

# Indian minister visits China after patch-up of border dispute

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Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid proceeded with a long scheduled two-day visit to China late last week, but only after the two countries made a last minute deal to defuse a three-week long crisis over their rival border claims.

During Khurshid's visit, which was to prepare a visit to India later this month by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, both he and his Chinese interlocutors were at pains to play down the significance of the recent military standoff near Daulat Beg Oldi along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) separating the Indian-held Ladakh region and Chinese-held Aksai Chin.

India had accused a Chinese army platoon of intruding 19 kilometres into Indian territory and setting up tents. China maintained that its troops were within its territory. Three flag meetings between military officers from the two sides failed to resolve the issue. While India demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the Chinese troops, China tied their withdrawal to India dismantling recently built military infrastructure in the contested area, including bunkers and roads.

With the standoff continuing, the Indian government said it was considering retaliatory measures. New Delhi let it be known that Indian Army Chief General Bikram Singh had presented possible military options to the Cabinet Committee on Security and that the government was considering cancelling Khurshid's visit. And in a move that was widely interpreted as a message to China, Indian government officials let it be known that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh would be doubling the length of his coming visit to Japan, which in recent months has been pressing its own territorial claims against China.

Only after a fourth flag meeting on May 5 did the two sides claim that the border dispute had been resolved.

On May 9, Khurshid held two-hour long talks with

his counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing. The following day, he met with Premier Keqiang and a top Chinese diplomat, Yang Jiechi, recently designated China's Special Representative for resolving the historic border dispute between the two countries—a dispute that 51 years ago resulted in a border war.

Speaking to reporters, Khurshid said he had raised the recent alleged incursion of Chinese troops with Yi, but had not sought any explanation from Beijing for its actions. “We are not seeking any background,” claimed Khurshid. “Actually, we are not even ready with our own analysis.”

Neither India nor China has explained how they resolved their recent standoff. Quoting an unnamed senior Indian Army officer, Reuters reported that in return for the Chinese army withdrawing its troops to their original location, the Indian military had agreed to abandon and destroy bunkers they had built in the Chumar sector near the LAC. The Indian External Affairs Ministry has denied any such deal.

New Delhi and Beijing are trying to downplay their border dispute because both have concerns that it could quickly spin out of their control and escalate into a major conflagration.

Despite attempts by both Indian and Chinese governments to present their relations in rosy terms, there are profound underlying tensions between Asia's two rising powers—tensions which are being enormously exacerbated by the Obama administration's “pivot to Asia.”

India is viewed by Washington as central to its drive to isolate China and prepare for war against it. With the aim of harnessing India to its predatory agenda, the United States has forged a “strategic global partnership” with New Delhi, encouraged India's ambitions to become a major Indian Ocean power, and

secured for it special status within the world nuclear regulatory regime.

Speaking to reporters after commissioning the first MiG-29 K supersonic fighter jets squadron into the Indian Navy at the INS Hansa in Goa last Saturday, India's Defence Minister A.K. Antony asserted India's "right to develop its [military] capabilities and infrastructure in the border areas on its own land" and vowed that "this process will continue."

As the budgets for India's military have swelled in recent years, its top brass have made numerous bellicose statements against China and Pakistan, India's historic rival and a close Chinese ally. Antony's comments suggest that sections of the Indian military are unhappy with the deal to end the recent border standoff. Be that as it may, what is indisputable is that Antony's remarks were directed at China, for they were framed by his claim that India and China have the same right to develop military installations on their respective territories.

While China is very concerned about India's ever-increasing ties with Washington and the US's other key strategic partners in Asia—Japan and Australia—India fears China's growing influence in South Asia. The two emerging powers are also "bumping up against each other in their search for resources and new markets" from "Africa to the Arctic," as a recent Associated Press article noted.

Two other major sources of frictions between New Delhi and Beijing are China's decades-long alliance with Pakistan and India's role in hosting the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan Government in Exile, which is headquartered in Dharmasala.

Both issues figured in Khurshid's talks. Speaking to reporters the day after Khurshid had left China, a top government official said Beijing has "full confidence" in Indian assurances that "it will not allow the Dalai Lama to indulge in any political activity."

The Chinese media has termed Khurshid's visit a success. The ruling Communist Party's *People's Daily* carried a front-page commentary that claimed the two countries had agreed to a new relationship in which the "boundary issue" will be separate from "overall China-India relations" so as to "ensure the relevant differences" do not "affect the development of the bilateral ties."

This week the *Hindustan Times* reported that just

prior to the three week-border dispute with Beijing, India suddenly withdrew from planning for a trilateral naval exercise with the US and Japan, because of concerns China would see this as the beginnings of a trilateral military alliance. Nevertheless, New Delhi remains eager to continue taking advantage of the value that both the US and Japan place on promoting India as a counterweight to China. Even as it pulled out of the trilateral exercise, New Delhi pressed for an increase in bilateral military ties, including Indian and Pacific Ocean war games, with both Japan and the US.

Such diplomatic manoeuvring and border dispute patch-ups cannot and will not contain the explosive geopolitical cleavages produced by the crisis of capitalism—above all by the attempt of U.S. capitalism to offset its historic decline by waging and threatening war, including its aggressive Asian "pivot."



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