-Indian territorial and boundary dispute holds the potential of flaring up into a border conflict, limited or otherwise, placing the overall strategic balance in Southern Asia at risk. Though all mechanisms appear ostensibly promising on paper, they have abjectly failed in bringing about a tangible breakthrough to the boundary impasse, thereby adding to the operational challenges in attempting to revive a barren process that has been in flaccid motion for 35 years now. Delving deeper into history, the ancient military strategist, Sun Tzu, famously stated, “Engage people with what they expect ... It settles them into predictable patterns of response, while you wait for the extraordinary moment — that which they cannot anticipate”.

Notes

1. David Shambaugh, “Coping with a Conflicted China,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Winter 2011, p. 12.
2. Ibid.
3. Views expressed by Xia Liping, at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, cited in,

- "The Evolution of Chinese Views toward CBMs," in Michael Krepon, ed., Report No. 23, prepared for the Henry L Stimson Centre, May 1997.
4. Ibid.
 5. It would be pertinent to mention here that according to Chinese experts on strategic affairs, there is considerable optimism and confidence that China's boundary dispute with Bhutan may be resolved soon. This sentiment was expressed during a personal conversation with this author in China in August-September 2012.
 6. Zhao Gancheng, "South Asia's Position in the International Order and Choice Before China," *South Asian Studies Journal* (Chinese), No. 1, May 2010.
 7. Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, "New Foreign Policy Actors in China," *SIPRI Policy Paper*, No. 26, September 2010.
 8. For more details, see Monika Chansoria, "India and China: A Case of Constrained Cooperation," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 3, July-September 2011.
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