The Chinese Puzzle

Srinath Raghavan

Understanding why Beijing is displaying, in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's words, “a certain amount of assertiveness” towards New Delhi is the first step towards crafting a sensible public discourse on India's relations with its largest and most important neighbour. It is also imperative that the government of India informs and shapes domestic opinion on China. The bogey of an aggressive China may well become a self-fulfilling prophecy, for strident views on both sides feed on and accentuate the other.

Speaking at a think tank during his recent visit to the United States, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh succinctly summarised the state of India's relations with China. Notwithstanding the long-standing boundary dispute, he averred, India would continue to engage China. The “Chinese leadership at the highest level" had assured him that pending a settlement the frontiers would remain peaceful. Yet, he went on to observe that “there is a certain amount of assertiveness on the part of the Chinese. I don’t fully understand the reasons for it. That has to be taken note of” (Council on Foreign Relations 2009).

Given the venue of the speech, it is not surprising that this last remark has not gone down well with the Chinese. But the prime minister's admission that he was unable to fathom recent Chinese behaviour is significant. This is equally true of much media coverage and commentary on the subject; though hazy understanding has seldom deterred them from pontificating with great confidence. In such a situation, there is always the risk of adopting a worst-case scenario approach and imputing the most malign motives to the other side. The recent anti-India polemics in the Chinese press have lent credence to such interpretations.

Coming at a time when China has become India’s single largest trading partner, its stance might seem puzzling. Yet Beijing's approach is understandable in its own terms. And such an understanding will be the first step towards crafting a sensible public discourse on our relations with our largest and most important neighbour.

The current situation has arisen owing to the confluence of a number of issues: reports of Chinese “incursions” into Indian territory; Beijing’s vociferous protests against visits to Arunachal Pradesh by the Indian prime minister and the Dalai Lama; its attempts to block the sanction of an Asian Development Bank loan for developmental work in Arunachal; and, of course, the seeming deadlock on the boundary negotiations. To understand, the reasons behind China's stances it is useful to dis-aggregate these various strands of policy and consider their mutual interaction.

Chinese Incursions?

Start with the issue of “incursions” by the Chinese. The problem largely stems from...
the fact that the two sides have different perceptions of where the Line of Actual Control (LAC) lies. The LAC is supposed to divide the areas that are under Indian and Chinese control since the end of the 1962 war. The line, however, was not mutually agreed upon by the two sides. This is in contrast to similar lines with Pakistan in Kashmir. Both the Cease Fire Line of 1949 and the Line of Control of 1972 were drawn up by formal agreements between the two countries. There was no such agreement on the LAC both because the war ended with a unilateral ceasefire by China and because subsequent efforts by the “Colombo countries” to mediate ended in failure.

In the Ladakh sector, the differences in perception are owing to China’s occupation of additional disputed territory during the war of 1962. The issue of where exactly Chinese forces stood after the war remains contested. The areas where Chinese intrusions occur are claimed by both sides as lying on their side of the LAC.

In the eastern sector – Arunachal Pradesh – the problem is a bit more complicated. The Chinese do not recognise the boundary claimed by India: the McMahon Line. The line, named after the then foreign secretary of India, was defined in a set of notes exchanged between Henry McMahon and the chief Tibetan delegate on 24-25 March 1914. This line was then marked on the map of the draft convention, which was initialled by the Chinese as well as British Indian and Tibetan representatives. The Chinese government, however, repudiated the Simla convention owing to their disagreement vis-à-vis the boundaries between Tibet and China, and their desire to curb British attempts at enhancing Tibet’s autonomy.

Nevertheless, Beijing treats the McMahon Line as the LAC in this sector. The problem is that since 1959, India and China have differed on just where the McMahon Line actually runs. There are “grey areas”, which lie north of the McMahon Line as marked in the original maps of 1914, but are actually south of the highest watershed. India’s position – which China does not accept – is that the line was intended to run along the highest range of mountains dividing Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh, and despite discrepancies the boundary had to be accordingly interpreted.

These grey areas include, Namka Chu, Thag La, Sumdurong Chu, Tulung La, Asaphi La, Longju, and Chenju. It bears emphasising that there have been no reports of Chinese incursions in other parts of the LAC. In any event, India and China have signed agreements on measures to maintain peace and tranquillity along the LAC. The agreement concluded in 1996 admits that both sides have differing perceptions of the LAC. The Indian army chief has stated that “the Chinese have a different perception of the Line of Actual Control, as do we. When they come up to their perception [sic], we call it incursion and likewise they do” (Financial Express 2008).

Boundary Negotiations

This problem is naturally linked to the wider boundary dispute between the two countries. In April 1960, the prime ministers of China and India met in New Delhi to discuss the boundary issue. Zhou Enlai indicated that if India accepted China’s claims in the western sector (Ladakh and Aksai Chin), they would adopt a reasonable stance on the McMahon Line boundary in the eastern sector (now Arunachal Pradesh). Beijing, he clarified, could not accept the McMahon Line, but could agree to a slightly different boundary. Having earlier denounced the McMahon Line as a relic of British imperialism, the Chinese government faced considerable domestic opposition to accepting it.

The parts of the eastern sector where the Chinese evinced interest were the grey areas along the McMahon Line. Jawaharlal Nehru, however, rejected Zhou’s attempt to club together the eastern and western sectors and called for a sector-by-sector examination of claims. In the western sector, Beijing not only claimed Aksai Chin but also areas south and south-west of the region. Although the Chinese had moved forward and occupied some of these parts in 1959, they were not in control of the entire area they had claimed. Indeed, China occupied all of this area only after the war of October-November 1962 (Raghavan 2009).

When talks on the boundary were revived in the 1980s, New Delhi stuck to the position of sector-wise negotiations. The assumption was that once China acceded to India’s position in the east, it would politically be easier for the Indian government to make concessions in the west. Domestic politics also mandated that India should secure China’s withdrawal from the 3,000 square miles in Ladakh, annexed in 1962, as the government could not afford to be seen as acquiescing in the gains of war.

China agreed to this approach, but began emphasising its claims over Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the Tawang area. If concessions in one sector would not be linked to gains in another, it made sense to adopt a maximalist negotiating position on each sector. Moreover, the Chinese leadership had to take into account domestic constraints. Having formally claimed all of Arunachal Pradesh for over two decades, they had to obtain some favourable concessions in this sector of the boundary.

The focus on Tawang reflected Beijing’s belief that it had a strong historical case. After the Simla conference the government of India had not made efforts to extend its administrative presence right up to the McMahon Line. Republican China was a shambles, and posed no significant threat in the Assam Himalaya. The McMahon Line came to the fore in 1935, following an incident involving a British botanist studying the frontier tracts and Tibetan officials who controlled the area surrounding the Buddhist monastery in Tawang. Between 1938 and 1944, the Indian government belatedly sought to make good on the McMahon Line; but to no avail. Lhasa refused to withdraw its personnel from Tawang; and the British were chary of offending the Chinese – now their ally in the struggle against the Axis powers. Consequently, the Raj’s administrative control could not be extended to Tawang.

Following the Chinese invasion of Tibet, New Delhi decided in February 1951 to bring the Tawang under its administrative hold. Interestingly, the move evoked no response from Beijing, but Lhasa protested vehemently. China’s current claim to Tawang rests largely on the fact that it came under Indian control only in 1951. India’s stance relies on the fact that Tawang fell on the Indian side of the McMahon Line; that its populace are Monba not ethnic Tibetans; and that Tawang had a religious not political relationship with Lhasa.
The negotiations that commenced in 2003 departed from the previous attempts in important respects. India assented to the idea of a comprehensive package settlement, encompassing all the sectors. Further, the two sides agreed to work towards a political agreement, eschewing excessive focus on historical claims. The parameters of 2005 took into account the positions of both parties and sought to reconcile them. Delhi needed a Chinese withdrawal by at least 3,000 square miles in the western sector; Beijing sought some concessions in the eastern sector. Indian leaders have repeatedly stated that uprooting settled populations would be unacceptable.

China’s continued claims to Tawang reflect two considerations: First, Tawang is its strongest bargaining chip for territorial adjustments. Beijing seeks not only to obtain some concessions south of the watershed in this sector, but also to avoid having to forsake too much in the western sector. Second, in exchange for giving up their claims to Tawang, the Chinese evidently want India to provide some tangible reassurance vis-à-vis Tibet.

**Tibetan Tangle**

This brings us to the third intertwined strand: China’s concerns both about the situation in Tibet and India’s policy towards it. These have always played an important role in Beijing’s stance on the boundary question. The Chinese have for long rejected the McMahon Line on the grounds that Tibet had no right to conclude an agreement with India. Beijing felt that accepting the line would be tantamount to agreeing that Tibet had enjoyed some kind of independence in 1913-14. Tawang also has an impact on China’s policies towards Tibet. Up to the 1950s the Tibetan administration – under the present Dalai Lama – had strongly contested India’s take-over of Tawang. Beijing is concerned that if it dilutes its claims on Tawang, the Tibetans (especially the exile community) could denounce it as a sell-out on Tibetan interests and as underlining China’s lack of legitimacy in Tibet. More important, there are deeper concerns about the intentions of the government of India and the Dalai Lama vis-à-vis Tibet.

Back in 1954 India signed an agreement with China recognising Tibet as a region of China and renouncing the special privileges in Tibet inherited from the Raj. These, as the then foreign secretary observed, were “a concession only to realism.” However, the activities of Tibetan émigrés in border towns like Kalimpong stoked China’s suspicions about Indian intentions. These steadily intensified as a rebellion broke out in Tibet in 1958. Beijing assumed, wrongly, that India was colluding with the rebels. India’s decision to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama gave further credence to these suspicions. By mid-1959 the Chinese were convinced that India sought to make Tibet an independent buffer state. These perceptions played a major role in China’s decision to go to war in 1962 (Raghavan 2010). Concerns about the Dalai Lama and India’s intentions continue to shape China’s stance on the boundary issue.

Discussions between Beijing and the Dalai Lama date back to 1979. The then Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, suggested that short of independence the Tibetan problem could be resolved through negotiations. In the next decade, the Dalai Lama moved away from his earlier position of seeking independence for Tibet towards the “Middle Way” of seeking Tibetan autonomy under Chinese rule. But this shift in stance did not evoke an enthusiastic response from the Chinese government. For one thing, the Dalai Lama’s projection of his proposals in western capitals did not go down well with China. For another, his conception of Tibetan autonomy kindled Beijing’s suspicion.

A key component of the Dalai Lama’s idea of autonomy was (and remains) to unite under a single administrative entity all the areas populated by ethnic Tibetans. More specifically, the regions of Kham and Amdo that currently fall under four different provinces of China should be grouped with the area that is designated as the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The Dalai Lama’s stance reflects his conception of the Middle Way as a means of preserving Tibetan identity. Besides, other minority nationalities in China, such as the Mongols and Uighurs, govern themselves within a single autonomous region.

The Chinese, however, believe that the Dalai Lama’s stance is tactical. The creation of such an entity would merely serve as a stepping stone to eventual independence for Tibet. The Chinese insist, therefore, that the Dalai Lama must not only renounce independence, but also accept...
that Tibet has always been a part of China. The Tibetans are wary of making such a concession, for it might further undermine their case for autonomy. Hence, the Dalai Lama has emphasised the need to look to the future rather than the past. But Beijing will not be placated. China has stated that negotiations could only proceed if the Dalai Lama recognised Tibet and Taiwan as “inalienable” parts of China and dropped his demand for “Greater Tibet”.

Deepening Mistrust

Furthermore, China’s mistrust of the Dalai Lama has considerably deepened in the last two years. Beijing regarded the unrest in Tibet in March-April 2008 and the accompanying worldwide protests as orchestrated by the Dalai Lama. The Chinese media unleashed a vituperative campaign against the “Dalai clique”, a phrase that clubbed together various groups including the government-in-exile, the Tibetan Youth Congress (tvc), and Tibetan People’s Uprising Movement. A white paper on defence released later in the year identified separatism in Tibet as one of the main security threats to China.

Beijing’s actions might seem paranoid. But as Woody Allen once observed, even the paranoid can have real enemies. The Tibetan youth groups were certainly involved in the campaign against the Beijing Olympics. Moreover, the tvc was founded in 1970 by the Dalai Lama, and several members of the parliament-in-exile were formerly associated with it. But in recent years, the tvc’s political stance has been at variance with the Dalai Lama’s. The youth groups continue to call for an independent Tibet and oppose the idea of autonomy under Chinese constitution. However, the Chinese continue to hold to the idea of a cabal led by the Dalai Lama.

The upshot of it all is that the Chinese are more inclined than ever to drag out the negotiations with the Tibetans. They believe that once the Dalai Lama passes on, the Tibetan cause will lose its sting: it will neither have a charismatic leader nor the current traction with the international community. Beijing’s position would be much stronger if it could simultaneously undercut efforts by émigrés to influence Tibetan politics in the future. An important institutional player in this regard is the “Tibetan government-in-exile” operating in India. Created in the early 1960s, the government-in-exile has ramified into a substantial organisation involved in several tasks – administrative, economic, cultural and educational.

The Indian government has not recognised the government-in-exile and has maintained that it would not permit the organisation to undertake political activities. But the Chinese are sceptical about India’s disavowals, and believe that India tacitly permits anti-China activity by Tibetans. At the height of the Tibetan protests in 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao welcomed the steps taken by India against the activists, but also said that Tibet remains a “very sensitive” issue in Sino-Indian relations (Hindustan Times 2008). Hence, in the ongoing boundary negotiations with India the Chinese seem to be looking for some strong reassurance on Tibet – perhaps the dissolution of the parliament-in-exile.

China’s “assertive stance” thus stems from the conjunction of the boundary issue and the Tibetan problem. Paradoxically, China’s recent activism may reflect the fact that the boundary negotiations have actually made some headway. As the Indian national security adviser observed last year, “Five or six, the more difficult points are settled...But areas of divergence remain” (Indian Express 2008). The most important of these is China’s claim to Tawang; but there is also the issue of the territory acquired by China in the Ladakh sector during the 1962 war. China’s robust stance is evidently intended to buttress its position on the bargaining table.

Furthermore, Beijing’s approach reflects the subtle but increasing pressure of domestic politics. Even as the parleys are in progress, the Chinese government’s past policies on the boundary issues are increasingly being subjected to scrutiny. In particular, the wisdom of the decision to unilaterally withdraw from the eastern sector, especially Tawang, after the 1962 war is being questioned. For a regime whose legitimacy rests on its historical role in unifying the country, such criticism is difficult to deflect.

However, Tibet is the more serious problem. Ties between India and Tibet have always been viewed by Beijing with wariness, not to say suspicion. The troubles in Tibet have accentuated China’s concerns about the “Dalai Clique” and its links with India. Repeated calls in Indian public discourse on the need to play the “Tibet card” only serve to stoke China’s suspicions. Beijing’s protests against the Dalai Lama’s visit to Tawang were vehement precisely because it put the spotlight on the links between the Tibetan problem and China’s territorial claims on the area.

Indeed, Tibet is the one issue that could undermine India’s steadily improving ties with China. Contrary to wishful thinking in some quarters, the Tibetan issue does not afford any leverage to India. The issue has no purchase on the Indian political class or public opinion. This being case, the realistic course is to find ways of offering more convincing reassurances to China about its attitude to Tibet. This will be essential to removing needless mistrust and to reaching an accord on the boundary. Towards the latter end, it is equally imperative that the Indian government informs and shapes domestic opinion on China. The bogey of an aggressive China may well become a self-fulfilling prophecy, for strident views on both sides feed on and accentuate the other. An accord on the boundary may not be reached in the near-term. But the boundary dispute need not hold to ransom the multifaceted relationship between the two countries. As Deng Xiaoping once observed, perhaps our grandchildren will be wiser than us.

REFERENCES


– (2010): War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years (Permanent Black).