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## India-China Boundary Question : Old Issues and New Development

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# NIDS Commentary

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### Introduction

After its inauguration in May 2015, the Modi-led BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government has been dealing with the boundary question with China in a determined manner compared to its predecessor. It is clearly stated in the Election Manifesto that one of the security issues is “the intrusion inside the LAC (Line of Actual Control)”. Furthermore, the “massive infrastructure development, especially along the Line of Actual Control in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim”, that belongs to the north east region of India, and shares the borders with the Tibetan Autonomous Region is considered as the priority. While the leaders of India and China project a friendly relationship at the summit, behind the scenes the more hostile tit-for-tat games are constantly played. For example, in September 2014, just before the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to India, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has transgressed the Sino-Indian border at the Chumaer sector in Ladakh. When Prime Minister Modi visited Arunachal Pradesh in February 2015, the Chinese vice-foreign minister lodged a stern representation to the Indian ambassador. There is a clear understanding that the border disputes should not impede the bilateral relationship and this is also stated in the joint Declaration. However there is a huge gulf between the two countries regarding the boundary as is apparent from Prime Minister Modi’s following comments. “I stressed the need for China to reconsider its approach

on some of the issues” and “There is a need for the clarification of LAC.” Modi made these comments at the joint press conference with Chinese President Xi Jinping when he visited China in May 2015.

What is the core of mutually exclusive positions on the boundary questions? In this commentary we will first examine what “LAC” is, and then how it is perceived by China and India. Next, we will examine the increasing China’s assertiveness over the State of Arunachal Pradesh. Our conclusion is that India’s catching up with China in terms of military and infrastructure building along the borders since the mid 2000s linked the issue of Tibet to the boundary questions, that revealed their original differences all the more difficult to compromise. The real issue of boundary questions is Tibet, although the visible part is the competition in building of military forces and infrastructure.

### 1. Different interpretation of boundary

#### (1) India and China’s interpretation of LAC

The current LAC is based on the “McMahon Line” which was demarcated by the representative of Great Britain, Henry McMahon at the Simla Conference, a conference held to discuss the status of Tibet among the leaders of Great Britain, China and Tibet in 1914. In the process of negotiations, the British representative gave notice that it will recognize the “suzerainty” of China over Tibet, but will not recognize “sovereignty”, and

called for abstaining from interference in the administration of “outer Tibet”. At that time, China’s interest lies in the border of inner and outer Tibet, and the border between outer Tibet and the British India was not an issue.

When the PLA stepped in Tibet in 1950, India appealed China for a peaceful resolution on which China frowned. The Government of India initially advised Tibet to present the issue to the United Nations. However, being anxious not to be seen as siding Imperialism vis - à - vis Asia, India chose to stand by China rather than to support the cause of Tibet. This led to the “Agreement between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India” in 1954. The preamble of this document is famous for “Panchsheel, or the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence” which is considered as an indication of the principle of co-existence for Asian emerging countries. On material side, the document prescribed border trade and pilgrimage. India abandoned the rights and privileges in Tibet it inherited from the British. With regard to the border between India and China after the demise of Tibet, India assumed that the preamble to the 1954 Agreement contains an implied agreement to the boundary. While respecting the McMahon Line due to State succession, Prime Minister Nehru refrained from advocating the legitimacy of the McMahon Line, which was a legacy of Imperial history. The Chinese side was also taking the stance of disregarding or avoid negotiations about issues that they are not yet prepared. However after the Tibetan Rebellion in March, 1959, and the exile of the 14th Dalai Lama to India, it made its position clear by questioning the validity of McMahon Line and pointing that “the China-India boundary has never been formally delimited.” (A letter from Zhou Enlai to Nehru, January 23, 1959). Since the border demarcation had not been carried out concurrently with the 1954 Agreement, the border transgression of the Chinese side and the

forward deployment of the Indian side triggered for the 1962 Sino-Indian War.

During the cease-fire negotiations, China referred to “the LAC as of November 7, 1959” which China meant the McMahon Line in the Eastern sector and “the line that is effectively controlled by China as of November 7, 1959” in the Western sector. Zhou Enlai’s letter reveals that at least in the Eastern sector, China accepted the McMahon line as the basis of the “LAC”.

## (2) India and China’s approach to border negotiations

The border negotiations began in December 1981, and 8 more negotiations were held until November 1987. Continuous negotiations at the Foreign Vice Minister level helped improve bilateral relations, and led to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to China in December 1988 after 34 years when Zhou Enlai and Nehru made mutual visit in 1954. However the gap between the two countries as regards the boundary could not be narrowed.

A series of negotiations revealed that China and India insisted on two different approach, the “package deal” by China and the “sector-wise examination” by India. The Chinese “package” meant the Eastern sector and the Western sector as a package, and involved China recognizing the McMahon Line as the boundary in the Eastern sector, and in return India recognizing China’s sovereignty on Aksai Chin, which was controlled by China in the Western sector. After recognizing this basics, a slight adjustment would be made on demarcation, that is China cedes Ladakh in the Western sector and India cedes Tawang in the Eastern sector reciprocally. On the other hand, India’s approach was to conduct a detailed investigation of the legality of the McMahon Line with historical evidence by sector. India believed that the borders had already been demarcated, and there was no other legitimate demarcation line. It was natural that China inclined to maintain the status quo rather than be drawn into a

legal debate that could undermine their actual control in the Aksai Chin.

## 2. Progress of Border Negotiations

Border negotiations restarted in June 1989, but this time the focus was more on confidence building. The term LAC was officially used in the “Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas” that was signed when Prime Minister P. V. Narsimha Rao visited China in 1993. This agreement was followed by “The Agreement between India and China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas” in 1996, which stipulated reduction of respective military forces along the LAC, restriction and prior notification regarding the military exercises, prevention of air intrusion across the LAC, and communication measures to prevent any escalation of tension. No words on demarcation of the LAC is found in these documents which are often cited in the subsequent border negotiations.

Political will to carry on border talks was expressed during Prime Minister Vajpayee’s visit to China in June 2003. The “Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation Between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China” incorporated each party’s position by stating to “seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solutions, through consultations on an equal footing”. Furthermore, pending an ultimate solution, it was expressed they should work together to “maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas” and “commitment to continue implementation of the agreements signed for this purpose, including the clarification of the LAC”. Another agreement is the appointment of a “special representatives” by each side, indicating that both leaders have made their decisions to move on to the next phase of exploring “the framework of a boundary

settlement”.

One significant progress is that China and India made mutual concessions regarding the sovereignty of Tibet and Sikkim at the summit meeting. In the joint statement it was clearly stated that India recognized the Tibet Autonomous Region as a part of the territory of the People's Republic of China and that “it will not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China activities in India”. In the “Memorandum on expanding border trade” that was concluded at the same time, Nathula Pass was designated as entry and exit point for border trade between Sikkim and the Tibet Autonomous Region. This indicated that China had indirectly recognized Sikkim as Indian territory for the first time since its merger by India in 1975.

Special Representatives’ talk were held biannually, after the first discussion was held in October 2003. As a result, in April 2005, the “Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question” was signed during Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to India. In the agreement, it was confirmed that “the differences on the boundary question should not be allowed to affect the overall development of bilateral relations.” The old principles such as “The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” and the same phrase such as “fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solutions”, was reiterated. Added was the new phrase “meaningful and mutually acceptable adjustments to their respective positions” and “due consideration to each others’ strategic interests so as to arrive at package settlement.” On the boundary delination, two standards, namely “natural geographic features” and “due interests of settled populations” were listed.

## 3. Setback after 2005 – India’s Strategic Improvement and China’s Assertiveness

Having both agreed to resolve boundary question on the basis of “mutual and equal security,” implementing

mutual concessions, and establishing “Strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity,” India and China substantially improved bilateral relations which experienced the best season since the China-India war in 1962. However, by 2008, it was clear that bilateral relations had set back over the boundary questions. This retard was evinced by China’s claims over Arunachal Pradesh as well as the frequent cases of border intrusion.

We will examine the Arunachal issue in order to identify positions of China and India. Arunachal Pradesh is an under-populated area located in the North Eastern region of India in the mountain region of the Himalayas, with an area size of 86,700 square kilometers, a population of 1,300,000. It used to be under the direct control of the central government, but state legislature was established in 1975, and it became the 25<sup>th</sup> state in India in 1987.

In November 2006, just before President Hu Jintao's visit to India, the Chinese ambassador to India commented that the entire region of so called Arunachal Pradesh is the territory of China. Thereafter, China has been registering questions to India's sovereignty in various ways. In May 2007, China refused the visa application of a state government official from Arunachal Pradesh stating that the visa was not required, and subsequently has been issuing only a stapled visa, not regular stamped visa to applicants from the state. After expressing “unhappiness” towards Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's visit to the state of Arunachal Pradesh in January 2008, China’s increasingly strong voice of dissent have become stronger each time an Indian high official visits the state. In 2009, it notified the Asian Development Bank that it will not support the board of directors meeting as long as the projects within the state of Arunachal Pradesh is included, and hence made its voice clear to the international audience.

Why has China been more and more assertive on Arunachal Pradesh? One interpretation is that China's

sphere of interest had expanded and therefore it had become uncompromising as regards its sovereignty and territorial rights. Another interpretation is that China was anxious about India’s closer ties with the United States and was trying to check India’s rise. In this commentary I would like to present two particular interpretations from the viewpoint of bilateral relations. First is the interpretation that the vulnerability of China concerning the Tibetan issue is an explanatory variables for her attitude on Arunachal. Second is the interpretation that due to the rapid catching-up of India since the mid 2000s, not only has there been a change in the balance of power along the border, but there has also been the disappearance of a buffer zone between China and India.

In the next section, Tibet and Arunachal is explored followed by examination on infrastructure building in the border.

#### 4. Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh

In 2008, grievances against Han immigration and cultural assimilation led to uprising in Tibet. Tibetan activists and sympathizers made a protest by obstructing the torch relay of the Beijing Olympic worldwide in the summer. In order to avoid law and order problem, India shortened the length of the relay zone, prevented the attendance of spectators, and controlled the protests of the Tibetans, while China is suspicious that India and the United States is behind the protests. Meanwhile, in India, the insurgence in Lhasa and the protest against Beijing Olympic has prompted the debate calling for a review to its policy on Tibet. More specifically, these were call for change the policy of nonintervention toward more value-oriented policy coupled with pressuring China on human rights issue.

The subtle changes in the Indian policy on these issues are reflected in the visit of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh in November 2009. The Dalai Lama delivered a spiritual discourse at a monastery in Tawang located at the north-west of the state. Tawang

had been especially important for China ever since 1957. The Chinese government had been expressing its clear interest for Tawang in the border negotiation (see sec.1 of this paper). Tawang is not only the birth place of the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, but it was the entrance to India for 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama when he fled from Tibet. Tawang is the symbol of religious and political unity for Tibetan refugees. It is this power of symbol that China is extremely anxious not to be utilized by the Dalai Lama. In June 2007, during the 6<sup>th</sup> Negotiation between China and the Tibetan Government in Exile, induced by the United States, China urged the Dalai Lama to acknowledge that Arunachal Pradesh was a part of Chinese territory. China expanded her claim from Tawang to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh. An underlying cause was China's vulnerability regarding the Tibetan issue.

## 5. Military modernization and infrastructure building in the border: Catching-up of India

### (1) Military build up

China modernized the Chengdu Military Region in late 1990s, and the 13<sup>th</sup> Group Army of Chengdu with assignment to support policing Tibet transformed to a modernized rapid response forces. Also, the air-force capability was enhanced to station the Su-27UBK with the most advanced radar system at Chongqing. Although Su-27UBK was not specifically targeting India, seen together with construction of a new runway in Tibet and the concept of "limited war under high-tech conditions" which was publicized in 2004, China's move in the border was to improve deterrence against India.

In contrast, India finally started to strengthen their military forces at India -China border in the mid 2000s. The main assignment of the Indian Eastern Command headquartered in Calcutta was to cope with insurgence in the North Eastern region. Furthermore, since the 1990s the three army corps of the Eastern Command

had been dispatching their military forces to the counter insurgency operation in Kashmir. At the end of 2007, the estimate of the Chinese military forces was revised and decision was made to reinforce the troops at the India-China. Accordingly on December 2007, India redeployed the 27<sup>th</sup> division of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps which had been stationed for more than 10 years in Kashmir, to Kalimpong, which is located at the corridor adjacent to Sikkim and Bhutan. Furthermore in January 2008, India announced the raising of two new mountain division. In addition, 20 battalions of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) were raised to watch and guard the LAC. The role of Eastern Command shifted from internal security to deterring China.

The reinforcement of the Eastern Air Command is also very significant. It is obvious that basing of SU-30 in the Eastern Command in 2008 was for the purpose of deterring China's intrusion and supporting operations in the forward area.

### (2) Infrastructure building

India has been actively building up its infrastructure along the border in order to catch up China.

Completed in 2006, China's Qinghai railway service between Xining and Lhasa had a substantial impact on the Indian strategic community. First, the road between Xining and Lhasa should be closed in winter, but the railway service overcame this difficulty with enhanced transportation capacity. Consequently, this enabled the PLA to be rapidly deployed all over the Eastern sector. Secondly, there was a plan for extending the Qinghai Tibet Railway to the Chumbi valley, which is located at the border between Nepal and Sikkim. India saw China's connectivity with India's immediate neighbor as China's influence coming to next door. This anxiety was strengthened all the more by the construction of the Kodari bridge connecting Tibet and Nepal, as well as the highway connecting Lhasa and Kathmandu, both of which were completed in 2005.

India has reviewed her border infrastructures from 2004 on. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the construction of the strategic roads in the Arunachal Pradesh in May 2005. This was a significant departure from the conventional policy that prohibited the construction of the roads stemming from the anxiety that the Chinese may utilize the roads in war time. The Defense Minister Antony, who visited Assam in December 2007, stated that government had to invest in new roads and railways to allow troops to relocate quickly. This statement indicates that the systematic effort for the infrastructure building in the North Eastern region was set forth in order to respond Chinese activity. In January 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Arunachal Pradesh and announced infrastructure development in the state. It included the construction of the 1,700km Trans-Arunachal Highway traversing the state from east to west, the construction of a railway connecting Itanagar, the state capital with Assam, and the opening of a helicopter transportation service between Tawang and Guwahati in Assam. The Trans-Arunachal Highway had been projected to connect 7 prefectural capitals along the Highway with the strategically important points along LAC, but the construction has been behind the schedule. In regard to the railway project, the construction has completed between Naharlagun (10km from Itanagar) and Assam. Prime Minister Modi visited Arunachal Pradesh in February 2015 and flagged off the Naharlagun-Delhi Express. China expressed protest with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin lodged a “stern representation” after calling in the Indian ambassador. It was a stronger expression compared to former occasions in which foreign spokesperson made statements.

Compared to China’s moderate response to India’s consolidation of administrative control of the state before 1980s, China’s recent protest against India’s infrastructure building in the border regions is striking. It could be argued that China is trying to claim

sovereignty rejecting India's efforts to build up military and civilian presence along the border. Ironically, it is just what China has been doing to show “effective control”.

## 6. Future Prospect

While reaching a compromise with maintaining subtle balance between "package deal" and "sector-wise examination" in the two documents signed in 2005, the differences between China and India has increasingly become apparent. China is trying to redraw the boundary between India and China, while making swap deal of territory. On the other hand, India has insisted on the legality of the existing boundary based on historical evidence. For China, the terminology of “pending ultimate solution” is a prefix for working towards confidence-building in the military field along the LAC. On the other hand, for India, it is a prefix for presumption of legality of boundary stipulated in existing treaty. China uses the term LAC as a criteria for describing the code of conduct, but it doesn't indicate the boundary on the map, while India asks China for clarification of LAC on the ground. This differences of approach are causes of conflict today.

The fact that negotiations of the China-India border have been stagnating since 2008 can also be observed from joint declarations and joint statements. Neither the phrase "clarification of the LAC" which India had previously pushed, nor the words of "One China Policy" and the status of Tibet can be found. While advancing economic cooperation with China, the Modi government has clearly adopted a package of measures for infrastructure building in Arunachal Pradesh to counter China in the area. The Modi government has also launched quiet offensives against China regarding Tibetan issues by inviting the Prime Minister of the Tibetan government in exile to the swearing-in ceremony at the time of inauguration. The China-India boundary question cannot be divided from the Tibetan



issues. It would be necessary to watch not only the competition of military and infrastructure build-up, but also India's possible decision on engaging the Tibetan issues.

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