

**THE BORDER QUESTION  
AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE ON INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS  
FOR 1990s**

March-1986

**AMARNATH KAKKAR\***  
Professor & Head  
Department of Defence Studies  
University of Allahabad at  
Allahabad-21102 India

\*Dr Kakkar is a visiting Fulbright/Ford Senior Research Associate in South Asia Program at the Office of Arms Control Disarmament and International Security (ACDIS) University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 330 Davenport Hall 607 South Mathews Street, Urbana Illinois 61801

\*\* This paper was presented at the Association of Asian Studies 38th Annual Conference held at Chicago Hilton And Towers on 21-23 March 1986

THE BORDER QUESTION AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE ON INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS FOR  
1990s  
AMARNATH KAKKAR

The 1962 Sino-Indian war was a classic of sorts. Neither side wanted war. It was a case of misperceptions and miscalculations<sup>1</sup> which conspired to make the 1962 war a sad mistake. The causes of India-China conflict were many. They ranged from early discernible disputes over territory and threats to security through more complex questions of national ideology to abstract considerations of status in the international hierarchy of power.<sup>1</sup> The causes and misperceptions have also been dealt in detail by many scholars and there have been Indian, Chinese and Western interpretations of the developments which led to 1962 war. But this author is going to confine the discussions on the possibilities for improvement of relations between the two nations with special reference to the boundary disputes.

We cannot pretend that the bilateral relations between India and China have been good. But we want to improve them and we have stretched our hands of friendship. The issues between us are most difficult and emotional. Nothing can be solved without basic good will.<sup>3</sup> It is encouraging to note that an important recent development in contemporary international politics is the emerging detente between India and China. The two countries are engaged in a continuous political dialogue starting in 1981 to bring about improvement in their relations. The relationship between India and China is rather a complex one and therefore the pace of development of their relations to find some new directions is also quite slow.

Despite mutual efforts towards 1984, the Chinese had reached the conclusion, dismally, that there was not much progress in their efforts to

improve relations with India. However, the change of leadership has once again brought new hope in Beijing. They extended an invitation to Rajiv Gandhi again and interlaced it with an offer to reopen the Indian mission in Lhasa. This seems to be a major decision and China seems to be convinced regarding New Delhi's peaceful intentions and lack of desire to instigate any kind of mischief in Tibet.

China has been trying to buildup a new image and those who seriously study the nuances in diplomatic moves that are made by Beijing from time to time can understand it. They are also very keen to show the development which has taken place in China. They are proud of their achievements and want others to have a look at it. The Chinese leaders have no Indian experience and therefore Zhao Ziang the Chinese Prime Minister will appreciate most an opportunity to visit India. But it is not possible for him to visit India due to protocol. The Chinese Prime Minister Zhao En-Lai had visited India in 1960 and now it is time for the Indian Prime Minister to return the visit during 1986-87. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi appears to be transparently sincere about his intentions to improve Sino-Indian relations and will remain until he has had the full taste of inter-state treachery.

The Chinese government in Beijing seems to be sincere about improvement of relations with India. They did not use 'ifs' and 'buts' about the future of India under Rajiv Gandhi as was done by some major powers. China was also sure about the continuity of leadership after elections and did not cultivate the opposition leaders like some important countries did.<sup>4</sup> China relates itself to the third world in a manner which is different from India. The emphasis in Beijing is an modernization and

its responses in international relations are essentially diplomatic conciliatory tolerant and accomodating particularly towards countries with which China does consider itself in competition But conciliation and competetion are policies and not principals so far as China is concerned However with the changes taking place in China and the young leadership coming up it is quite likely that some understanding is struck with India which also has a team of young leaders headed by the PM Rajiv Gandhi

It is in the context of this framework that we must look a afresh at the problems we have to resolve between ourselves One of the tactical mistakes India and China made initially was to treat the border dispute as something more than a bilateral conflict This damaged relations between India and China and impinged on their links with other countries notably the Soviet Union and Pakistan <sup>5</sup> The Chinese looked at Indo-Soviet friendship as an impediment to the normalization of relations between India and China Similarly, India considered China's friendship with Pakistan as a hurdle to a border settlement These attitudes dominated the thinking of both countries to such as extent that they failed to recognize the fact that India's dependence on Soviet Union and China's tilt towards Pakistan were a consequence and not a cause of the border conflict These perceptions have, however changed to some extent over the years China is no longer insisting that India should wean itslef away from Soviet Union to qualify for better Sino-Indian relations Similarly, India no more demands further curbing of involvement in Indo-Pak disputes to prove that China's intensions are genuine about the border settlement But the shared desire to take a more detached look at the bilateral dispute without prejudice to relations with other countries, has not removed the remaining barriers to a

border accord since the two countries still tend to view the matter in the total context of their relations extending to their relative roles in South Asia

It is very important to recognize that a border settlement will certainly try to erase the impressions of a very painful chapter but cannot by itself lead to a revival of Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai kind of kinship unless the two countries recognize and respect each other's legitimate interests. It is not that India wants to deny China its due role in South Asia so long as China's policies and actions do not seek to undermine India's primacy in the subcontinent. It is possible for China to be friendly with India and Pakistan by steering clear of any involvement in their conflicts and controversies. Perhaps getting rid of "enemy's enemy is our friend" syndrome will help China a great deal to carve out a niche for itself in the region.

It is of some significance to note that even the super powers have changed their attitudes. U S S R <sup>6</sup> is no longer concerned about Sino-Indian normalization whereas the US is favorable to the reconciliation between the two Asian giants. It was the US which was carrying on an anti-Soviet and anti-Chinese ideological crusade, that tried to involve India in an anti-China alliance in the wake of 1962 border conflict. At the same time, the US was also suggesting India to give up Kashmir Valley to befriend Pakistan on the one hand and draw it into a wider Asian alliance against China on the other in return for American military assistance to meet the threat of renewed Chinese aggressions. But the US was disappointed. Nehru refused to bite the bait and get drawn into such an alliance and agree in the process to a token participation in the

Vietnam war But the international strategic environment has changed now

India and China being no longer adverse to the idea of a negotiated settlement there are chances of normalization but there are still formidable obstructions to it Nobody in India now talks of 1962 resolutions of the Parliament not to give up even an inch of territory and to insist on an unconditional Chinese withdrawal from all occupied areas before starting the talks for normalization The Chinese too are not threatening to occupy the rest of the territory claimed by them although they are not prepared to give up any part of the disputed area under their occupation <sup>7</sup> The Deng Xiao Ping leadership has tried to set the ball rolling by making a package offer on the basis of the existing realities with China retaining all the areas under its occupation but giving up its claim to the rest of the disputed territory The Indian side has also been talking of a settlement based on the legitimate interest of both the countries in that insisting on a return of all territories under Chinese occupation It appears that if negotiations are begun in all seriousness from both the sides there are chances of accomodating the reasonable interests of the parties involved But the package deal has been to a great extent a non starter because it sought to settle issues on the basis of status quo Since China never appeared to be in a mood to settle the border issue in a hurry, India did not seek the development of relations in other areas exclusively at the expense of a settlement on the border question

After going round and round the mulberry bush the third round of talks also failed to provide any results as issues relating to modalities and procedures could not be solved It was only in the 4th round in Delhi

in October 1983 that some progress was made. The two sides discussed and exchanged views on international affairs and also agreed to discuss border questions sectorwise for which a proposal was earlier mooted by India. It appeared that it was a step forward. Despite this China seemed to be of the view that the border problem could be solved only through mutual accommodation and not on the basis of unilateral territorial concessions by China in the Western Sector. They also believe that India should make concessions in the East and China in the West at the most but the 'package plan' was the best way. There have been seven rounds of talks and China sought some clarifications about the parameters of the sectorwise talks and India has explained the same.

India has been of the view that the Chinese package proposal was one-sided. The Chinese desired the status quo to be more acceptable to India. They felt that mere abandonment of Beijing's remaining territorial claims should be a good enough compensation for conceding the territory already in its possession. They did not realize that India hardly gained anything by accepting the defacto position without any countervailing concessions. The Chinese have been maintaining a sharp presence in Tibet facing India. They have about 250,000 troops with improved logistical position and a vast network of lateral roads all along the border branching off from the main Aksai Chin highway running through Tibet to Sinkiang which is also connected with the Karakoram highway linking Pakistan. The Chinese built 8 airfields at Tibet besides laying an oil pipeline and a railway line almost halfway from China to Tibet. With these facilities China can at least sustain 250 000 troops fighting for about a month or about 150 000 troops for two months in another Sino-Indian conflict.

There seems to be no great advantage in accepting the status quo by giving the defacto position the halo of de jure recognition. There has to be a political settlement based on mutual accommodation to end this chapter in Sino-Indian relations. The historical data produced by the two sides in support of their respective claims cannot by themselves end this impasse. A settlement can be reached only by understanding each others limits for making concessions. If, as the Chinese agree, India's claim to Aksai Chin or even the demarcation of the McMahonline was based on treaties or conventions imposed by British imperialism, it is equally arguable that the Chinese locus standi for claiming the disputed territory stems from its own occupation of Tibet.<sup>9</sup>

Some foreign experts justify the Chinese claim to the occupation of Aksai Chin on strategic<sup>10</sup> rather than legal grounds, maintaining that this territory was necessary for China to build a road through Tibet to Sinkiang which could not be reached otherwise across the Gobi desert. It is not generally known that in addition to Aksai Chin which lies between the Karakoram and the Kuenlun ranges on the north, the Chinese had also occupied on the southern side of Karakoram, five other areas in Ladakh- the whole or parts of Soda Plains, LingziTang, Changchenmo Valley, Deepsang Plains and the area between Lanak La and Dumjor La which are at least twice as large in area as Aksai Chin and are an integral part of the Indus river basin and not of Tibet by any stretch of imagination. The Colombo proposals put forward in 1963 to help India and China resolve their dispute was rejected by China and India has not pressed for the same either

If the Aksai Chin area is separated and the watershed principle applied the Karakoram could be deemed to be reasonable demarcation line which would give China all the territory to the north it would need to maintain communication link with Sinkiang and even Pakistan. It would also enable India to regain at least one-fourth to one third of the territory lost in Ladakh, making the accord acceptable to Indian opinion.

The sector by sector talks have not taken off because the two sides could not agree on what should be deemed to be marked geographical features, like the watershed or the crest of the dividing mountain ranges for commencing the sectorwise discussions. The Chinese claim in all the three sectors extend well into the Indian side of the Himalayas and the Karakoram. It remains to be seen whether this issue can be sorted out at the next round of talks sometime this year in 1986 to clear the way for substantive discussions. If India and China decide to meet each other's requirements it is quite possible that the border settlement comes about right in time. There should be no hesitation in India for giving up Aksai-Chin by extending the watershed principle to the Karakoram if China is prepared to withdraw from the South of this mountain range. Similarly, the Chinese have no great need for retaining the Chumbi Valley, a wedge between Sikkim and Bhutan which is vital for the defence of India's North-East region. In the Central Sector too, it is possible to arrive at an accord taking India's sentiments into consideration since China has no need at all for the territory it has already occupied or laid claims to in Bara Hoti, Nilang-Jadhang, Sangcha Malla and Lapthal along the Ganga and Spiti river systems. But the Chinese idea of a comprehensive settlement

is that it should cover the border in all the sectors from the Karakoram along the Himalayas to the trijunction between India, Burma and Tibet. But India wants the accord to extend to the whole range of mutual political relations with China, also steering clear of any involvement in sub-continental problems, leaving India, Pak, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh free to settle their differences. In other words, leaving South Asia to India's primacy without detriment to China's right to maintain friendly relations with all countries in the region.

With a dynamic and forward looking Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, India is prepared to negotiate in all sincerity. There are no domestic compulsions demanding rigid positions in either India or China. It is hoped that success will not elude both sides for a very long time as the times seem to be ripe for a solution. As discussed earlier, a realistic reassessment of the situation will perhaps help in bringing the two nations out of an artificially created emotional atmosphere. The two giant nations are capable of providing a mutually agreed solution without jeopardising their national prestige and position. It is also certain that the highest political leadership in both the countries will use imagination and demonstrate statesmanship as both these nations believe in the spirit of the Boundary Conference and the principles of peaceful coexistence. Both the countries stand to gain from a settlement at a time when consolidation of internal political order and developing their economies with simultaneous reduction in their emphasis on military preparedness is necessary to create a peaceful regional atmosphere for continued and genuine cooperation with the countries of the third world. In the context of international security, it is advisable that both these Asian

giants follow the path of cooperation rather than confrontation 11 Forces which misguided India during the late fifties and after are now closer to China and it is up to the Chinese leadership whether they want to be used as a card by another power or not India and China must make best possible attempts to make sure that they do not tread on each others' corns and come into conflict as that would be calamity for Asia

## NOTES

- 1 See Allen Whiting, The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence (Ann Arbor The University of Michigan Press 1975) Also See S P Seth Sino-Indian Relations Problems and Prospects in Pacific Community Fall 1984 No 26 p66-85 , Neville Maxwell India's China War (London) Penguin, 1972) Melvin Gurtov and Byoong-Moo Hwang China Under Threat (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press 1980) Gerald Segal Defending China (Oxford University Press 1985) Manoranjan Mohanty, China and South Asia, World Focus (New Delhi) Vol 4-No 11-12, Nov Dec 1983 Y Vertzberger, Misperceptions in Foreign Policy Making Boulder, Colorado 1983 A Lamb The Sino-Indian Border in Ladakh, (ANU Press Australia 1973 South Carolina 1975) Karunakar Gupta, The Hidden History of Sino-Indian Frontier
- 2 U S Bajpai, India's Security, School of International Studies JNU IDSA New Delhi and India International Centre New Delhi (1983 Lancers Publishers) Also see Karunakar Gupta, Spotlight on Sino-Indian Frontiers, (New Book Centre, Calcutta 1982)
- 3 Indira Gandhi, Press Conference, 10 July 1981 See The Hindu (Madras, July 11, 1981) It was the time when Chinese Foreign Minister, Huang Hua visited India in June 1981
- 4 Lee Liang Jiejun Rajiv Gandhi's landslide and administration in Contemporary International Relations, Vol 8,1985 (It is an official publication of People's Republic of China in Chinese language with summary in English language)
- 5 See for a good treatment of this aspect-Chapter 5 of Surjit Mansingh India's Search for Power Indira Gandhi's Foreign Policy 1966-82, (Sage Publications, 1984)
- 6 See Bhabani Sen Gupta Soviet-Asian Relations in the 70s and Beyond, (New York, Praeger 1976) Many discussions between the author and Bhabani Sen Gupta on this issue In any case India too has to be independent of outside pressures while negotiating border settlements
- 7 An inference drawn by the author during a private discussion with a senior Chinese analyst from PRC on his visit to the United States (14 Oct 1985)
- 8 It was lack of knowledge about China's capabilities to overcome logistical problems during the 60s that made Indian defence experts complacent about their own preparation
- 9 A view privately expressed by late R K Nehru ICS (Former Ambassador to China and Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs) to this author at the Allahabad University in 1966 Mr Nehru was a profound scholar of India-China Relations