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Stability in a Secondary Strategic Direction: China and the Border Dispute with India After 1962

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Abstract

This chapter reviews China's approach to its disputed border with India after the war between the two countries in 1962. China's approach has emphasized maintaining stability on its southwestern frontier, defined as preventing the escalation of armed conflict on the border and maintaining a dominant position in the dispute it enjoyed after the war. For China, its dispute with India has always been a strategic secondary direction and not the primary focus of its military strategy. Dominance on the border and deterring Indian challenges form the basis of stability from China's standpoint.

Introduction

The China-India border dispute is perhaps the world's most continuously negotiated territorial dispute. Since 1981, negotiations or talks regarding the border have been held every single year—for thirty-eight years. This includes eight rounds at the vice-ministerial level in the 1980s, fifteen meetings of the joint working group from 1989 to 2005, and twenty-one meetings of the special representatives at the level of national security advisor since 2003. Moreover, several agreements on confidence-building measures were concluded in the 1990s, along with agreements relating to principles for settling the dispute or managing the border in 2005 and 2013. Nevertheless, a final settlement of the border dispute has remained elusive, and the two sides appear no closer to reaching agreement today than they did when negotiations resumed in 1981. At the same, since 1962, armed conflict along the border has been limited. Apart from the clash over Nathu La in 1967, no soldier has died on the border since 1975 (Menon 2016: 22).

This chapter examines China's general approach to the border dispute after the 1962 Sino-Indian war. China's approach has emphasized maintaining stability on its southwestern frontier, defined as preventing the escalation of armed conflict on the border and maintaining a dominant position in the dispute it enjoyed after the war. Stability has been more important than either making unilateral concessions to settle the dispute or resorting to armed force to advance its claims. In other words, China seeks to balance the defense of its claims in the dispute with its other interests, either in its overall foreign policy or in its relationship with India. The reason is straightforward: despite the sheer size of the territory at stake, India and the border dispute has never posed the main threat to China's national security. The dispute has been a secondary threat that must be managed so that it does not impact China's ability to pursue its interests in other areas that the country deems more important.

China's approach to military strategy distinguishes the country's main or primary strategic direction (*zhuyao zhanlue fangzhen*) from secondary (*ciyao*) strategic directions. The primary strategic direction refers to the most important threat that China faces and the geographic direction in which China should focus its efforts (Fravel 2019: 28, 60).

Secondary strategic directions include other potential sources of armed conflict that, as the name suggests, are secondary or less important when compared with the threat in the primary strategic direction. For China, its relationship with India and the border dispute have always been a strategic secondary direction. This is not to say that India does not pose important security concerns for China. India can threaten China on its southwestern frontier, especially dangerous from China's standpoint when combined with instability in Tibet, or, hypothetically, in a "chain reaction" (*liansuo fanying*) when China faces a simultaneous threat in another direction (Fravel 2007: 716). Nevertheless, since 1949, China's leaders have never viewed China's southwest, or India, as the country's primary strategic direction. Instead, it was the northeast in the 1950s and 1960s (the United States), the north in the 1970s and 1980s (the Soviet Union), the southeast after the end of the Cold War (Taiwan), and the southeast along with the maritime domain today. India has never been China's main or primary strategic adversary or opponent. Even when during the 1962 war, China remained more concerned about the potential of a US invasion along the Chinese coast. Thus, generally speaking, China seeks to maintain stability in its secondary strategic directions in order to conserve energy and forces for the contest in the primary strategic direction. China may use force in a secondary strategic direction, but the purpose is to manage the conflict in order to maintain a focus on the primary strategic direction. Stability is a primary goal.

Since 1962, from China's standpoint, the challenges to stability on the China-India border have varied, but generally are reflected in the level of military activity and tensions. One of China's main goals in attacking India in 1962 was, paradoxically, to reduce military tensions on the border (which China viewed as caused by Indian actions) and not to seize land it claimed but did not control (especially in the eastern sector). Later, from the mid-1990s, maintaining stability on the border was a prerequisite for developing a broader China-India bilateral relationship, to ensure the ongoing territorial dispute would not harm the development of ties in other spheres (Fravel 2011). For China, dominance on the border and deterring Indian challenges form the basis of stability.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first section reviews China's goals in the 1962 war, which frame how China has approached the dispute afterwards. The main

goals were to restore stability by evicting Indian forces from territory controlled under Nehru's "forward policy" and to compel India to negotiate a final resolution, based on the "package deal" that Zhou Enlai and Jawaharlal Nehru discussed in April 1960. The second section examines the situation along the border from 1962 to the mid-1990s. Apart from the 1967 clash at Nathu La, the border remained stable until the mid-1980s, when a crisis erupted over Sumdorong Chu in the eastern sector. From China's standpoint, the resumption of Indian patrols in this area threatened China's position on the border. The third section examines the 1993 border peace and tranquility agreement, which has allowed the broader India-China relationship to flourish. The fourth section examines how changes on the border have led to an increase in "transgressions" in areas where the two sides differ regarding the line of actual control (LAC). The final section discusses the 2017 standoff in Doklam and how it might shape China's approach to the border dispute in the future.

China's Goals in the 1962 War

Any assessment of China's approach to the territorial dispute after 1962 must start with the goals that China pursued when Mao decided to attack Indian forces along the disputed border in October of that year.

The origins of China-India border war are covered elsewhere in this volume and by previous research. Briefly, from China's perspective, the revolt in Tibet highlighted the fragility of the CCP's rule in this region and broader concerns about territorial integrity in China's ethnic minority regions adjacent to its international frontiers. Tibet itself had been governed indirectly after it was seized by the PLA in 1950. When the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959 amid the revolt that had spread from Kham to Tibet proper, the border dispute with India became intertwined with the territorial integrity of the People's Republic. Beijing viewed the implementation of Nehru's "forward policy" of establishing outposts to control contested land as threatening and increasing instability on the border, especially as China faced instability in Xinjiang in the spring of 1962 and the prospect of a Nationalist invasion along the east coast that summer. After blocking

moves in the summer of 1962 failed to halt the momentum of the forward policy in the western sector, tensions escalated over the Dhola and Namka Chu in the eastern sector north of Tawang.

In mid-October, China decided to attack India forces all along the border. One goal was to protect Tibet, which China believed India would continue to threaten if it strengthened its position in disputed areas.¹ China perceived that India was continuing the British policy of northern expansion into Tibet, seeking to transform Tibet into a colony or protectorate (Lei 1997: 207). For China, India had first opposed China's occupation of Tibet in 1950, later supported Tibetan rebels, and then provided refuge to the Dalai Lama and sanctuary to a government in exile with claims to Chinese territory. The forward policy was a continuation of such Indian pressure on Tibet. PLA documents describe the attack as necessary because, otherwise, India would continue to press north and expand inside Tibet and Aksai Chin (Jiang and Li 1994: 473–4). To this day, Chinese analysts almost uniformly view the territorial dispute through the lens of Tibet and residual Indian ambitions (despite the statements of the Indian government to the contrary) (Fravel 2011)

Another Chinese goal was to demonstrate resolve. China's leaders believed that India had concluded China was debilitated by internal unrest, or “weak and easily bullied” (Lei 1997: 188). Beijing believed that Delhi was seeking to take advantage of not just the Tibetan revolt but also the upheaval of the Great Leap Forward to make gains on the border at China's expense. As Zhou Enlai (1997: 472) said at the time, India “reckoned that our famine was very serious, Tibet was empty, the rebellion unsettled.” He also noted, “when you have no room for retreat and you do not counterattack, that is really showing weakness.” Attacking India allowed China to demonstrate resolve in the face of Indian pressure and during a moment of internal strife—and to deter India from challenging China again.

Finally, and most importantly, fighting was seen as the only way to eliminate Indian pressure and restore stability along this frontier. Given that diplomacy and deterrence in the spring and summer of 1962 had failed to halt the forward policy, war

¹ For detailed accounts of China's decision-making in the 1962 war, see Garver 2006 and Fravel 2008.

was necessary. As Chinese General Lei Yingfu had concluded in August 1962, “not fighting was not enough to prevent the Indian intrusions” (Xu 1993: 91–2). Likewise, Mao said that “if we counterattack one time, then the border will become stable and the boundary problem can be peacefully resolved” (Lei 1997: 210). A former Chinese diplomat recalls that Mao believed the attack would “create ten years of stability on the border” (Zhang 1990: 75). To achieve these goals, the CMC highlighted that the purpose of attacking India was to protect the stability of China’s frontiers and to create conditions for a negotiated settlement of the dispute (Jiang and Li 1994: 473–4).

After 1962

After the 1962 war, China had achieved its goal of stability, defined in terms of deterring further Indian challenges. Yet two crises occurred on the border that involved a forceful response. In both cases, whether warranted or not, China viewed India as challenging the post-war stability on the border.

The first occasion was a six-day clash at Nathu La, on what was then China’s border with Sikkim adjacent to the Yadong (Chumbi) valley between Sikkim and Bhutan. The area had become a source of tension in 1965 and tensions grew in August and September 1967 (on the clash at Nathu La see Bajpai 1999: 156–95). The proximate spark for the Chinese attack was India’s effort to construct fencing and other fortifications in order to consolidate the Indian position around the pass. More generally, Indian forces deployed in this area had grown substantially since 1962, as part of a much broader effort to strengthen the Indian Army after its defeat in the war with China. Evidence suggests that the PLA actions were not authorized by the party and military leadership in Beijing and that local PLA commanders may have lacked authorization to attack, even if at a tactical level the Indian actions challenged the Chinese position around Nathu La (Fravel 2008: 199).

After the 1967 clash, no major incidents occurred on the border. When the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution subsided, China focused on the growing threat from the Soviet Union all along its northern border. Maintaining stability on its southwestern flank

with India served this interest, as China did not want conflict on two fronts. Following the gradual move to normalize relations in the mid-1970s, China and India began boundary talks in 1981 at the vice-ministerial level. China opened the talks again with the idea of pursuing a package deal. India rejected this approach, preferring to hold talks over each sector separately (the “sector-by-sector” approach). At the same time as talks started, however, military forces on both sides began to move back towards the border.

While these talks were occurring, a new and much more severe crisis occurred in 1986 in an area called Wangdong or Sumdurong Chu in the eastern sector. It involved the same territory north of the McMahon Line but south of the watershed near Dohla over which a struggle for control in 1962 escalated to war. In 1983, India resumed patrols in the area and created a seasonal outpost or patrol point on the banks of the Sumdurong river. China viewed the Indian post as an effort to start changing the situation along the border, retaking land from which it had been expelled in 1962. Meanwhile, the border talks had stalled. Thus, China may have viewed India’s action as intending to create a *fait accompli* in the eastern sector. In 1986, China preempted the return of the Indian detachment and occupied the area first. China then fortified the position and refused to leave. Over the next twelve months, both sides mobilized tens of thousands of troops. The crisis subsided in June 1987, when the Indian foreign minister visited China. Nevertheless, Indian and Chinese forces would not disengage in the area for another seven years.

Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement

Paradoxically, the intensity of the standoff at Sumdurong Chu prompted a bilateral effort to prevent a recurrence of such an event. When Rajiv Gandhi visited China in December 1988, a breakthrough occurred. During the visit, China and India agreed to “actively develop the bilateral relations in other fields and create an atmosphere and conditions conducive to a reasonable settlement of the boundary issue” (MFA 2004). Toward this end, joint working groups were created on the boundary issue and for economic issues.

Progress in the joint working group on the border soon stalled, however, as Chinese leaders became consumed by the demonstrations in Tiananmen, the violent crackdown, and subsequent elite rifts over party policy. In 1992, India proposed to China drafting an agreement that would be focused not on resolving the dispute but instead on maintaining peace and tranquility along the border. By September 1993, the two sides reached an agreement, based largely on a draft text that India had created to serve as the basis for the talks. The most important provisions were committing to resolving the dispute through “peaceful and friendly consultations,” not threatening or using force, and to “strictly respect and observe the line of actual control” (Bhatia and Tang 1993: 1). Given differences in thirteen areas over the location of the LAC, the two sides formed a working group to discuss where the line lay and attempt to resolve these differences. The agreement also called for confidence-building measures, which were detailed in a 1996 agreement, and affirmed that joint efforts to maintain the status quo along the LAC did not prejudice either country’s claims in the territorial dispute.

The agreement was ground-breaking. As one of its architects, Shivshankar Menon (2016: 19), notes, it was the first agreement of “any kind” between China and India over the border. Moreover, “it formalized in an international treaty a bilateral commitment by India and China to maintain the status quo on the border.” As a result, the agreement “effectively delinked settlement of the boundary issue with the rest of the relationship, and delinked it also from the maintenance of peace on the border” (Menon 2016: 19). In this way, the agreement “permitted the expansion of bilateral relations in other areas, despite the boundary question remaining unsettled” (Menon 2016: 20).

Although India had proposed the agreement, China readily and quickly agreed. China’s leaders were facing severe internal challenges to the regime’s stability and security in the aftermath of Tiananmen. The leadership was initially divided over the merits of suppressing the demonstrations and later divided over whether to continue with reform and opening. Soon thereafter, the Soviet Union collapsed, removing a key security threat to China but also underscoring the vulnerability of communist systems. US leadership in the Gulf War indicated that unipolarity might eclipse the multipolarity that China hoped would materialize with the end of the Cold War. Thus, China moved to settle many of its outstanding territorial disputes, concluding that stability on its borders

and improved bilateral relations with neighbors were more important than the territory at stake. By 1994, China had reached boundary agreements with the Soviet Union, Laos, Vietnam, Russia, and Kazakhstan (Fravel 2008: 126–74). In this context, India’s proposal for an agreement to maintain the status quo along the border was pushing on an open door. Also, by affirming the existing LAC, rather than competing definitions of the line from before the war, the agreement in many ways consolidated China’s position along the border.

Following the election of the Hindu nationalist BJP in 1998, India-China relations suffered a temporary setback, with India justifying its nuclear tests in 1998 based on the China threat. Nevertheless, in the decades since the 1993 agreement, and despite the presence of one of the world’s largest territorial disputes between two sovereign states, bilateral relations have flourished. Bilateral trade reached 84 billion USD in 2017, up from only a few billion in the early 1990s. Likewise, China and India have deepened cooperation in international fora such as the BRICS. Finally, each now is an observer in a regional organization the other leads, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Fravel 2011).

Incursions in the 2000s

In the past decade, a number of reported incidents along the border have occurred, often described in the Indian media as “transgressions” or “incursions.” Here it is worth noting some of the limits of the 1993 and 1996 agreements. First, they did not clarify the location of the LAC. Unlike India’s Line of Control with Pakistan, the LAC has never been depicted on a map. The two sides began to exchange maps in the early 2000s, starting with the central or middle sector, but then stopped when it appeared that the process might increase tensions, as both sides began to “exaggerate their claims” (Menon 2016: 22). In thirteen sectors, China and India hold different views regarding the location of the LAC. In these sectors, one side’s patrol up to what it views as the limit of the LAC violates the other side’s view of the LAC. Second, these agreements did not cover broader efforts to enhance military infrastructure in border areas and, perhaps

unintentionally, may have created an incentive to build such infrastructure to enable each side to be able to consolidate control on their side of the LAC (without violating the agreement itself).

The number of reported incursions by China began to increase significantly after 2010. As shown in Table 1, incursions peaked at around five hundred in 2014. This figure refers to the number of times that Chinese patrols have violated what India views as the LAC, based on reports from the Indian government. China has never released any information regarding what it views as Indian violations of the LAC. If India patrols up to what it sees as the limit of the LAC in contested sectors, then these would also be “transgressions” from China’s perspective. The question, for our purposes, is, what explains the general increase in Chinese activity, and how does such activity contribute to maintaining stability on the border?

Table 1: Border Transgressions on the LAC, 2010-2018

<u>Year</u>	<u>Transgressions</u>
2010	250
2011	220
2012	430
2013	340
2014	500
2015	350
2016	200/271
2017	415
2018	137 (through 20 Sept)

Source: Figures for 2010-2016 from Sandhu 2016. Figures for 2016-2017 from PTI 2018. Figures for 2018 from Gupta 2018.

Analysis here remains speculative, but China appears to be responding to several changes along the border. The first change is the substantial improvement of India’s border infrastructure along the China-India frontier. India’s efforts to upgrade infrastructure in the area has lagged behind China’s, which started earlier (in the mid-1990s) as part of a much broader modernization of China’s border defense forces (Fravel 2007: 729–31). In 2006, the Indian government approved a plan to build 73 strategic roads along the LAC.

The second change is a modification of Indian military's force structure directed at China. Under the guideline of strengthening "active deterrence," India decided to establish two new mountain divisions in 2009 and, later, in 2013, announced the intent to create a mountain strike corps of 90,000 soldiers in order to be able to conduct offensive operations against China in Tibet (Pandit 2013). India has reactivated airfields ("advanced landing grounds") along the border, in the east and west, which facilitate the rapid movement of troops as well as offensive strikes across the LAC (DHNS 2014). In 2013, for example, the Indian Air Force landed a C-130 at the Dalut Beg Oldie landing ground (Firstpost 2013). In 2014, advanced Su-30 aircraft and surface-to-air missile squadrons were deployed (Pandit 2014a). As Menon wrote in 2016, "India has done more in the past ten years to strengthen and build border infrastructure and military preparedness and to create offsetting and asymmetric capabilities than in any decade since independence" (Menon 2016: 24).

A third change was an increase in the frequency of Indian patrols along the LAC. By 2014, India had increased both the frequency and tempo of operations, and was patrolling most areas on a daily basis (Pant 2014). Although India may have merely been catching up with China's own rate of patrols, the increased frequency, all else equal, would not only improve India's tactical intelligence of the situation on the LAC but also increase the odds of encountering a Chinese patrol and prompting a face-off or incident.

Amid this context, unprecedented standoffs occurred in areas where the LAC was contested. For several weeks in April and May 2013, Chinese and Indian forces faced off in the Depsang area in the western sector. China may have been using the incident to signal resolve before Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India, but it was likely also reacting to India's renewed activism along this part of the disputed border, and signaling that China would not accept India's actions without reacting in any way. In 2014, a similar incident occurred near Chumar, also in the western sector, as China tried to build a road to an area near where India had erected an observation post (Pandit 2014b). This incident occurred during Xi Jinping's first summit with Narendra Modi in India, perhaps indicating a desire to signal China's dominance and strength to India (Menon 2016: 26).

The Standoff at Doklam

The 2017 standoff over the Doklam bowl was the most serious military confrontation between the two countries on the border since Sumdurong Chu. The proximate cause was China's intention to enhance a road in the area from the Yadong Valley to an Indian border post at Doka La in the Doklam bowl. The road travels through territory in an area that has been under Chinese control but is disputed with Bhutan (not India). To complicate matters further, China and India differ regarding the end of their common border. China places it to the south of Doklam, at Mount Gipmochi, while India maintains it lies to the north, at Batang La. India may have believed that China was seeking to extend an existing track all the way to China's claimed trijunction and, in this way, be in a position to threaten the Siliguri corridor. China's intent may have been more limited, namely, to improve the track from the Yadong Valley (Bardalai 2018: 5). Nevertheless, before China was able to begin construction, India deployed approximately three hundred troops. From China's standpoint, Indian forces had crossed an international boundary, not the LAC, as China and India have never disputed the border between Sikkim and Tibet (although it has never been demarcated).

If India hoped that the Chinese construction crews would depart, it was mistaken. Instead, China strengthened its forces and the two sides hunkered down. Diplomatically, the situation was resolved at the end of August. During the standoff, both sides acted cautiously, using their armed forces to strengthen their diplomacy but not taking tactical military actions that would result in an escalation of the situation or the use of force. In this way, both sides sought to maintain stability while defending their positions regarding the border. Chinese analysts suggest that China did not want maritime issues to be linked with the Indian border situation, underscoring that the border remained a secondary strategic direction and thus should be managed accordingly (Guan and Zhang 2017; Ye 2018). One Chinese scholar notes that China could have characterized the Indian actions as "aggression" (*qinlue*), which would have justified a forceful response to the Indian intervention. Instead, however, the MFA used the word "incursion" (*ruqin*), a phrase that gave China more flexibility in how to deal with the situation diplomatically (Zhang

2017). Thus, with China refusing to remove its personnel, India had to choose between compelling China to leave Doklam through force or accepting the Chinese presence.

At the tactical level, China's position in Doklam was weak. China's main military facilities in the area were tens of kilometers away, in the Yadong Valley, which meant that the PLA would need to transport forces uphill and at high altitude to reach what China views as the border with India. The Indian Army also maintained several divisions in Sikkim while the PLA has far fewer forces in the broader area, at least on a permanent basis. Although China maintained a track in Doklam up to Doka La, and patrolled it occasionally, it had not erected any permanent facilities to match those of India's. India's ability to intervene to halt Chinese activities in Doklam highlighted India's superiority and China's vulnerability in the area of the standoff.

After the diplomatic resolution, however, China moved to significantly enhance its physical position in Doklam in the areas adjacent to the Indian position at Doka La and its control over this area. The purpose of this buildup was to prevent a recurrence of the Indian intervention and thus restore stability that, from China's standpoint, India's intervention had upset. Satellite imagery reveals the construction of a network of roads from the Yadong Valley, fortifications and defensive positions, helipads, and barracks and other buildings (Bhat 2018). India has also enhanced its own defensive positions, including what appears to be a track or trench that runs south from Doka La to China's claimed tripoint, allowing India to monitor Chinese activity in the area.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chinese analysts have viewed India's action as a sign of increasing hostility towards China and tension more generally between China and India, along with exposing the limits of "mutual trust." Hu Shisheng (2017), for example, believes that India initiated the action because of its growing concerns about China along with a desire to preserve India's preeminent position in South Asia. Other scholars suggest that China has been too optimistic—even naive—regarding India. These scholars view India's willingness to confront China over Doklam as a sign that India will never stop challenging China on the border. Thus, for one pair of scholars, "China should be ready diplomatically and militarily and predict possible Indian actions in the border region" (Guan and Zhang 2017: 74). Although many experts called for greater vigilance on the border with India, one of China's most prominent Indian experts, Ma Jiali (2017),

called for greater management of the disputed border by both sides and even encouraged a resolution of the dispute. In other words, the border dispute in the context of the bilateral relationship could be managed and stability could be maintained.

The long-term effect of the Doklam standoff remains unknown. In the short term, however, China and India recommitted to maintaining peace and stability along the border. One of the outcomes of the informal meetings between Xi and Modi in Wuhan in late April 2018 was “strategic guidance to their respective militaries to strengthen communication in order to build trust and mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in the management of border affairs” (MEA 2018). In essence, they appeared to recommit to the language of the 1993 agreement and to “strengthen existing institutional arrangements and information sharing mechanisms to prevent incidents in border regions” (MEA 2018). As noted in Table 1, for the first half of 2018, the number of transgressions along the LAC have decreased from previous years.

Conclusion

Both before and after 1962, China has viewed the border with India as a secondary strategic direction. Stability on the border allows China to focus on other priorities. As a result, China’s main goal has been to manage the border so that it does not weaken China’s efforts to address its main security threats or other diplomatic goals. China has sought to balance the defense of its border claims with the pursuit of other objectives. When China believes India threatens its claims in the dispute or stability along the border, China has responded in order to restore stability and not to impose a final settlement.

For the past few decades, China has sought to prevent the dispute from dominating its relationship with India, in order to pursue other goals linked with economic growth and to expand Chinese influence in other regions around the world. Although India’s action at Doklam has renewed Chinese concerns about India’s intentions and willingness to raise tensions on the border, China is unlikely to shift from

its current approach so long as it assesses that it faces greater foreign policy challenges from other countries. The deterioration of US-China relations since 2017 suggests that China will prioritize other strategic directions, not the border with India.

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