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### **INDIA-CHINA CODE OF CONDUCT ON BORDER:**

### **THE 'PARADIGM SHIFT' CHALLENGE**

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The India-China border dispute has always been at the forefront of their bilateral relationship despite strong signs of cooperation at bilateral level as well as multilateral fora. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed charge in May 2014, the general perception was that his stand on the India-China border issue will be firmer and more straightforward in comparison to his predecessors. Though tangible gains are yet to be witnessed from Prime Minister Modi's China policy, he has been applauded for his 'out of the box' thinking vis-à-vis the dispute. During his first China visit as the Indian Prime Minister in May 2015, he spoke candidly about the border dispute while delivering his speech at Tsinghua University, Beijing where Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi was also in attendance. Prime Minister Modi stated:<sup>i</sup>

*We have been remarkably successful in maintaining peace and tranquility along the border. Our agreements, protocols and border mechanisms have been helpful but a shadow of uncertainty always hangs over the sensitive areas of the border region. That is why I have proposed resuming the process of clarifying it. We should think of creative solutions to issues that have become irritants - from visa policies to trans-border Rivers.*

Clearly, Prime Minister Modi's objective was to push for the clarification on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) from the Chinese side so that the dispute gets resolved at the earliest. However, given that the Chinese side has always been reluctant to take such a step; this time too, Chinese side has shied away from Prime Minister Modi's proposal to clarify mutual positions on the LAC, and has instead offered to ink another pact with India on a 'Code of Conduct' to maintain peace along the border. It is in this context, Deputy Director General of the Asian Affairs at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Huang Xilian reiterated China's position. He stated:<sup>ii</sup>



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*Both sides should try to reach an agreement on Code of Conduct as attempts to clarify mutual positions on the LAC had “encountered difficulties” in the past. Whatever we do in the border area, it should be constructive. That means it should be a building block for the process of negotiations not a stumbling block.*

India has been pressing for more mutual clarity in terms of agreed positioning of the Indian and Chinese forces along the border, which China has been overlooking, thereby leading to more apprehensions on the Indian side. China's past approach towards the border question suggests that China's counterproposal is nothing more than a strategy to delay the solution. China's reluctance to settle borders with India is intriguing considering that China has already settled boundaries with 12 out of 14 neighbouring countries in the past five decades. It may be noted that apart from India, Bhutan is the other country with which China has unresolved land border dispute. China has been insisting upon a boundary swap plan with Bhutan, which the latter has been avoiding owing to its long – lasting friendship and mutual trust with India. China's pressure tactics on Bhutan need to be carefully monitored as Bhutan is not only located at a strategically important point, but is also critically important for connectivity and development plans in India's Northeastern states.

There have also been a few positive developments on the border front. The number of incursions has come down. Further, Prime Minister Modi's visit to China was completed without an incursion taking place along the India-China border. Although, as of now, China is not concerned about its dispute with India and is at loggerheads with the US and Southeast Asian nations, such as Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea dispute, India still needs to be cautious of its unresolved border dispute with China. For instance, in May 2015, China issued its White Papers on “China's Military Strategy”. Although India was not directly mentioned in the White Papers, China did mention of its land border disputes. It was stated that, “*Certain disputes over land territory are still smoldering*”. Clearly, this was made in reference to unresolved India-China border dispute and to a lesser extent, Bhutan's border dispute with China.



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While it may be said that the Chinese proposal to sign a Code of Conduct on border with India is a part of its delaying strategy, it is clear that the two parties need to resolve their differences over boundary for their long-term strategic and economic interests. Till now, 18 rounds of negotiations have taken place between India and China but both sides are still focused on taking measures to maintain the status quo at the border. While these declarations and pledges are essential for maintaining peace and tranquility in the short-run, the real challenge lies not only in finding a ‘paradigm shift’ in border settlement mechanism but also in ensuring that the processes lead to resolution of the much-awaited objective of the border resolution, which has been elusive for the past more than half-a-century now.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

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i For more details on Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Speech at Tsinghua University, see Address by Prime Minister at the Tsinghua University Beijing, Ministry of External Affairs, India, May 15, 2015, [http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25242/Address\\_by\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_at\\_the\\_Tsinghua\\_University\\_Beijing\\_May\\_15\\_2015](http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25242/Address_by_Prime_Minister_at_the_Tsinghua_University_Beijing_May_15_2015), accessed on May 15, 2015.

ii K. J. M. Varma, “China Wants Agreement with India on Code of Conduct at Border”, Press Trust of India, June 4, 2015, [http://www.ptinews.com/news/6106823\\_China-wants-agreement-with-India-on-Code-of-Conduct-at-border-](http://www.ptinews.com/news/6106823_China-wants-agreement-with-India-on-Code-of-Conduct-at-border-), accessed on June 5, 2015.