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## **GRT** INDIA-CHINA BORDER DISPUTE: A STUDY OF JOINT WORKING GROUP

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**Abstract:** Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in December 1988, the Joint Working Group (JWG) meetings have emerged as the most significant instrument by which India and China can tackle their border dispute. While the confidence-building measures (CBMs) dominated the program of the early talks of the JWG, the focus was shifted to the clarification of the line of actual control (LAC) after 1999. Thanks to the CBMs along the borders the aim of avoiding unexpected conflicts and military clashes along the disputed border has so far proved achievable. However the task of clarifying the alignment of the LAC seems to be more difficult than initiating the CBMs because there is division of opinion on the approach. Without further momentum or compulsion, maintaining the status quo along the border seems to be the best that can be hoped for in the foreseeable future.

**Keywords:** India-China, confidence-building measures, Joint Working Group, border dispute, peaceful co-existence.

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian and Chinese governments have attempted to resolve the border dispute through diplomatic negotiations since 1980. The border negotiations have been institutionalized and generated several meaningful footsteps. India-China relations entered a new phase with the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in December 1988. During his meetings with senior leaders of China, including Deng Xiaoping, Gandhi emphasized the promotion of "peaceful and friendly" ties between the two countries based on the doctrine of peaceful co-existence. He stated that, "India and China being the initiators of the five principles of peaceful co-existence can bring about sound development in Sino-Indian bilateral relations on the basis of these principles." His visit set a tone for positive 'atmospheric changes' in relations between them. Both sides agreed to break an impasse on the boundary question and to maintain peace and stability in the zones on both sides of the line of actual control (LAC).<sup>1</sup> An important outcome of this visit was the formation of the Joint Working Group (JWG) in early 1989, which among the other issues in Sino-Indian relations discussed their border dispute. The China daily described this visit as a major event of high significance in bilateral ties and a positive reaction to this country's 'repeated invitations'. It further described it as part of the effort made by both countries to increase mutual understanding and trust on the basis of peaceful coexistence rather than a step that will bring about instant dramatic changes in Sino-Indian relations.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the early 1990s witnessed flurry of unprecedented activity between the two countries. The numbers of high level visits by the leaders of both countries have infused confidence and trust between them. This memento in India-China relations was raised to an even higher leveling in May 1992 when the then Indian President R. Venkatraman visited China. The communiqué issued at the end of the visit reiterated the India- China position of setting aside differences and concentrating on areas of common interest and concern. During the then visit the Chinese President warned that "if India and China did not seize the opportunity to strengthen bilateral links, they would be bullied by others."<sup>3</sup> In 1991, the then Chinese Premier Le Peng paid a visit to India, the first visit by a Chinese Prime Minister after a gap of 31 years. During the visit leaders of both states agreed to maintain peace and tranquility in the area along the line of actual control pending the final settlement.<sup>4</sup> The leadership of the two countries also agreed that the difficult boundary question needs to be tackled with patience over a period of time.

The then Chinese Ambassador to India, Chen Ruisheng expressed optimism that an agreement could be

signed during the proposed visit of Prime Minister PV Narsimha Rao to China. In September 1993, The then Indian Prime Minister PV Narsimha Rao and Chinese Premier Li F'eng, met at Beijing and formalized CBMs to ensure peaceful borders, which could become live due to the intractable India-China borders dispute.<sup>5</sup>

The process of normalization has also coincided with perceptible changes in China's attitude towards South Asia. In principle India and China have agreed to maintain the status quo on the border till a solution is found to accommodate each other's specific territorial interests. China has been emphasizing regional cooperation at the SAARC level and a peaceful resolution of differences through bilateral dialogue among South Asian nations. It is in this context that, Beijings' position on Kashmir has changed. It is now no more circumspect and has maintained neutrality over Kashmir problem and emphasized on the adherence to the Shimla agreement. The then Foreign Minister of Cgina Qian Quichen's statement in New Delhi in March 1994 and subsequently Chinese statements on this issue have echoed this new position and is in line with the Indian official posture.<sup>6</sup> The India-China Joint Working Group (JWG) on the boundary question held its seventh meeting in Beijing on 6-7 July 1994. The India-China expert group has also completed its third round of talks in New Delhi on 04 March 1995 and decided that their border personnel should meet with each other at two additional points. The eighth round of the India-China JWG on border talks concluded in their meeting on 19 August 1995 in New Delhi and agreed to withdraw troops from four posts (two on either side) in the eastern sector. As a result, the two countries withdraw two posts at Kunming and Arunachal Pradesh on 13 December 1995. New Delhi and Beijing on 24 July 1996 agreed to resume their border talks shortly after the scheduled meeting of their then two Foreign Ministers I.K. Gujrat and Qian Qichen in Jakarta. India and China signed four agreements on confidence building measures (CBMs) along the LAC on 29 November 1996. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman expressed optimism that 1996 agreement would create a conducive spirit and will facilitate towards a final solution of the border dispute.<sup>7</sup> The visit of the then Chinese President Jiang-Zemin to India became the first visit by a President of the People's Republic of China to India. This visit gave important contribution in the normalization of India-China relations. In the aftermath of the Indian nuclear tests and controversy over the "China threat" issue, the latter reported that no progress whatsoever over the border talks on 12 June 1998. In response to this future New Delhi also rejected Beijing's claim to Arunachal Pradesh in a statement in the Parliament on 23 June 1998. As an extension of the Chinese position India-China border talks were stalled as reported on 30 June 1999. The two sides again proposed to settle the border issue and made an announcement to this effect February 1999. On 25 February 1999 Spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs in India announced on the commencement of talks about the border issue with China. After two days of "exploratory" talks New Delhi and Beijing refused to comment on the outcome to the press in a statement on 01 March 1999. The then Indian Defence Minister stated on 07 April 1999 that they purpose to resume border talks with in a month. Accordingly on 28 April 1999 the Chinese Foreign Minister and the Indian Foreign secretary met for talks on the border issue. A Chinese spokesman hoped that the two sides would manage the border talks suitably. In between India made allegations against Chinese violation of border. On 17 February 2000 China denied that it had violated the LAC with India in response to reports in a section of the Indian media that the Chinese PLA had constructed bunkers and roads in the Aksai Chin area of Ladakh during the Pakistani military intrusions into the Kargil sector since early 1999. On the conclusion of the twelfth meeting of the JWG on the boundary issue said on 01 may 2000 both observed that they would meet often as necessary to discuss the problem<sup>8</sup>.

After a meeting held on 28 July 2001, the Indian spokesperson stated that talks had been held in a friendly and constructive atmosphere but it did not revealed much. The subsequent meetings yielded little more. In fourteenth meeting held in Beijing in March 2002, the two sides agreed to a time frame for clarifying the LAC.<sup>9</sup> Chinese, Prime Minister Zhu Rongji's visit to India in 2002, played a very important role in the normalization of India-China relations. The trip of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to China from June 22 to 27, 2003 represents a decisive step towards normalization. It was by and large an efforts towards realising peaceful relationship for over a decade now, as the India-China relationship has undoubtedly been, need not necessarily be a normal relationship.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, this visit in the end successfully added its own shine and spark to the long drawn India-China rapprochement so assiduously evolved since early 1970s. The fact that two sides signed nine MoUs and agreements on the very first day of their formal interactions clearly showed a certain level of mutual good will and maturity though these agreements covering mostly routine matters of facilitation and nothing really new or substantive. The more substantive issues were to be slowly hammered out in the two critical documents- the joint statements issued at the time of visit of important leaders of the live courtesies and MoUs signed at that live. Mandarins from both sides were as if splitting their hair into the very wee hours of their second day of interactions in Beijing with uncertainty writ large in most media commentaries. In the end, however, the two sides were able to give final shape to these two documents in time thus making them the hallmark of Prime Minister Vajpayee's China visit of June 2003. Besides, the two sides also believed to have verbally indicated agreements on various other issues that may or may not become known with passage of time. It is this unsaid part which has perhaps led many to describe Vajpayee's China visit as having heralded new stage in India-China ties<sup>11</sup> The joints statement clearly makes several important decisions including: (a) agreeing for annual meetings between their foreign ministers; and (b) taking the boundary negotiations to the political level by appointing two very important people Brijesh Mishra from India and Dai Bingguo from China

as special representative to provide a “political perspective” to their ongoing boundary negotiations.<sup>12</sup> In spite of these factors, India and China have shown interest in improving military to military ties through greater interactions between officers and more cooperation on the high seas to combat arms smuggling and piracy.<sup>13</sup> Both countries had also outlined a rather ambitious timetable for exchanging maps on all three sectors of their borders as also actually exchanged maps for the central sector in time<sup>14</sup>. This ambitious process of exchanging maps had since been derailed and needed to be strengthened.

Subsequent visit of the Chinese premier Jiabao to India in 2005 provided a further fillip to bilateral relationship. In June 2006, the visit the then Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee to China led to several crucial confidence building measures (CBMs) between the armed forces of the two countries. The joint declaration issued in New Delhi, on the eve of Chinese President Hu Jintao's India's visit on 21 November 2006, envisaged the commitment of both India and China to pursue ten pronged strategy with a view to fully realize the substantial potential for their cooperation in a wide range of areas to upgrade India-China relations to a qualitatively new level and to further substantiate and reinforce their strategic and cooperative partnership.<sup>15</sup> In May 2007, China denied the application for visa from an Indian Administrative Service officer in Arunachal Pradesh. According to China, since Arunachal Pradesh is a territory of China, would not need a visa to visit his own country. Later in December 2007, China appeared to have reversed its policy by granting a visa to Marpe Sora, an Arunachal born professor in computer science. In January 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited China and met with President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao and had bilateral discussions related to trade, commerce, defense, military and various other issues. The year 2008 started with the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to China in January and the two Prime Ministers signed a statement entitled, “The Shared Vision of India and China for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. That signified the pace of transition of the nature of their relations from bilateral to global. There were no dramatic announcements during the visit. But it showed normally of the developing relations particularly in trade and culture. The Olympics was a testing time.<sup>16</sup> The way Indian Government handled the march of the Olympic torch in New Delhi allowing the peaceful march of the torch bearers while permitting the Tibetans to demonstrate at a distance illustrated the care with which the Government of India pursued the balanced policy.

The year 2011 began on a positive note with the spillover effects on Chinese Premier Wen Jiabo's visit to India in December 2010. That visit was primarily heavy on economic content and there was no significant breakthrough expect that Premier Wen Jiabao reiterative China's already stated position in India's terms of aspiration to play an important role in United Nation Security Council.<sup>17</sup> There was no pronouncement on the vexing issue of stapled visa issued to Indian Citizens of Jammu & Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh, which had past a shadow on the bilateral relationship between the two countries. Significantly, such bilateral contacts did not result in the resolution of many bilateral problems. The 15<sup>th</sup> Special Representative meeting was held on 16-17 January, 2012 after this was postponed by China from December 2011 due to the Dalai Lama's valedictory speech to the International Buddhist convention in December 2011 at New Delhi. This meeting was the last to be attended by Dai Bingguo, who is expected to remit the office of State Councilor following the changes expected at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in last 2012. Dai had been the continuing figure in all the previous special Representative meetings, which the Indian Counterparts changed from Brijesh Mishra, JN Dixit, MK Narayanan and current National Security Advisor Shiv Shanker Menon. First meeting decided to establish “Working Mechanism on Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs”. This mechanism was suggested during the December 2010 Premiers meet at New Delhi and ratified by PM Manmohan Singh and President Hu Jintao at Sanya in April 2011.<sup>18</sup> First meeting of this mechanism, led by the joint secretary in the foreign ministry, met at Beijing quickly on 5-6 march, 2012 and decided to meet once or twice a year and also utilize teleconference facilities during emergency situations. Secondly, both the representatives agreed to prepare a joint record of the deliberations so far. Third the meeting emphasized on coordination between the two countries at the regional and global levels. A following of the latter proposal led to discussions later on the developments in West Asia, Africa and other areas. This is a major change as China had during the cold war viewed India in the South Asian ambit. To recall, in November 2006, during the visit of Priesdent Hu Jintao to Delhi, both suggested working at the South Asian levels.<sup>19</sup>

In 2014, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj too decided to skip the event and chose to visit Dhaka around the same time, sending a rather strong signal. If Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, who is expected to visit India in September, decided to depart from the Panchsheel framework and embark on a new relationship, both countries will benefit. Both leaders have that ability. Both enjoy the trust and confidence of their countries. Most importantly, both are seen to be out-of-the-box leaders.

India and China can cooperate with each other on the principles of sovereign equality and mutual sensitivity. China has emerged as an economic super-power, but is exposal to serious internal and external threats. It is facing problems with almost all of its 13 neighbors. The fact that China spends more money on internal security than on external security speaks volumes about its internal vulnerability. So, while India is not as big economically as China, its security apparatus is better-placed.

Modi and Xi can chart a new course in Sino- Indian relations if they are prepared to unshackle themselves from ritualism and symbolism. Both have the ability and the support to do it.



## CONCLUSION

In the joint declaration both countries articulated satisfaction by in their all round progress made in recent years in India China relations and progress made in their regional and multilateral cooperation. While noting that the relationship between New Delhi and Beijing are of global and strategic significance, the joint declaration reiterated. Each side welcomed and took positive view of the developments of the other, and considered the development of either side as a positive contribution to peace, stability and prosperity of Asia and the world. Both sides hold the view that there exist huge prospects for their common development. Thus, the process of normalization between India-China relations has gained new momentum in the aftermath of Xi Jinping's visit to India.

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