

Tensions between India and China flare again

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Tensions have flared again this month between China and India. The immediate spark was a visit by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the northern state of Arunachal Pradesh on October 3. The trip provoked a protest from Beijing, which disputes Indian control over the area, resulting in heated words in the Indian and Chinese media.

Singh visited Arunachal Pradesh as part of an election campaign for his Congress Party. On October 13, a spokesman for China's foreign ministry declared: "China is strongly dissatisfied with the visit to the disputed region by the Indian leader disregarding China's serious concerns." He insisted that China and India had "never officially settled" their border dispute and China's claim over "South Tibet" was "consistent and clear-cut".

China claims 90,000 square kilometres in Arunachal Pradesh, while India asserts its right to 33,000 square kilometres in China's Aksai Chin, near Kashmir. India and China fought a border war in 1962 over the disputed territories. Chinese forces advanced rapidly, declared a ceasefire and then voluntarily withdrew in 1963. India transformed the areas into a separate state in 1987.

India's External Affairs Ministry responded to the Chinese statement on the same day, reiterating that Arunachal Pradesh was "an integral part of India". Escalating the dispute, New Delhi called on Beijing to end its highway projects and a \$US12.6 billion dam in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). "We hope the Chinese side will take a long-term view of India-China relations and cease such activities in areas illegally occupied by Pakistan," a spokesman said.

By targetting China's longstanding ties with Pakistan, India only added further fuel to the fire. At the time, Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani was in Beijing meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao over the projects. India and Pakistan both claim Kashmir and have fought two wars over the area. China hopes to be able to use Pakistan as a means of accessing energy supplies from the Middle East, thus easing its dependence on longer and more strategically vulnerable sea routes. Such a plan would require building roads and pipelines through Kashmir.

The war of words heated up on October 14. Editorials in the Chinese *People's Daily* and *Global Times* took a strident stance. The former accused India of being "obsessed" with a "hegemonic mentality", refusing to "drop the pretentious air when dealing with neighbours like Pakistan". Criticising India's close ties with the

US, it declared that New Delhi's policy was to "befriend the far and attack the near"—that is, China.

The more hawkish *Global Times* declared that India would be making "a fatal mistake" if it mistook "China's approach for weakness". Declaring the disputed area to be "of strategic importance", the editorial warned that Singh's visit and a planned trip by the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh "could have dangerous consequences".

Calling for tougher government action, a comment in the *Times of India* on October 14 declared: "Our response was tepid, to say the least, and that is how it has been across the geopolitical spectrum where we are competing with China. If anything, we seem to be getting weaker." Pointing to China's growing influence in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa, and its direct competition with India for energy resources, the newspaper declared: "And even as all this happens, we have nothing else to show except hot air, theatrics and slogans."

The comments reflect deep concerns in the Indian establishment that the country is being overshadowed diplomatically, economically and militarily by the rise of China. The tensions have only intensified under the impact of the global economic crisis. Both New Delhi and Beijing regularly whip up nationalist sentiment and indulge in sabre rattling as a means of diverting attention from the deepening social crises at home.

The dispute over Arunachal Pradesh erupted in April when China attempted to block an Asian Development Bank (ADB) loan worth \$2.9 billion to India, including \$60 million for projects in Arunachal Pradesh. In June, India outmanoeuvred China, with the backing from US and Japan. In August, however, Beijing struck back with the support of Japan, Australia, Pakistan and most South East Asian countries to state in the ADB's public notification of the loan that Arunachal Pradesh is not part of India, on the grounds that it is disputed territory.

The row has not been limited to the diplomatic sphere. India deployed 60,000 soldiers to the north-eastern state of Assam near Arunachal Pradesh in June, bringing total numbers in the area to more than 100,000. A new airfield was built just 30 kilometres from Arunachal Pradesh, in an obvious counter to China's strategic build-up in Tibet, including the construction of a major railway that could be used for rapid troop deployment.

In September, India initiated “Operation Alert”, an exercise that involved sending half its troops along the Line of Actual Control in Kashmir to forward posts. This was in response to a huge cross-country mobile exercise by 50,000 mechanised Chinese troops, which was viewed in New Delhi as part of Beijing’s efforts to improve its military capacity against India.

Following last week’s outbursts, both governments have downplayed the issue. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has asked to meet Indian Prime Minister Singh at this week’s Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) gathering in Thailand. While the two men are likely to meet tomorrow, none of the underlying issues will be resolved.

In ruling circles in New Delhi, the fear is that India, which has ambitions to become a major world power, is losing out to rival China in every sphere. Although China is now India’s largest trading partner, with trade expected to reach \$60 billion in 2010—30 times the size of 2000—it is largely in China’s favour. India’s deficit with China increased by 41 percent in 2008-09 to more than \$20 billion, fuelling protectionist sentiments among sections of Indian business.

Strategically, China’s growing influence in countries, such as Sri Lanka, that India has regarded as within its regional sphere of influence has come as a shock in New Delhi. While India was constrained in its support for the Sri Lankan government’s war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by popular opposition in south India, China provided arms and diplomatic support and in return is constructing a major port facility in southern Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan port is part of broader Chinese plans to extend its naval reach into the Indian Ocean with the building of port facilities in Pakistan, Burma and Bangladesh. The “chain of pearls” strategy is aimed at securing China’s vital energy supply lines to the Middle East and Africa. As far as India is concerned, Beijing is involved in an unwelcome intrusion into what New Delhi regards literally as the “Indian” Ocean. Further, China has a close relationship with India’s bitter regional rival Pakistan and with neighbouring Burma. Rivalry between the two powers is also on the rise in Nepal and Bangladesh.

In the midst of these tensions, the most destabilising factor is the intervention of the US, both directly through its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and its proxy war in Pakistan, and indirectly through its efforts to encircle China with US military bases and allies stretching from North East Asia right around to Central Asia. China’s sensitivity over Arunachal Pradesh is in part a product of concerns in Beijing that social unrest in neighbouring Tibet could be exploited by the US and its allies for their own ends. China’s prodding of India over Arunachal Pradesh serves to remind New Delhi that there is a price to pay for its closer ties with Washington.

Already there are concerns in the Indian establishment over ties

with the US. The nuclear pact signed with the US last year was regarded in New Delhi as a triumph that could transform India into a “world power”. Since then, however, Washington had been compelled because of the global economic crisis to prioritise its relations with Beijing. Amid the media hype about an emerging G2—the US and China—Washington’s relationship with India has been pushed into the background.

In the military sphere, India is also conscious that it lags behind China. While India boosted defence spending this year by 25 percent to \$30 billion in 2009, this figure is still less than half China’s military budget of \$70 billion. One of the largest Indian expenditures is \$10 billion for 126 new fighters, which the military insists is necessary because its air capacity is just one third of China’s.

What is emerging is a dangerous arms race. Last month the *Hindu* reported the remarks of K. Santhanam, a former chief adviser for the Defence Research Development Organisation, calling for further testing of nuclear weapons. Noting that India’s nuclear warheads were in the 25-kilotonne range, he declared: “We are totally naked vis-à-vis China which has an inventory of 200 nuclear bombs, the vast majority of which are giant H-bombs of power equal to 3 million tonnes of TNT.”

While Santhanam’s claims have been dismissed by Indian National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan, the comments do point to the discussions taking place in top military and political circles in New Delhi. Tensions over current Arunachal Pradesh dispute may die down, but the issues underlying the longer term and dangerous rivalry between the two states remain.



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