

RULES FOR A RESOLUTION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

National Security Adviser Ajit Doval's visit to China for the 21st edition of Special Representatives talks presents an opportunity to take stock of the dos and don'ts related to the resolution of the boundary dispute.

First, China has resolved all its continental land borders, except with India and Bhutan. In those instances, the U.S. was neither an ally nor a key defence partner of that counterpart country. New Delhi's blossoming maritime ties with the U.S. implies that the India-China frontier will remain an expedient pressure point in Beijing's playbook to signal disaffection. Full resolution will have to await that as-yet distant day when New Delhi is willing to elevate its ties with Beijing at par with Washington. Vigilance and patience are counselled in the interim.

Second, the lack of a medium-term resolution does not preclude the two countries narrowing their boundary-related differences. Each easing cycle in Indian-China ties, going back to the establishment of the Special Representatives mechanism in 2003, has witnessed an initial focus on repair and stabilisation on the ground followed by a successful effort at narrowing the underlying dispute at the table. With the 'Wuhan spirit' as the backdrop, the recent effort to link up military headquarters and regional commands with hotlines bodes well for an intensive phase of settlement-related discussions after the general election next year.

Third, none of China's 12 territorial settlements has been concluded under duress or reflects an obsession with cartographic detail. Rather, an opportunity cost-based calculus tied to good neighbourliness has prevailed. The received wisdom that New Delhi can leverage its American relationship or the Dalai Lama to extract a stiffer bargain on the boundary is wrong. Both recent periods of effusive Indo-American warmth (2007-2010 and 2015-2017) witnessed more, not less, pressure on the boundary.

Fourth, while India has been admirably flexible in accommodating a variety of dispute settlement modes, including third-party arbitration, a solitary principles-based package approach has characterised China's territorial settlements. Mr. Doval's preference for a bottom-up approach that clarifies specific points of contention along the Line of Actual Control is unlikely to find purchase with State Councilor Wang Yi. That said, it is nowhere written in stone that a package-based settlement must extend across every inch of the frontier all at once. Mr. Doval should aim to realise an early harvest settlement that delimits a substantial portion of the boundary in the east and west, while shelving the most intractable points to a future date when India and China are more geopolitically supportive of each other's aspirations in Asia and the world.

The writer is a senior fellow at the Institute for China-America Studies in Washington, DC

Blaming Gandhi for Partition and by implication lionising his assassin is the worst form of historical revisionism

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