



India & China

Looking Beyond Border Incursions & Li Keqiang's Visit



Jayadeva Ranade

Distinguished Fellow, IPCS & Member, NSAB

As the dust settles after Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India and accompanying intrusions, it will be prudent to objectively assess the nature of the China-India relationship over the longer term. An episodic evaluation will be misleading, particularly as the timing of these intrusions marks them out as of significance. They are also an escalation of the unfriendly Chinese behavior demonstrated shortly before the visits of Chinese President Hu Jintao in November 2006 and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in December 2010.

Just prior to Hu Jintao's visit to India in 2006, China's Ambassador in New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, publicly declared: "In our position, the whole

of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory. And Tawang is only one of the places in it. We are claiming all of that". Later, in the months prior to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit in December 2010, Beijing denied a visa to India's Northern Army Commander and began issuing stapled visas to residents of J&K thereby implicitly designating the entire state as 'disputed', a stand from which it has not backed off. Barely a month earlier around the visit of Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member Zhou Yongkang in November, an article by a senior commentator in the Party mouth-piece 'People's Daily' had warned India against drawing closer to Japan in pursuit of its 'Look East' policy.

Contextualizing Li Keqiang's India Visit

The circumstances surrounding Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit are relevant as are Beijing's other actions and pronouncements. These need to be viewed in the larger perspective of the new Chinese leadership's strategic foreign policy. Chinese President Xi

The author is a Member of the National Security Advisory Board and former Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India. The views expressed are personal.

Southeast Asia Research Programme (SEARP)



Jinping's 'China's Dream', in fact, promises to wipe out past humiliations and lays bold emphasis on a strong and wealthy China.

There are adequate indications that Beijing assesses that the time is now opportune for it to push for international acceptance of what it perceives is its pre-eminent position in the region, including the Asia-Pacific. It considers that it has adequate stature and strength for it to partner the US in the resolution of international and regional issues. The recent (June 7-8, 2013) Sino-US Summit publicly stated that a start had been made in building a "new type of major power relationship", a point which was often reiterated by the two senior Chinese interlocutors, Vice Premier Wang Yang and State Councilor Yang Jiechi, at the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (SED) held soon after on July 10-11, in Washington DC.

Tacit US acceptance, at least for the short-to-medium term, seemed apparent in US National Security Advisor Tom Donilon's disclosure that the Summit had taken place at a time when the US faces "an intense range of bilateral, regional and global challenges on which U.S.-China cooperation is critical". Describing discussions as "quite unique and important" he added that the Summit aimed to start building a "new model of relations between great powers".

Relevant in this context are the lessening references to the 'Asian pivot', for which the preferred term is now 'rebalancing'. The emphasis seems also to have shifted from the military to the economic sphere with focus on

the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which envisages a whole new set of rules for the international economy and trade. The US and West possibly expect to retard China's economic growth and rise by these new rules, which will also adversely affect a number of other countries too.

Shortly prior to the Summit, China's self-image was clearly outlined in two articles by senior commentators which were published in the Party's official mouthpiece 'People's Daily'. On May 28, 2013 Jiemiao Yang, Dean of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS) and younger brother of Chinese State Councilor and former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, candidly declared that the increase in China's comprehensive national strength had given its new leaders more confidence in dealing with the international community. Stressing that China will adhere to its own theories, systems and path of development, he emphasized that this "self-confidence" has enabled China's leaders to be "very firm" in safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity while simultaneously being flexible in dealings with smaller countries. He revealed that they will focus more on the neighbourhood and travel oftener in the region.

Conceding that China needs to "normalize relations with Japan" and that the "many maritime disputes" are major challenges, he concluded that so long as "the United States, other major powers, neighboring countries and other members of the international community" cooperate and support China, "it will eventually emerge as a very peace-loving, powerful and prosperous nation".

The second article was published on June 4, 2013, and written by Li Wen, a scholar from the 'Centre for Research on the Theory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Stating that Beijing wanted cooperative relations with major powers, it advised major powers to discard 'Cold War' ideas and hegemonic policies. It urged major countries not to depict a country as a "strategic

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competitor" and seek to "contain it", but to "show more kindness and less hostility, and respect each other's core interests".

The reference to "core interests", which is China's short-hand for territories claimed by it, is pertinent. While these "core interests" currently include Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, some months ago a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson repeatedly referred to the Senkaku islands, called Diaoyu in Chinese, as China's "core interest". In 2011 and 2012 there were numerous references to the South China Sea as China's "core interest", though these have since tapered off.

This increased self-confidence of China's leadership is visible in its more activist and muscular foreign and strategic policy of the past few months, particularly in its strategic periphery. Beijing has continued to consolidate and expand its strategic investments in Pakistan notwithstanding India's objections or the disturbed conditions there. A slew of new agreements were signed during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Islamabad in May this year and newly-elected Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif broke with past practice and travelled to Beijing on his first visit abroad during this tenure.

While he has not returned with financial assistance, there is renewed talk in Pakistan of a Chinese-built railway line linking the Chinese province of Xinjiang with Pakistan's port city of Gwadar. Similarly, the Chinese Embassy and its diplomats are noticeably more active in Nepal. Their primary objectives are to monitor and curb the activities of the Tibetans residing in Nepal and to prevent Tibetans from escaping into Nepal. In Myanmar too, Beijing has moved to safeguard its strategic investments. It has, for the first time in decades, overtly engaged in the internal affairs of another sovereign nation – albeit at its request – and brokered at least six rounds of 'peace talks' between the Kachin Independence Army and Myanmar's military.

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where China flaunted its influence by guaranteeing the security of all participants. This has been buttressed by increased, though quiet, contacts between the Chinese and Myanmar's military and Intelligence establishments.

The Chinese Premier's visit to India and premeditated military intrusion that preceded it had multiple objectives. They brought into sharp definition China's new policy towards its neighbours and countries in the region with which it has unresolved sovereignty and territorial disputes. As evidenced by its policies towards Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan, Beijing is uncompromising on the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity. China's official news agency, 'Xinhua', has earlier publicized that growing economic and trade ties will not translate into good bilateral relations unless China's "core interests" are acknowledged. For the first time it used the economy as a lever against Japan when it banned the export of rare earths to Japan. It repeated this months later against the Philippines over the Scarborough Reef issue, thus making it amply clear that regardless of international trade laws and practices Beijing will not hesitate to use economic pressure to achieve its objectives.

The texture of all these relationships is assertive and differs from China's pragmatic, conciliatory, non-confrontational stance with the US. They make clear that while China's new leaders could show flexibility in formulating the framework for a bilateral relationship, there will be no willingness, or

concession, on matters perceived as impinging on China's sovereignty or territorial integrity. They also reinforce the assessment that on issues concerning sovereignty and territorial integrity, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the security establishment continue to exercise a prominent role as they have for the past some years.

Some reports circulating in April-May 2013 wildly speculated that a group of Chinese Generals not amenable to control by Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman, Xi Jinping, were responsible for the 'action', or that it was an isolated action by a local commander. The number of such so-called rogue Generals was even mentioned as 45! There is not a shred of evidence to support such speculation.

On the contrary, since at least 2002 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has steadily and inexorably tightened its grip on the PLA. Political Commissars, who monitor the political reliability of all personnel, have been granted the power of veto over promotions and three successive year-long campaigns were carried out throughout the PLA to ensure political reliability and loyalty to the CCP. One such campaign is presently underway. Political reliability and loyalty to the CCP has, for at least the past year and a half, been listed as the most important criteria for promotions and was reiterated by Xi Jinping promptly on taking over as CMC Chairman. Additionally, thorough background checks to ascertain the political reliability of officers were conducted last year in the wake

of the Bo Xilai affair.

Xi Jinping, who succeeded Hu Jintao as CMC Chairman at the 18th Party Congress in November last year, exercises firm control over the PLA. The new members of the CMC, Commanders of the ground forces, Air Force, Navy and Second Artillery, Military Region Commanders and Generals appointed to key positions have all been selected by Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. Since his elevation as CMC Chairman, Xi Jinping has paid a lot of attention to the PLA and been continuously visiting military establishments. He also has considerable personal influence in the PLA and knows a number of high-ranking PLA officers, especially the 'princelings'. The current Director of the important General Political Department (GPD), General Zhang Yang, is also a close long-time associate of the PLA Chief, General Fang Fenghui. These factors preclude the possibility of any local commander attempting such an adventure. Furthermore, there have been no such behavioral aberrations by local Chinese troops over the past so many years. Importantly, Xi Jinping presides over the powerful Foreign Affairs Small Leading Group. The action was undoubtedly approved by the top CCP leadership in Beijing.

II The India-China Military Standoff (Apr- May 2013): A Post Mortem

An important attribute of the stand-off that stretched over twelve days in April-May 2013, was that Beijing remained transparently impervious to the three flag meetings at the level of local army commanders, communications from New Delhi and, to the prolonged and adverse media publicity which was embarrassing to the Indian government and damage it caused to India-China relations. The clear message was that for Beijing's leadership the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity trump all other considerations. This stance is additional

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confirmation that the stand-off was not a local incident provoked by the action of a local commander, but one initiated with the full knowledge of China's senior leadership.

At the tactical level the prolonged military intrusion by Chinese forces near Daulet Beg Oldi in the Aksai Chin area was intended to send three clear signals. Very pertinently the equipment carried by the PLA troops involved in this act did not point to any military intent. The objectives were to:

- continue the practice of marking out the increasing extent of Chinese claimed territory along the entire length of the border with India and inhibit India from activities, including civil construction, near the border on its own side;
- test the rapid reaction capability of Indian forces to deploy to counter a threat, and to test the time it takes for India's military command and political leadership to respond to a threat; and
- signal that the border can be activated militarily at any time of Beijing's choosing.

In addition to demonstrating the extent of China's territorial claims and attempting to capture areas of importance along the border, of particular importance to PLA Commanders is ascertaining the readiness and response capability of the Indian forces deployed along the border and that of the Indian military and political commands.

This has become important as preparations by PLA Commanders are for a quick, decisive local war. Current Chinese military literature makes amply clear that China's leadership and the PLA envisage a decisive short-duration conflict using overwhelming firepower that concludes with a Chinese victory within a few days and certainly before it can enlarge and involve other powers. In fact, China is preparing for a local war where the initial first phase opens with a cyber-offensive targeted at military and civilian public utilities. The next stage involves the use of missiles and that is

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followed by use of the PLA Air Force. Ground troops would be used only in the final mopping up stage if required. This doctrine is a major factor prompting Beijing's recent proposal to Delhi on border management. Realities of capability and terrain would place India at a severe disadvantage in case this is accepted.

Interesting is that during the period of the intrusion, senior Chinese diplomats based in Delhi dissimulated to some foreign diplomats that approval for the action near Daulet Beg Oldi in Aksai Chin by People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops had been granted by China's top leadership in Beijing. The decision regarding timing of the action was left to the local Commander. This green light was given prior to the leadership's final approval for Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's 4-nation tour abroad. Significantly, they added that it was Beijing's assessment that India would not cancel the Chinese Premier's visit to avoid damaging relations with China.

These Chinese officials also predictably dismissed description of the PLA's action as "intrusion" or "incursion" and asserted that the troops were within Chinese territory. They added that Chinese Premier Li Keqiang would reiterate China's position in his meetings and not yield ground. At least one Beijing-based foreign diplomat was told by an official in Beijing that there had been no intrusion and that the Chinese troops were inside their territory.

Intrusions by Chinese forces are not a new

feature. They have been occurring with increasing frequency since 2008 along the length of the entire 4,057 kilometers border and in each case are intended to test Indian responses and preparedness in addition to keeping India under pressure. China has, in the past few years, actually sought to increase pressure by expanding its territorial claims.

Examples of the above include the expansion a couple of years ago of the policy of issuing 'stapled visas' – followed in the case of residents of Arunachal Pradesh – to residents of Jammu and Kashmir thereby depicting the entire state as 'disputed'; reinforcing their territorial claims by successfully preventing international financial organisations from extending developmental aid to projects in Arunachal Pradesh; officially declaring a considerably reduced length of the border with India; re-opening the settled issue of Sikkim; and forcibly seizing, or nibbling away, the traditional grazing grounds of Indian herders in areas of Ladakh and Barahoti-Kaurik in Himachal Pradesh and denying them their use.

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The intrusion of this April and the subsequent ones are assessed to have had at least two major objectives. A major military objective concerns border defences. The PLA has completed construction and refurbishing of border defences along the entire length of its border, including construction of adequate accommodation for additional troops that may be inducted, ammunition and storage dumps and secure fibre-optic communications linking each border and command post. This is a major factor prompting Beijing's proposal to Delhi on border management made late last year at the time of then Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie's visit. The proposal, in effect, suggests that neither side should patrol the LAC up to a specified depth on their own side or augment existing border defences or build new ones. Realities of capability and terrain will place India at a severe disadvantage in case this is accepted.

The larger objective was to warn India against expressing support to Japan during the scheduled visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Tokyo. The CCP leadership at the highest levels continues to be very suspicious of US designs and apprehensive that the US is intent on putting together an anti-China coalition aimed at 'containing' China. It sees this US-sponsored coalition as comprising Japan, Australia, India, Vietnam and the Philippines. Pertinent was the observation in the context of the South China Sea dispute as far back as July 2010, in a Hong Kong-based pro-Beijing newspaper, that: "the issue of China's territorial disputes with neighbouring countries will ignite the flames of war sooner or later. If a country must be chosen for sacrifice, India will be the first choice... India's long term occupation of southern Tibet is indeed worrying... If armed force is used to resolve border disputes, China must pick a country to target first, and it will definitely pick a big country, which means choosing

between Japan and India...”. Other references stated that China’s relationship with India and Japan had limits imposed by history. The references unmistakably draw India into the ongoing confrontation in the South China Sea.

China’s deliberate and prolonged military intrusion near Daulat Beg Oldi in the Depsang Plains in Aksai Chin did cast a perceptible shadow over Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s first visit (May 19-22, 2013) to India as Premier, despite the overt display of courtesy. It embarrassed the government and starkly outlined China’s policy towards India and has had an impact on India’s relations with China. Indications were immediately available in the 35-paragraph joint statement issued at the end of Li Keqiang’s stay in Delhi on May 20, which revealed little forward movement on substantive issues.

There was negligible progress on economic issues which mainly comprised Li Keqiang’s agenda. India raised the issue of the border incursion and incident in Ladakh, making it clear that such incidents could not form the basis for trying to build friendship. Beijing would have also noted India’s departure from usual practice and refusal to reiterate that Tibet was an integral part of China in the joint statement. The last occasion such a stand was taken was during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit in 2010. China also did not have its way in the references to the Asia-Pacific and South China Sea in the joint statement and received, instead, an ambiguous comment on international cooperation and freedom of navigation. Importantly, it ensured a more fruitful and positive visit by the Indian Prime Minister to Japan.

China’s deliberate and prolonged military intrusion could well have been prompted by the rapid progress by India in the past few years in building forward border defences and intended to slow it down. Instead, China’s action cast a perceptible shadow over Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit and brought China’s policy towards India into bold relief. This and similar intrusions along with Beijing’s other

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actions that impinge on India’s sovereignty, make it imperative that there should be no easing in the construction and augmentation of India’s defence build-up. Construction of border defences, including of border roads and ALGs in forward areas, should continue apace as also the acquisition of modern military hardware, equipment and effective strategic deterrent capability.

III Conclusions

Any evaluation of India-China relations over the longer term needs to factor in Beijing’s views. In this context worth recall is Mao Zedong’s telegram to Stalin around 1950 when he conveyed Zhou Enlai’s very unfavourable opinion of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and observed implicitly that this would guide the tenor of the relationship for a very long time.

In recent conversations with foreign diplomats and analysts their Chinese interlocutors list three main issues as responsible for the strain in India-China bilateral relations. These are: the Dalai Lama’s presence and activities in India; the unresolved border dispute; and India’s international aspirations. Viewed along with the statements publicized by China’s official media that ‘limits have been imposed by history on the extent to which China can develop relations with India’, it is clear that tensions will exist in India-China relations for

the foreseeable future.

Two other major issues, in addition to the unresolved border or shrinking export markets sought by both countries and competition for scarce energy, natural and mineral resources, have a real potential to erupt into serious confrontation between India and China. Water is the most important. Much of north China faces severe water shortages and as this gets increasingly accentuated it will probably accelerate Beijing's ambitious plans to divert waters from the south to the north. Diversion of the Brahmaputra River to the north at a currently estimated cost of US\$ 66 billion is a major part of these plans. Chinese engineers are going ahead with the construction of a series of dams along the course of the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) and the project is presently under the direct supervision of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang.

Thus far Beijing has exhibited marked insensitivity to either India's concerns or those of other lower riparian nations as in the case of the Mekong River. The deleterious effects of diversion of the river will be heightened by the quickening retreat of the snow-fed glaciers in Tibet caused by warming and the rise in temperatures because of the new dams and development projects undertaken by China in Tibet. Together this will affect the 40 crore people residing in the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra river basins.

The other area of likely competition is food. At a time when global population is rising, both China and India, according to analysts, will move from their current self-sufficiency in food to become food grain deficient nations between 2045-50. Global warming has an adverse impact on food production which registers a decline for each degree Celsius rise in temperature above the norm. During the growing season, farmers can expect a 10 per cent decline in wheat, rice, and corn yields.

Four countries namely the US, Canada, Russia and Australia will remain the main sources of food grain supply for the world. China and India will compete for the limited supplies and grain prices will soar. China will also try and enhance food production by using the large tracts of arable land in its water starved north, thus accelerating implementation of the south-north water diversion project.

If India is to persuade China to cooperate, it must accelerate efforts to, at least in asymmetric terms, acquire the ability to impose costs and deter China. The growing restiveness among China's minorities and increasing societal discontent, are vulnerabilities that will potentially constrain Chinese leaders in the not too distant future.

Meanwhile, India should build the capacity to frustrate Chinese ambitions and ensure a calibrated enhancement of resistance to Chinese pressure. For this India will need to recast its strategic foreign policy objectives to enable it to urgently find and attract good sources of large scale capital investments, advanced technology and hi-tech joint manufacturing ventures. India will simultaneously have to upgrade the skills of its workers; favour establishment and growth of a manufacturing industry especially in the hi-precision and advanced technology sectors; and, put in place the back-bone for a secure, modern telecommunication and global navigation systems. China's entry into the Indian economy will require to be controlled and India's indigenous critical industries safeguarded.

