

# 'THERE WILL BE NO CONFLICT IF INDIAN ARMY DOESN'T ENTER OUR ACTUAL LINE OF CONTROL'

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PM Jawaharlal Nehru with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1954. The Hindu Archives

The Chinese have literally stuck to their guns since the 1962 border conflict when it comes to approaching a border settlement with India and reaching a common position on who sits where along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

A slice of history from the archives reveals that Beijing would be unyielding if India tried to disturb the post-1962 status quo, something that could shine a light on current border incidents with China.

In December 1963, a year after the November 1962 border conflict with India, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai told Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser that there would be “no conflict between the two sides if the Indian army does not again enter our actual line of control.”

At pains to explain Chinese actions to President Nasser, Mr. Zhou said about the post-war situation: “What is the outlook for the Sino-Indian border conflict? Frankly speaking, all is well for now. Since our side has taken the initiative of a ceasefire and such mitigation measures as initiating a withdrawal of 20 kilometres along the entire front line, there will be no conflict between the two sides if the Indian army does not again enter our actual line of control.”

## Chinese assessment

Given the recent impasse along the LAC and fistcuffs between Indian and Chinese soldiers, Mr. Zhou's dictum holds good — all would be well as long as the Indian side did not assert itself.

A record of the Zhou-Nasser conversation, available on the Wilson Center Digital Archive, showed the Chinese assessment of New Delhi's position: “India's attitude is: for the eastern border, we must accept the McMahon line; for the western border, India wants it where it has never been, an area where Chinese have been living for several hundred years and made their own.” Mr. Zhou claimed that he visited India three times – in 1954, 1956 and 1957 – but the Indian side never put forth any proposals.

In July 1962, Foreign Minister Marshal Chen Yi and Defence Minister Krishna Menon met in Geneva in a “situation where both sides were prepared to settle through discussion in maintaining the border status quo [both the eastern and western border were more to India's advantage at that time than at present] and hold talks without conditions to resolve the issue”.

## No agreement

“At the time we assumed that the Indian side could accept a negotiated agreement reached with us on the basis of maintaining the border status quo. But unexpectedly, Menon wanted our side first to demarcate several areas to give to him, commit them in advance, and then hold talks again. Because of this, the two sides did not come to an agreement,” Mr. Zhou told Mr. Nasser.

The Chinese side seems stuck on this even today – they have not agreed to share maps on their perception on the eastern and western sectors of LAC first at the Joint Working Group

(JWG) mechanism at foreign secretary-level agreed upon during Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's path-breaking visit to Beijing in December 1988. Maps in the less contentious middle sector were shared at a JWG meeting in 2001.

In a major step-up, the two countries agreed to set up a dedicated mechanism at the level of Special Representatives (SRs) to resolve the border dispute during Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's China trip in June 2003. This superseded the JWG.

Though the SR mechanism led to a "guiding principles" agreement in 2005, the two countries are still to exchange maps on where each side is in the eastern and western sectors. "Advance demarcation" still appears to be a problem for the Chinese side, although the contours of a possible settlement referred to by Mr. Zhou is no longer Beijing's official position.

### **A pressing issue**

Over the years, India and China have agreed on a number of mechanisms to enhance confidence at the military level, but their inability to agree to a border settlement have led to consistent problems – troops coming into conflict with each other – and continues to be a pressing issue.

Mercifully, there have been no fatalities on either side for the past 45 years – since the two countries restored full diplomatic relations in 1976.

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