
Asia

Talks on the Sino-Indian border dispute: the ritual continues

by Susan and Ramtanu Maitra

For the seventh time in the last four and a half years, Indian and Chinese officials sat around the table on July 21 in Beijing to discuss the disputed borders between the two countries, and for the seventh time they failed to make any headway. The officials talked on the same old stalemated concepts, and promised to meet for the eighth round in New Delhi next year.

The ritual belied expectations built up around Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's "very friendly" meeting with Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang in New York early this year, that a political breakthrough may be in the making. In early June in Beijing, Liu Shuqing, Chinese vice-minister for foreign affairs, had told visiting Indian journalists that China wanted a negotiated solution to the dispute.

However, on July 15, the Indian foreign ministry suddenly surfaced allegations that the Chinese had crossed the line of actual control and moved into Arunachal Pradesh, a northeastern Indian state. The charges, flashed on the front page by all leading dailies, concerned a month-old event in which some 40 Chinese, both in and out of uniform, were spotted six to seven kilometers inside Indian territory. The Indian government, the news flash noted, had sent its protest to China. A subsequent Chinese statement denied any intrusion into "Indian territory," and counter-alleged that Indian troops had regularly made incursions into China.

A senior Indian foreign ministry official reported, the Chinese intrusion took place in the Kameng division of Arunachal Pradesh and in the vicinity of Sumdorong Chu Valley. The area is easily accessible to China, while India reportedly must make a special effort to maintain vigil in this sector.

Although Indian Foreign Secretary A. P. Venkateswaran, head of the Indian delegation to Beijing, assured that the talks were indeed still "on," the publicity move had already had its effect. In India, the Sino-Indian border issue is an emotional touchstone: China still occupies 37,000 square kilometers of what India claims as its territory, as a result of the military humiliation it delivered to India in 1962. Revelation of new Chinese moves creates a surge of vengeful suspicion in the Indian mind.

What is at stake

As with the previous six, the seventh round of border talks centered on a 2,500-mile-long Sino-Indian border broken up into three different sectors. In the eastern sector, which stretches from the trijunction with Bhutan to the trijunction of Burma, the present line of actual control, known as the McMahon Line, which follows for the most part the watershed line of the Himalayas, is recognized by India as the legitimate border between China and India. China rejects the Indian claim. The border in the middle sector, which is entirely demarcated by the Himalayan watershed, is agreeable to both.

The western sector is a major bone of contention, because of its strategic location. The area under Chinese control includes almost the entire Aksai Chin, a barren, bulb-like protrusion in the northeastern part of Kashmir, and a part of northeastern Ladakh adjoining the Aksai Chin area.

The present border negotiations began in December 1981, after a 15-year hiatus was broken in Sino-Indian relations following the 1962 war, with the establishment of ambassadorial links in 1976. In 1977, Yu Chan, Chinese vice-minister for foreign affairs, and Han Nienlung, vice foreign minister and head of the Chinese delegation in the first round of talks, told Indian journalists of the Chinese interest in re-establishing friendly relations with India. At that time, the Chinese advocated a discussion of political, cultural, and trade relations before tackling border negotiations.

In 1979, India's then-foreign minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, visited Beijing with the hope of breaking ground. But his trip was cut short rudely when China chose to "teach Vietnam a lesson" while the Indian foreign minister was in town.

Late in June 1981, Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua visited India. He had earlier met the late Indian prime minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, in Salisbury, and his party boss, Hua Guofeng, met her a month later in Belgrade. Hua's visit to Delhi ended with a friendly press conference in which he called for a "fair, reasonable, and comprehensive settlement" of the border dispute, taking into account the "historical

background, the present actual situation, and the national feelings of the two peoples.”

In December of that same year, two teams met for the first time since the 1962 war to discuss the border. As early as June 1981, in an interview with an Indian journalist, Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping had spelled out Chinese strategy: “While we can recognize the present line of actual control in the eastern sector, India should recognize the status quo in the western sector.” Deng was offering the Indians a package deal in which China keeps what it has already grabbed, and India gives something to China!

The Indians, for lack of a counter-proposal, made a sector-by-sector settlement their negotiating platform. (India was not prepared to insist that talks begin only after Chinese troops had been withdrawn in the western sector.) As a result, negotiations were effectively stalled at the procedural level.

Behind the stalemate

To the Chinese, the McMahon Line is a “cartographic boundary,” drawn by the colonialists. The Chinese note that the line, agreed between Imperial Britain and Tibet at Simla in 1914, was boycotted by the Chinese plenipotentiary under orders from Beijing.

In 1950 China invaded Tibet and annexed it militarily. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s claim that India recognized the “sovereignty” of China over Tibet but not its “sovereign” rights, did not have much weight against the Chinese military *fait accompli*. By the time Nehru finally raised the border dispute in 1958, China had already built the road through Aksai Chin. Nehru believed that bringing India and China together for the cause of non-alignment would preempt superpower designs in Asia. Chinese Premier Chou en-Lai was disarmingly receptive to the idea. The love-fest with China reached its feverish pitch at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in April 1955.

Nehru had earlier formulated the *Panch Shila*, or Five Principles, of non-interference and peaceful co-existence as Asia’s answer to the United States’ SEATO/CENTO pacts. Nehru saw his and Chou en-Lai’s signing of the declaration in New Delhi in 1954 as representing “a certain historic change in the relationships of forces in Asia.”

In 1956, when Chou visited India again, he skillfully avoided endorsing the validity of the demarcation, but agreed to accept the line as the border with India. Two years later, when Nehru wrote to Chou, following official protestation by the Indian government to a map published by *China Pictorial*, about settling “very minor border problems,” Chou’s response was ruthless. The McMahon Line was a “product of the British policy of aggression against the Tibet region of China,” Chou said, adding that this “illegal” line had never been “formally delimited” and that the Aksai Chin Highway had been built on Chinese territory.

Chou’s 1958 statement made plain what China had already demonstrated with hands and feet. China’s continuing

rejection of the McMahon Line—like its rejection of a sector-by-sector settlement—is rooted in China’s chief concern: hanging onto the strategic piece of real estate they have occupied in the western sector. China cannot afford to give up the threat of a substantial claim in the east without first gaining India’s acceptance of their land-grab in the west.

Chinese forces had remained all along the frontier they claim in the west, which coincides roughly with the watershed of the Karakoram range, after the 1962 war. During the war, China occupied a large amount of territory—almost 6,500 square kilometers—in northeastern Ladakh. But long before they started shooting, during the heyday of the slogan, *Hindi Chini bhai bhai* (“Indians and Chinese are brothers”), China had built the Aksai Chin Highway connecting its Xin-kiang Province with western Tibet across land India claims as its own.

Geo-strategic maneuvering

China’s concern for Aksai Chin is geo-strategic. Not only does it provide a crucial access-link between Tibet and Xin-kiang, but by occupying almost the entire area between the Karakoram and Kunlun ranges, China has virtually choked off India’s access to Central Asia.

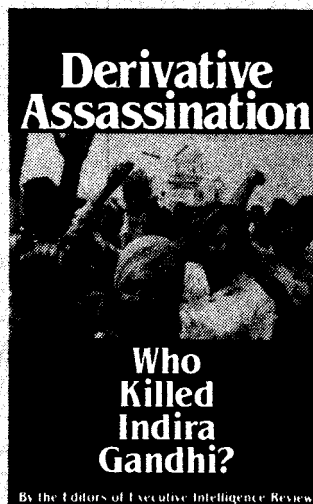
In 1963, China signed an agreement with Pakistan which endorsed Pakistan’s grab of Kashmir. The agreement recognized China’s border with “the contiguous areas, defense of

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which is under control of Pakistan," and added that "after the settlement of the dispute over Kashmir between Pakistan and India, the sovereign authorities concerned shall reopen negotiations with the Chinese government regarding the boundary of Kashmir, so as to sign a formal boundary treaty to replace the provisional agreement"

From the Indian side, the mistrust of China is not based entirely on China's rigid negotiating policy nor on the border issue per se. India believes that China has armed and trained the Mizo and Naga rebel insurgents in India's underdeveloped and politically sensitive northeastern border region. New Delhi also voiced its opposition to China's construction of the Karakoram Highway, opened in 1978, linking Pakistan to China.

Pakistan furthermore receives significant economic and military aid from China. Concerned with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, China has developed close contact with the Pakistani army. China has also reiterated its support for Pakistan's stand on the Kashmir dispute. Chinese support to Pakistan in 1971 to prevent the formation of Bangladesh and issuance of tough notes to India during the period did not go unnoticed in New Delhi.

China's intransigent back-handedness has been exploited by influential forces in India to make the India-China relationship a permanent problem. The most active *anti-China* lobby in India is the *Soviet* lobby, working through the left faction of the ruling Congress (I) Party, socialists, Communist Party members, pressmen, and some high-level bureaucrats. On the other side, Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang and Chinese Communist Party boss Hu Yaobang, during their recent separate trips through Europe, pointed out that China continues to view the close relationship between Delhi and Moscow as an impediment, if not a barrier, to better understanding with Beijing.

The Soviet Union does not want any betterment of relations between India and China. The image of India and China ganging up in Asia would ruin the Soviet dream of controlling the Indian Ocean. The Soviet Union's friendly relations with India are strictly determined by such perceptions of self-interest. Nehru's move to combine India and China, however premature it might have been, was not appreciated by the Kremlin bosses. One need only recall the pile of abuse the Soviet leadership routinely heaped upon Nehru in the post-Independence days.

India's Soviet lobby insists that, since the formation of a U.S.-China-Pakistan axis is aimed against India, any friendly gesture from China only hides evil intentions. They point in particular to the re-opening of the Chinese claim to 90,000 square kilometers in the eastern sector, as occurred in the last round of talks, when China agreed to India's demand for a sector-by-sector discussion. Never mind that the claim is the same exact hard-bargaining stance the Chinese have had from the beginning—in the 1950s, when the Soviets and Chinese were comrades—to today, when the Soviets are once again courting their long-lost comrades.

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