

Chinese Perceptions and Discourses on India-China Border: Comprehending the Way Forward

On 21 Oct 2024, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri announced that India and China have disengaged in the Depsang and Demchok areas. Later, after Indian Prime Minister Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met at Kazan, both sides acknowledged that Special Representatives talks would be resumed to find solutions to the pending border problem. It is, therefore, imperative to understand the discourses in China on the border issue after the Galwan clash and the plausible solutions and problems being discussed in China.

Actual Length of the Border and Related Problems

India views the border with China as 3,488 km; while the Chinese look at it as nearly 1,700 km, divided into three sections: west, middle and east. The west section is about 600 km, the middle section is about 450 km, and the east section is about 650 km.¹ Hence, there seems to be a gap in understanding the length of the disputed border on both sides.

As per Zhou Bo, a researcher at the Center for Strategic and Security Studies, Tsinghua University, and Special Expert at China Forum, this gap stems from the western section border of Kashmir. India controls 2/3 of Kashmir's territory; while Pakistan controls 1/3. India believes that Pakistan illegally sold Indian territory (part of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir) to China, which led to the difference in the understanding of the border length during negotiations.²

Then there is the issue of what constitutes the disputed area. What China considers as an undisputed territory on the map, is regarded as a disputed area by the Indian side. This issue also stems from the three lines on the border:

One is the traditional customary line of India, which is the line formed by the administrative jurisdiction of India in history. India claims that it is incorporated in the 1954 map of the Republic of India.

Second, China claims that although there is a traditional customary line along the entire India-China border (including the western section), it has never been demarcated. It is the same line that has been proposed by the then-Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in the letters written to the then-Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 07 Nov and 17 Dec 1959. In the absence of a treaty to demarcate the border, the traditional customary line can serve as the borderline; however, since India and China have different opinions on where this traditional customary line is, it is necessary to determine the location of the border through negotiations and field surveys and to use the treaty to confirm it in unambiguous words.³

India believes that the India-China border in the Western Section, has been demarcated or confirmed by treaty, and that this is the theoretical Johnson-Ardagh Line on the western section. India claims that the western section of the India-China border was stipulated by the Tibet-Ladakh Agreement of 1684, confirmed by the Dogra-Ladakh Agreement of 1842, which was further confirmed by the Sino-British exchange of notes in 1846-1847; while India's right on Aksai Chin was further confirmed by a note from Britain to the Chinese government in 1899.⁴

Third is the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the two countries, but this line has not been verified by either side. On this, China wants to move from the principle of 'Mutual understanding and mutual concession'⁵, which means that if India wants a solution, it should 'Give a little and then take a little'. However, India opines that as the line is not clear, first there is a need to clarify the line. According to Zhou Bo, the intentions of India are very likely to have a survey for this line and once that is clarified, then India might say that it is difficult for them to make concessions. Hence, the Indian position would be that as a clear line exists, let us make it a de-facto border between the two sides; while India will continue to claim its actual international border.⁶

What led to the Galwan Clash?

Various broad factors resulted in Chinese actions on the border. China thinks that India's military and strategic confidence was on the rise along with its economic growth. This was visible during surgical strikes on terrorist camps across the India-Myanmar border in Jun 2015, as well as the surgical strikes across the Line of Control in Sep 2016 in response to the Uri terror attack.

Thereafter, India's action in Doklam in 2017 created a confrontation with Chinese troops. China perceived the Indian Army's action in Doklam as far-fetched. The second clause of the 'India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty' of 1949 which was revised in 2007, stipulates that India and Bhutan will closely work together once the national interests of both sides are involved. For the Chinese, such close cooperation does not mean that India can send troops to provoke another country. i.e., China.⁷

Later, in response to the 14 Feb 2019 Pulwama attack, India retaliated with an air strike on Balakot terrorist camps in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, deep inside Pakistan.

Besides, China views the Modi government as a nationalist government, which suddenly decided to divide the Jammu and Kashmir state into two parts on 05 Aug 2019, by abolishing certain sections of Article 370: one, is the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir; and the other is Union Territory of Ladakh. The Chinese opine that this changed the status quo of the area and as China claims territories in Ladakh, India has altered the territory of the region. The change in status quo implied that the region is now fully integrated with the Republic of India; while the security and infrastructure development of Ladakh now directly falls under the jurisdiction of the

central government of India. Moreover, Home Minister Amit Shah's statement on Aksai Chin in the parliament caused greater annoyance to the Chinese.

Hence, China suspected the Indian military might make permanent deployment in unoccupied areas (Patrolling areas) in the Western Sector to gain leverage in the clarification of the LAC. This led China to pre-empt military build-up along the entire Western Sector; while violating all the agreements and arrangements reached by the two sides in the past.

Obstacles and Problems in Resolving the Border Issue

In Chinese perception, there are few obstacles in resolving the border problem. These problems are not just the gap in understanding or strategic advantages, but also Indian domestic problems in their perception.

According to some Chinese scholars, one of the major obstacles to the border negotiations with India is the Indian political system. For them, India is a multi-party system and the ruling party is elected by electoral voting. Whether it is the Congress Party or the BJP, if they dare to make any concessions in delineating and demarcating the border, then that party will be forever nailed to the pillar of shame in Indian politics and will never have a chance to regain power.

According to Sun Shui, a documentary photographer, China advocated demarcation of the border along the Line of Actual Control by suffering some losses during 1950; while in the 1980s, China wanted a 'Package Solution'. At that time, the leaders of China had great persuasion capabilities for the people of China to accept such a solution. However, as today, China's national strength has been accentuated, China has become more and more assertive on the border. In the recent negotiations, China has explicitly asked India to return 'Tawang' area and is no longer willing to compromise by accepting the 'McMahon Line' as before.⁸

With regards to the various mechanisms and Special Representatives talks, Wu Zhaoli, an Associate Researcher at the Institute of Asia-Pacific and Global Strategy in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, states that China and India have reached a consensus on the 'Three-step' roadmap for resolving the border issue and established the political guiding principles for resolving the border issue. However, the progress of the 'Second Step' framework negotiations has been relatively slow.⁹ Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi also said in Mar 2015 that "The China-India border negotiations are in the process of accumulating quantitative changes. It is like climbing a mountain. Although it is hard, it is on an uphill road."¹⁰

Probabilities and Possibilities

China clearly understands that the essence of the territorial dispute between the two countries is no longer a confrontation of military strength. Hence, military means cannot fundamentally resolve the territorial issue. In addition, it recognises that there are legal procedures that need to be followed. India's annexation of Sikkim and Russia's annexation of Crimea both followed the so-called 'Referendum' as a legal procedure.¹¹

According to Sui Shui, it is not realistic for China to get the disputed territory by force. First of all, there must be a legitimate reason for the war, and secondly, the benefits must be able to offset the cost of starting the war, international sanctions, and political turmoil. In 1962, China could demarcate the border by force, but could not afford the cost, and the same is true in the present day.¹² For the Chinese, if there is neither economic benefit nor strategic significance, pragmatic people like the Chinese will choose to accept reality.¹³

In ancient times, mountains and rivers were regarded as boundaries, as in the event of a war, they acted as strategic locations to defend, and the enemy would not be able to invade directly, which is beneficial to national defence. Hence, it was considered that if the border was divided according to the terrain of mountains and rivers, it would be relatively peaceful. This method of demarcation is called the 'Geographical Principle'.

However, the Chinese consider this as just a relatively reasonable tool, as Chinese Kingdoms in ancient times have also used the customary demarcation methods to form 'Traditional Boundaries' across the mountain which have nothing to do with geographical principles. However, internationally many states used rivers or ridges, which is the principle of 'Watershed' or 'Ridge Line'. India has always advocated the geographical principle on the border issue, while China advocates the 'Traditional Principle'.¹⁴ Interestingly though, in Article 6 of the 2005 'Agreement between the Government of Republic of India and the Government of People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of India-China Boundary Question', both sides agreed to draw the boundary 'Based on easily identifiable natural geographical features'.¹⁵

Most Chinese opine that the border issue is left over from history and is an extremely sensitive issue between India and China, involving both national sentiments and the prestige and dignity of the two countries. In their opinion the urgency to resolve the border issue has increased significantly after the Galwan incident, but objectively speaking, there are still many obstacles, and the possibility of reaching a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution in the short term is

still low and is dependent on the political will of the two leaders.¹ This resonates with the larger narrative of the Chinese discourse, where the highest level of political intervention is seen as the main guide and direction for any resolution to be expedited.

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¹ Wu Yongnian 吴永年 (2021) “The Inside Story of the Border Dispute Between China and India: Difficult Progress Amid Twists and Turns” (中印两国边界争端内幕：曲折中的艰难进展), *Global Magazine* 《环球》杂志, November 21, cited at <http://jczs.sina.com.cn>, available at <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2003-11-10/161845.html?from=wap> (accessed December 9, 2024)

² Zhou Bo 周波 (2021) “What is Difficult About the China-India Border Negotiations?” (中印边界谈判难在哪里 ?), April 14, available at https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/3424 (accessed December 9, 2024)

³ Xue Junfu 薛军福 (2020) “A Historical and Legal Study of the Sino-Indian Border (Western Section) Dispute (Part 1)” (中印边界 (西段) 争端之 历史与法律考察) (上), August 3, available at <https://jindelaw.com/newsinfo/679488.html> (accessed December 5, 2024)

⁴ Zhou Bo 周波 (2021) “What is Difficult About the China-India Border Negotiations?” (中印边界谈判难在哪里 ?), April 14, available at https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/3424 (accessed December 9, 2024)

⁵ The Chinese use the term “互谅互让” (*Hu Xiang Hu Rang*). Although “让” (*Rang*) can be translated as “Adjustment”, “Accommodation” or “Concession” in English, but in this context the Chinese use it for “Concession”, with a very fine nuance of exchange in other area; rather than “Adjustment” or “Accommodation” in the same area.

⁶ Zhou Bo 周波 (2021) “What is Difficult About the China-India Border Negotiations?” (中印边界谈判难在哪里 ?), April 14, available at https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/3424 (accessed December 9, 2024)

⁷ Zhou Bo 周波 (2021) “What is Difficult About the China-India Border Negotiations?” (中印边界谈判难在哪里 ?), April 14, available at https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/3424 (accessed December 9, 2024)

⁸ Sui Shui 随水 (2021) “[Ten Thousand Words Interpretation] The Past and Present of the Sino-Indian Border Issue (Part 1I)” (【万字解读】中印边界问题的前世今生 (下), March 14, available at <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=477572&page=4> (accessed December 5, 2024)

⁹ Wu Zhaoli 吴兆礼 (2021) “Dilemma, Difficulties in Solving the China-India Border Issue and Future Prospects” (中印边界问题困境、解决难点与未来前景), *South Asian Studies Newsletter* (南亚研究通讯), April 13, available at <https://www.essra.org.cn/view-1000-2419.aspx> (accessed December 9, 2024)

¹⁰ Wang Yi’s Statement cited in Wu Zhaoli 吴兆礼 (2021) “Dilemma, Difficulties in Solving the China-India Border Issue and Future Prospects” (中印边界问题困境、解决难点与未来前景), *South Asian Studies Newsletter* (南亚研究通讯), April 13, available at <https://www.essra.org.cn/view-1000-2419.aspx> (accessed December 9, 2024)

¹¹ Sui Shui 随水 (2021) “[Ten Thousand Words Interpretation] The Past and Present of the Sino-Indian Border Issue (Part 1I)” (【万字解读】中印边界问题的前世今生 (下), March 14, available at <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=477572&page=4> (accessed December 5, 2024)

¹² Sui Shui 随水 (2021) “[Ten Thousand Words Interpretation] The Past and Present of the Sino-Indian Border Issue (Part 1I)” (【万字解读】中印边界问题的前世今生 (下), March 14, available at <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=477572&page=4> (accessed December 5, 2024)

¹ Wu Zhaoli 吴兆礼 (2021) “Dilemma, Difficulties in Solving the China-India Border Issue and Future Prospects” (中印边界问题困境、解决难点与未来前景), *South Asian Studies Newsletter* (南亚研究通讯), April 13, available at <https://www.essra.org.cn/view-1000-2419.aspx> (accessed December 9, 2024)

¹³ Chang He Hong Yang 长河红阳 (2019) “Changhe Hongyang: A Model of Cultural Treason - A Preliminary Review of “In-Depth Interpretation of the Sino-Indian Border Dispute”” (长河红阳：学问卖国的典范——初评《深度解读中印边境纠纷》), February 22, available at <https://www.kunlunce.com/ssjj/guojipinglun/2019-02-22/131301.html> (accessed December 5, 2024).

¹⁴ Sui Shui 随水 (2021) “[Ten Thousand Words Interpretation] The Past and Present of the Sino-Indian Border Issue (Part 1I)” (【万字解读】中印边界问题的前世今生 (下), March 14, available at <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=477572&page=1> (accessed December 5, 2024)

¹⁵“Agreement between the Government of Republic of India and the Government of People’s Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of India-China Boundary Question”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, April 11, 2005, available at mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/CH05B0585.pdf (accessed December 8, 2024)