

China-India border talks highlight rising tensions

John Chan
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The 13th round of border negotiations between China and India, held in New Delhi from August 7 to 8, became a focus of mounting tensions between the two regional rivals.

China sent its special representative State Councilor Dai Bingguo to meet with an Indian delegation led by National Security Adviser M. K. Narayanan. According to the *Hindu* newspaper, citing “informed sources”, the immediate aim of the talks was to agree on an outline for a final stage of negotiations, in which “both sides could get down to the actual nuts and bolts of the whole issue—negotiating the demarcation and delineation of the border”.

In other words, nothing concrete has even begun to be discussed since the talks were established in 2003. The only reported achievement of the latest round was an agreement to establish a hotline between the two prime ministers. India has only established such a hotline previously with Russia, so this is regarded as friendly gesture toward China.

China has shared a 4,000-kilometre-long “Line of Actual Control” with India since 1959, stretching from northwest Kashmir to Burma. In 1914, Britain drew the “McMahon Line” between India and Tibet, sowing the seeds of the future conflict between the two countries. China claims about 90,000 square kilometres in northeast India, mainly in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing regards as “South Tibet”. India claims 43,180 square kilometres in China’s Aksai Chin region in eastern Kashmir.

Following conflicts over Tibet, the two countries fought a border war in 1962, in which the Indian forces were overrun. However, the Chinese army withdrew and unilaterally declared a ceasefire. The US had threatened to intervene to support India. With growing Sino-Soviet tensions, and Moscow refusing to back China against India, Beijing was in no position for a full-scale war with India.

Since the early 1990s, unresolved border disputes have once again become a potential flashpoint between the two aspiring powers. Although China is now India’s largest trade partner, tensions between the two further intensified with the global financial crisis. India banned imports of a series of Chinese goods.

In April, in an unprecedented move, Beijing attempted to block a \$US2.9 billion Asian Development Bank (ADB) loan to India that included \$US60 million for a flood control project in Arunachal Pradesh. India’s project rekindled a controversy that erupted in

2006, when the Chinese ambassador to India declared that the “whole state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory”.

India obtained the ADB funding in June, apparently with the support of the US and Japan, after a vote by the ADB board. China strongly protested the ADB’s approval.

Also in June, New Delhi announced the deployment of an additional 60,000 soldiers, along with tanks and two squadrons of advanced SU-30MKI strike aircraft, to the northeast state of Assam (near Arunachal Pradesh), bringing the total troop numbers in the area to 100,000.

In response, China’s official *Global Times* published an editorial on June 9 warning India “to consider whether or not it can afford the consequences of a potential confrontation with China”. The editorial reminded New Delhi that China had established close relations with Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal and declared: “China won’t make any compromises in its border disputes with India.”

An unnamed Chinese official told the *South China Morning Post* on August 7 that India had intensified the border row with China by obtaining the ADB funding through the support of the US and Japan. “India has enough money to develop Arunachal Pradesh,” he declared. “But it wanted to test the Chinese. China opposed the loan application tooth and nail but India had its way. We lost face. And we don’t like losing face. We disgrace anyone who disgraces us.”

Indian officials meanwhile complained that Beijing had rejected their proposal for India to retain Arunachal Pradesh in exchange for accepting China’s control over Aksai Chin. An Indian foreign ministry official told the *South China Morning Post*: “China has developed a big superiority complex. It thinks that any give-and-take vis-à-vis India will dent its self-projected image as the predominant power in Asia.”

China’s ambassador to India, Zhang Yan, urged both sides to resolve their disputes “with the utmost political wisdom”. Brahma Chellaney, a strategic analyst at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research, told the *Indian Express*: “Mr. Zhang’s syrupy words are designed to salvage the [border] negotiations from the damage inflicted by vituperative attacks on India in China’s state-run media. China’s objective is to keep India engaged in endless and fruitless border talks so that Beijing, in the meantime, can change the Himalayan balance decisively in its favour through development of military power and infrastructure.”

In 2006, China built a major railway into the Tibetan plateau, a project widely regarded by Indian officials and defence analysts as

designed for the rapid deployment of troops to attack India, if need be. China has also expanded its influence in a number of South Asian countries, including the construction of a “string of pearls” of ports and other facilities for deploying warships in the Indian Ocean. These developments have raised concerns in New Delhi about China’s intrusion into India’s “backyard”.

The bitter exchanges spilled into the open after the chauvinist *China International Strategy Net* web site urged the encouragement of communal divisions in India in order to break it up into 20-30 small states. “There cannot be two suns in the sky,” the web site declared, arguing that Asia could have only one dominant power. The *Financial Times* noted that the web site was run by Kang Lingyi, “who took part in hacking into the US government websites in 1999 following US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Sites such as his are part of the Communist Party’s strategy to allow nationalism to grow to strengthen its political legitimacy.”

An outcry in the Indian media forced the Indian foreign ministry to issue a statement on August 10. It stated that the article “appears to be an expression of individual opinion and does not accord with the officially stated position of China on India-China relations conveyed to us on several occasions,” such as the previous week’s border talks.

India is seeking to become a “world power” by aligning with the US, which is actively seeking to woo New Delhi through a series of nuclear, economic and military agreements. China attempted to block India’s access to the Nuclear Suppliers Group after the former Bush administration pursued a civil nuclear deal with India in order to make it a strategic counterweight against Beijing. China has also assisted India’s rival Pakistan to build nuclear reactors and supplied it with arms.

The China-India rivalry has extended well into the Indian Ocean. In the name of fighting piracy, China recently sent warships to Somali waters to escort its merchant fleet, which is vital for the Chinese economy. The deployment is part of Beijing’s development of a blue-water navy. India is even more concerned by China’s growing influence in Sri Lanka. Beijing provided arms and diplomatic support to Colombo, helping its military crush the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in May.

A week before the China-India talks, the Indian defence ministry’s naval planner, Alok Bhatnagar, announced that it would build 107 warships over the next decade, including aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates and nuclear submarines, to rival China’s fleet. “China is developing its navy at a great rate. Its ambitions in the Indian Ocean are quite clear,” Bhatnagar declared.

At present, India is a lesser power than China. According to an article written by India’s former chief economic adviser, Shankar Acharya, and published in the *Financial Times* on July 29, China’s economy is three times the size of India’s, with per capita income 2.5 times that of India. China’s share of the world’s merchandise exports is almost nine times India’s. “Despite the rapid growth of India’s information technology-based service exports since 1995,” Acharya wrote, “in 2007, China’s total service exports exceed India’s by 40 percent”.

India’s chairman of the chiefs of staff, Admiral Sureesh Mehta,

admitted on August 10 that India was no match for China militarily. “In military terms, both conventionally and unconventionally, we can neither have the capability nor the intention to match China force for force,” he said. Mehta said India’s annual defence budget of \$US30 billion was much smaller than China’s \$70 billion. He proposed avoiding conflict with China, “as it would be foolhardy to compare India and China as equals”.

However, the US is tipping the balance, seeking to woo India away from Russia and China. This is bound up with the Obama administration’s strategy to focus on the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan and surrounding Central Asian areas, aiming to control the energy-rich heartland of the Eurasian continent. During US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s trip to India in July, she signed a key defence pact, laying the basis to expand the already burgeoning US arms sales to India, including fighters and high-tech weapons.

The *Wall Street Journal* noted: “With their companies jockeying for market share abroad and their militaries modernising at home, China and India have been regarding each other less as friendly neighbours and more as future rivals.” The newspaper cited Brajesh Mishra, a former Indian national security adviser who headed the previous border talks with China. He urged India to deepen its ties with the US and other countries. “The Chinese must know that if they create something on the border, there would be an instant reaction far beyond what happened in 1962,” he said.

The US nuclear accord with India not only provides New Delhi with advanced nuclear technology but also effectively accepts India as a nuclear weapons power. In July, India unveiled its first nuclear-powered submarine armed with nuclear missiles, making it the sixth country in the world to acquire such weapons systems. This only underscores the dangers presented by the sharpening rivalry between the two regional powers that is being encouraged by Washington.



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