

Contested borders and national security: understanding the India-China tensions

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ABSTRACT

Though the border dispute has held great significance in India-China relations over the past 62 years, it has not hindered broader interaction between these two major international players, particularly in the post-Cold War era. China's economic growth and India's democratic polity have drawn the attention of many developed and developing nations. However, China's human rights record remains a contentious issue in international politics, especially within the neo-liberal framework of the post-Cold War period. It is in the interest of both India and China to resolve the border dispute amicably through mutual trust and confidence-building measures. A zero-sum approach by either side in settling the border dispute would provide external powers with an opportunity to exploit the volatile situation in the region, to the detriment of the security of both nations. The growing interaction between India, the United States, and Japan, while not explicitly targeting any country, disrupts China's unchallenged dominance in Asia. If China's communist leadership recognizes the urgency of addressing domestic and regional concerns—such as resolving the Tibetan struggle for genuine autonomy within the People's Republic of China (PRC) and reaching a border settlement with India along the McMahon Line - it would not only heal the wounds of the 1962 war but also provide a permanent solution to the Tibetan issue. These steps would enable China to focus more effectively on domestic challenges, including human rights violations, while enhancing its overall security. Notably, China has amicably resolved border disputes with countries such as Russia, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. This paper aims to examine the India-China border dispute from a security perspective.

Keywords: *Tibet, border dispute, human rights, post-Cold War, zero-sum game.*

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Introduction

The strategic significance of the Himalayan region lies in the fact that the boundaries of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and Myanmar converge. In addition, the area is the source of water for nearly half of the world population. The region is inhabited by people of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic faiths. This ethnic-religious mix makes the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region prone to conflict and external interventions. The Himalayan region had witnessed many major land-frontier disputes. Since 1947, India and Pakistan are locked in a conflict over Kashmir. The seven-decade old India–China border dispute remains unresolved and the Tibetan peaceful struggle for right to self-determination (UNESCO 1989) continues unabated.

This paper argues that Tibet is central to the India-China border problem and border dispute is the major security issue in the Himalayan region. The dispute can be resolved by China accepting Tibet's right to self-determination. Prior to Tibet's annexation by China in 1951 India and China did not have a common border. The restoration of buffer zone between India and China is essential to border settlement between the two countries and the security of the region. India maintained good relations with Tibet during the British period. However, with the signing of the India-China agreement of 1954 and the subsequent recognition of Tibet as the integral part of China, India forfeited many of the trading rights and diplomatic privileges that it enjoyed in Tibet.

Moreover, India's stand on the Tibetan issue at the United Nations (UN) in the 1950s, adversely affected the prospects of the UN intervention in the Tibet. India's idealist approach neither helped solve the Tibetan imbroglio nor did it aid the resolution of border dispute and thereby India's core security issues. In fact, India's idealism was reciprocated by realist policy of China which resulted in India-China war of 1962. However, despite the lingering Tibet and border dispute, the two most populous nations of the world have enhanced their economic engagements in the post-Cold War globalization era. The emergence of nontraditional threats to

national security has also necessitated greater cooperation between the two.

The Tibetan issue

The unresolved Tibetan issue is a challenge as well as an opportunity to enhanced India - China relations. The issue is embedded in the history of Tibetan nationalism and Tibet-China relations, which can be divided into four main periods. (Smith 1996; Goldstein 1989; Grunfeld 1987). The first phase from 630 to 842 represents the beginning of the consolidation of the Tibetan state and its consequent fall in 842. In the post fall phase, political unity continued to elude Tibet till mid-13th century, when Tibetan Lamas established a political—spiritual relationship known as ‘cho-yon’ or ‘priest-patron’ relationship with the Mongol empire. From 1260 to 1368 and then again from 1644 to 1911, Tibet remained a dependent state under the Mongol Yuan and Manchu Ching dynasties respectively. From 1368 to 1644, Tibet was independent of Ming dynasty of China. During the second phase, Tibet was under the direct rule of China for a short span of three years from 1911-14.

In the third phase (1914-50) Tibet had experienced an upsurge of, nationalism, which was stimulated in the early 20th century by the British imperialist interference and in Tibet and Chinese attempt to impose direct control over it. However, during this phase with the British assistance Tibet managed to enjoy de-facto independence, devoid of international legitimacy.

In the fourth period (1950 to the present) Tibetan independence was forcibly eliminated. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) annexed Tibet in the 1950 under the garb of ‘peaceful liberation’ from ‘imperialist forces’. Tibet was forced to sign a ‘17-Point Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet’ with China in 1951. The agreement brought the Tibetan national identity under stress as it paved the way for China to impose ‘socialist transformation’ of Tibetan society. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Tibetan culture was once again subjected to intense assimilationist pressure. However, after 1980,

Tibetan culture and nationalism revived. During this phase Tibetans gained international support for right to self-determination (Smith 1996).

The great power game was well visible in Tibet from the beginning of 20th century. In 1904 the British troops entered Tibet and forced China to sign an agreement. This British move was inspired by Viceroy Lord Curzon's perception regarding the Russian moves in Central Asia and in particular Tibet. However, the Britain did not approve the invasion of Tibet and the Chinese suzerainty was restored. The 1907 convention by Russia, China and British-India approved the Chinese suzerainty over Tibet. In the 1914 Shimla convention Tibet attended as an independent entity along with British India and China. The convention resulted in drawing the Mc Mahon line that demarcated the border between India and Tibet. There is difference of opinion regarding the Chinese approval to the final outcome. However, given the weak power position of China at that times it had only limited option.

It is important to note that Tibet was never formally recognized by the League of Nations or the United Nations. However, between 1913-51 Tibet had an independent government, currency, army, judicial and postal systems. Furthermore, the Tibetan government enjoyed formal bilateral relations with the neighboring countries such as Mongolia, Nepal, India, and Bhutan, and concluded treaties with China and Britain. The Tibetan claim that they have every right to self-determination as China had illegally occupied their territory in the name of 'peaceful liberation of Tibet'. The Chinese annexation of Tibet, in fact, eliminated the long existed buffer zone from the region and a common border was formed between India and China. When two equally powerful nations based on nationalist feeling emerged and they share a contested common border both nations try to resolve the border issues through a zero sum game. It appears that the denial of autonomy to the Tibetan people by the communist China further worsened the India – China relations.

Tibet and India-China border dispute

It appears that there are four major factors which form Tibet and India - China Border Dispute:

- (i) Tibet's Status
- (ii) Tibetan refugees in India
- (iii) Common Security Concerns
- (iv) Tibet in India - China border dispute

(i) Tibet's status

Independent India had shown less interest in Tibet. However, when the PLA entered Tibet, India deplored the invasion of 26 October 1950, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, told the Chinese foreign office how it looked at the event that "In the context of world events, invasion by Chinese troops of Tibet cannot but be regarded as deplorable and in the considered judgment of the Government of India, not in the interest of China or peace." (Mehrotra, 2000:14)

Again on 7 December 1950 the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru reiterated India's stand in the Parliament:

It is not right for any country to talk about its sovereignty or suzerainty over an area outside its own immediate range. That is to say, since Tibet is not the same as China, it should ultimately be the wishes of the people of Tibet that should prevail and not any legal or constitutional arguments — the last voice in regard to Tibet should be the voice of the people of Tibet and of nobody else (Mehrotra 2000:14) The then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru's statement well reflected India's stand on right of the people for self-determination.¹

After initial support for Tibet's claim for self-determination, the Indian stance on the issue changed in the wake of Indo - China bilateral agreement of 1954, known as Panchasheel.² As per the agreement India had accepted China's claim on Tibet. On 29 April 1954, India agreed to the Chinese insistence on referring to Tibet

as ‘Tibet Region of China’. Though India did not provide any direct support to the Tibetans right to self-determination when it was taken up at the UN General Assembly in 1958, it did provide political asylum to Dalai Lama and his followers in 1959.

(ii) Tibetan refugees in India

India had provided political asylum to Dalai Lama and over 80,000 Tibetans refugees. India’s consistent official policy has been to disallow anti-Chinese activities by Tibetan refugees on Indian soil. However, India has allowed the Tibetans to run a government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Administration. So long as the exiled community stays in India, Tibetan nationalism and the demand for self-determination will remain a major apprehension for PRC. (Suresh R. 2011; 246) India has refused to reduce or suspend its support to Tibetan refugees in India. This is one of the major irritants in India – China relations. The Chinese complain that such open encouragement and support given by the government of India to the Tibetan in their ‘anti - China activities’ constitute interference in China’s internal affairs and harms the progress of India - China relations. However, an independent Tibet as a buffer state between the two would ensure India’s security.

(iii) Common security concerns

It appears that Tibet is an extremely important factor in security paradigm of both India and China. Since its geopolitical position has impacted it between two great powers, it has to be dependent on either China or India, having no other choice. Tibet has always had a high degree of spiritual identification with India. The Republican Chinese officials way back in 1910 expressed similar assessments when they stated: ‘Tibet is a buttress on our national frontiers – the hand, as it were, which protects the face – and its prosperity or otherwise is of the most vital importance to China’.

India has its reciprocal fears arising from Chinese military presence in the Tibetan plateau.³ The true extent of China’s military presence in Tibet cannot be gauged, given the extreme secrecy surrounding information about the PLA. The presence of Chinese strategic forces on the Tibetan plateau adds another

dimension to India's China threat perception. Again China's management of water resources emanating from Tibet, which feed the Indian subcontinent, also features in Indian security conceptions. The historical memory and sense of betrayal and humiliation on account of the 1962 war that continues to disturb India and casts a shadow over Indian perceptions of China.

In essence, the complex of security concerns connected to Tibet underpins the strategic rivalry between these two major Asian players, India and China. Consequently, the China and India have common security concerns that are connected to Tibet. These issues can be well addressed only through mutual trust and confidence building measures. Though there are mechanisms to resolve the border dispute amicably since 1988 through the joint working group (JWG), little progress has been reported so far. Meanwhile the external powers exploit the conflicting situation to their advantage through various overt and covert moves.

(iv) Tibet in India – China border dispute

The border dispute continues to elude resolution ever since India and China have acquired a common border when the PRC occupied the Tibetan plateau in 1950-51. The historical roots of the India-China border dispute can be traced to the imperial period when the great game between British India, Czarist Russia and Qing China over Tibet and Central Asia. Empires thrived on uncertain borders were more preferable to imperial powers as clearly demarcated borders constrained their own ambitions and strategic flexibility. In addition, the inhospitable terrain of the high Himalayas, the absence of sophisticated surveying technologies and existence of a functioning Tibetan state made the delimitation of India's northern border either unnecessary or difficult.

Nevertheless ultimately in the Shimla convention of 1914, in fact, made the border line between British India and Tibet. However, in the mid-20th century, when two equally nationalistic and territorial states gained control over the India and China, the latter was not ready to accept the British proposed Mc Mahon line. This stand of China was well reflected especially after the signing of the 'India–

China Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India' (April 29, 1954) in which India for the first time accepted Tibet as a part of China. On the Indian side Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru at the time of signing of Panchasheel agreement thought that the boundary was no longer an issue, and that the Chinese have accepted the historical status quo.

The Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote of this to the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in 1958 when the border issue heated up:

When the Sino-Indian Agreement in regard to the Tibet region of China was concluded, various outstanding problems, including some relating to our border trade, were considered.... No border questions were raised at that time and we were under the impression that there were no border disputes between our respective countries. In fact we thought that the Sino-Indian Agreement, which was happily concluded in 1954, had settled all outstanding problems between our countries.⁴ He had also expressed shock at seeing maps printed in China showing certain 'Indian' areas to be part of China.⁵

Thus, the India - China border problem is embedded on Tibet as China had no border with India except through Tibet and India's border with Tibet was a well-settled border negotiated at the Shimla conference of 1914. Therefore, it appears that a solution to the Indo-China border problem lays in the Tibetan claim for the right to self-determination.

India-China border dispute: proposals for peaceful settlement

Among various proposals put forward to settle the Tibet issue and India - China border dispute the Dalai Lama's five-point peace plan for Tibet, known as the Strasbourg Proposal of June 1988 assumes great significance. The proposal called for the transformation of "the whole of Tibet, including the eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo," into a zone of peace and nonviolence. The establishment of a peace zone "would be in keeping with Tibet's historical role" as a "buffer state separating

the continent's great powers.” Dalai Lama explained the relevance of Strasbourg Proposal:

Historically, relations between China and India were never strained. It was only when Chinese armies marched into Tibet, creating for the first time a common border that tensions arose between the two powers, ultimately leading to the 1962 war. Since then, numerous dangerous incidents have continued to occur. A restoration of good relations between the world's two most populous countries would be greatly facilitated if they were separated-as they were throughout history-by a large and friendly buffer region.⁶

It appears that the proposal that Tibet should become a buffer region is almost identical to the Indian government's proposal for the demilitarization of Tibet, an idea India toyed with prior to independence. (Zhao 1996:255) After independence, India advocated this idea until the 'liberation of Tibet' by the PLA in 1951. However, the Dalai Lama's call for the establishment of a peace zone or demilitarization of Tibet has failed to draw a positive response from the Chinese government, to which it was addressed. A demilitarized buffer zone along the Indo-China border would have brought peace in the region. It is also argued that such a demilitarized buffer zone would have accelerated the bilateral interaction between the two major Asian powers, India and China. However, the Tibetan proposal was long rejected by the Chinese communist leadership.

Recently India and China met at Beijing to strengthen coordination mechanisms along the disputed border including the on the ground implementation of a border defence agreement aimed at formalizing patrolling and minimizing the occurrence of incidents along the disputed borders. The meeting had explored into the ways and approaches to safeguard peace and tranquility in the border areas. The meeting was the sixth round of the working mechanism which was set up in 2012 with the objective of cross ministerial platform focusing on the ground issues in the border areas. However, it appears that all these efforts fails to achieve

anything concrete towards the settlement of border dispute mainly due to the fact that once China accepts the Mc Mahon line between India and China its claim on Tibet would further diminish. This is mainly because the acceptance of British negotiated Mc Mahon line by China is tantamount to accepting the independent status of Tibet.

Thus it appears that Tibet has shaped the informal and invisible dynamics of India - China relations and politics from 1950 to the present. Tibet is also the legal foundation on which both India's and China's border claims rest. It is important to note that China had amicably settled all border claims with Russia, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Again, China had long ago settled its territorial dispute with Myanmar along the Mc Mahon line.

It appears that in the post-cold war period any further delay on the part of China to resolve the border dispute with India would be detrimental to China on two counts. Firstly, it provides an opportunity to strengthen the bounds of India – US – Japan relations. Such an alliance, especially in the context of prevailing South China Sea and East China Sea disputes act against the China's interest. Secondly, the alliance of world's largest democracy and world's most powerful military power and powerful economic power with a strong democratic system would pose a major challenge to communist regime in China. Any kind of strong bonds of friendship among these three major players appears to pose internal as well as external threat to the survival of the present communist regime in China.

In such a situation the viable option before China is to set its own house in order, both within China as well as in Asia. The acceptance of Tibetan demand for autonomy within PRC and non-zero sum amicable settlement of the border dispute with India along the Mc Mahon line would not only improve the image of China in the comity of nations but also enhance its security. Further the post-cold war blurred boundary between human security and national security on the one hand and national security

and international security on the other hand also emphasis the imperatives of pacific settlement of border disputes.

It is important to note that the existence of the liberal economic system and an authoritarian political system led to various internal contradictions within China. Similarly the coercive methods adopted to enforce law and order, without protection and promotion of the basic human rights of the citizens, in the age of information and communication technology appears to pose a major threat to the survival of the present Chinese communist regime. The disintegration of the Russian Communist regime after 70 years of its existence also shows that there are limits to any regime to rule by force and denial of basic freedom of individuals to a longer period. The communist regime in China will complete 70 years of its coercive rule by 2019. The universal quest for democracy, human rights and global economic integration along with ICT would sweep any regimes that fail to maintain basic human freedom. It appears that any further failure on the part of present communist regime in China to initiate political reforms commensurate with the economic reforms would be detrimental to the survival of the present communist regime in China. Concomitantly the suppression of ethnic minorities aspiration for self-determination appears to spell doom on the present communist regime in China. All these factors point towards an imminent transition to democratic system in China and pacific settlement of the Tibetan issue and the India - China border dispute. Once Tibet regains its historical position as a buffer state between India and China the security issues in the Himalayan region cease to exist.

Notes

1. Tibet is not a province of China. It is different from China proper. We recognize that and, therefore, we consider it to be an autonomous region of the Chinese State. The Chinese people are called the Han people. The Tibetans are not Hans. The Tibetans are Tibetans. See the transcript of the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru press conference held on 4 April 1959 in New Delhi.

2. (i) Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (ii) mutual non-aggression (iii) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; (iv) equality and mutual benefit; and (v) peaceful co-existence.
3. Chinese irredentism and communist imperialism are different from the expansionism or imperialism of the Western powers. The former has a cloak of ideology which makes it ten times more dangerous. In the guise of ideological expansion lie concealed racial national or historical claims. The danger from the North and North-East, therefore becomes both communist and imperialist. See the Letter from Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru New Delhi 7 November 1950
4. Notes, Memoranda and letters Exchanged and Agreements signed between The Governments of India and China White Paper III, MEA, Government of India, New Delhi.
5. Indian Parliament on Issue of Tibet, Lok Sabha Debates 1952 -2005, Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Centre, New Delhi, 2006.
6. See 'Strasbourg Peace Proposal', Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, Dharamsala, India, 2013.

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