

REALISM AND THE UNDEMARCATED BORDER

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The “deep conversation” with China that External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has indicated must be informed by the past but should be based on the changed global context as festering problems left over from colonialism tend to get re-framed (West Asia is an example), as new trade-offs emerge, and leadership matters.

As civilisational states, neighbours and rising powers, India and China have a unique continuing process of diplomatic engagement, even as their militaries face off against each other, which is very different to the international relations theory developed in the West to explain something that had never happened before, the 200 year global colonial and post-colonial world and inapplicable to differences arising from colonial ambiguity.

Comment | [China's LAC aggression, India's obfuscation](#)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertion that “this is the age of development”, and former Generals of the Leh-based Corps pointing to the undemarcated border, suggesting a ‘practical’ boundary along the Karakoram watershed reframes the national interest. Combined with the recent shift by China from Line of Actual Control (LAC) to Claim Line, a new national debate on demarcating the border is needed.

The origin of different interpretations of the boundary is poorly surveyed ancient maps of uninhabited areas, visited only by traders and nomads, with even passes at an altitude above 13,000 feet. Commerce dominated economic activity and several trade routes converged on Leh. With settled agriculture limited to strips along the Indus in the west, Aksai Chin was a kind of no-man's land, as there was no need for an administration.

With the Treaty of Amritsar, in 1846, the British granted Gulab Singh Kashmir without specifying its eastern boundary in Aksai Chin. According to Article 2 of the Treaty, the boundary was to be “defined by a separate engagement after survey”. The first one, the Johnson-Ardagh Line surveyed in 1865, ran along the Kunlun Mountain, included Aksai Chin in Kashmir and was not communicated to China. Another survey, the McCartney-MacDonald Line, ran closer to the Karakoram Range, treating the Indus watershed as the border. The later survey, officially sent by the British to China in 1899, was not followed up, and the border remained ‘undefined’.

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The dispute continues to be which watershed defines the boundary. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, according to the official transcript of the boundary talks with Premier Chou-en-lai [Zhou Enlai] in April 1960, argued that ‘it is true that the boundary is not marked on the ground; but if delimitation can take place by definition of high mountain areas and watershed and if it is a normally accepted principle of demarcation, then it is precisely defined in the past’, his reference was to the Kun Lun range. Premier Chou's position was ‘we do not recognise the McMahon line but that we were willing to take a realistic view with Burma and India. It is easy to see that the national boundary between China and India is the Karakoram watershed. This extends from Kilik Pass, passes through the Karakoram Pass to Kongka Pass. Broadly speaking, rivers and streams to the south and west of this belong to India while those to the north and east of it are on China's side’. Both sides could only agree there was no demarcation on the ground.

Three missteps by both countries have resulted in the current stalemate. First, two civilisational states establishing their identity were ill-advised by poorly informed experts. India issued new maps in 1954 removing the 'un-demarcated territory' tag and China in 1957 also showed Aksai Chin with the only traffic artery between Tibet and Xinjiang in its new map. A cartographic ambiguity was converted into clashing sovereignty, with unwarranted inherent notions of 'concession' and 'aggression'.

Second, further reliance placed on experts to assist the diplomatic process in reconciling records and custom obfuscated the political nature of the settlement. In 1960, the history and tradition of the area were to be examined by a joint expert group which could not produce an agreed report as earlier maps considered basin boundaries, and not who had exercised control over territory. These deliberations only confirmed that trust, the essential element of a negotiation, was missing.

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Third, despite the system of engagement from 1993 for "meaningful and mutually acceptable adjustments to their respective positions on the boundary question", militaries remain tasked with defending borders where 'grey areas' and maximum restraint in 'face to face' situations have inherent limitations. Infrastructure development increases the potential for action and then reflection, and that process has outlived its utility. The Special Representatives of India and China, set up to resolve the boundary issue and diplomats have had to step in on border management.

The missteps extended into the operational sphere. China constructed its strategic highway unhindered, as regular patrolling till all the border passes was not undertaken between 1954 and 1959, when a clash took place near the Kongka Pass, south of the Galwan valley, galvanising hectic diplomatic activity. On the Chinese side also, in 1960, their experts showed Indian experts a new map of the Chinese-claimed 'traditional customary line' which was at points well to the west of the alignment of the same area which Premier Chou en-lai had earlier described to Jawaharlal Nehru.

Then, as now, public opinion had a disproportionate role and a furore arose when the term territory "administered" by India was used. The Soviet Union (Russia), as in the case of the Galwan face-off, resorted to quiet diplomacy, with a tilt towards India impacting on the disengagement.

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The context is no longer newly independent countries unsure of themselves, but neighbours confident in their national power seeking 'accommodation'. Lt. General P.J.S. Pannu, who commanded the Leh-based Corps, has advocated a boundary settlement laying stress on the difficulties in holding ground 'divided by this history', with military clashes inevitable as the LAC is not marked on the ground (<https://bit.ly/35jNEfj>). Lt. General N.S. Brar, a former chief of staff of the Leh-based Corps, has advocated a 'sober handling of national security issues' by 'accepting Chou-en-lai's proposal as 'a practical and honourable accommodation with China' (<https://bit.ly/32eZ42h>). National security is more than the military posture.

Wedded to the questionable line of 1865, on the Kunlun Range, India has not claimed the more legitimate line of 1899 on the Karakoram watershed (communicated by the British to the Chinese) and which China has accepted as the boundary with Pakistan, and fully covers our patrolling points and strategic heights we now occupy. This translates to the Indus watershed lying within India, with the area to its east in China, including its strategic highway G219.

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Another new development is the guidance from the Modi-Xi summit, held in Wuhan in 2018, that the boundary question should be considered from the 'strategic perspective of India-China relations'. The debate should really be whether the Wuhan Spirit, expected to create conditions for the Asian century, Asia with two poles, is still relevant. This marks a shift from India's earlier stand agreeing with China that problems left over from history be left for another generation.

There are indications that Jawaharlal Nehru was inclined towards negotiation but feared his Home Minister, Govind Ballabh Pant, would play the national card to oust him. Prime Minister Modi is secure, within the party and the national trust in him. He should audit the past, explain colonial ambiguity, establish the Himalayan watershed as border, and take a giant step for the \$5-trillion economy.

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