




THE  
**CENTRE  
OF GRAVITY**  
SERIES



**THE SINO-INDIAN  
BORDER DISPUTE  
AND ASIAN SECURITY**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The border dispute between India and China is long and unique with disputes over length, control and third parties such as Tibet.
- From 1999 until 2008 India and China made fresh efforts to resolve the dispute, however these have faltered and stalled.
- The relationship between India and the US is affecting the relationship, both speeding up and slowing down resolution depending who India is focused on, Washington or Beijing.
- A middle power coalition, free of the US and China is the only way for countries such as India, Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Japan to ensure their security.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Asian nations must recognize that distancing themselves from the United States will not necessarily win political rewards in Beijing. Deepening ties with the United States must remain a high priority for all of China's neighbours.

Asia's regional powers, including Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam need to find ways to strengthen security cooperation amongst themselves in a variety of ways and through flexible political arrangements.

Although each has a different set of compulsions in relation to China, they share an overriding objective in constructing a middle power coalition that can shape the Asian security order.

The coalition must neither be seen as an extension of the American alliance system, nor a counter to it. It is the first step towards constructing an in-situ balance of power in Asia.

## Introduction

The three week military stand-off between India and China in the Ladakh sector of Jammu and Kashmir during April-May 2013 ended in the restoration of the status quo ante on the disputed frontier. China ended its intrusion into the territory claimed by India and Delhi too pulled back from the region.

This, however, is unlikely to be the last such incident and the next one might need a much bigger political effort to defuse. The conditions that produced the crisis in the first place are acquiring a sharper edge. Even more important, the crisis has deepened the mutual distrust on the ground which in turn could intensify the bilateral military tension.

This policy paper begins with a brief review of the context in which the Ladakh crisis flared up. It then examines the transformation of the disputed frontier in recent years, evaluates the impact of the United States on the India-China relationship, and concludes with an analysis of the limits to India's overtures to China and the lessons for the rest of Asia.

## A Complex Border

The India-China border is disputed in many unique ways. For one Delhi and Beijing do not even agree on the length of their contested border. Delhi says the border is about 4060 km long; China claims it is only 2000 km.

India contends China is in occupation of 38,000 sq km of territory in the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir; Beijing claims 90,000 sq km of territory in the eastern Himalayas that is constituted as the state of Arunachal Pradesh in the Indian Union.

Beyond the large claims on territory in each other's control, there is no delineated line of actual control in most parts of the contested border. In some places the gap between competing versions of the Line of Actual Control is pretty wide, as in parts of the Ladakh region.

Transgressions and intrusions by each side on the other's perception of the line of actual control have significantly increased as both sides have begun to patrol the border aggressively in recent years.

Making matters worse are the profound mutual differences over Tibet and Kashmir. While Delhi formally recognizes Chinese control over Tibet, Beijing is wary of popular Indian support to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause.

The Tibetan refugees in India run a 'government-in-exile' much to the discomfort of Beijing. China meanwhile has begun to question India's sovereignty over Kashmir, which explains the Chinese figure of 2000 km for the border.

Delhi and Beijing also differ on how to resolve the boundary dispute. Beijing sees it as a difficult problem left over by history that must be put aside; it puts emphasis on strengthening bilateral relations.

Delhi, on the other hand, is open to expanding the bilateral relationship but insists that without a resolution of the boundary dispute, the full potential of the partnership cannot be realized.

## A Transformed Frontier

The last decade and a half has seen India make repeated efforts at finding a solution to the boundary dispute. In 1999 it persuaded Beijing to embark on a clarification and delineation of the line of actual control by exchanging the respective versions of maps.

The two sides exchanged maps on the least contentious middle sector of the boundary. Talks to do the same in the Western Sector collapsed amidst Chinese reluctance. The eastern sector was never taken up.

In 2003, Delhi made a fresh pitch. It got the Chinese to acknowledge Indian sovereignty over Sikkim, elevate the negotiations on the boundary dispute to a higher level and agree to a negotiation on a political basis rather than historic and legal claims.

This approach seemed to pay dividends when the two sides finalized a set of guiding principles for the resolution of the boundary dispute in 2005. This was to be followed by a mutual agreement on delineating the boundary, and a final phase which would see demarcation on the ground.

The 2005 agreement came amidst the rapid expansion of bilateral economic cooperation, the proclamation of a strategic global partnership and expanded engagement on multilateral issues.

Yet before the end of the decade, Delhi and Beijing were back to square one. China publicly reaffirmed sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh, objected to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit there, prevented the Asian Development Bank from funding projects in the state, denied visas to Indians from the state, gave stapled visas to Indian citizens from Jammu and Kashmir.

Meanwhile the boundary negotiations stalled, with China reluctant to settle the dispute by legitimizing the current territorial status quo. Beijing sought major territorial concessions on the eastern sector that Delhi was unwilling to offer.

Further, the modernization of transport infrastructure on the frontier initiated by China and followed by India began to intensify the military tensions on the ground.

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As part of its West Region Development strategy unveiled at the turn of the 2000s, Beijing had rapidly modernized the infrastructure on its borders in Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan. The long overdue development of its remote regions also helped reduce the mobilization times for the People's Liberation Army in a potential confrontation with India and improved its capacity for muscular patrolling.

India, which woke up to the threat belatedly, announced plans to raise additional troops to be deployed on the China border, reopen landing strips that were abandoned many years ago facilitating the use of its air power, and improve its own transport infrastructure all across the Himalayan border with China.

Despite the conflict in 1962, both sides had largely left their remote Himalayan frontier underdeveloped. As that situation began to change in the 2000s, increased military tensions along the delineated frontier became inevitable.

India is concerned that China is seeking to alter facts on the ground by continually probing Indian positions much in the manner that it has done in the waters of the East and South China Seas. China's most recent proposals to constrain India's military modernization on the border have been viewed skeptically in Delhi.

## The Strategic Triangle

Adding another layer of complexity are the significant improvement of India's relationship with the United States and the mounting tensions between Washington and Beijing in recent years. In the second term of the Bush Administration, the U.S. unveiled the historic civil nuclear initiative to end India's prolonged international atomic isolation.

Delhi and Washington also signed a framework agreement for defence cooperation which resulted in India buying for the first time since independence major weapons platforms from the United States and deepening military to military cooperation.

Beijing saw Washington's new warmth towards Delhi as part of an effort by the United States to contain China and build India up as a countervailing power in Asia. Beijing sought to undercut the civil nuclear initiative in the Nuclear Suppliers Group in 2008 and since has sought to sustain Pakistan's nuclear parity with India.

The sudden burst of energy in India's relations with the U.S. was probably one reason why Beijing seemed to walk back from the understandings of the 2005 agreement on boundary settlement. Meanwhile Delhi had its own problem with the U.S. policy since the end of the Bush Administration.

Washington's outreach to Beijing in the first year of the Obama Administration raised significant concerns in India that a weakened United States might be tempted to cut a separate *modus vivendi* with China.

By 2011, the U.S. had switched gears again announcing the pivot to Asia. While Washington proclaimed that India was the 'lynchpin' of the rebalance to Asia, Delhi remained ambiguous. Like many other capitals in Asia, Delhi was not sure about the sustainability of the pivot amidst the prolonged fiscal crisis in the United States.

Delhi neither endorsed the U.S. pivot nor criticized it. India's strategic ambiguity towards the strategy of rebalance was rooted in three considerations. First was the sense that as the weakest of the three powers, India was vulnerable to shifts in the relationship between China and the United States and the importance of protecting its own room for manoeuvre.

Second, sharing a long frontier with China, Delhi was apprehensive about getting too close to Washington and provoking Beijing into a premature confrontation. India was also acutely conscious of the growing strategic gap with China and need for time to catch up.

Third, India was hopeful that China's preoccupation with the U.S. pivot and its escalating territorial disputes with its East Asian neighbours might make it amenable to an early resolution of the boundary dispute.

Together the three concerns resulted in a certain but imperceptible slow-down in India's engagement with the United States that had seen rapid expansion in the previous years. In tandem Delhi focused on boosting ties with China.

The Ladakh crisis, brief though it was, has severely undermined the Indian calculus on the prospects for an early breakthrough on the boundary dispute. The incident is also bound to compel Delhi to rethink its recent emphasis on a 'China-first' foreign policy that sought to carefully limit strategic cooperation with the U.S., Japan and Vietnam in order to avoid giving political offence to China.

## Limits to India's China Strategy

The Ladakh flare-up showed that China is under no real pressure to make nice to India on the border because of its preoccupations in the East. India's logic of sustaining the bilateral engagement with China remains, but it may increasingly be subject to Beijing's reasonableness in ensuring peace and tranquility on the border and to take steps towards an early resolution of the boundary dispute.

The Chinese premier Li Keqiang's visit to Delhi in the third week of May 2013 marked an inflexion point in India's China policy. Singh reminded Li that the progress in the bilateral relationship during the last quarter of a century was based on the commitment of the two sides to maintain peace on the border. If that peace is undermined, Singh warned, then the rest of the relationship would inevitably be undermined. Li, who was all charm in Delhi, was willing to listen to what India had to say. He promised to address India's new concerns not just on the boundary, but also on managing shared water resources and the growing trade deficit, about \$40 billion in two-way trade of \$66 billion, in favour of China.

It is by no means clear if Li can deliver on the promises in the near term. Meanwhile Delhi is under great political pressure at home after the Ladakh incursion to stand up to China on the border dispute, accelerate its planned military modernization, resort to more vigilant patrolling to prevent future Chinese intrusions, and step up the efforts to upgrade border infrastructure.

This in turn could make it increasingly difficult to maintain peace and tranquility on India's China frontier. While new confidence-building measures are under consideration, none of the previous protocols could work because the frontier remains delineated and the military modernization can only gather momentum on both sides in the coming years.

Since the dispute is rooted in the incomplete territoriality of the two Asian giants, and the nationalist passions are resurgent in both countries, significant territorial concessions by either appear unlikely.

Short of a final resolution of the boundary dispute, the Sino-Indian security dilemma on their contested frontier is likely to deepen and continue to hobble the bilateral relationship as it has for so many decades.

Peace and tranquility on the Sino-Indian border and the slow but steady normalization of bilateral ties over the last quarter of a century has been a stabilizing factor in major power relations in Asia.

Amidst the rapid rise of China and the slower emergence of India as a major power, instabilities in their bilateral relations will feed into the already dynamic state of great power relations in Asia and the challenges of constructing a credible regional security architecture.

Continuing contestation on the Sino-Indian border will deepen the distrust between Delhi and Beijing and accentuate the competitive element and dampen the prospects for cooperation between the two on regional and global issues.

As India copes with the new challenges in its engagement with China, Delhi might seek stronger security ties with the United States and end its strategic hesitation in playing a larger role in the security politics of East Asia and the Western Pacific even as it holds on to the notion of strategic autonomy.

Although few in Asia would want to be drawn into the bilateral disputes between Delhi and Beijing, there could be a wider range of possibilities for the United States and the Asian powers to strengthen ties with Delhi.

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## Lessons for the Region

India's emerging difficulties with China underline the pitfalls of an illusion that is widespread in Washington as well as many Asian capitals: the expectation that each one can carve out a separate peace with Beijing.

Rising China is acutely conscious of the narrowing power gap with the United States and expanding power differential with its Asian neighbours. There appears no real compulsion on Beijing's part to yield on China's core interests, especially territorial issues.

It is also quite clear that the rhetoric of neutralism, non-alignment, and equidistance between Washington and Beijing, which has a long lineage in Asia, will only make it easier for China to divide its periphery and demand peace on its own terms.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Asian nations must recognize that distancing themselves from the United States will not necessarily win political rewards in Beijing. Deepening ties with the United States must remain a high priority for all of China's neighbours.

Asia's regional powers, including Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam need to find ways to strengthen security cooperation amongst themselves in a variety of ways and through flexible political arrangements.

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