



Crossing the Line At Odd Times: China-India Border Disputes

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Last month yet another standoff at the disputed China-India border reached yet another peaceful conclusion, though not before spoiling the atmosphere of Chinese President Xi Jinping's inaugural visit to India. In mid-September, as many as 1,000 Chinese soldiers crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, Kashmir and were met in a prolonged face-off by an equal number of Indian troops. While violations of the de facto border are a common affair, the conspicuous timing and motives of the latest intrusion, and its broader implications for Sino-Indian relations, merit greater scrutiny.

Last year India reported over 400 Chinese incursions across their desolate Himalayan border, mostly in the dozen volatile stretches where there is no mutual agreement on where the LAC belongs. By and large, the incursions are petty, harmless exercises with patrols temporarily crossing the un-demarcated border before returning to their forward base. Unlike the unruly Indo-Pakistan border, there has not been a fatal confrontation at the LAC in decades.

When opposing patrols do meet, they generally disperse amicably after a ceremonial unfurling of flags and verbal exchange of warnings. Occasionally, however, Chinese patrols have crossed several miles over the LAC and established camp, prompting prolonged face-offs with escalation risk.

What is most peculiar about these extended "intrusions" is their inopportune timing. The latest intrusion coincided almost perfectly with Chinese President Xi Jinping's arrival in India, the first visit by a Chinese leader in eight years. The episode immediately evoked a sense of déjà vu: last spring, just before Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid was to visit Beijing in India's first exchange with the Xi administration, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) launched an eerily similar intrusion into Ladakh. Then too, it took more than three weeks and several rounds of talks to dislodge the encampment, though not before tainting the optics of Khurshid's visit.

Indian and Western strategists are puzzled. What is the logic behind intrusions that yield no apparent strategic or material value but provoke rampant anti-China sentiment in India? And why are they timed to coincide with high-level exchanges at a time when China is diplomatically courting India? After all, the two latest intrusions happened at a time of relative harmony in China-India relations. Yet, in earlier years like 2009, when Sino-Indian relations were mired in acrimony, the border was devoid of these prolonged standoffs.

One theory is that the PLA has gone "rogue," operating independently from the political leadership in Beijing. The controversial theory seemed to gain some credibility during the Hu Jintao administration (2003-2013), when PLA actions and statements often appeared at odds with, or unaware to, the political leadership. Gordon Chang argues that in this case, "someone in the Chinese army... wanted to derail relations with India by timing the incursions to coincide with Xi's visit."

President Xi only fed this rumor mill when he seemed ignorant of the intrusion during discussions with India's popular new prime minister, Narendra Modi. Even more conspicuous, after returning from India Xi appeared to dress down the PLA brass, exhorting them to "have a better understanding of international and domestic security situations" and insisting on "absolute loyalty and firm faith in the Communist Party of China."

However, there is good reason to cast doubt on this theory. While Xi's address to the PLA was unusually direct, it was by no means out of line with frequent invocations stressing absolute loyalty to the party. More important, Xi has amassed more power and authority over the various organs of the Chinese state, including the PLA, than any of his recent predecessors. He also has not shied away from targeting disloyal or corrupt officials in arguably the most robust purge of senior party figures in decades.

Yet, as far as observers know, no officer has been reprimanded or replaced, and no brass reshuffled. Given that the number of incursions has grown exponentially in recent years (from 140 in 2006 to 411 in 2013), and given the 2014 intrusion followed the same template as the 2013 intrusion suggests a coordinated strategy, not a rogue operation. The most plausible explanation is that Beijing has given local commanders some degree of autonomy at the border, both in responding to Indian moves and in employing probes and petty adventurism of their own.

Another explanation is that India bears responsibility for the border intrusions. Because China largely avoids commenting on border issues, and because it conflicts with the conventional narrative of China as the aggressor, this explanation gets less media attention.

However, Prime Minister Modi signaled a tougher line on border issues, warning on the campaign trail that “No power on earth can snatch away” the Chinese-claimed state of Arunachal Pradesh. “Times have changed,” he said. “China will also have to leave behind its mindset of expansion.” And Modi shrewdly appointed a Member of Parliament from Arunachal Pradesh, Kiren Rijiju, as the Minister of State for Home Affairs, a position which carries responsibility for border issues.

More important, Modi has accelerated a drive to improve military and civilian infrastructure along the LAC. Only days before Xi arrived in India, Delhi announced it was relaxing environmental rules and clearances for new infrastructure projects within 62 miles of the LAC. After decades of intentionally neglecting development in border areas for fear it could aid an advancing Chinese army, Delhi has of late been working to narrow the substantial infrastructure advantage China enjoys along the LAC.

During the spring 2013 intrusion, there were credible reports that the PLA was simply responding to India erecting new border infrastructure provocatively close to the LAC. The PLA, observers learned later, only withdraw after India agreed to dismantle one or more of those structures. According to Reuters, the current standoff followed a similar pattern. On September 8, India reportedly erected an observation hut in Chumar close to the LAC, to which Beijing responded by building a two-kilometer road supported by 500 PLA soldiers before the situation devolved into a prolonged standoff.

In the latest intrusion the PLA may well have been parrying an Indian move to improve its wildly disadvantaged position at the LAC. Yet Beijing also bears responsibility for its apparent commitment to keeping the border dispute alive. In recent years, Beijing has slow-walked the border negotiations, reinvigorated claims on the border town of Tawang, resisted an exchange of maps outlining each side’s perception of the LAC, and issued “stapled visas” to Indian citizens from Arunachal Pradesh.

This is at least in part because China’s leaders have made a strategic connection between the border dispute and Tibet, and seem unwilling to resolve the former until their position in the latter is more secure. During the latest crisis, China’s hardline Global Times argued: “It is not a border dispute alone. It is intertwined with the Tibet question.”

Beijing has long been incensed over the hospitality Delhi has shown the Dalai Lama and the Dharamsala-based Tibetan Government in Exile, periodically implicating India in support for “splittist activities” from the “Dalai Lama clique.” Dating back to the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, Beijing has a history of using the border dispute to signal discomfort with developments in Tibet.

It is not clear whether that was the case last month. In a largely unnoticed but unprecedented move, Modi invited the Tibetan Prime Minister in Exile, Lobsang Sangay, to his inauguration ceremony where he was prominently seated. And Modi’s government recently affirmed that, like its predecessor, it would refuse recognition of China’s “One China” principle unless Beijing accepts Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir. Hopes for a breakthrough in long-stalled talks between Beijing and the Dalai Lama also seem to have been dashed recently, after Beijing nixed a proposal from His Holiness to make an unprecedented visit to Tibet.

What does seem certain is that the border dispute and Tibet are likely to remain both linked and core friction points in the China-India relationship for the foreseeable future. I have argued that for China and India, the window for both greater cooperation and greater competition have expanded simultaneously in the Xi-Modi era. Thus far, at least, the allure of the latter appears to be greater.