



## INDIA-CHINA STAND-OFF IN DEPSANG: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's three day India Visit successfully concluded on May 21. The visit happened against the backdrop of recent Ladakh flare-up. Point to be noted is that after concluding his India visit, Li also paid a state visit to Pakistan, China's all-weather friend, which has been projecting itself as an archrival of India.

As stated by Li himself, who is at the second rank of the 18<sup>th</sup> Politburo Standing Committee of the Peoples' Republic of China, the main objective of the visit was to increase mutual trust, intensify cooperation and face the future and, further stated that regional stability and world peace cannot be achieved without mutual trust between India and China.<sup>1</sup> A huge number of delegates accompanied Li and both sides inked eight agreements to boost economic relations and establish people-to-people contact. Bilateral trade has increased manifold since 2000 and crossed the \$66.5 billion in 2012. The two countries aim to reach the \$100 billion level by 2015. Additionally, the first meeting of India-China CEO Forum, which was set up in 2010, was held during the visit in order to give a further fillip to macro-economic coordination.

Evidently, enhancing economic relations remained at the core of the visit, overlooking prolonged border dispute between India and China, and the recent Ladakh impasse. India-China bilateral relations are still marred by more than five decade old border dispute. Both countries have approximately 4,000 km unsettled border and share conflicting perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The two countries had agreed in mid-1990 to demarcate the LAC, but no decision has yet been taken with regard to the border issue. Although, both Premier Li and Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, in the Joint Communiqué,

stated that both India and China seem content over the work done by the Special Representatives of the two countries on the boundary question and perceive the outcome of Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on Border Affairs as fruitful.<sup>2</sup> Dr Singh didn't forget to mention that the boundary problem is one of the major factors in India's relations with China. Other being huge trade deficit, Chinese infrastructure projects in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) and Chinese alleged water diversion projects on transnational rivers. Emphasising on the importance of the speedy and amicable solution of the border row, Dr. Singh did take up the matter with Li during an informal meeting on May 19<sup>th</sup>. He reiterated that it

is essential to maintain peace and tranquility at the border, otherwise, the relationship between the two countries will suffer.<sup>3</sup> However, the matter was not discussed in open.

It won't be a wrong assertion that Li's visit to India was largely surpassed by the recent Ladakh stand-off. The border intrusion at Depsang Valley in Ladakh was timed a month after China's newly appointed

President Xi Jinping took over in March and identified the territorial dispute as the first of his five-point formula for improving relations with India.<sup>4</sup> Chinese platoons entered 19 km inside Indian side of LAC and established five tents for almost three weeks which has emerged as a major impediment in bilateral relations. The plateau holds immense strategic importance in Indian security calculus. First, it is strategically located in the Karakoram Eastern Siachen region and is just eight km south of Aksai Chin. Second, it is a home to the highest airstrip in the world which is maintained by India. The base was established during India-China 1962 war, however, it became operational again in 2008 with the landing of a military transport aircraft, Antonov AN-32.

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### Possible Explanations for Military Stand-off at Depsang

Even after a month of withdrawal of Chinese troops from Depsang and somewhat successful conclusion of Li's visit, no official explanation has yet been provided by Chinese government for such an action. The reason for the stand-off is still open for speculations. However, a number of reasons can be cited for the Ladakh face-off. Pattern of Chinese incursions and Chinese increasing assertiveness in recent years clearly show that dramatic events have to take place before any high-level visit between India and China. It is noteworthy that both countries were in similar embarrassing situation in 2006

when the then Chinese envoy to India, Sun Yuxi, in his official pronouncement, laid Chinese claim of sovereignty over the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. The statement came just before the then Chinese President Hu Jintao's first ever visit to India in 2006. Later in 2008, Chinese incursion at Pangong Tso Lake as well as Trig Heights in eastern Ladakh was witnessed on September 2, just four days before the visit of former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to India. This typical Chinese

behaviour can be seen as an indication towards rigidly uncooperative stance of China on the border issues.

Chinese incursions have almost become a predictable behaviour and some of it seems like 'attention-seeking'. The only advantage of the incursion was that, during Li's visit, the attention of Indian as well as global media was shifted to Chinese Premier's maiden foreign visit. As a consequence of the incursion, which was timed just a month before the visit, media groups and populace were keeping an eye on Li's first overseas visit. Moreover, people, who were earlier engaged in the discourse of India-Japan bonhomie and US *Pivot to Asia*, suddenly began to talk about the ways to alienate irritants in India-China relations.

Depsang transgression can also be attributed to Chinese curiosity to check Indian military preparedness along the India-China border. In the past five years, India has re-activated most old forward air fields in the Ladakh sector, completed important road building projects in the Chumar sector, begun work on the road to link Dualat Beg Oldi with Leh and moved high-performance fighter aircraft to bases proximate to the border.<sup>5</sup> Besides this, the Indian Army was in the process of building seven bunkers before the Chinese intrusion.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that after China had developed infrastructure in Tibet and Xinjiang,

specifically, feeder roads to the border areas, railway projects, air fields, fibre optics, and China's transgressions in the region expanded in the last decade; hence, it is also quite queer that China demands rollback of similar infrastructure developments being attempted by India in the region.<sup>7</sup> There are ample evidences suggesting that incursions can also be perceived as a response to India's growing military profile and China's increasing uneasiness with respect to improvement in India's border infrastructure.

There is another theory that is advancing the explanation for the incursions. A section in the society deems that

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Ladakh stand-off was propagated by a few Generals of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) who are alleged to be loyal to former Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Jiang Zemin was well-known for his unbending policies towards India during his tenure. Reports indicate that a Major-General based in Chengdu Military District, close to Jiang Zemin, is responsible for the Chinese side launching a Chinese version of the Indian policy in late 1950s/early 1960s popularly named as 'forward policy'.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it has been speculated that 1986 Sumdorong Chu

incursion by China was also masterminded by elements hostile to China's Paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping's reconciliatory policy towards India.<sup>9</sup> Such practices by a few military personnel who are assumed to be faithful and pursuing the policies of erstwhile top leadership, particularly, when the current leadership's approach is positive towards a specific country may be seen as the so called 'Rogue General Theory'. Nevertheless, the question continues to linger is whether PLA has the authority to carry out such a grave action without the consent of Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the possibility of which seems bleak. Phrasing it as a 'localised affair' would not be accurate as PLA is tightly controlled by the CCP; hence, the chances of PLA going against the party do not exist. India-Pakistan bilateral relations have also been a victim of such phenomena over the past decade. However, the Rogue General Theory, for the most part, can't be substantiated vis-à-vis the recent Ladakh stand-off. China is secretive and not much information is available in the public domain.

All the above-mentioned reasons are based on speculations and no concrete solution can be reached upon without knowing the exact causes of the incursions. However, whatever the reason was, China acted like a bully. In a

way, Chinese wanted to make a point that peace and stability of India depends on Chinese maneuvers and if India wants to maintain tranquility at the border regions, it has to abide by Chinese wishes and rules, be it compromising India's relations with Japan or put a halt to India's infrastructure building along the shared border.

#### Possible Reasons for Withdrawal

Such incursions are not new in the history of India-China relations. It has become a frequent feature of their bilateral relations since 1950s. First such incident happened in 1956 when PLA occupied the Indian outpost at Longju. As a consequence of that, in 1960, Prime Ministers of both countries agreed to set up a joint official committee to go into evidences. This led to publishing of the *Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China on the Boundary Question*. However, the report was later discarded by the Chinese leadership and relations got strained after 1962 India-China war for nearly 18 years. Normalisation of diplomatic relations in 1979 was hampered by frequent intrusions by Chinese to alter the LAC. In response to Indian Government's decision to establish Arunachal Pradesh as a fully developed Indian state, Chinese incursion had taken place at Sumdorong Valley in North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA). That was the most somber and long-drawn confrontation in the times gone by, which ended with the withdrawal of Chinese troops in mid-1987. In 1980s, towards the end of the cold war, China had several reasons to let go of the differences and maintain friendly relations with India. The Soviet Union was on the verge of collapsing and Chinese economy was going down. China was isolated after 1989 and facing many challenges. In the changing international environment, China was in a dire need of reliable friends; hence, along with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, India was the safest bet for China.

The situation has remained largely unchanged since then. China still needs an influential country which can endorse China's peaceful rise. Chinese agreement to the withdrawal of troops from Depsang can be attributed to Chinese ever-escalating apprehensions vis-à-vis Japan's adamant stance towards Daioyu/Senkaku Islands and *Rebalancing in Asia* strategy under Obama administration II. China and Japan are at loggerheads vis-à-vis Daioyu/Senkaku Islands. Chinese are nervous about blooming India-Japan relations. The improvement in ties might lead to a situation where India realises that its interests converge more with Japan than China. Considering persistent territorial disputes with China, both India and Japan might

get closer than ever, leading to new and stronger challenges to Chinese hegemonic designs in Asia. Japan's goal to entice India and other Southeast countries through impressive economic deals are apparent. Japan invested approximately \$ 500 million in China during the financial year of 2011-2012. With the leadership change in Japan last December, Japan's newly elected Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, might plan to take that investment out of China and invest in Indian economy. Terming the politicians of Japan as 'petty burglars', CCP's mouthpiece, People's Daily asserted that the 'petty burglars', like some of Japanese politicians, will endeavour to create problems in the way of prosperous India-China relations.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, in a way, for China, Li's visit to India was timely and crucial as Dr. Singh paid a three-day visit to Tokyo from May 27-29. Dr. Singh's visit to Japan helped both countries to rejuvenate the economic and strategic ties which are certainly displeasing for China. One may argue that Li's visit was to win the India's trust back and convince the Indian leadership about its 'peaceful development', and stop India from inching closer to Japan and the US. Whether it all leads to India getting closer to Japan and the US remains to be seen. Clearly, Dr. Singh's Japan visit has indicated that India, while maintaining peaceful relations with China, is also interested in getting as close as possible to Japan which has been completely reciprocated by Japan. While India and China's peaceful engagement would be welcomed by all, India has to be prepared for a situation where it is able to deal with China in an adversarial equation as well.

#### Conclusion

It may be noted that the Chinese incursions into Indian Territory, by land, sea and air, increased after 2005, with as many as 233 violations in 2008 and more than 500 transgressions from 2010 to 2012.<sup>11</sup> This is an obvious indication towards rather precarious relations between India and China vis-à-vis demarcation of their border. No high level visit from 2010 till 2012 further suggests that there exists a problem between these two Asian giants. Furthermore, recent stand-off contributed to the waning mutual trust and remnants of which will take some time to fade away.

While a direct confrontation is not on the cards, the resolution of the recent stand-off and for that matter, final settlement of the border conflict would be reached upon via diplomatic channels only. Nonetheless, in retrospect, the likelihood of the early settlement of the border dispute has become all the more problematic. There might be a

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possibility that Chinese will push for the steady resolution of border differences along the LAC in Ladakh but the matter of Arunachal Pradesh will remain untouched for a longer time. Given that procrastination and deception are inherent in Chinese foreign and security policies, it is imperative for India to keep pushing for a more transparent approach and exchange of maps and relevant documents as evidences of their claims should be accelerated. Given that, as of now, reaching upon a mutually agreeable solution is a far-fetched dream for India; persuading China to retain the status quo is certainly in India's favour.

Both countries have decided to commemorate 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence (*Panchsheel*) in 2014 by designating it as the 'Year of Friendly Exchanges'. In order to give a new direction to their bilateral relations, it is important for both India and China to underpin these principles not only in the joint statements but also in reality. Needless to say that repudiation of these principles is partly responsible for the numerous border incursions. Reinforcement of *Panchsheel*, which has been a fundamental reference point in India-China relations since 60 years, is central to the final settlement of the protracted border row. In the given situation where relations are troubled by recent incursion at eastern Ladakh, putting emphasis on the principle of 'mutual respect for each others' territorial integrity and sovereignty' across LAC is the need of the hour.

Entangled in an awkward situation where Chinese moves seem ambiguous, it is in India's long-term interest to remain 'status quoist' vis-à-vis more than 50 year old boundary dispute while emphasising on the maintenance of cordial India-China ties through reinforcing *Panchsheel*. On another hand, it is equally imperative for both countries to push for early peaceful resolution of the issue during the 16<sup>th</sup> round of Special Representatives Talks and Dr. Singh's expected

visit to Beijing later this year. To say the least, strengthening affable relations with countries like Japan is not directed at China or any third country but to build closer cooperation between two important countries of Asia which share many strategic interests, including energy security.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Premier Li's visit to India to enhance trust, cooperation", May 21, 2013, at <http://english.cri.cn/7146/2013/05/21/191s766010.htm> (accessed on May 22, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For details see, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/21723/Joint+Statement+on+the+State+Visit+of+Chinese+Li+Keqiang+to+India> (accessed on May 20, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> "Ties will suffer in absence of Peace along border: Manmohan to Chinese PM", *The Indian Express*, May 19, 2013, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/ties-will-suffer-in-absence-of-peace-along-border-manmohan-to-chinese-pm/1117860/> (accessed on May 19, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Srikanth Kondapalli, "On the Borderline with Beijing", May 17, 2013 at <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/on-the-borderline-with-beijing/> (accessed on May 20, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Manoj Joshi, "Making Sense of the Depsang Incursion", *The Hindu*, May 7, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Zorawar Daulet Singh, "How to Deal with the New China", *The Tribune*, May 19, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Srikanth Kondapalli, "Standing our ground with China: What India needs to do", April 26, 2013, at <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/standing-our-ground-with-china-what-india-needs-to-do-column/20130426.htm> (accessed on May 15, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Madhav Nalapat, "Jiang group in Chinese army behind incursions", April 27, 2013, *The Sunday Guardian*, at <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/news/jiang-group-in-chinese-army-behind-incursions> (accessed on May 15, 2013)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> "Sino-Indian miracle' embarrasses Japanese Politicians", May 28, 2013, at [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-05/28/content\\_28954287.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-05/28/content_28954287.htm) (accessed on June 2, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Suman Sharma, "Army accessed China war-game plan, did not enhance security", *The Sunday Guardian*, April 27, 2013, at <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/news/army-accessed-china-war-game-plan-did-not-enhance-security> (accessed on May 15, 2013).



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