

Chinese Intrusions into India's Borders Ever End?

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There has been a faceoff between the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops and Indian soldiers in Burtse and Depsang in northern Ladakh, as late as March 20 and 28, 2015, according to press reports.

The two locations had been the targets of the PLA patrolling in the past also. The involved Chinese troops withdrew to their areas after being challenged by the Indian side.[1] The reports are disquieting from India's point of view. The development, if confirmed, comes at a time close to the scheduled visit to China of the Indian Prime Minister Modi in May 2015. Modi had told China that if bilateral relations were to improve then border intrusions by PLA troops had to cease. Going by the India-China Joint Statement issued at the end of President Xi Jinping's visit to India (September 2014) which laid stress on border tranquility, it appeared that the PRC understood what Modi said. Even then, the latest incident in Ladakh has happened. It will therefore be incumbent on the Chinese side to explain why there is still no let up in its transgressions across Indian borders.

2. India- China borders remain rather quiet without any serious military incident since last several years. The last major standoff between the troops of the two sides took place in 1987 in Sumdorong Chu valley in Arunachal Pradesh. It followed the veteran Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's threat in October 1986, as reported in the press, to teach a lesson to India if it continued nibbling across the border.[2] This being so, Chinese PLA intrusions into India's borders have been a regular feature in recent periods; the reported March 2015 border happenings are a case in point.

3. Are the continuing border incidents in the India-China border 'transgressions' or 'intrusions'? Each side interprets the border happenings differently. India alleges that the Chinese troops are carrying out 'transgressions' into the border[3] which according to it means that they cross over to Indian territory only to eventually retreat to their side. India at the same time admits Chinese 'intrusions' are occurring some

times which it sees as their crossing over to Indian side, but staying put. It says that no 'intrusion' has been reported or taken place on the border including Sikkim, during the five years since 2010 [4] The People's Republic of China (PRC), on its part, refers in general only to occurrences of "isolated incidents" in the border.[5] It however feels that India is also transgressing along the LAC and that such 'violations' against China could be more than double than that has been alleged by India. [6] The intentions of the two parties in any case look to downplay the tensions along the LAC; both seem to be against attaching too much importance to border crossings in the interest of overall bilateral ties. Importantly, they agree on one point, i.e. Differing perceptions of each other on the LAC are contributing to border tensions.

4. Given below, is data on notable Chinese intrusions into Indian borders in recent years, including on the PRC's relevant prominent statements and cartographic positions:

Feb 1997: Chinese PLA intruded 6 kms across India's Himachal Pradesh. It happened subsequent to former PRC President Jiang Zemin's visit to India in November 1996. The incident happened despite the 1993 India-China agreement for maintenance of peace and tranquility along the LAC and the November 1996 agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC in the India-China Border areas.

26.6.2003: The PLA intruded in the Asaphila region of the upper Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh, which is one of the eight known pockets of dispute (In Arunachal: Thag La, Sumdorong Chu and Yangshi in Kameng, Asaphila in Subansiri and Madan Ridge in Lohit; in Ladakh and Uttarakhand: Trig Heights, Yakla and Barahoti[7]). The incident happened when Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee was on an official visit to Beijing. 10 Indian soldiers were abducted by Chinese military according to reports.

May 2005: Chinese troops intruded into Asaphila again. The incident happened after former Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to India in April 2005 and despite India-China Protocol on "Modalities for the Implementation of CBMs in the Military Field along the LAC in India-China Border Areas", signed during Wen's visit. As per protocol, settled population in the border is not to be disturbed. (The Chinese side denied the incident).

November 2006: The then PRC President Hu Jintao visited India. Prior to that, the PRC Ambassador to India Sun Yuxi affirmed that "the whole of the so-called state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory. Tawang is only one of the places in it. We are claiming all of that".

2009: Chinese Foreign Ministry protested the then Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh.

December 2010: Former Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited India. Prior to that, Beijing denied visa to India's Northern Army Commander and began issuing stapled visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir.

2012: Chinese Foreign Ministry protested the visit to Arunachal Pradesh by the then Indian Defence Minister.

2013: Chinese Foreign Ministry protested the visit to Arunachal Pradesh by the Indian President Pranab Mukherjee.

April 2013 – early May 2013: Chinese intruded in Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), Ladakh region, and Depsang plains of Aksai Chin. They set up camps in tents in Depsang valley. The PLA also intruded in Chaglagam area in Arunachal Pradesh. All such intrusions happened prior to Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's first visit to India (19-21 May 2013). Indian officials say Chinese Depsang intrusion was 19 km deep inside Indian Territory, ahead of even the Chinese perception of the LAC.

June 2014: Coinciding with Indian Vice President Ansari's visit to China, the PRC published a map showing the entire Arunachal Pradesh and large chunks of Jammu and Kashmir as Chinese territory.

24.6. 2014: The PLA intruded into Pangong Lake, Ladakh; Chinese troops made a 6 km deep incursion. Stayed for 2 hours in the high speed boats and went back.

September 2014: The Chinese troops intruded in Chumar area of Ladakh. Intrusion by Chinese civilians at Demchok along the LAC also took place. 1000 Chinese troops intruded into 3 kms inside India's Chumar territory. Chumar incident lasted for a week. It reflected a Chinese claim on a new area. It happened ahead of, during and beyond Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India (17 – 19 Sep. 2014). China however withdrew its troops from Chumar finally. China's objection was reportedly to India's construction of a road in the area.

January 2015: Chinese Foreign Ministry protested Japanese minister's recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as part of India (Japanese foreign minister Fumio Kishida, New Delhi, January 2015)

20.2.2015: China protested Indian Prime Minister Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh; Chinese Vice Foreign Minister summoned Indian envoy to protest; Chinese Foreign Ministry and the PRC embassy in New Delhi, also protested.

8.3.2015: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the Sino-Indian border dispute "has been contained. At the moment, the boundary negotiations are in the process of building up small positive developments. It is like climbing a mountain and the going is tough because we are on the way up."

20.3.2015 & 28.3.2015: The PLA intruded in Burtse and Depsang in Northern Ladakh.

2.4.2015: The PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson said at a regular press briefing that China is ready to work with India to find a comprehensible and reasonable solution to the border dispute, adding that the dispute is a "huge" one in the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian border and is undeniable fact".

5. Useful data for reference are also the numbers of Chinese transgressions/intrusions across the Indian border, as given below^[8] : **2010-228; 2011- 213; 2012- 426, 2013-411** and **2014** (till 4.8.2014) - 334.

Intrusions- Broad Trend

6. A close examination of data given in paragraphs 4 & 5 above reveals a broad trend with respect to China's intrusions across Indian borders, as listed below:

- It can be seen that the intrusions have happened during or close to the periods of exchanges of high level visits between India and China. No doubt, the PRC's primary motive behind such acts is to reinforce its border claims against India on such important occasions; more importantly, China might also be hoping that the intrusions could push India into defensive positions during the crucial bilateral talks taking place during these visits on various strategic issues dividing them including the border.
- China's intrusions seem to be extending to new areas; this would mean expansion of its border claims. So far, there have been 8 areas of dispute in its thinking - Thagla, Sumdorongchu, Yangshi, Asaphila and Madan ridge (all in Arunachal Pradesh) and Trig Heights and Yakla (both in Ladakh region) and Barahoti (Uttarkhand). New additions being noticed are Chumar, Pangong, DBO and Depsang, all in Western Sector. Reports quoting Indian experts say that through incursions, China has been able to occupy 640 Sq kms of Indian territory in Eastern Ladakh .^[9] They have since been denied by the Indian government.
- 90% of Chinese intrusions since 2012 have happened in the Western Sector. This suggests China's priority to the defence of its perceived borders in the Western Sector in comparison to that of Eastern Sector. The PRC, in particular, may like to defend its position in the Aksai Chin region of the Western Sector, already being occupied by it, but claimed by India. The importance was also noticed in the PRC's past 'swap' formula which provided for its giving up claims in the Eastern Sector in return for India's recognition of Aksai Chin in the Western Sector (China no longer mentions this formula). For China, the Western Sector is of significant strategic value; the key Western Highway connecting Xinjiang and Tibet falls in it. Also, the PRC's intrusions into and apparent efforts to establish permanent facilities in the Indian border, may be aimed at linking the Aksai Chin with Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir where the Chinese military is engaged in construction activities. Another point with regard to China's importance to Western Sector, are some claims, not so far official, noticed in the PRC that Ladakh is a part of China's Tibet^[10].

- It appears that the Chinese intrusions across Indian border have been gaining momentum ever since India carried out its nuclear tests in 1998 suggesting China's inclination to link the border dispute with India with geo-politics. Notable in the current context is that they almost doubled in 2012 in comparison to the figure for the previous year. The 2012 level has continued in 2013 and for 2014, the situation could be the same. A reason could be new compulsions being felt by China to respond to India's heightened activity close to the border, in particular to stop the latter's acceleration of military infrastructure up gradation in the border – troop buildup, establishment of new border posts, putting air strips into operations again such as DBO, building of border roads etc. Departing from their past practice, Indian security forces are now more aggressive with daily patrolling along certain areas on the border and ready to forbid Chinese troops along the LAC.
- Some Chinese intrusions have happened deep inside Indian Territory, for e.g. in the DBO sector, the presence of Chinese military is kilometers ahead of even the Chinese perception of the LAC. This and staying of Chinese troops in the intruded land in tents could mark a new trend and reveal the PRC's long term intentions. Indian experts (like Srikanth Kondapalli) feel that these intrusions could be meant for probing Indian defences and testing of India's vulnerabilities along the LAC. Indian experts (like Brahma Challaney) think that China may try to gain more Indian territory in the process, change ground realities in the border and redraw map in its favour. They call this as China's 'Salami Slice' strategy aimed at taking control of Indian territories by small maneuvers.
- On the question as to why the Chinese intruded while President Xi Jinping's visit to India was still in progress, a possible explanation could be that after Mr Modi's landslide election victory in India, the PRC was unhappy with his government's foreign policy moves; in particular, the Chinese could have been unhappy with Mr Modi's implied condemnation of it for having "18th century expansionist mindset, encroaching upon other countries, intruding in other's waters, invading other countries and capturing territory". India's boost to ties with Japan and Vietnam, two China-wary nations, during days before Mr Xi's visit to Arunachal could also have contributed to China's unhappiness. Some analysts have raised a question whether or not the Chinese intrusion in September 2015 was known to President Xi Jinping who was still in Indian soil; they have argued that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) influences the country's foreign policy course. But it has to be acknowledged that the whole party and government including the military in China function under a unified command which decides the foreign policy of the country; any idea of isolating the PLA in the process could be wrong.
- The continuing Chinese intrusions across Indian border may mean the ineffectiveness of the signed India-China Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA). It is possible that the PRC is taking advantage of the BDCA's silence about deployment of troops in the LAC and in particular on from how many kilometers from the LAC, the two countries are required to exchange information on troop movements. India may think that not all its troop movements near the border are its troop build ups.

- China's protests over visits of Indian leaders to Arunachal Pradesh could be because of another factor- the stand of the Dalai Lama set up in India on Arunachal Pradesh. The Dharamsala-based Tibetan government in exile has said that "they recognize the McMahon Line as international border and that as such, Arunachal Pradesh is a part of India. It is bound by the Simla Agreement signed with the British India in 1914 and that there is no reason to deviate from the agreement." [11] Beijing seems to be wary of any attempt to link the Tibet issue with that concerning Sino-Indian border; it considers the former as an internal problem. For the outside world, however, the linkage is obvious.

PRC's suspicions of the roles of US and Japan on the border issue

7. Of special interest to observers are signs suggesting that the PRC may be becoming suspicious of the US support to India on the question of border issue. Influential Chinese writers (Professor Zhang Li, South Asia Research Center, Sichuan University) have said that the support of Washington "led to a hardening of India's position on disputed border with China like that in Aksai Chin, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh". They (Prof Wang Dehua) have remarked that the Indian army's intrusions into the Chinese side were encouraged by the US so as to make some noise to distract China from the South China Sea, where it is in a spat with its sea neighbors such as the Philippines and Vietnam over the disputed islands. But India is neither on the US side nor on China's side, but has its own agenda[12]." Scholars (like Zhang Mi of the Independent Dujia Network based in Beijing, www.dooo.cc [1]) have alleged (9.4.2015) that the US is provoking India in the latter's relation with China, by offering the bait of support to India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council, adding that India remains unmoved.

8. Chinese suspicions on US as above need to be understood in another context. For the first time, Japan has sided with India on Arunachal issue (Foreign Minister Kishida, New Delhi, January 2015, while offering Japan's support to India's development projects in the Eastern Sector). Also, for the first time in recent years, a foreign power seems to have come in open support of India on the issue. With apparent concern over any internationalization of Arunachal issue, the Chinese foreign ministry promptly conveyed its 'serious concern' to Japan on this count. A PRC scholar[13] affirmed that Kishida's words had "unveiled Japan's intent of 'uniting' the countries that have territorial disputes with China, in an attempt to create a strong impression that Japan, along with China's other neighboring countries, is bullied by a rising China."

9. In connection with what has been said above, it will be useful to have a look into the existing official positions of the US and Japan on the Sino-Indian border issue. The official US line is that it accepts the McMahon line as defining the Sino-Indian border, as observed by former US Ambassador to India J.K. Galbraith in October 1962[14]. Washington is however non-committal on the status of Aksai Chin. Japan's official position is that it does not take sides on the Sino-border issue; but definitely marking a departure from this position is the de facto recognition of the country's foreign minister that Arunachal Pradesh is part of India. Relevant is his clarification – India "basically and effectively controls [Arunachal], and China and India are continuing consultations on the border issue, I made the remark taking these facts into account"[15]. One can expect that at a time when the US and Japan are engaged in a geo-political contest with China in Asia-Pacific region, they may not like to further annoy China by giving open support to India on the Sino-Indian border issue; however, the two official positions mentioned above, seem to contain a message – US and Japan may not be averse to adopt a pro-India stand on the issue when

the time comes.

10. India may have to watch closely for any evidence towards China's official perception about the intentions of the US and Japan on the Sino-Indian border issue. As a consequence of any PRC feeling that the two powers are working in tandem with India on that issue, regional geopolitics may become a factor in Beijing-New Delhi relations, posing a challenge to the two sides on how to manage it.

Intrusions in a wider context

11. It will be a mistake to look at China's border transgressions into India in isolation; they need contextualization taking into account China's historical views of its boundaries, which expose the country's expansionist outlook. The PRC believes that it has 'historically lost' territories to foreign countries; it however says that it is not making such claims in the modern sense. Beijing connects the country's external boundary as existed during Qing dynasty period to the contemporary borders. The maps published in the PRC in end eighties and in first decade of the century encompassed vast areas belonging to neighboring countries (The Historical Atlas of China, 1982-1987 and History of China's Modern Borders, vol. 1, 2007). Parts of India's Northeast and Andamans were shown in the maps as 'historically lost territories' of China.

12. Meriting close attention is also the impact on the Chinese stand on border intrusions coming from the PRC's "core interests'-based foreign policy framework, visible since middle of 2008. Under this framework, China aims to promote 'win-win cooperation' with outside world, but would not compromise its 'core interests', i.e on all matters concerning the country's territorial sovereignty. China says that friendship and the 'no compromise' position are two 'pillars' of its diplomatic strategy. India should therefore expect China's adoption of a two pronged approach towards it, which simultaneously mixes elements of both cooperation and assertion. At this juncture, signs seem to be emerging towards a beginning by China to readjust its foreign policy through according priority to economic interests in comparison to core interests; India may have to wait for the impact of such readjustment on China's policy on borders with India; it may have to examine the probability of the level of PLA intrusions into the Indian border coming down as China starts reducing the importance of assertiveness and according priority to economic interests while making its foreign policy.

13. Can 1962 be repeated? The answer could be yes, but not in that scale. Despite the apparent success of several mutually agreed confidence building measures in keeping the borders peaceful, India should be alert on the eventuality of intrusions expanding further, leading to an India-China 'local war'. The PRC visualizes occurrence of 'local wars under informatisation conditions'. The belief is that such wars can be short and happen in China's periphery, enabling China to realize limited political objectives. Can China use force to settle borders with India? The answer is affirmative considering that China's 'Active Defence' strategy does not rule out the military resorting to 'offensive operational postures'. Forceful recovery of 'Southern Tibet' (as China calls Arunachal) and fighting a 'partial war' with India were topics in the Chinese blogs not very long ago. China's use of force to turn territorial conditions in its favor has precedence. Beijing launched 'counter attacks in self-defense' against Vietnam, India and former Soviet Union in 1979, 1962 and 1969 respectively. In the current period, China is indulging in a show of force in East and South China seas.

14. Bilaterally, China's keenness to get closer to India and vice versa at the present moment is beyond question. President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi are taking a lead in this direction. The motivating factors for the two countries are obviously mutual economic benefits. At the same time, they require to face the fact that the strategic mistrust between them is not going to disappear soon. A Chinese blog aptly describes such situation. It [16] identifies the roots of misunderstandings between China and India and wants their removal. It says, "The Chinese people suspect that India is using US and Japan to contain China and the Indians believe that China is restraining India through its moves in Indian Ocean and building of ports in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka etc. India also fears that China opposes India's nuclear policy".

15. India will have to be prepared for the Chinese border intrusions /transgressions to continue as it is not going to be easy to bridge the perceptual differences among the two on the LAC quickly. More important will be to find a permanent solution to the border issue; India and China find that it is complex and will be time consuming. This explains their current inclination to conduct bilateral relations looking beyond the border dispute and concentrate on working together in other fronts, especially by strengthening mutual economic cooperation. India-China border talks may prolong indefinitely as the PRC is going to persist with its principled position of not compromising on all sovereignty-related issues including that of "Southern Tibet", as it calls India's Arunachal Pradesh. In such a situation, the best way for India would be to continue the border talks with China, but without expecting any quick breakthrough in them. Its long term plans should take into account the likelihood of future border conflicts with China and the need to build its defense preparedness as an insurance against any misadventure by China, howsoever it may look illogical at present.

(The writer D.S.Rajan, is Distinguished Fellow, Chennai Centre for China Studies, Chennai, India. This is an updated version of his talk on the subject at a seminar on "China's Asian Challenges and Opportunities", organized by the Defence Services Staff College- DSSC, Wellington, on 26-27 March 2015. Email: dsrajan@gmail.com [2])

[1] "Two Chinese intrusions detected last fortnight", Deccan Herald News Service/ PTI, 6.4.2015, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/469998/two-chinese-intrusions-detect...> [3]

[2] "China and India: Surjit Mansingh and Steven Levine, Problems of Communism, Vol.38, No.2-3, March-June 1989.

[3] Explaining the difference between intrusion and transgression , India's home ministry officials said that while intrusion would mean that the Chinese troops crossed over to Indian side of the LAC and stayed put, transgression implied that they had entered Indian Territory only to eventually retreat to the Chinese side, Times of India, 20.8.2014

[4] "No intrusion has been reported or taken place on India-China border, including Sikkim, during the last five years, However, there are cases of transgression due to difference of perception of the Line of Actual Control (LAC)," India's Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju, written reply on 13.8.2014 to a question from a Rajya Sabha MP. "There have been no instances of intrusion along the India-China border. There is no commonly delineated LAC between India and China. There are areas along the border where India and China have differing perception of LAC. Transgressions along the India-China border occurred when troops of both the countries undertook patrolling up to their respective perception of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Chinese troops had transgressed temporarily across our perception of the LAC in Chumar area," "Transgressions occur, on occasions, on account of both sides undertaking patrolling upto their respective perception of LAC. Due to such difference of perceptions, transgressions have also occurred in the general area of Pangong Tso Lake", India's Defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar, reply to a written question in Rajya Sabha. DNA, 2.12.2014

[5] Colonel Geng Yansheng, spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of National Defence, 31.7.2014

[6] http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-05-18/news/31765593_1_... [4]

[7] Virendra Sahai Verma, "China Land Swap only in Disputed Pockets", Times of India, 6.1.2013

[8] Answer by India's Ministry of Home affairs to a Rajya Sabha question, 13.8.2014.

[9] A team, headed by National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) Chairman Shyam Saran, visited Ladakh between August 2 and 9, 2014, to review the border infrastructure development and the situation there. It reportedly submitted its findings to the government.

[10] A Chinese language blog in the official 'Global Times' in 2009 (under the title "Ladakh- another Southern Tibet", bbs.huanqiu.com/thread-283700 dated 13 December 2009) described Ladakh region as part of China's Tibet, along with the assertion that the Chinese government had never recognised New Delhi's official position that Ladakh is part of India. It further argued that the Volume 8 of the "Historical Atlas of China", published in Beijing showing China's territories as existed in 1820, included Ladakh as part of China's Tibet. "Whether it is McMahon line in the East or Johnson line in the West, both have no legal basis and received no recognition from the Chinese government and people", it asserted.

[11] R.Dutta Choudhury, "Tibet Solution will end Sino-India border row", Assam Tribune, 22.7.2014

[12] "China reacts cautiously to over 500 transgressions remark", PTI, 18.5.2012, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-05-18/news/31765593_1_... [4].

[13] Geng Xin, Renmin University, Beijing, "New Delhi won't fall for Tokyo's attempts to stir up trouble with Beijing", Global Times, 23.1.2015

[14] Jeff M. Smith, "A forgotten war in the Himalayas", Yale Global online, 14.9.2012. He asks for US support to India on the border issue with China in the current context.

[15] <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/aranachal-pradesh-border-row-chinese-expert-cautions-india-against-japan-tricks/1/414886.html> [5]

[16] Huan Qiu Shi Bao, Chinese version of the Global Times, written by Prof Wang Yiwei of the Chinese People's University International Affairs Department, Beijing, 16 September 2014

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