



The Wuhan Summit and the India–China Border Dispute

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ABSTRACT

The recent Wuhan summit between India and China has been called many things: from a "game changer" to a much needed "reset" in Indian-China relations. It has generated expectations in the two countries that they will avoid any clash due to miscalculation and error. This has strengthened the tradition

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that India and China have maintained since the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement of 1993, of resolving problems bilaterally through dialogue and negotiation. While the focus of the summit was on the interaction of the leaders, little is really known of what transpired. Both sides held delegation-level talks and issued press statements emphasising their desire to handle differences peacefully through dialogue. They also underscored the importance of their ties in the regional and global context. This paper, however, argues that unless the two countries resolve their longstanding border dispute, they will not be able to make any radical transformation in their current relationship. The problem is no longer merely about technical differences, which have been resolved by the dialogue between their Special Representatives, but about their political leaderships taking the actual decision to finally settle the dispute.

INTRODUCTION

The recent Wuhan Summit can be seen to have multiple outcomes. A press release from the Indian government on 28 April noted, “It will be a positive factor for stability amidst current global uncertainties.” It will also be conducive “for the development and prosperity of the region and will create the conditions for an Asian Century.”¹ Press releases from the Chinese and the Indian governments emphasised that they “have the maturity and wisdom to handle the differences through peaceful discussion.”²

The meeting, which was billed as an “informal summit,” is significant as it puts “strategic communications”—high-level interaction between the two countries—on a new track. While meetings between officials of the two countries are held regularly, the Wuhan Summit has paved the way for a new era in diplomatic relations. Post this informal get-together, top leaders from the two countries plan to meet more frequently and engage in a way that is free from the constraints of protocol. In the international domain, the summit has established the idea that while China and India may have troubled relations, their leaders have the maturity to exercise political will to take stock of the situation. This meeting may help strengthen bilateral ties—even if symbolically—as was the case with Rajiv Gandhi’s China visit in 1988 and Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s in 2003.

In practical terms, the Wuhan meet establishes that the two countries do not want any clash due to miscalculations in their political moves. They will like to retain, as the press releases observed, their respective strategic and decisional autonomy in dealing with their regional and global issues. India has long argued that it seeks to maintain its strategic autonomy on issues of foreign policy. In

recent times, as India moved closer to the US, this was de-emphasised. A restatement of “strategic autonomy” in this form is a useful signalling exercise.

While there is a slew of problems that bedevil the India–China relationship—Masood Azhar, NSG, Sino-Pakistan relations and India–US ties—it is imperative that the two countries focus on resolving the core area of concern, i.e. the disputed border issue. Both countries tend to procrastinate on resolving this primary issue while trying to strengthen the bilateral relationship. This paper will argue that relationship-building between the two countries will be challenging if the border issue is not settled. It has been argued in the realm of international relations that this issue is a residual problem from history and can be set aside while the two countries work on developing their partnership. However, the border issue can poison the bilateral relationship—as is evident from the series of face-offs in Depsang in 2013, Chumur in 2014 and Doklam in 2017—and render relationship-building efforts ineffectual.

The Indian press release mentioned the issue of maintaining peace and tranquillity on the border in some detail. The evidence of the primary concern, it noted, was that the two leaders had issued “a strategic guidance to their respective militaries” to enhance communications and implement various confidence-building measures (CBMs) and effective border management. The Chinese statement was pithy, noting merely that the two sides will strengthen the CBMs and enhance communication and cooperation to uphold peace and tranquillity.

Significantly, both press releases use the same phrase in referring to the importance of the work of the two Special Representatives (SR), “to seek a fair, reasonable and mutually accepted settlement” to the border question. The Indian media has observed the two immediate fallouts of this. The first is the decision to set up an India–China hotline at the level of Director-General of Military Operations.³ The second is the set of instructions that has gone out to the Indian Army to maintain peace at the border, avoiding aggressive patrolling tactics and following the 2005 protocol in dealing with the PLA on the border. Presumably, the PLA has also been issued similar instructions.

A 4,000-km Line of Actual Control (LAC)—a notional line to which both sides agree—marks the India–China border. There are around 20 places where their claims overlap: Samar Lungpa, Trig Heights, Depsang bulge, Kongka La, Pangong Tso, Spanggur Gap, Mount Sajun, Dumchele, Demchok, Chumur in eastern Ladakh, and Namka Chu, Sumdrong Chu, Yangste, Asaphilla, Long Ju, Dichu in Arunachal Pradesh, and Kaurik, Shipki La, Barahoti and Pulan Sunda in the central sector.

Since the early 1980s, both sides have held multiple rounds of talks to draw up a mutually acceptable LAC and resolve their border dispute. However, even though they have inched towards the goals, they have failed to follow through. Over the decades, China has shifted goalposts at will. Till 1959, it wanted adjustments in Aksai Chin; between 1960 and 1982, it was willing to swap claims, i.e. accept the McMahon Line in the east in exchange for India accepting its claim on Aksai Chin. Since 1985, China has been demanding Indian concessions in the east, specifically the cession of the Tawang tract. Since China now controls Aksai Chin, it denies all dispute there, claiming that the problem relates to only approximately 2,000 km, not 4,000 km as per India's claims.

THE CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES REGIME

The confidence-building measures regime began in 1993 with the signing of the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA). The successful handling of the 1986–87 crisis heralded a phase of cooperation, which eventually led to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988. This was based on the premise that India would be willing to normalise its relationship with China, even though the border issue was still to be settled. The agreement in September 1993, to maintain "peace and tranquillity" along the LAC in the India–China border areas, was a key development.⁴

The BPTA was seen as the first step to transform the LAC into a normal border.⁵ First, it sought to promote peace through specific modes of conduct of the two armed forces. Second, it called for a reduction—on both sides—of the forces and deployments to a “minimum level,” based on the principle of “mutual and equal security.” This force reduction was to be done over time through mutual consultations. Since there were varying perceptions regarding where the LAC lay, the two countries further committed themselves to jointly checking and fixing the parts of the line for which they had “different views as to its alignment.”

This came with an associate 1996 agreement on “Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas,” which specifically addressed the CBMs in the military area along the LAC.⁶ They agreed to limit their respective militaries and various armaments such as tanks, infantry combat vehicles, howitzers, SAMs and SSMs. The reductions would be through mutual consultations and applied on the principle of “mutual and equal security,” taking into account the difficulties each side faced in the terrain. They also agreed to not conduct large-scale military exercises along the LAC and, if they did, to notify the other side before

carrying them out. Combat aircraft and helicopters were barred from flying within 10 km of the LAC. Detailed implementation measures were to be conducted through an India–China joint working group on the boundary question, assisted by a military expert group.

A decade later came the next big military CBM: the 2005 “Protocol on Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India–China Border Areas,” which essentially built on the 1996 agreement.⁷ The agreement spelt out the standard operating procedures on what would happen when patrols met each other on the territory that both countries claimed. They would display a first banner emblazoned, “This is Indian/Chinese territory.” They would then flash the second banner, on which would be written, “Turn around and go back to your side.” Instances when these banners had to be shown were called “face-offs” by the media. In addition, the military officers of the two sides would hold additional meetings at three designated spots on the LAC—Spanggur, Nathu La and Bum La—for formal occasions. Meeting points at Kibithu-Damai and Lipulekh pass were also to be created.

A further development in military CBMs took place in 2006, when the then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee was visiting Beijing. The two sides signed an MoU—the first ever between the two defence ministries—calling for high-level military exchanges, joint exercises, counterterrorism and anti-piracy cooperation.⁸ As a part of this, India and China held their first joint military exercise in Kunming in 2007 and in Belgaum in December 2008. They have so far had five counterterror drills, the last in Kunming in 2015. In 2016, they held joint exercises in Ladakh. In November 2014, a delegation of the Indian Army’s Eastern Command visited Chengdu, and subsequently, a Chinese military delegation visited India. After a hiatus in 2017, the next exercise is expected to be in 2018.

The Chief of Naval Staff attended the International Fleet Review at Qingdao, and the Indian participation included INS Mumbai, INS Ranveer, INS Khanjar and INS Jyoti. A Chinese missile destroyer made a port call in Kochi in August 2009 and later in 2012, 2014 and 2015. A visit by three Chinese ships to Kochi in 2016 was, however, aborted.

The two sides also initiated an annual defence dialogue in December 2007. The Indian side was represented by the defence secretary and the Chinese side by a senior PLA official. While the second dialogue took place in Belgaum, Karnataka in December 2008, the third was in January 2010. The dialogue

addressed issues of common concern, such as piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the maintenance of peace on the LAC, joint exercises and sporting activities. The fourth round took place at the end of 2011 in December as India had called off the process following China's denial to grant a visa to a senior Indian military officer in August 2010. The fifth, sixth and seventh rounds took place in January 2013, February 2014 and April 2015. There have been none since.

The first reconstituted strategic dialogue between Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar and Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui was held in February 2017. The two sides also set up a high-level dialogue mechanism on counterterrorism led by R.N. Ravi, Chairperson, Joint Intelligence Committee and his counterpart Wang Yongqing, Secretary General of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission of China. The first meeting took place in Beijing in September 2016.

Despite these measures, the Chinese pressure on the LAC remained constant. This was as much a function of the policy as of the enhanced border construction in Tibet that enabled China to develop a railroad and several lateral highways with radials leading to the border.⁹

Two incidents stand out in the past two years: the incursion in the Depsang Plains in April–May 2013, just before Li Keqiang's 19 May visit, and the face-off in Chumur in September 2014 during President Xi Jinping's India visit. The timing of the two incidents— close to the visits by China's top leaders— suggests an aspect of signalling in both cases.

Since 2008, alarmed at the Indian actions in strengthening their border defences, China suggested that the two sides sign a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA). In the bilateral talks, China wanted India to freeze border construction, arguing that it was not necessary in light of the other CBMs. But India demurred. In January 2012, the two sides signed an agreement on the establishment of a working mechanism for consultation and coordination on India– China border affairs in January 2012, which was seen as a move to replace the old joint working group process that linked the two foreign ministries. However, this was not enough to prevent the Depsang face-off in March 2013. Following the event, the BDCA was signed on 13 October 2013. Significantly, the signatories were India's Defence Secretary and Admiral Sun Jianguo Deputy Chief of General Staff of the PLA.

This agreement reiterated the previous agreements and enhanced the interactions of the military operations departments and the defence ministries. The two countries agreed that even while observing the provisions of the past

agreements, they would not tail the patrols of the other side in areas where there was no common understanding of the LAC. Subsequently, China wanted to discuss the code of conduct on the border areas. In the recent Wuhan meeting, there was no fresh talk on CBMs. Instead, the two sides were given “strategic guidance” to maintain peace and tranquillity along the India–China border.

There is an interesting side story when it comes to the CBMs. While the BPTA was signed at the ministerial level with R.L. Bhatia, Minister of State for External Affairs and Tang Jiaxuan, Vice Foreign Minister of China, the 1996 Agreement was signed by Foreign Minister I K Gujral and his Chinese counterpart. The protocol on CBMs on the military field was signed by Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and Wu Dawei, Vice Foreign Minister of China in 2005. The 2006 MoUs on cooperation between the two defence ministries was signed by the two ministers.

While the working mechanism on consultation and coordination was signed by the two foreign secretaries in 2012, the 2013 BDCA, as noted, was signed by the Indian Defence Secretary and the Deputy Chief of General Staff of the PLA, Admiral Sun Jianguo. It was evident that the PLA plays an autonomous role in shaping Chinese foreign policies; agreements between foreign ministries, while important, do not have the last word.¹⁰ The fact that the PLA steered the BDCA and the subsequent proposed code of conduct—instead of the foreign ministry, which was involved in earlier agreements—corroborates this.

EFFORTS TO SETTLE THE BORDER DISPUTE

The measures to resolve the border dispute ran parallel to the advances in the political relations between the two countries. By 2003, however, the talks between the officials of the two countries were not heading anywhere. The Chinese were clear about one thing: maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC was not the same as accepting its alignment. They rolled back on the process of clarifying the LAC that had been laid out in the 1993 agreement. After exchanging maps of the central sector, the two sides saw each other’s maps of the Western Sector in July 2002. The two had such divergence that there was little point in moving ahead.¹¹ The process eventually petered out by 2005.¹²

The next benchmark was Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s visit to China in June 2003. The two sides worked out the “Declaration on The Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation,” which established the principles of economic cooperation, on 23 June 2003. However, a

significant decision was to take the border dispute away from the remit of officials and give it to two Special Representatives, who “would explore from the political perspective of the overall relationship, the framework of a boundary settlement,” in other words, a political deal. This was a shift from the Indian position, which had till now claimed that the India–China border was established by treaty, custom and usage.¹³

The generally positive tenor of relations between the two sides carried on till 2005, when during the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao, the countries signed a new protocol on managing military relations. Premier Wen’s visit also saw the relations being elevated to a strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and security. Most importantly, building on the work of the two Special Representatives, they arrived at a far-reaching agreement on the “Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the Border Question.”

Article VI of the agreement said that the boundary should be “along well-defined and easily identifiable natural geographical features,” something that India had been suggesting for a while. However, Article IV and Article VII of the agreement were of greater significance. The former said that a settlement would “take into account” the strategic interests of the other, while the latter noted that it would “safeguard” the interests of the settled populations of the border areas. This suggested that it was possible to quickly yield a framework for working out the border settlement based on a rough exchange of the two countries’ claims.¹⁴

However, spooked by the sudden positive turn in India–US ties, which led to their nuclear deal, Beijing began to pull back. In 2007, China denied a visa to an officer from Arunachal Pradesh. They also began to staple visas of applicants from Jammu and Kashmir. In addition to aggressive patrolling, China began to pointedly reiterate its claim over Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese took issue with the visit of the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Tawang in October 2009, as well as with Dalai Lama’s visit there in November. Simultaneously, China strengthened its links with Pakistan with the agreement to supply two nuclear reactors, albeit under IAEA supervision. Pakistan’s missile programmes saw significant developments: the tests of the Babur nuclear capable cruise missiles, and the training launch of the Shaheen-II medium-range ballistic missile, both of which had Chinese fingerprints.

The Tibetan uprising on the eve of the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 convinced China that India remained a threat. Tibet has been a key element in India–China relations and the outbreak of protests, especially in areas outside

the Tibet Autonomous Region, shook the Chinese, who believed that the Indians—specifically the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans living in India—were somehow behind it. Some Chinese academics, in a conversation with the author of this paper, hinted at India’s involvement in this issue.

There was a shift in Chinese policies accentuated by the economic crisis in the West, which saw China leapfrog ahead in its global standing. Not surprisingly, this was accompanied by greater Chinese assertiveness, e.g. in the Senkaku/Diayou islands, the South China Sea, the India–China border. Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and India have been grappling with the implications of this ever since. This was reflected in a slowdown of the negotiations of the Special Representatives. Having delivered the 2005 Agreed Guidelines agreement, the Special Representatives continued their work. However, the downturn in political ties could not but affect their dialogue. In 2009, in the 13th round of the Special Representatives’ talks, the two sides expanded the scope of their talks to cover the entire gamut of their relationship, indicating that they had come to a roadblock of sorts on their primary mandate to resolve the border dispute. With the arrival of Shivshankar Menon as the Special Representative, border negotiations to reach a framework agreement were resumed.

The framework agreement is the most complex one, since it will translate into the border line. The third stage will be the actual delineation of the border on the maps and its demarcation on the ground. In an article in a newspaper in May 2013, Chinese ambassador Wei Wei noted that the two sides had already arrived at an 18-point consensus on the resolution framework.¹⁵ In 2015 in an interview to Sheela Bhatt of Rediff.com, the former Special Representative Shivshankar Menon noted, “We have done whatever technical work has to be done. Now it is a question of a political decision.”¹⁶

However, the framework agreement can only come after there is some clarity on China’s negotiating stance. According to Indian negotiators, China wants India to concede its demands not only in the West, i.e. Aksai Chin, but also in the east: if not all of Arunachal Pradesh, at least its key town Tawang, with its important monastery. A negotiation where “what’s yours is negotiable, and what’s mine is mine” is obviously not acceptable to India.

CHANGING GROUND REALITIES AT THE HIMALAYAN FRONTIER

When the Chinese entered Tibet, the closest route from Lhasa to the outside world was through the Nathu La in Sikkim to Kolkata. The Chinese developed an all-weather road through Aksai Chin in the early 1950s. After consolidating

their rule, they developed four trunk highways, linking Tibet to Qinghai, Yunan, Xinjiang and Sichuan. Beginning in the 1990s, road construction and their improvement accelerated with an investment of more than ¥4 billion. By the end of 2000, more than 1,000 permanent bridges and 22,500 km of roads have been put in place across Tibet. In 2001, the Qinghai-Tibet railway was inaugurated.¹⁷ In the first phase during the 1950s–70s, connecting mainland China to Tibet was the main goal. Subsequently, developing a network for internal integration and military control was important.

Indian road construction was slower. There was just one jeepable track to Tawang by 1962, and road-building from Srinagar to Leh had just begun. Even in 1986, there was no road to Walong. In 2006, India took the decision to accelerate its own border construction and called on the Border Roads Organisation to finish 70-odd projects in the mountains by 2012. It also took the decision to build roads right up to the LAC rather than stop short by 50–70 km, as was the practice. By the end of the 2012 financial year, however, only 16 of the planned roads had been completed. Of these, six were less than 10 km long. According to a report, only 527 km of roads had been built out of the required 3,505.¹⁸

In 2017, in the wake of the Doklam crisis, it was revealed that the deadline to complete many of these roads had been further extended to 2022. According to a report, 27 of the 73 roads approved for construction have been completed, while the others will be finished only by December 2022.¹⁹

It is important to understand these issue in context. For more than a decade after 1962, the border was barely patrolled. The Chinese, too, stayed away. It was only after 1976, having determined where India's version of the LAC lay, that the Indian forces started patrolling. Originally, there were eight instances where India had differing claims. Later, the list grew to 16 as Chinese patrolling increased. Patrolling altered the dynamics because it generated friction from encounters and meetings. Having enhanced their infrastructure, the Chinese began to strengthen their border posture and increased the number of patrols they sent to the LAC.²⁰

It was at this point in the mid-2000s that India began to feel the need to strengthen its border defences. In 2008, India began the process of raising two new divisions for the mountains and had them in place by 2010. In 2008–09, India decided to deploy the Sukhoi 30 MKI in the areas of Jammu and Kashmir and Assam facing China.

The process of improving roads was intensified: important roads to Chumur were completed and work begun on a road to link Daulat Beg Oldi. At the same time, they started using the Indian Army or the Indo-Tibetan Border Police to patrol the border instead of those belonging to the Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau. The basic patrolling limits had been drawn up in 1976 when the China Study Group was first set up. They were revised after the 1993 and 1996 agreements. The Indian side changed the frequency of the patrols to improve their performance, but India's basic understanding of the LAC, which was worked out in 1976, remained the same.

The CSG was established by the Cabinet Committee on Security to advise them on policy issues relating to China. Initially, the foreign secretary chaired the group that is now headed by the National Security Adviser, and had all the top secretaries, military and intelligence officials and select academics as its members.

Today, China has only six border regiments and three brigades in Tibet, according to Ravi Rikhye, who specialises in developing orders of battle of the rival forces.²¹ In contrast, India has two divisions in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, four divisions in the east and another four brigades associated with the new strike corps. India is also raising two new independent armoured brigades for use in the mountains and is planning develop capabilities for offensive operations.²² However, the effective use of these forces depend on road-building and upgradation of the transportation infrastructure.

The reason Chinese deployments are so low is that they have the capacity to build forces fast in Tibet. According to one estimate, they can move in more than 30 divisions to the border, including its 15th Airborne Corps in a period of 30 to 40 days.²³ These forces can easily outnumber the Indian deployment in a longer-drawn conflict, which will give them time to acclimatise. However, the possibility of a long-drawn India–China war is remote.

THE DOKLAM EPISODE

In the annals of the India–China interaction across the Himalayas, the Doklam episode occupies a unique position because it took place outside the India–China theatre, albeit adjacent to it in Bhutan. For a variety of reasons, it was intimately connected to the India–China dynamics along the LAC. It took place in the only part of the India–China border not defined by the LAC but by a mutually accepted border set by the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890.²⁴

The confrontation raised many issues and threw light on the otherwise secret proceedings of the SR. Through the course of the face-off, both sides revealed details of their decisions to back up their respective positions. The Chinese insisted that India had agreed on the alignment of the boundary in the Sikkim sector in 2006 and that both sides could “verify and determine the specific alignment of the Sikkim sector and produce a common record.”

In their statement on 30 June 2017, the Indian side ignored reference to the 1890 Convention—probably to clear the decks for a border settlement based on a political bargain across its entire length, and not British-era agreements—and said there was only “mutual agreement on the ‘basis of alignment’” that had been confirmed in 2012 and “further discussions would have to take place to actually finalise the boundary.” There was also an agreement between India and China that “trijunction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalised in consultation with the concerned countries.”²⁵

As a consequence of the Doklam face-off, there was, understandably, a heavy build-up of Chinese forces in the area.²⁶ In an opinion piece, a serving colonel of the PLA, Zhou Bo said the Doklam outcome “was not even a tactical victory for India” because the Chinese have continued to remain there and have resumed road construction activity, albeit in another area.²⁷

The most important part of Zhou’s article, however, was his declaration that India is going to be the net loser now, because while “the disputed border was not on China’s strategic radar” initially, the Doklam standoff had “provided China with a lesson on reconsidering its security concerns.” As a result, China is enhancing its infrastructure construction along the LAC. Indian military sources confirm a sharp uptick in China’s border defence constructions.

Comfortable with its economic and military lead over India, China did not categorise India as a competitor; support to Pakistan was sufficient to keep India off balance. Taking advantage of the relatively easier terrain and India’s lackadaisical pace at the border, China was able to build high-quality roads to every part of the border. The Chinese now feel that since a long-drawn conflict is unlikely, they need a forward position to match the rising Indian capabilities. Housing for the forces and cantonments are also being constructed.

CONCLUSION

Chinese policies towards South Asia have been shaped by their insecurities relating to the control of Tibet, which is one of their “core concerns.” Beijing must ask itself whether its actions—within Tibet and the 1962 war against

India—have been helpful or detrimental to this goal. In the past, China has offered to swap claims with India: Aksai Chin for Arunachal Pradesh. However, in recent decades, its position has been to deny that India has any legitimate claim in Aksai Chin as well.²⁸

The current status quo on the border has been the same for more than half a century since the Chinese withdrew their forces from NEFA in 1963. The only circumstance in which one or the other party will unilaterally back off from its claim is if it suffers some catastrophic military or political setback. Such an event will have consequences well beyond the border dispute and is not easy to imagine. Fortunately, neither will actually contemplate a war to “recover” their claim.

When it came to dealing with Russia on the border issue, China backed off and settled along the Russian claim. In the South China Sea, they occupied low-tide elevations and built on them without anyone contesting it. With India, China confronts a significant military force across the entire length of the border. The Chinese are aware that the border issue can be a major headache, as witnessed during 1986–87.

An interesting aspect of the Wuhan summit is that it has the potential to take the two countries back to a benign point in its recent history, just before Wen Jiabao came to Delhi in April 2005 and signed the two significant agreements. This was when India’s economic growth was picking up, as was its self-confidence. China, on the other hand, was on the cusp of emergence as a world power.

Based on the belief that their relations had now acquired a global and strategic character, the two countries established an “India–China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity” with the goal of promoting “mutual respect and sensitivity for each other’s concerns and aspirations” and with the belief that “an early settlement of the boundary question will advance the basic interests of the two countries and should therefore be pursued as a strategic objective.”²⁹

Subsequently, there were signals from both sides that they wanted a quick settlement of the dispute. Speaking at Durban, on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in South Africa in 2013, Xi Jinping declared, “China and India should improve and make good use of the mechanism of special representatives to strive for a fair, rational solution framework acceptable to both sides *as soon as possible* [emphasis added].”³⁰

Following the Depsang crisis, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited New Delhi in May 2013 and held talks with his Indian counterpart Dr. Manmohan Singh. In the press interaction following his visit, Dr. Singh called for an “early agreement on a framework for a fair, reasonably and mutually acceptable settlement.”³¹

Wang Yi’s visit to New Delhi in June 2014 was the first such visit by a foreign minister of a major power after the forming of a new government at the centre. During the visit, he declared, “Through years of negotiation, we have come to an agreement on the basics of a boundary agreement, and we are prepared to reach a final settlement.”³²

In September 2014, following President Xi Jinping’s visit to India, the India–China joint statement reiterated the commitment of both sides “to an early settlement of the boundary question and expressed their conviction that this will advance basic interests of the two countries and shall, therefore, be pursued as a strategic objective.”³³ Such language had not been used in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s China visit in 2013.

Even as the Wuhan summit promises to reset India–China relations—claims that are yet to be proven—the developments at the border remain less than comfortable. There is a CBM regime in place, but instead of bringing down military competition, it is seeking— somewhat pointlessly—to cope with it. With better logistical infrastructure, the friction between the two countries continues to increase. At the Wuhan summit, both sides acknowledged this and spoke of the need to enhance efforts to maintain peace and tranquillity. Even after a succession of CBMs, there have been instances of face-offs, as in Depsang in 2013, Chumur in 2014 and Doklam in 2017. This suggests a limitation to what the CBMs can achieve.

If either party does not want to accept the reasoning behind the CBMs, which is to build confidence to the point that the dispute can be resolved through give and take, there is little these measures can do to improve bilateral ties. Strategic communications are necessary as the issue of settling the border dispute has remained mostly constant over the years. Technical solutions can promote restraint and reduce the risk of confrontation and war, but they cannot entirely eliminate them. Elimination can only be achieved by removing the *casus belli*.³⁴

The India–China dialogue to settle their border dispute has reached a dead end. Though the two sides came up with an agreement on the political

parameters and guiding principles of a border settlement in 2005, they have not been able to work out a framework agreement that can be applied to delimit their border. The SR who were appointed in 2003 appear to have worked out many of the technical issues that are required to create a framework agreement, but it requires a final push from the leaders to clinch the matter for the establishment of a mutually recognised international border between the two countries. This issue is, undoubtedly, linked with the strategic calculations of the two sides with each other. As recent events have shown, these calculations could go awry to their mutual loss.

The Wuhan summit has led to India and China providing “strategic guidance” to their personnel to implement the CBM regime and prevent any confrontation along the LAC. However, it is uncertain as to what they intend to do with the real problem of settling their boundary dispute. [ORF](#)

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ENDNOTES

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