

# The Sino-Indian Border Problem

Manoj Joshi

For the past several decades, the issue of the Sino-Indian border has preoccupied specialists, commentators, Governments and researchers. Through the eighties whether the border issue had to be resolved before Sino-Indian normalisation occurred or whether it could be kept aside even while steps were taken for normalisation were recurrent themes. A sub-theme was whether or not the border issue could be resolved "sector-by-sector" or whether it had to be settled in one package. It is recognised today that the Sino-Indian border has become a back-burner issue, it is nevertheless clearly understood that the efforts for its resolution have to be the fulcrum of any Sino-Indian relationship in the near term. An unsettled border will mean that relations between India and China can, to use a mathematical analogy, tend towards normalisation but never quite attain it.

Following six days of talks between the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in April 1960, the latter had a 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hour press conference whose substance could be broken down into six points around which revolved the discussion and comment on this vexed issue for the next two decades. These were:

1. That the two sides accept that there is a dispute;
2. There is a Line of Actual Control upto which both sides exercise jurisdiction;
3. In determining boundaries geographical principles like watersheds ought to be applicable on all sectors;
4. A settlement of the boundary ought to take into account the national feelings of the peoples of the two countries to the Himalayas and Karakoram;
5. Pending settlement both sides should recognise LAC and not put forward territorial claims as preconditions but individual adjustments can be made; and

---

The author Dr. Manoj Joshi is Special Correspondent, *The Hindu*, New Delhi.

6. In order to ensure peace and tranquility both sides should refrain from patrolling all sectors of the boundary.<sup>1</sup>

In 1990, India took a giant step to resolve the border dispute with China. In the second Joint Working Group meeting held in Delhi, in August 1990, it told the Chinese that it accepted there was a border dispute; that it was willing to negotiate an entirely new alignment to the Sino-Indian border; thirdly it proposed an alignment while broadly indicating to the Chinese the limits of flexibility of its new "negotiating position."

That insofar as the Chinese were concerned, the issue was one of adjusting a border that had not been delineated or demarcated but not accepting that any territorial dispute existed. The point put across was that while "adjustments" were possible, "accommodations" that would drastically alter the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that presently constitutes the border were not.

From the points put across by the Indian side, it would seem that their "ideal" border line would approximate the Line of Actual Control on September 7, 1962 or a mutually accepted date prior to the outbreak of the Sino-Indian border war of October 1962. This is because the government would then be able to convince the Indian people that they have not accepted any settlement that has resulted from the military defeat of 1962.<sup>2</sup>

Does this mean that the Indian and Chinese negotiating positions on the border issue are now converging and what they are really waiting for is political support and direction?

This is still difficult to call. But it is clear from the tone and tenor of the Sino-Indian relationship that the border issue has been successfully nudged off the main agenda. The initial Chinese response to the Indian offer was that nothing had changed and a reiteration of their hardline position of the mid-1980s. Disappointed Indian officials said at the end of 1991 after another round of JWG meetings that as of now the Indian offer was hanging in the air. But following the visit of the Chinese Premier Li Peng to New Delhi the Chinese position had softened somewhat into accepting the fact that a positive shift had occurred.

Between 1960 and 1985, the Chinese had their negotiating position of trading off their claim in the East with the Indian claim in the West. This was a reasonable and workable position since all it did was to ratify the status quo. But a generation of officials who

had served Mr. Nehru still remained in important advisory positions, particularly Mr G. Parthasarthy.<sup>3</sup> The talks between India and China continued in a sterile cycle which could not prevent the Sumdorong Chu crisis of 1986-87 which almost created a new border war. One of the major reasons for the virulence of the crisis was the lack of transparency of the two sides as regards to the military dispositions of either side as well as a total opacity of understanding of the military perspectives. In fact the Chinese were perhaps well informed about movements at the Indian border and what they saw alarmed them sufficiently to begin a counter buildup. The less said about the RAW assessments of the Chinese in Tibet the better. But because of the lack of transparency in general it was possible for people to speculate in a somewhat dangerous fashion.<sup>4</sup>

It was only when Mr Rajiv Gandhi with his characteristic flair for bold solutions took the bit between his teeth and visited Beijing that the long-jam was broken. This return visit of the Indian Prime Minister may even now remain Rajiv Gandhi's more enduring legacy. He was ready to expend political capital and that appears to be the key that will unlock the door to a settlement. Now, after taking the totality of the Indian response through the Governments of Rajiv Gandhi, V.P. Singh, Chandrashekhar and P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Chinese have begun to accept that the Indians are indeed ready to negotiate the border dispute seriously. But another phase will come when some more political will is required to be spent.

The talks so far has comprised of eight rounds of border talks and Joint Working Group meetings. The JWG is not all that different from the earlier group except that it signals the intent of the two sides to talk seriously on the border. It also has the provision of involving personnel from other services besides those of the Foreign Ministry. Currently there is a possibility that the level of military involvement will be stepped up since maintenance of Peace and Tranquility has emerged as an important goal and accepted as such by the two sides.

The earlier set of talks meandered from the original round in December 1981 to the eighth round in November 1987. It was in the second round on May 17-20, 1982 that the Deng proposal was formally broached in Delhi. There was no Indian response. So by its offer at the JWG in 1990, India has planted the ball firmly back in Beijing's court. However, not because of what we have said at

the JWG but for a variety of other reasons, the formal Chinese position on the border question appears to be harder than it was in 1982. Perhaps this is just the process of reacting to the Sumdorong Chu episode but more likely it is a response to Indian stone-walling in the mid-1980s and inability to focus on the issue that changed the Chinese position, but whatever be the cause, the formal position as of 1986 has not changed and this is:

“...there are disputes over all the eastern, middle and western sectors of the Sino-Indian boundary, the eastern sector being the most disputed area.”<sup>5</sup>

Looking at their statements since 1987, there is room for doubt first as to whether the Zhou and Deng packages are still their basic negotiating position, and second, as to whether the Chinese wish to resolve the border problem at this juncture.

#### A matrix of settlement?

The matrix below that emerges from the two set of ideas and principles floating around shows that an International Border can be negotiated around the present Line of Actual Control which would fit with the requirements of the two sides.

*Zhou Enlai 1960:* A settlement of the boundary question between the two countries should take into account the “national feelings of the two people towards the *Himalayas* and the *Karakoram* mountains.”

*India 1990:* A settlement should not legitimise the gains of *armed intervention* and should be based on *logistical convenience* and *administrative considerations*.

*Deng 1980:* The settlement should be on the basis of *Mutual Understanding and Mutual Accommodation*.

*India 1987:* The settlement should be on the basis of *Mutual Adjustment and Mutual Understanding*.

The debate really has been as to what is the import of the word “concessions” the Chinese are referring to? Are they the same as “adjustments” of the Line of Actual Control to accommodate mutually acceptable principles such as the watersheds, history and the like or “Accommodation” of substantive Chinese claims in the Eastern sector such as the Tawang tract or even Arunachal?

The Indian negotiating position is based on our formula called MAMU (Mutual Adjustment and Mutual Understanding). This means that we are essentially for resolving the border on the basis of "adjustments" of the Line of Actual Control. The Indian position now is that instead of talking endlessly about who was occupying what at a particular date, it is willing to take up the delimitation of the entire Sino-Indian frontier based on the principles of "logistical considerations and administrative convenience" as well as geographical principles. Historical issues such as the legality of the McMahon Line etc. could be set aside.

For example insofar as the Western and Central sectors are concerned the Indian formulation of 1990 and the Zhou offer of 1960 can be met by the Karakoram and Himalayan watersheds. "Logistical considerations" would mean that India realise the importance of the Xinjiang-Tibet highway to China while "administrative convenience" would mean that China recognise the integration of the Tawang tract and Arunachal with India since the dispute began.

A set of concessions that India can offer to the Chinese is to accept that while the IB in the East will follow the McMahon Line (without necessarily calling it so and merely referring to it as the LAC) it will follow the strict interpretation of the McMahon Line resulting in India conceding its claim of Thagla to the Chinese and possibly even, in a final settlement, Hathung La ridge, and Khinzemane, Tamaden and other points that may be North of the McMahon Line.

It is clear that the two sides are now holding negotiating positions that are workable, require requisite political direction in this sensitive area to begin the process of agreeing on principles that can be applied to mutual satisfaction.<sup>6</sup> Obviously what these "principles" will depend on the constituencies that the Indian and Chinese leaders have to handle. In India, political will would mean expending valuable political capital to undo the mischief done by over-zealous officials who led Prime Minister Nehru and the political leadership to take the wrong decisions between 1954 and 1962.

From the Chinese side, it would mean the ability of Mr. Li Peng to convince fellow members of his ruling troika of Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin and President Yang Shungkun as well as the *eminence grise*, Deng Xiaoping that a settlement of the

border issue and normalisation of relations with India will be strategically useful to China in this new era of world politics.

#### **Assessing the problem: The Li Peng visit and after**

Mr. Li Peng's remarks at the banquet speech, during his visit to India, in the function hosted by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, as well as during the talks have failed to remove a shade of ambiguity over the Chinese position today. On the one hand Mr. Li has spoken about mutual understanding taking history and status quo into account, and on the other he has reiterated the call for Mutual Accommodation meaning concessions by both sides. This "mutual understanding and mutual Accommodation" (MUMA) is the Chinese code which we must interpret. Mr. Li Peng has amplified that MU means "we should respect history and also respect the status quo", the "problem" is the MA. What does Mr. Li Peng mean when he says "that there should be concessions on both sides"?

It needs to be noted however that the visit was very warmly commented in the Chinese press and following its conclusion the *People's Daily* noted:

The people of China and India have a tradition of friendship...Because of various reasons, the relations between two sides were estranged for sometime.

Earlier in the editorial the *People's Daily* noted that the 1988 agreement between the two Prime Ministers were the "basis for the settlement of the border issue," and now the two Premiers (Li Peng and P.V. Narasimha Rao) talks and "its specific plans and measures have created a good atmosphere to settle the border problem. We believe that both sides should be sincere and patient, an appropriate solution for the border problem will be reached..."

Notwithstanding this we must enter a caveat relating to the complexity of the problem itself. There are issues like the Kashmir dispute which also interface with the Sino-Indian problem in the case of the cession of the Shaksgam Valley to China by Pakistan in 1963. Of course the Sino-Pak agreement of 1963 quite properly notes that the settlement will be finally contingent on the resolution of the Indo-Pak dispute on Kashmir.

A second problem could be the status of Sikkim. China has not recognised the accession of Sikkim to India. In recent times

there has been a tendency on the Chinese side to send subtle signals to the effect.

A third, and possibly emerging problem could be of the status of Tibet. If Tibet seems like it is about to leave the Chinese orbit, the logical question could be: why negotiate the border with China. In a world where Leningrad is once again becomes St. Petersburg it is difficult to rule out anything; but our own submission would be that the hypothetical event of Tibetan freedom ought not distract our current negotiating posture which is to be based on principles current to today's world rather than historical claims and treaties.

If we assume, the formal Chinese position is merely their negotiating posture which arose out of legitimate frustration with the Indian side's coolness to the Deng offer, not a final position, then there is very little difference between the two positions which in essence are outlined by the above statement.

The key issue is of course of our understanding of China. Most observers say that China is deeply committed to economic reforms and does not want anything to distract itself from this effort, especially one so expensive as a military commitment in Tibet. Indian Defence Minister, Mr. Sharad Pawar was repeatedly reminded, during his recent visit to China, of the expense of maintaining troops in the high altitude areas.<sup>10</sup>

In addition with the end of the Soviet Union, the major Chinese fear of a Soviet-Indian axis has receded. Even the contentious international issues like Afghanistan and Cambodia have been removed from the tables as it were. The Joint Communique issued following the Li Peng visit last December indicated a fairly sharp convergence in the world views of India and China.

### **The wider global context**

At the global level, the Chinese are feeling the pressure of changed circumstances. Their relative importance to the US has declined and the post-Tiananmen situation is still negative though the Chinese have succeeded in retrieving it to a great extent. Nevertheless a changed Administration in Washington can have a negative consequences, already the writing appears to be on the wall. But the Chinese have not been entirely unaware of the shifting balance of power since Gorbachev's accession to power.<sup>11</sup>

The Chinese, though feeling that they are the new target of the

America's New World Order, they have not allowed any grass to gather under their feet. They have moved significantly to restore their relationship with Russia and re-entered into a substantive arms transfer relationship with them. It needs to be recalled that virtually all of China's conventional arsenal was built by Soviet licence dating back to the 1950s. The Chinese as a member of the Permanent Five of the UN Security Council and a nuclear weapons power view themselves as a class apart from India. But this is not just the Chinese self-view but is of the rest of the world as well.

They have also come up with an alternative formulation of the World Order which as outlined in the Sino-Indian Joint Communique of December 16, 1991:

"Every country, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor is an equal member of the international community entitled to participate in the decision-making and settlement of international affairs."<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless they have also opposed the idea of expanding the Security Council or substantially reforming the world body. They have moved with regard to India and the ASEAN. In the Manila Ministerial meeting they sought to defuse worries regarding their claim over the Spratlys. In their presence as observers at the 10th Non-Aligned Summit at Jakarta, they may be signaling a new phase in which the Chinese will seek to emerge as the leaders of the Third World though it should be clear, sans ideology.

The Chinese have played the power game with great skill, ruthlessness and determination. Power, not principles, appears to drive their policy. They used their veto in the United Nations to overcome the post-Tiananmen diplomatic isolation and subsequently they have used their 'abilities' in the area of nuclear and ballistic missile technology to extract other concessions as well. They have also used their interdependence with the US to some advantage such as selecting an American company to explore oil in the Spratlys, or providing the McDonnell-Douglas Corporation the biggest-ever civil aircraft deal.

Another aspect of this was visible on the issue of the Chinese participation in the Five-Nation discussions on nuclear weapons in South Asia. The Chinese made it clear that they were working on the formula—Three plus Two (i.e. Three 'Big' Powers Russia, America and China to guarantee any settlement arrived at by the



'Two'—India and Pakistan). The American insistence that Chinese would be part of the substantive dialogue to assuage India's security perceptions vis-a-vis China were answered by the powerful nuclear test carried out during President R. Venkataraman's visit to China in May. The message, in our view, was to the US and not to India.

The Chinese have made important though limited moves towards India and maintained their important relationship with Pakistan. Good relations with India have an intrinsic value as well a subsidiary, though important goal, to ensure that India does not slip into the Western camp and further imbalance the global balance of power. Relations with the rest of South Asia are good though the developments in Burma appear to be somewhat enigmatic.

In addition they appear to be consolidating their gains with the Iranians. The new situation presents them with unique opportunities and contrary to the view that they fear Islamic fundamentalism and thus will take an isolationist posture in the Xinjiang region, they are viewing it as business opportunity and the newly opened railway line to Russia and onwards to Europe is the focus of their efforts.

In the South China Sea the Chinese have moved forward staking their claim to the region, but with all due caution since it involves problems relating to all of South-east Asia and the Chinese would not like, at this juncture, to alarm the region unduly and have the negative impact of re-inflating the shrinking American presence. In 1997 their posture will be enormously enhanced by the accession of Hong Kong, the only deep water mooring in that part of the world.

In this matrix, India is important and yet not important to the Chinese. A realpolitik prognosis is that with its priority for economic development of the coastal regions, meeting the challenge of demands for greater political freedoms, the assimilation of Hong Kong and the economic transformation of the Mainland China would not be focussing on the Sino-Indian border in a significant way except to ensure that it does not come up with unpleasant surprises to derail these priorities.

### **Confidence Building Measures**

The Indian case on the border is not necessarily weak and neither is the Chinese case irrefutable. As it is the region was

poorly mapped. Given the terrain there was a peculiar problem because most of it was uninhabited thus complicating the task of determining who was where, and even what is where, in this vast region. Given the good "atmosphere" and positive trend of relations there is need on our part to remove the wilderness of mirrors set up in the past which keep on fostering illusions. There are many fears about how a settlement can be sold to the people or whether the Parliament resolution of 1962 can be overcome and so on. The simple point is that if the people are bluntly told the truth, a settlement can be reached. The circumstances and policy impulses of the time need to be clearly put forward, a good starting point can be the publication of the Henderson-Brooks' report. The issue of the Parliament resolution too is no problem since it pertains to *Indian* territory and obviously does not relate to what was not ours, notwithstanding possibly, erroneous claims.

Then, for example the Government now has in its possession a file noting of Jawaharlal Nehru observing that he had been misled by officials into pushing the change boundaries of India in the official Survey of India map of 1954. It is well known that the Survey of India map of 1950 had shown the border in the Aksai Chin area, the area to the west of the Karakoram Pass, and the Central sector of UP and Himachal as "border undefined" but with a colour wash indicating the extent of Indian territory. In the east, a broken line following the McMahon Line showed the border as being defined but undemarcated. Even the map attached to the White Paper on Indian States in 1950 showed the border in this way.<sup>13</sup>

In 1954, in an act of rare folly, the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs decided to draw a hard line instead all across, preparing a map of India as we see it now by fiat rather than negotiation. This led to the sequence of events that have kept India and China at loggerheads over the border since. Subsequently too, politicians without any serious thought or caution impelled the Government along a path it had rashly chosen. This path led to the tragedy of 1962. Undoing this and rendering the map of India as it ought to be drawn would be another step in removing the veil of illusion that has been drawn over the eyes of the public for these many years.

In short to medium term, the key goal for Sino-Indian relations is to ensure Peace and Tranquility, obviously a range of other

Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) are indicated. This has been the thrust of the growing transparency sought by the armed forces of the two sides. This has added a new element to the MUMA-MAMU equation, and this is a constant "T" which stands for "Trust." The decision to have flag-meetings on the border, the hot-line arrangements, Pawar visit, the visits of the delegation of the United Services Institution are part of this exercise. Soon we may have a PLA Navy goodwill visit to an Indian port. An important aspect of this has been the stepping up or, the proposal to step up, the level of military representation in the JWG talks.

The military equation between India and China is a peculiar one. If India has the tactical edge, it is hopelessly placed with regard to nuclear-armed China whose main centres are out of range of the Indian Air Force. Nevertheless, the Chinese have shown, as indeed they showed with regard to the Chequerboard crisis, that events on the border do concern them. They have also hinted about the nature of some light-armour dispositions which make them uncomfortable in Northern Sikkim and South-eastern Ladakh. The current assessments are that the Chinese deployments in Tibet are very laid back with their main force focussed on Lhasa to prevent internal revolt. So the Chinese concern has been defensive and more to do with their desire to ensure that no action occurs that is likely to embarrass them rather than with a view of destabilising the Indian positions. They cannot be unaware that India has moved some two divisions from the East to Kashmir and Punjab and also some other formations from forward deployments on the border.

### **A Proposal to enhance Peace and Tranquility**

The LAC, as it exists, is not properly defined as the LoC of 1972 with Pakistan, which is set down in a mosaic of 25 or so maps each duly initialled by the then local commanders of the respective sectors of either side. The LAC is therefore open to innumerable disputes of the Sumdorong Chu variety. The first step could be an effort to see whether or not the two sets of military officials with surveyors and mountaineers can sit down and work out a mutually acceptable LAC. In essence this means to decide mutually as to who sits where? This can be done at the local level since the local commanders know who is sitting in which feature? The process of determining this is important given the nature of the terrain, which

cannot in most cases be permanently occupied and is only intermittently patrolled or manned.

A sincere effort to actually work out a mutually acceptable LAC could take several years and would involve give and take since there are places that may have to be traded—we may be sitting in an enclave of no particular use, or we may want some part of the Chinese side which may have the only water source around for miles. The very process would help to map this region and determine what is where, build confidence and trust as well as take a giant step in assuring Peace and Tranquility by ensuring that there is actually an LAC that both sides recognise as such without prejudice to their respective cases.

### NOTES

1. See Dorothy Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers: A Political Review of British, Chinese, Indian and Russian Rivalries* (London, Barrie and Rockliff, 1965) pp. 256-257.
2. M(anoj) J(oshi), "Falling hurdles: Towards a solution to the border problem," *Frontline* (Madras) January 3, 1992, pp. 11-14.
3. See Appan Menon's interview of A.P. Venkateswaran in *Frontline*, May 16-26, 1987. Venkateswaran confirms that the proposal on the trade-off was made first by Zhou, then by Deng to a journalist and to G. Parthasarthy in 1982. He indirectly confirms the refusal by people of Parthasarthy's generation to respond adequately.
4. See Neville Maxwell, "Towards India's Second China War," *South* (London) May 1987 pp. 80-83. "Withdraw troops China tells India," *The Times of India*, (Delhi) June 17, 1987 cites a *Washington Post* report saying that Mr. Yang Shunkun had told officials in Washington D.C. that if the Indian posts in Chinese territory were not withdrawn, then it would be forced to take action. See also Manoj Joshi, "The comparative armed might," *Frontline*, May 18-19, 1987, pp. 17-21; and "Quite Activity on the Border," *The Hindu*, May 26, 1987.
5. See *Xinhua* Statement datelined Beijing of August 22, 1986.
6. See A.G. Noorani, "Mending fences," *Frontline*, December 20, 1991, pp. 26-29.
7. See n.2.
8. Editorial in *People's Daily*, December 17, 1991 (translation courtesy Ministry of External Affairs).
9. *Ibid.*
10. See "Sino-Indian Ties Gain Strength," *The Statesman* (Delhi) July 31, 1992; see also Manoj Joshi, "Coming Closer: Sharad Pawar's China Visit," *Frontline* August 28, 1992.
11. See note 1 in Hua Di "One super power is worse than one," *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, August 1991.
12. See text in *China Daily*, December 17, 1991.
13. Manoj Joshi, "India-China Border: Time for the leadership to act," *The Hindu*, August 30, 1990; see also n. 2, p. 14