

Sino-Indian Border Dispute: Explained in Constructivist Paradigm

Reena Bhatiya

Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies

reenabhatiya5@gmail.com

Abstract

The intractable Sino-India border dispute has been persistently affecting the India-China bilateral relations. The latest skirmishes at the Galwan valley testify that. While several attempts have been made to comprehend as well as resolve the dispute, it becomes pertinent to examine the trajectories, and go beyond a limited approach. This paper therefore analyzes the border dispute and patterns of incursions, standoffs, within a constructivist prescriptive framework. By comparing and critically analyzing the scholarly works on the dispute in the last decade through a constructivist paradigmatic optic together with an update of more recent developments at the border, this paper will contribute to the existing literature by giving a much ignored theoretical direction to the discussion on Sino-India border dispute.

Keywords:

Borderlands, Incursions, Norms, Border-Conflicts, Paradigm

Decades have elapsed since the border war in 1962, the Sikkim skirmishes in 1967, the Sumdorong Chu valley skirmish in 1987, to the recent Doklam standoff in 2017, and the current Galwan valley incident. So far 1025 minor transgressions have occurred along the LAC between 2016-2020.¹ These include 37 incursions between 2006 and 2011, by Chinese forces along the 350-km border that Uttarakhand shares with China.² Further, in the eastern sector two incidents occurred in 2007 in the Thagla Ridge area of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. The incident of 2003 was in the Asafila area of Arunachal Pradesh. It coincided with former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Beijing in June.³ In 2013 seven incidents were reported in the Western Sector, six among which took place along the Ladakh-Tibet Autonomous region boundary. These were in the areas of Siri Jap, Chumar, Counsel, and in Demchok. The remaining one occurred in the Daulet Beg Oldi sector in the Aksai Chin region.⁴ Moreover, as Lt. Gen. SL. Narasimhan, member, National Security Advisory Board explains that 'the fact of the matter is some kind of planning has gone through before these multiple face-offs', it

¹economicetimes.indiatimes.com/news/defense/1025-chinese-transgressions-reported-from-2016-to-2018-government-data/articleshow/72262114.cms?from=mdr. (Accessed on 14 June 2020).

² *The Times of India*. April 16, 2012. '37 incursions of Chinese forces reported in Uttarakhand: CM'. (accessed on 14 June 2020)

³ *The Hindu*. July 25, 2003. 'Arunachal Pradesh not part of India'. (Accessed on 14 June 2020).

⁴ <https://internewscast.com/india-china-border-dispute-a-conflict-years-in-the-making/>. (accessed on 14 June 2020)

seems clear that keeping the border issue persistently alive is a part of Chinese Strategy to outcompete India in the regional and global power matrix.

Chinese intent seems to have succeeded slightly which is to prevent India from carrying out any new construction beyond the confluence of the Shyok-Galwan River.

Recently, the incidents at Galwan Valley and nearby areas were due to China's discomfort about India's military and administrative build up in Ladakh over the years. All these above incidents raise several important questions on the contours of the Asian Century which seems to be pillared by China. As Ladakh constitutes the western sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) several spots along the border-Galwan Valley, Depsang Plains, and Hot Spring- have been sites of standoffs since April-May in the light of Chinese incursions. As per the latest news reports, both sides have agreed to what has been termed as a 'buffer zone', which would be an area where neither side carries out any construction or patrolling activity and would differ from location to location. Although, no specific time has been agreed upon regarding how long the buffer zone will exist. It is being exercised as a confidence-building measure for restoration of the status quo as of early April. Nevertheless, the Chinese intent seems to have succeeded slightly which is to prevent India from carrying

out any new construction beyond the confluence of the Shyok-Galwan River. It is against this backdrop that one needs to situate the contending views regarding India-China's competitive power projections at the border. If one looks at the prolific literature around this topic, it has almost been within the realist or neo-realist tradition of international relations either explicitly or implicitly. C.V. Ranganathan looks at the rivalry through the prism of changing geopolitical situations while suggesting India for a multilateral architecture in the South Asia region (2015). Srikanth Kondapalli yields a persuasive insight into India's engagement with China on multiple fronts to prevent any change in the configuration of power in the region (ibid).

Constructivism takes a sociological, rather than 'strategic interaction' view of international relations.

As it is also well said that, in the realist conception of security, threats are external and military-based, and the actors are rational unitary states. Borders are strategic lines to be militarily defended or breached. State survival is based on the deterrent function of borders against military incursions by other states. (Andreas 2003:81).

On the contrary, the constructivists offer a rebuttal to this dominant view. They consider that the political importance of the selection of

these boundary lines did not lie in their being 'true' or the claim being 'real' but in their being shared by a process of political selection and then reified in respective countries (Karackattu, 2017). The creation of knowledge, beliefs, and norms in each country's decision-making process evolved to alter the meaning and construction of the material reality of the boundary (Adler, 1997). Constructivists also think that the early disputes that marred Sino-Indian relations created a perception of mistrust and hostility. This perception was kept alive and reinforced by the periodical crisis arising out of their many unresolved disputes (ibid). It got extended by their inescapable geographical proximity and near-simultaneous emergence as a rising power.

Further, according to the constructivist point of view, international relations are shaped not just by material forces such as power and wealth, but also by inter-subjective factors, including ideas, norms, history, culture, and identity. Constructivism takes a sociological, rather than 'strategic interaction' view of international relations. The interest and identities of states are not pre-ordained, or a given, but emerges and changes through a process of mutual interactions and socialization. Constructivists have challenged the uncritical acceptance of the balance of power system posited by realist and neo-realist scholars as the basis of Asian regional order by giving greater play to the possibility of change and transformation driven by socialization (Acharya, 2007).

While the aforementioned views are important insights given by constructivists, they do not help provide any prescriptive framework for the Sino-India border dispute. To examine the trajectories, and go beyond a limited approach to understand the border dispute and patterns of incursions and standoffs, this paper gives a constructivist prescriptive framework. By comparing and critically analyzing the scholarly works on the dispute in the last decade through a constructivist paradigmatic optic together with an update of more recent developments at the border, this paper will contribute to the existing literature by giving a much-ignored theoretical direction to the discussion.

Sino-India border dispute can be traced back to the British territorial policies for the subcontinent.

The primary argument of this study unfolds as follows. The first section of the paper briefly describes the comparison of the studies on the border dispute in the period between 2008-2019 while analyzing the perceptions created by these works. As, this decade has also been important due to the major global political shift in international politics and change in the discursive frameworks of the scholars. Implying that the relative decline of the US hegemony and China's global BRI projects has had an impact on the way issues involving

China have been perceived in this decade. Next, the article investigates the potential benefits of territorial expansion by China in the eastern sector by analyzing news articles and reports. Potential benefits here mean the strategic advantages of territorial expansion by China in the eastern sector of the McMahon line.

Sino-India Border Dispute: Late 20th Century

The scenario of the Sino-India border dispute can be traced back to the British territorial policies for the subcontinent. One such example is the border demarcation between India and China, faced with many disputes even till today. The border is divided into eastern, middle and western sector wherein disputes exist in each one. In the eastern sector, the line is disputed because China declined to sign the agreement declaring the Shimla Convention and the tripartite arrangement illegal on the grounds that the local government could not be a party to it.⁵ Additionally, the middle sector of the border starts from the tri-junction between the Southwestern of Ngari Prefecture, Tibet, Ladwags and Punjab to the tri-junction between China, India, and Nepal. The border is 450 km long, with about 2000 km of land under dispute.⁶ And the western sector starts with the

⁵ T S Murty, Maxwell. 1971. 'Tawang and Un-negotiated Dispute', *China Quarterly*. No 46 (April - June 1971), pp 357-62.

⁶ Varma, Ganesh. 2012. 'Reading Between the Lines'. 18 November 2012, available

pass of Karakoram in the North to the tri-junction between Tibet's Nagri Prefecture, Ladwags, and Himachal Pradesh, running along 600 km. The disputed area in this sector is known as Aksai Chin which occupies about 33,500 km of land and is controlled by China.

Given this backdrop, it is evident that the British territorial policy caused severe discontentment to China. Followed by PRC's presence in Tibet in 1951 made India feel threatened by China at its borders. Retorting to which, India took control of Tawang, a center of Tibet's Buddhist Monastery. But 'While the Tibetan government protested against India's move, the Chinese central government remained very quiet on the issue'.⁷ China's silence was perceived by India as acceptance of the McMahon line, eventually creating much confusion.⁸ Thereafter, the implementation of the forward policy by India led to the increased Chinese military presence in the disputed areas along with check posts, border patrols. These continuing tensions resulted in the 1962 Sino-India border war ending with China's victory and a unilateral ceasefire. The premise of the dispute had been China's rejection of the legality of the McMahon line signed by the British with Tibet in 1914.

at <http://www.fairobserver.com/article/reading-between-lines>

⁷ Zhang, Hongzhou, and Li Mingjiang. 2013. 'Sino-Indian Border Disputes', *ISPI Analysis* No. 181, June 2013.

⁸ P.B. Sinha and A.A. Athale. 1992. 'History of the Conflict with China, 1962', *India: Ministry of Defence 1992*, 1-5.

Border Incursions and after effects

Since the 1962 border war, the dispute has continued to affect the bilateral relations as well as the perception of both the countries about each other's intentions. The timely incursions have played a major role in maintaining the threat perceptions. As Suhasini Haider (2020) argues that the latest PLA actions at LAC are different due to three reasons: Chinese troops have shown more aggression, engaged in physical skirmishes, and disregarded agreed protocols. She argues that another point of concern for diplomats has been whether the modified Chinese patterns reflect a tactical push or beyond that are driven by its ambitions on a strategic level. China regards the DSDBO road with some suspicion, as its advantage in gaining access to Karakoram pass.⁹

Doklam flashpoint is not just about Doklam but about India's status as a regional power able to defend its interests and those of its allies.

The May 11, 2013 edition of TOI suggests that the Chinese use of force over territory would put pressure on the United States to enforce shared norms against any such conquest.

⁹ Haider, Suhasini. 'PLA Actions at LAC in Ladakh denote a shift from Past: Experts'. May 24, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pla-actions-at-lac-in-ladakh-denote-shift-from-past-experts/article31665294.ece>

Similarly, China's claim in Arunachal Pradesh should be seen not only as a pressure point in Negotiations with India but more importantly, driven by a refusal to acknowledge what has historically been a contentious relationship with Tibet.¹⁰ Further, in the context of much recent Doklam Standoff Colonel Vinayak Bhat reveals three points. In the way China's bellicosity and aggressive rhetoric has closed off many of its negotiating options and made many of its neighbors wary and open to the idea of counter-balancing, Doklam can no longer be resolved by coercive means. Thereby, China's unilateral occupation of the disputed territory should be raised through diplomatic channels. To defend its national interest, India must step up its power projection capabilities both in economic and military sense or risk having to compromise them due to the inability to effectively challenge China on critical issues.¹¹ Because Doklam flashpoint is not just about Doklam but about India's status as a regional power able to defend its interests and those of its allies.

Sino-Indian Border Dispute: A Possible Alternative Explanation

Norms and Knowledge Creation

¹⁰ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/Chinas-expanding-core-interests/articleshow/19992246.cms>

¹¹ <https://theprint.in/defence/new-trouble-for-india-as-china-fully-occupies-doklam/29561/>

Mostly the researches avoid the question as to why territorial disputes arise and remain intractable. They merely explain the power-political dynamics associated with the disputes. This section of the analysis argues that these modes of explanation are severely misleading since many of today's territorial disputes can be better explained from a normative perspective, by referring to subjective conceptions of international norms. Territory is also perceived as an emotive issue and loaded with several emotional and normative elements that surpass its 'rational' economic or strategic values. Therefore, attempts to resolve the territorial disputes which do not take into account the normative dimension underlying such disputes are not likely to give positive outcomes.

Norms

The dominant norm in the realist paradigm of international relations is to solely focus on linear borders neglecting the fact that the reality of the spaces at the intersection of these borders was different earlier. Some of the scholars who have worked on the Sino-Indian border dispute have attempted to understand the complexity of the borderland regions before the linear demarcations of those spaces than merely giving a strategic analysis of the issue. The fungibility of these intersecting spaces had made the precise demarcation a rather difficult task, as explained in the next section.

The Tawang monastery (in Arunachal Pradesh) assumes significance for China due to its

historical connection with the Lhasa monastery (in Tibet). This historical aspect has been vindicated by interviews in the Tawang monastery until China occupied Tibet in 1951.¹²

Goswami (2011), found in her interviews that the ties were based on exchanges of monks and tribute paid in barter to Lhasa. However, she also argued that for China to articulate a claim based on history and the conception of Southern Tibet is not only incorrect but deliberate construction of false history. While Tawang had religious and administrative connections with Tibet, no such connection existed with China.¹³

Goswami (2015) found in her interviews with Tawang Monastery spokesperson that

“ the local discourses converge on the view that Tawang and the neighboring Monpa inhabited areas were taken over by India in 1951 under the leadership of the Naga Indian army officer.....The Tawang-Lhasa had an administration dimension to it.....Before 1951, the Monpas of the area were Tibetan subjects and gave tribute to the Lhasa monastery.”

¹² Namrata Goswami’s interviews with the first and second Lamas in Tawang Monastery, Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, March 17-22, 2011.

¹³ From her interviews conducted in Mechuka, March 11-13, 2011 and Tawang, March 17-22, 2011.

The principal challenge in the Sino-Indian border dispute for China is that it has to ‘maintain’ control over vast borderland populated by ethnic minorities that were never governed directly by any of the previous dynasties

Similarly, Alkester found that, the rights and obligations of the Tawang Monpa under the Tibetan state prove that Tawang was an internal colony of the Lhasa government, given its onerous tax obligations, minimal participation or influence in central decision making and the tenuous cohabitation of local rulers with a central authority, particularly the Sat Raja of southern Monyul, or Kalaktang (2015). What is noteworthy here is that the principal challenge in the Sino-Indian border dispute for China is that it has to ‘maintain’ control over vast borderland populated by ethnic minorities that were never governed directly by any of the previous dynasties (Fravel, 2007: 53). As in the earlier part of the 19th century, borders were still left vague or non-existent in most parts of the world including in areas controlled by European empires. Hence, the underlying motive for China’s quest to resolve the disputed border seems not to be based on traditional usage or history but owing to the strategic nature of the western border. Thus, the Sino-Bhutan border negotiations appear to be part of a larger

Chinese strategy in South Asia, whereby ‘China wants to gain as much as possible in the western sector of the dispute with Bhutan’ and therefore, ‘Boundary settlement for China is about strategic enhancement’.¹⁴

The level of a state’s internal strength coupled with what functions its borders play usually determines the specific actions that the state may take on the disputed border.

The above discussion on the historical background of the McMahon line shows that mere change in the perception of the particular space can cause the conflict of the territorial claims. The authenticity of each party’s claim to the territory gets marred by the immediate strategic interests and role of the dominant perception creation to pursue those interests. The evolution of the norms in each country’s decision-making process helps in altering the material reality from time to time. Perhaps, this may be the cause of the persistent skirmishes at the border to materialize the perceptive claim. The question still lies for researchers to find whether there can be a norm creation in Asia for the borderlands which lie at the intersection of powerful nation-states, based on the pre-linear borders histories. As within the

¹⁴ Kumar, P. 2010. ‘Sino-Bhutanese Relations under the Shadow of India-Bhutan Friendship’, *CHINA REPORT* 46: 3 (2010): 243–252. p.248. Also see, Bisht, Medha. 2010. ‘India-Bhutan Relations: from Developmental Cooperation to Strategic Partnership’. *IDSIA Strategic Analysis* vol.34, issue 3, May.

constructivist paradigm, norms analysis is significant in reflecting the changing nature of China’s self-perception and its relationship with the rest of the world. Otherwise, the norm of Asianism has had a phenomenal impact on Chinese foreign policy behavior, and thereby, its role in resolving the border disputes demands serious attention of scholars.

Knowledge

The term ‘knowledge’ here means, scholarly explanations given to understand the underlying causes of border conflict. These explanations according to Constructivists contribute to creating a perception relating to the dispute, which eventually determines its linkages with other goals. As Blanchard (2005), hypothesized that the level of a state’s internal strength coupled with what functions its borders play usually determines the specific actions that the state may take on the disputed border. In the same context, Wiegand (2011) notes that the enduring territorial dispute is caused either by the dispute’s lack of salience to the parties concerned or by the dispute’s linkage with other foreign policy goals. When the inter-state border dispute lacks salience the claimants effectively ignore the dispute.

Further, Fravel (2008), states that the Sino-Indian border dispute is not very important for China because maintaining internal control trumps expanding frontiers. The regime will invariably choose control over a restive Tibet in preference to the acquisition of more

territory along the Sino-Indian border. Regime insecurity best explains China's stance, noting that when the CCP is insecure, due to internal threats such as secessionist movements, it is more likely to come to the negotiating table. So long as Taiwan's independence is not an active issue and Tibet is under control, the regime has a sense of security along its frontiers, which creates little incentive for compromise.

There is a need for new interpretations of 'reality' to be introduced into the conversations between India and China by changing the epistemic (and normative) premises of the understanding of boundaries.

In this regard, Malik (2011) contends that an unsettled border provides China the strategic leverage to keep India uncertain about its intentions and nervous about its capabilities while exposing New Delhi's 'good behavior' on issues of vital concern to China.

In the context of the above discussion, it can be discerned here that the frequent PLA intrusions into the disputed territory mainly take place to achieve three outcomes in the domain of International Politics. First, the internal strength of the state determines its actions in the disputed territory. Thereby, the reason PLA continuously makes intrusions into disputed territories is to demonstrate its strength from time to time and persistently

build the perception of China as a regional power in South Asia. Secondly, when there are instabilities within the Chinese regime then it results in the power projection at the borders to secure the stability within. This implies that it is not necessarily intended at resolving the border dispute or any territorial expansion rather it functions as a distraction from the regime instability. Third, in the competition of becoming a regional power in the South Asia region, China wants to keep India engaged in protecting its borders and create the fear of the neighbor to counter India's intentions of becoming powerful. The threat perception here works in the direction of preventing any expansionist tendencies of the competitors in the Region.

The Way Forward

It is beyond the remit of this article to examine the minute details of every Sino-Indian border dispute and the history of evolution of linear border in the region. Hence, by stepping outside the dominant gestalt of the issue this analysis has tried to answer the question of the intractable nature of the dispute and its implications for both the countries.

Therefore, it may be concluded that there is a need for new interpretations of 'reality' to be introduced into the conversations between India and China by changing the epistemic (and normative) premises of the understanding of boundaries. There are three types of Norms:

regulative norms to regulate and constrain behavior; constitutive norms to create new actors, interests or categories of action; and prescriptive norms to prescribe certain norms. Hence, the constructivist recommendation is that territorial disputes have more to do with changes in shared normative views than with changes in power relations. This must pave the way for the scholars working on the Sino-Indian border dispute to think at the normative level than merely analyzing the historical and strategic nuances of the dispute.

REFERENCES

- Adler, Emanuel. 1997. 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3(3), 319-363.
- Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan. 2007. 'Why is there no non-western international relations theory? An introduction', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 7, Issue 3, Pages 287–312.
- Andreas, Peter. 2003. 'Redrawing the Line: Borders and Security in the Twenty-First Century', *International Security*, 28(2), 78-111. (Retrieved July 20, 2020)
- Fravel, Taylor. 2007. 'Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol.30, No. 4-5, 705-737.
- Karackattu, Joe Thomas. 2017. 'India-China Border Dispute: A Historical Enquiry on the Political Selection of Boundary Lines', *ISAS Insights, Institute of South Asian Studies*, National University of Singapore, no. 433.
- Malik, M (2012) *China and India: Great Power Rival*. Boulder, CO: First Forum Press.
- N Lego. 2006. *Modern History of Arunachal Pradesh (1825-2006)*, Mrs. Ponung Lego, Itanagar 2006 pp.6-10.
- Namrata Goswami. 2015. 'China's Territorial Claim on the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh: The "Centrality of Tibet" and the Balance of Power', in Gurudas Das, C Joshua Thomas (ed.) *Voices from the Border: Response to Chinese Claims over Arunachal Pradesh*. Pentagon Press.

Reena Bhatiya is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Chinese Studies. She completed MPhil from Department of Political Science, University of Delhi. The title of the MPhil dissertation is “Linear Borders: Theoretical and Historical Analysis”. Her research interest is broadly Non-Western International Relations Theory, Borderland Studies in International Relations, Border Theories, and Study of the Intractable Border Disputes in South Asia. Currently her specific research focus is on Sino-India Border Dispute in the eastern sector and Borderland Communities, Comparison of Infrastructure Development in Borderlands in China-India.

The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.

The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution, which has a leadership role in the promotion of Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. The ICS Analysis aims to encourage debate and provide informed and balanced inputs for policy formulation and is based on extensive research and interactions with a wide community of scholars, experts, diplomats and military personnel in India and abroad.

ICS ANALYSIS *Back Issues*

Issue No/ Month	Title	Author
No. 111 July 2020	Hazarding Hazards: An Assessment of China's Workplace Safety Since Year 2000	P K Anand
No. 110 July 2020	Are US and China on the Verge of a Cold War 2.0?	Zorawar Daulet Singh
No. 109 July 2020	To Craft a Covid-19 Narrative, China needs Africa	Veda Vaidyanathan
No. 108 July 2020	Domestic Imperatives Behind Chinese Aggression at the India-China Border in 2020	Dr. Sriparna Pathak
No.107 July 2020	South China Sea Geopolitics and the Shadow of Covid-19	Yogendra Kumar
No.106 Jun 2020	The Indo-Pacific: Concept, Contestation and Cooperation	Sanjana Krishnan
No.105 Jun 2020	Pompeo Defies Covid-19 and Visits Jerusalem with 'Mission China' Agenda	Hemant Adlakha
No.104 Jun 2020	India and China in the Post-Covid World	Shivshankar Menon
No.103 May 2020	China's Belt and Road Initiative: History in the Making	Priyanka Madia
No.102 May 2020	China, WHO and the Covid-19 Pandemic	Bhaskar Balakrishnan

PRINCIPAL SUPPORTERS TO ICS RESEARCH FUND

TATA TRUSTS



MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA



INDIAN COUNCIL OF
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

GARGI AND VIDYA
PRAKASH DUTT FOUNDATION



JAMNALAL BAJAJ
FOUNDATION

PIROJSHA GODREJ FOUNDATION

ICS PUBLICATIONS



A short brief on a topic of contemporary interest with policy-related inputs



Platform for ongoing research of the ICS faculty and associates



Authored by the faculty, also emerging from research projects and international conferences



Draft paper of ongoing research

ICS JOURNAL



In its 55th year, *China Report* is a refereed journal in the field of social sciences and international relations. It welcomes and offers a platform for original research from a multi-disciplinary perspective, in new and emerging areas, by scholars and research students. It seeks to promote analysis and vigorous debate on all aspects of Sino-Indian relations, India-China comparative studies and multilateral and bilateral initiatives and collaborations across Asia.

China Report is brought out by Sage Publications Ltd, New Delhi.

Editor
Associate Editor
Assistant Editor
Book Review Editor

Sreemati Chakrabarti
G. Balachandirane
Rityusha Mani Tiwari
Vijay K Nambiar



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,
Delhi 110054, INDIA

T: +91 (0) 11 2393 8202

F: +91 (0) 11 2383 0728

<http://www.icsin.org/>

info@icsin.org

twitter.com/ics_delhi facebook.com/icsin.delhi
[ln.linkedin.com/icsdelhi](https://in.linkedin.com/icsdelhi) soundcloud.com/ICSIN
youtube.com/ICSWEB instagram.com/icsdelhi