



The Border Incident of Spring 2013 : Interpreting China-India Relations

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The Spring 2013 Border Incident: Interpreting China-India Relations

Isabelle Saint-Mézard¹

Abstract

The leadership transition that took place in the People's Republic of China between autumn 2012 and spring 2013 drew the attention of Indian authorities mostly because of the friendly gestures to which it gave rise. These goodwill gestures raised hopes of progress on the security issues that had been disrupting the otherwise intense and wide-ranging relations between the two countries. Yet as China's new leadership tried to deploy this policy of goodwill towards India, a serious incident in the border areas came as a reminder that the Sino-Indian relationship was still marked by a profound asymmetry. This incident, the most serious since the late 1980s, also confirmed that the two neighbors were locked in a worrying security dilemma. Although the principle of status quo in the border areas has remained the point of reference for authorities on both sides, it has been weakened due to small-scale – albeit highly symbolic – military movements in the Himalayas.

The leadership transition that took place in the People's Republic of China between autumn 2012 and spring 2013 drew the attention of Indian authorities mostly because of the friendly gestures to which it gave rise. In January 2013, the new General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and future President, Xi Jinping, wrote in a letter addressed to India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that Beijing would continue to place "great importance" on China-India bilateral relations. He confirmed his goodwill three months later, in March 2013, during a meeting with Manmohan Singh at the BRICS Summit in Durban, when he declared that India was one of China's most important partners.² Finally, and most importantly,

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2. "Xi Says World Needs Common Development of China, India," *Xinhua*, March 28, 2013.

China's new leadership quickly announced that the new Premier Li Keqiang, had chosen India for his first foreign trip in May 2013. From a Chinese perspective, this was a strong indication that the new leadership was not merely looking to maintain the goodwill policy implemented by their predecessors Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, but also to give it new momentum.

For a short time, these gestures of goodwill raised hopes of progress on the security issues that had been disrupting the otherwise intense and wide-ranging relations between the two countries. Indeed, Sino-Indian relations, which had long been haunted by the 1962 border conflict,³ had significantly improved over the previous decade. The most visible improvement was undoubtedly economic, since China had grown to be India's first- or second-largest trading partner (depending on the year) in less than ten years.⁴ Institutional cooperation was also substantially strengthened and the range of bilateral dialogues continued to broaden, with consultations taking place on counter-terrorism, maritime affairs, and disarmament, as well as various regional issues related to Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia.

However, although the two neighbors developed closer ties, they remained unable to resolve their enduring territorial conflict. No major breakthrough could be achieved despite thirty years of talks, the signing of two major agreements to maintain the status quo (in 1993 and 1996), the appointment of "super negotiators" in 2003, and, finally, in 2005, the drawing up of a set of guidelines to resolve the border dispute. In the name of Kashmir's territorial integrity, New Delhi has continued to claim 35,000 km² of land under Chinese control in the region of Aksai Chin, a high plateau located between Xinjiang, Tibet, and India's Ladakh region. As for Beijing, it claims 90,000 km² of land now located in Arunachal Pradesh, a state that lies along the Himalayan foothills in the large land-locked region of India's Northeast, in the name of Tibet's territorial integrity (Colin 2011). And to make matters worse, these demands, which had not been heard since the late 1980s, were strongly rekindled in 2006. The border areas have since become the center of a series of provocations, most of which have been instigated by China. Beginning first in Arunachal Pradesh, in the east of the border areas, these provocations spread to Jammu and Kashmir in the west in 2008-2010.

3. Following the Chinese offensives on October 20, 1962, the Chinese army occupied the territories of Aksai Chin in Kashmir and most of the North East Frontier Agency (that would later become the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh), which are high mountain areas (sometimes over 5,000 m in altitude). One month later, China withdrew from all of the territories except Aksai Chin, which it annexed and which India still claims today. As for China, it continues to claim most of Arunachal Pradesh.

4. With a trade volume of 66 billion dollars in 2012, it ranked as India's second-largest trading partner.

This Chinese posturing along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has not only rekindled an atmosphere of distrust and revived latent tensions along the Himalayas (Bajpai 2011; Dutta 2012), but it has also been in direct conflict with the Chinese leadership's efforts to strengthen cooperation with India.⁵ Thus, just as China's new leadership was trying to implement its goodwill policy towards India, the most serious incident since the late 1980s occurred in the border areas in April-May 2013. The incident seemed all the more incongruous in that it happened just a few weeks before Premier Li's visit to India – a visit that was meant to be a strong symbol of China's goodwill policy. The aim of this paper is to understand the significance and implications this border incident has had for each of these two countries, and, consequently, for their bilateral and regional relations. To this end, we shall first analyze the border incident at a local level before examining the strategies and perceptions of the protagonists, first in India, then in China. We shall then attempt to understand its implications for the relationship between the two countries and, more generally, for major geopolitical affairs in Asia.

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The Spring 2013 Border Incident: A Stand-Off between Camps

On the night of April 15, 2013, a small platoon of around fifty soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) crossed the LAC at the northern edge of Ladakh, in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, and pitched a three-tent camp at Raki Nala, at an altitude of about 5,000 meters. The next day, April 16, border guards from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) discovered the Chinese camp on what they considered to be Indian territory, and they in turn set up their own tent camp just a few hundred meters away. The stand-off thus established took place about thirty kilometers away from India's Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) military base, and hence in a sensitive, strategic area. Located in the far east of the Karakoram Mountains, the DBO sector lies at the intersect of two disputed areas: on the eastern edge of the Siachen glacier, on which Indian and Pakistani troops strive to maintain their positions under extreme conditions (Siachen is the highest location in which military operations take place in the world), and only a dozen kilometers from Aksai Chin, a region disputed between China and India.

Like nearby Aksai Chin, the DBO sector is a cold desert region that is not conducive to patrolling, especially for the Indians, whose primary access to the region is by plane. The area's only inhabitants are the troops of the Ladakh Scouts – a regiment

5. D. Roy Chowdhury, "Experts baffled by China-India border stand-off amid improving ties," *South China Morning Post*, April 30, 2013.

of the Indian Army specialized in high-altitude combat – and the ITBP. Each group falls under the authority of a different government department – the Ministry of Defense for the former, and the Ministry of Home Affairs for the latter –, which complicates their coordination in the field. Due to its unique topography, the DBO base served as a military supply base during the brief war of 1962 before being abandoned four years later after an earthquake. The Indian Army reopened the base in 2008 and built a helipad and simple airfield. This airfield – one of the highest in the world – can accommodate transport aircraft like the Antonov 32, making it possible to provide logistical support to the troops stationed in the region.

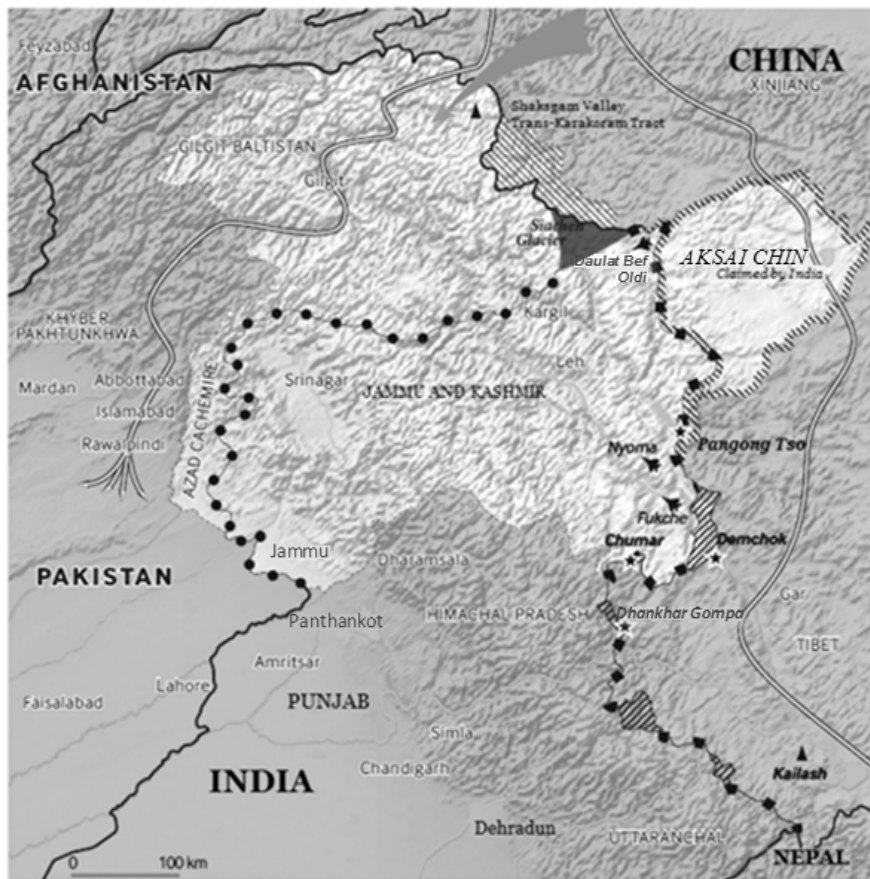
Besides the unique topography of the terrain in which it occurred, what set the spring 2013 incident apart was its duration. Of course, the number of Chinese transgressions – and to a lesser extent, those of India – had been increasing throughout the border areas since 2006.⁶ More often than not, these transgressions resulted from the fact that Indian and Chinese troops often had differing perceptions of where the LAC actually lay and, unlike in the past, they no longer hesitated to conduct extensive patrols in disputed areas. This was especially the case for the PLA. Nonetheless, such incursions had remained limited in nature up to that point; PLA troops crossed the LAC as defined by India, sometimes left a visible sign of their incursion, and then quickly retreated to their position well beyond the disputed areas. In the spring 2013 incident, however, the PLA established a presence well beyond the gray zones, penetrating 19 km deep into territory controlled by India and beyond its own perception of where the LAC lay.

It took twenty days of negotiations, including telephone calls between senior leaders in New Delhi and Beijing, as well as several flag meetings between Indian and Chinese military commanders in the field at Raki Nala before the two parties agreed to break their respective camps and return to the previous status quo. At the official level, the stand-off never appeared to be evolving towards a more beligerent conflict. Both capitals repeatedly stated that they were relying on institutional channels of dialogue – notably the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs established in 2012 – and that they did not plan to use any means other than diplomacy to resolve the incident.⁷

6. Indian authorities estimated that there were 228 transgressions in 2010, 213 in 2011, and 234 in 2012; the Chinese authorities have not provided any numbers, but they claim that Indian troops have also committed transgressions along the LAC, which some Indian experts have on rare occasions acknowledged.

7. This mechanism was created in response to the upsurge of LAC transgressions. It was established with great difficulty due to rising tensions around the border issue in 2010-2011. It is led by the Joint Secretary for East Asia from India's Ministry of External Affairs and by the Director General of Boundary Affairs from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

MAP 1: THE CHINA-INDIA BORDER



Hérodote, n° 150, La Découverte, 3^e trimestre 2013.

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The incident officially ended on May 6, when the spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, announced that the troops from both countries had left the stand-off zone (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2013a). The diplomatic dance immediately resumed. Salman Kurshid, India's Minister of External Affairs, whose visit had been temporarily suspended, travelled to Beijing as planned after all on May 9 and 10 to prepare Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India, and Li did in fact visit New Delhi and Mumbai from May 19 to 21. This diplomatic resilience should not be allowed to obscure the unique nature of what had happened up in the Himalayas, however. Due to both its depth and its duration, the Chinese incursion into the DBCO sector constituted the most serious incident in the Sino-Indian border areas since the Sumdorong Chu incident of 1986.⁸ In fact, this incident was a clear violation of the 1993 Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas. Lastly, it should be mentioned that the conditions agreed to by the two neighbors that led to the withdrawal were not made public.

In India: A Media Frenzy and a Low Diplomatic Profile

During the spring 2013 “mini-crisis” the Indian government adopted the official stance it had always adopted during times of border tensions. It played down the incidents on the LAC, restricted information from the field, and, whenever possible, refuted the very idea that there was an on-going crisis with China along the border. More precisely, Prime Minister Singh and his ministers of External Affairs and Defense – Mr. Kurshid and Mr. Anthony, respectively – were the ones who were front and center, informing the public and defusing any risk of rising tension. In fact, Prime Minister Singh did not hesitate to declare that it was just a “local problem.” The armed forces, which were generally quite forthcoming about the Chinese threat, remained in the background and made few public statements, while the troops in the field at Raki Nala received precise orders not to take any actions that might disrupt the diplomatic process. Most of the crisis management and talks with China was coordinated by officials from the China Study Group, a high-level committee within the Indian government that is responsible for dealing with border issues.⁹

8. Sumdorong Chu is a valley in Arunachal Pradesh where the PLA began establishing a presence in 1986. In response, the Indian government flew two army divisions into the region and stationed them along the ridge lines surrounding the valley. For several months, the two camps engaged in a stand-off, exchanging threats through their respective emissaries...

9. This group includes the Cabinet Secretary and the Secretaries of Home Affairs, Defense, and External Affairs, as well as the army's deputy Chief of Staff and the heads of the intelligence services.

However, in view of the government's pusillanimous position, Members of Parliament (MPs), the media, and the public at large demanded that a stronger stance be taken against what was unanimously perceived as an act of Chinese aggression.¹⁰ Unlike the Indian government, the Indian Parliament had often vehemently denounced Chinese aggressions since 2006. In November 2006 for instance, as the border dispute was showing new signs of escalating into something more serious, the Indian Parliament demanded that the government reaffirm its claims of sovereignty over the disputed territories, at the very time that President Hu Jintao was in the country on an official visit. As with previous border incidents, the harshest criticism in 2013 came not only from the parliamentary opposition, led by the right-wing nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but also from some of the government's allies. For instance Mulayam Singh Yadav, the historic leader of the Samajwadi Party, a powerful regional party established in Uttar Pradesh, criticized the government's cowardice in the face of the Chinese incursion, and demanded that External Affairs Minister Salman Kurshid's visit to Beijing be cancelled.¹¹

Beyond the perceived threats, which were real, the virulence of many a MP was part of a specific political context, in which Manmohan Singh's government was completing its term in a state of having lost all credibility. The heightened anti-Chinese discourse made it possible for the opposition, as well as some of the majority's powerful allies, to attack the Prime Minister, his government, and the ruling Congress Party directly – accusing them of being weak and lax on every point – and to gain visibility by depicting themselves as hyper-nationalist in preparation for the upcoming general elections of April-May 2014. In this sense, India's domestic politics can indeed lead to serious complications in a border imbroglio that is already quite complex.

As for the media, once the Press Trust of India reported news of the stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops on April 20, they began to produce an unrelenting stream of live reports and expert analyses, repeatedly showing maps of the DBO sector and photos of the Chinese camp. That being said, the disparity between this media frenzy and the Indian government's low profile was probably not as great as it might have appeared. The leaders in New Delhi have experience dealing with the media, since it is an omnipresent protagonist in public life in India. It is therefore possible that the Indian establishment used organized leaks to the press to alert international public opinion and thus place indirect pressure on China. As shall be illustrated in the next section of this article, this hypothesis appears to be confirmed

10. Indrani Bagchi and Rajat Pandit, "Ladakh Stand-Off Ends as China Agrees to Pull Out Troops," *The Times of India*, May 6, 2013.

11. "BJP Urges Khurshid to Call Off China Visit," *The Times of India*, April 29, 2013.

by the Chinese, who strongly criticized the Indian government's passivity regarding the sensationalism of the national news media.

The fact remains that the wide media coverage and proliferation of analyses did little to hide the very real difficulty that India was having in deciphering China's motives. Some felt the incident was a clear demonstration of an already well-established plan to nibble away at the border territories (Stobdan 2013); many saw it as a way for China to test India's response (Mahalingam 2013; Takshashila Institution 2013); while others believed the spring 2013 provocation was part of China's general agenda to assert its power along all of its borders. Despite these differences in interpretation, most Indian observers agreed that the main focus of China's strategy was to place pressure on India in order to limit its regional and global influence. Many were therefore concerned about the Indian government's lack of resolve, pointing out that it was strange that Indian troops had to resort to a military withdrawal from their own territory, allegedly to resolve the stand-off.

In the end, the spring 2013 incident undoubtedly strengthened the Indian public's already dominant perception of China as an aggressive and threatening neighbor that resorted to coercive practices all along its borders. Opinion polls clearly testified to this. According to the results of a study conducted by the Lowy Institute in 2013, China was the country that was most distrusted by Indians after Pakistan, with nearly 83% of those surveyed believing that China represented a threat to India's security (Medcalf 2013). Some of the primary factors behind this feeling of insecurity were, in order of priority: China's nuclear arsenal, the China-India competition for access to resources in third countries, China's close ties to India's neighbors and other Indian Ocean countries, and, lastly, China's claims on Indian territories. The border issue was thus not an overly determining factor in how the Indians perceived China, but it did contribute to a general feeling of distrust in a regional (Southern Asia and the Indian Ocean), global (access to resources), and bilateral context.

In China: Silence and Opacity

Unlike India, China maintained a coordinated official position (at least on the surface), and it was based on silence and opacity. For more than two weeks, Chinese diplomacy – as relayed by the spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defense – did its utmost to deny that any incident had taken place along the LAC, clearly stating in every official statement that Chinese troops were beyond reproach and had done no wrong (Ministry of National Defense of the PRC 2013). It was not until May 2 that the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, first mentioned the existence of an incident in the west of the LAC, only to announce

the end of the stand-off and the withdrawal of all troops four days later (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2013b).

Very little about China's view of the incident was leaked, and no official explanation of any kind was ever truly provided regarding the motives for the decision to make a foray into India's territory. Given that Xi Jinping seemed to have rapidly taken control of the Central Military Commission and the PLA, it is difficult to believe that the incident was an isolated initiative taken by the military with no connection to the ruling political establishment. On this subject, some experts like Li Mingjiang, of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, believed the incident "could have been caused by the new leadership's firm position on issues of national interest."¹² He pointed out that Xi Jinping had publicly called upon the army to make every effort to defend China's territorial integrity and fundamental interests. With such political messages, some members of the military, particularly those in the border guard regiments, may have felt encouraged to affirm their own position locally, including (and especially) in the disputed areas with India.

Interestingly, several interviews conducted by this author in Beijing in June 2013 revealed that in China the incident was primarily seen as a response to India's position. In other words, from China's perspective, it was India who committed the first provocation that led to the spring 2013 incident. Some Chinese experts referred to the infrastructure that India had built near the border areas, including a "concrete post" erected in a spot considered to be too close to the LAC. China was said to have expressed its concern on the subject, but to no avail, so Chinese leadership decided to take strong action to show India that it had gone too far. In this case, it deliberately made a relatively deep incursion into India, setting up camp beyond even the controversial post as if it wanted to cut off India's logistic support.¹³

This narrative illustrated the divergent perceptions and opinions present on either side of the LAC: whereas India viewed the incident as a unilateral, or even offensive, move by the PLA, China believed it simply acted in response to Indian provocation. Some historians may take the view that India and China did nothing more than replay history in a toned-down, limited version of the events that transpired in the early 1960s and that culminated in the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Indeed, it was Prime Minister Nehru's tactical decision to pre-position (unarmed) soldiers at advanced posts in the Himalayas (with the so-called Forward Policy) that led the

12. Cited in D. Roy Chowdhury, "Experts Baffled by China-India Border Stand-Off amid Improving Ties," *South China Morning Post*, April 30, 2013.

13. Interviews conducted at the Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceania Studies, Chinese Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing, June 14, 2013. The CICIR is a research center that has close ties to China's defense and intelligence services.

Chinese to take the offensive in order to “teach India a lesson” and to put an end to its provocations.

Lastly, it should be noted that the issue of the advanced posts was not ignored by the public debate in India, but the view taken of the situation was quite different. In fact, various open sources in India reported that the Chinese were demanding the destruction of several advanced posts in eastern Ladakh, mainly because they feared their troop movements and communication networks in the region were being kept under surveillance. Yet most of the time, instead of conceding that these posts were the cause of China’s feelings of insecurity, the Indian media and strategic community were primarily concerned that the authorities might give in to Beijing’s demands, interpreting this as yet another illustration of their leaders’ weakness and of the country’s fragile strategic position.

Implications for Bilateral Relations

The way in which the spring 2013 incident was viewed on either side of the LAC reveals the asymmetry of the Sino-Indian relationship. The hypersensitivity of Indian public opinion regarding the issue contrasts with China’s partly feigned, partly genuine indifference. Clearly, regardless of what Chinese officials and Xi Jinping might say, India hardly seems to be one of China’s top priorities. In Beijing’s diplomatic and academic circles, it is striking to note how the issue of China’s relations with India is commented upon in general and rather confident – if not edifying – terms, whereas the simple mention of Japan usually provokes a visceral response. Similarly, the Sino-Indian border conflict does not produce any specific reaction, except to bring up the issues of Tibet and the Dalai Lama, which are considered domestic issues. In any case, for the decision-makers in Beijing the Sino-Indian border issue remains marginal compared to the more serious problems to the east, such as the countless disputes in the South and East China Sea, the North Korean imbroglio, and the United States’ stated intention to return to the Asia-Pacific region.

At the same time, this asymmetry points to a deterioration in how each side views the other. The negative view of China that the spring border incident produced in India has already been discussed. But China’s official press rather perniciously reported on India’s media coverage of the incident, including its sensationalist aspects, thus painting India as ultranationalist and vindictive, if not vengeful. Furthermore, the Chinese did not hesitate to criticize both the Indian media for their negative influence on bilateral relations and the authorities in New Delhi for their inability to control what were considered excessive and inappropriate flows of

information. An editorial in the *Global Times* took issue with the “nonsense” of the Indian media:

Some Indian officials caution that China should pay no heed to the radical voices among some Indian media which sensationalize news. But their malicious impact is so real that it cannot be ignored.

The Indian public has been informed about Chinese troops’ “intrusion,” while provocative words uttered by Indian media and politicians can be read by Chinese people online.¹⁴

Most importantly, the spring 2013 border incident confirms that the two neighbors have become entangled in a security dilemma. In general, China’s military modernization in Tibet has been perceived to be a real threat in India. Since 2010, India’s military forces have reinforced their defenses in both the eastern and western sectors. They have already restored two air bases and raised two infantry divisions for the eastern sector, while also training an attack corps for high altitude combat. In the western sector, in Ladakh, they have renovated old airstrips near the border areas (the so-called Advanced Landing Grounds), not only at Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), but also at Fukche and Nyoma, as well as surveillance posts in Chumar (Saint-Mézard 2013) (see Map 1).

Yet these initiatives have in turn provoked irritation and misunderstanding among the Chinese. The PLA’s incursion in spring 2013 was precisely the expression of this unease. It was designed to make India understand that it had gone too far (or rather too close to the disputed border areas) in its military reinforcement. But whether India’s leadership in New Delhi has understood the message behind China’s maneuver is of little consequence. Of far greater import is the fact that the PLA intrusion reinforced the collective perception of China as being aggressive and prone to provocation and coercive action. In other words, by making a deliberate foray into India’s territory, China has only widened the gap of misunderstanding with its neighbor.

In this downward spiral of insecurity, it is striking to note that China has never considered the fact that India’s military built-up along the LAC could be directly related to its own policy of developing civilian and military infrastructures in Tibet. This expansion, which has been advancing at a brisk pace since the 1990s, has brought China’s presence to the edges of the border areas and increased its troop transport capacity in these remote regions tenfold, among other things. And it is primarily in response to this deterioration in the strategic balance on either side of

14. “New Delhi bears brunt of border hysteria,” *Global Times*, May 2, 2013, 12. Accessible online from: <http://services.globaltimes.cn/epaper/2013-05-02/22337.htm>.

the LAC that, from 2006 on, India has tried to restore the infrastructure it had left abandoned for over forty years. Nevertheless, Chinese experts have usually viewed India's defense effort as nothing more than reflecting an inferiority complex and a lack of trust resulting from the 1962 military debacle. In addition, they have felt that India's political class has used the "Chinese threat" theory to divert public attention away from domestic problems, and that India's military has used it as an excuse to inflate their budget (Liu 2013). While these manipulation strategies have been a fact of life in India, as has been demonstrated, the fact remains that the Chinese seriously underestimate the reality of India's concerns, especially in military circles.

Consequently, the status quo principle – if it has prevailed and remained the point of reference for both countries – has been weakened and has done little to prevent small-scale military movements along the LAC. The spring 2013 incident proved symptomatic of this deterioration because it violated the terms of the 1993 Sino-Indian Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control. In fact, China has recognized that such incidents, meaning not just transgressions but also stand-offs, may occur again in future, while also precluding the possibility of an escalation toward armed conflict.¹⁵ In other words, the Sino-Indian border areas may continue to be under a low, but permanent, climate of tension, especially since the militarization process is continuing on both sides of the LAC and the prospects for an exchange of maps (prerequisite to any agreement) seem rather dim.

The Border Incident in the Geopolitical Context of Asia

Since it lasted three weeks, the spring 2013 border stand-off drew international attention, contrary to the previous transgressions along the LAC. Moreover, it occurred in a context of general tension along some of China's maritime borders, as disputes in the East and South China Seas had escalated significantly. The Raki Nala stand-off was therefore just another in an already long string of recent incidents between China and its neighbors in Northeast and Southeast Asia; it thus reinforced China's image as a revisionist power likely to disrupt the status quo. Furthermore, it was primarily India's version of events that was spread throughout the world (thanks to its overactive media) and thus prevailed, given China's minimal public communication.

15. Interviews conducted at the Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceania Studies, CICIR, Beijing, June 14, 2013.

In light of this, one can wonder whether China fully grasped the impact that a local border incident in the far reaches of the Himalayas could have on its general position in Asia. According to some scholars, Chinese leaders may have been misled by their traditional sector-focused approach of external affairs and may have failed to see the connection between the tactical management of a specific issue and the more strategic stakes of the country's international positioning.¹⁶ In other words, by failing to promote a broad, integrated approach, the leadership in Beijing would have underestimated the impact that the management of a specific crisis, in this case on the remote Himalayan border, would have on China's standing as a whole. Nonetheless, it is clear that many of Beijing's decision-makers and experts understood that China had nothing to gain by exacerbating the tensions along the Himalayan border when the country's most difficult and immediate security concerns were on its maritime border.

The near simultaneity of the border incident and Premier Li Keqiang's official visit to India also raised questions about the general coherence of China's diplomatic apparatus. Li's visit, which had originally been organized as a sign of China's goodwill towards India, seemed to have lost all meaning after the April-May border incident. In many ways, the visit failed to rebuild confidence between the two countries, especially as the Chinese Premier gave greater priority to trade-related issues than strategic ones, and many Indian observers were disappointed that the border dispute had not been the focus of the discussions. Even the related question of China's hydraulic activities on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) River remained deadlocked. New Delhi, which would like more transparency on the part of China on this subject as well, was unable to get Premier Li to promise to disclose information about China's plans to build dams on the rivers it shares with India.

Significantly, New Delhi refused to renew its support for some of China's core interests, particularly in regards to China's sovereignty over Tibet, in the joint statement released at the end of Li's visit.¹⁷ The first time that India declined to mention these principles, which Chinese diplomacy holds so dear, was during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit in 2010. At the time, India's leaders were very irritated by the fact that China was not only transgressing the LAC in Ladakh, but was also issuing stapled visas to Jammu and Kashmir residents while denying a visa to the general in charge of the Northern Command (which includes Jammu and Kashmir). This "policy of omission", which reflected a growing exasperation

16. Interview with Laura Salman and Alice Ekman, Beijing, June 11, 2013.

17. Sandeep Dikshit and Ananth Krishnan, "India plays down omission of 'Tibet' from joint statement," *The Hindu*, May 21, 2013.

and a newfound firmness, has since become India's typical response to China's posturing on Kashmir-related issues (including the transgressions of the LAC in Ladakh). India's primary objective has been to demonstrate that Kashmir was as critical an issue to India as Tibet was to China, thus imposing a condition of reciprocity on China. This policy has also come as an indirect reminder of India's uneasiness regarding China's growing presence in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

China's alleged presence in Gilgit-Baltistan has been hard to verify beyond reports mentioning various construction projects in the region being led by Chinese companies. In a public statement released in 2011, the Chief of Army Staff, General V. K. Singh, estimated the Chinese presence in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir at 3,000 or 4,000 workers and technicians, which most likely included a certain number of security agents and military engineers.¹⁸ Consequently, many Indian strategic experts have grown convinced that the PLA has covertly entered the region and thus acquired another means of putting pressure on Jammu and Kashmir (Centre for Land Warfare Studies 2012). Beyond the controversy about China's activities in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, one thing is certain: the fifty-year-old friendship between Beijing and Islamabad has not weakened. Immediately after his visit to India, Premier Li Keqiang flew to Pakistan, thus perpetuating a Chinese diplomatic habit of putting India and Pakistan on the same footing, something that has always annoyed New Delhi.

As for India's Prime Minister Singh, he travelled to Japan soon after, where he was warmly welcomed. Despite their respective prevarications, India and Japan have established a rather elaborate cooperation on political and security-related affairs over the years. Interestingly, it was primarily Japan's leaders who took the lead and emboldened their Indian counterparts to overcome their fear of offending China. Japan's perseverance has slowly started to be paying off, particularly as regards maritime issues. After having established strong cooperation between their coast guards, the navies of both countries conducted their first joint exercises in June 2012. Six months later, in January 2013, Prime Ministers Abe and Singh agreed to increase the frequency of such exercises while launching a new bilateral dialogue on maritime affairs.

Prime Minister Singh's visit to Tokyo in late May 2013 also led to the establishment of a task force on the US-2, a Japanese-designed amphibious vehicle in which India had expressed interest. With Tokyo showing willingness for the first time to establish cooperation with India on dual-use technologies, an important

18. "Chinese troops in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir: Gen VK Singh," *The Economic Times*, October 6, 2011.

stage in the evolution of Indo-Japan relations has been reached.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, the growing coziness between India and Japan has been a source of frustration for Chinese diplomacy, although it should be noted that Beijing has taken its frustrations out on Japan much more than on India. Indeed, from China's point of view it is Japan that has taken the lead in engaging India as part of a strategy to encircle China.²⁰

Ultimately, what China's leaders and experts fear most is that India will decide to play into the hands of the United States' strategy for Asia.²¹ In strengthening their ties with the United States, India's leaders have always been careful not to stir up China's feelings of insecurity. They have repeatedly stated that their strengthening their ties with the US has nothing to do with a plan to encircle China. They have also dashed the United States' hopes of their becoming much more actively involved in the Asia-Pacific. In China, experts initially thought – and rightly so – that India's strong tradition of independence would prevent any possibility of an alliance with the United States. At the same time, however, they could not but be surprised at the seeds of coalition that India, the US, and Japan have been sowing through multilateral naval exercises and trilateral political talks.

The fear of seeing India become ever more sympathetic to American interests in the region has taken on new meaning since Washington announced its “pivot to Asia,” which implies refocusing its attention and military resources toward the Asia-Pacific and strengthening its alliances in the region. Despite this fear, China has deployed surprisingly contradictory strategies in its relations with India. While trying to win its favor on economic and global governance issues, China has continued – and even accentuated – its posturing in the border areas, and especially in the most sensitive sector of Jammu and Kashmir. From this perspective, the tactical decision to maintain a level of tension along the border has proved all the more counter-productive as it can only encourage India to strengthen its ties with the United States and its other allies, and thus further complicate China's strategic position throughout the region.

19. Civilian nuclear power could have been another area of cooperation on dual-use technology, but the 2011 Fukushima tragedy has suspended efforts in this area for the moment.

20. “Diplomatic Row Due to Disoriented Japan,” *Global Times*, May 30, 2013.

21. Interviews conducted at the Centre for American Studies, Renmin University, Beijing, June 11, 2013, at the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPC, Beijing, June 13, 2013, and at the Councillor's Office of the State Council, Beijing, June 14, 2013. Also see Hu Shisheng, “A new dawn,” *Outlook Magazine*, November 14, 2013. Accessible online from: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?282976>.

Conclusion

In the late 1980s, China and India deliberately decided to put the border dispute on the backburner and to focus on other areas of cooperation. This strategy proved fairly successful for nearly two decades, as it allowed for a strengthening in relations between the two countries in the 1990s, and contributed to the dynamic development of Sino-Indian trade at the turn of the twenty-first century. Today however, this approach has played out and has revealed its limitations. The friction in the border areas has returned to center stage and has been poisoning Sino-Indian relations as a whole.

Intoxicated by the expansion of their bilateral trade, the leadership in both countries have continued to play the economic card, with a target trade volume of 100 billion dollars in 2015, while leaving their senior bureaucrats the difficult task of dealing with the border negotiations. However, as Samir Saran and Abhijit Iyer-Mitra pointed out in an enlightening article about the territorial dispute, “Economic integration is not and will never be the answer to this political poser alone. It can provide the motivation for seeking a resolution, but it is not the answer by itself.”²² The two authors judiciously underlined that the border disputes and deterioration of public perception in both countries were already working against trade development. In fact, New Delhi has grown concerned about India’s growing trade deficit, and many of the country’s business leaders have pushed to limit Chinese businesses’ access to the domestic market.

For the rest, Chinese and Indian leaders may well project the idea of a shared vision on certain important global governance issues when it suits them, and most notably those related to climate change negotiations, reforming the international financial system, and the debate about foreign intervention in crisis zones. Yet this public display is essentially a tactic of ad hoc coalition-forming against the Europeans and North Americans. Once India and China find themselves confronted with circumstances that do not lend themselves to such opportunistic coalitions, the competitive model tends to prevail – a situation that is perfectly illustrated by the difficulty they have experienced in collaborating on the development of an Asian security architecture, or in considering coherent partnerships to improve the management of their shared water resources and thus spare themselves having to enter into fierce competition with one another in their global quest for energy.

22. Samir Saran and Abhijit Iyer-Mitra, “Time for Hard Questions on Sino-Indian Relationship’s Future,” *Global Times*, May 20, 2013.

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