

# ISAS Insights

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## India-China Border Parleys: New 'Signs' of Walking the Talk

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### Abstract

*The problem-solving mechanism of negotiations between the Special Representatives of India and China over their intractable boundary dispute has stayed course since 2003 when the process was agreed upon. Now, 50 years after the Himalayan war between these two major Asian neighbours, they have reaffirmed commitment to seeking a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable settlement of the basic dispute. Right now, there are two simple but significant signals that China and India, increasingly recognised as rising powers on asymmetric trajectories, are beginning to walk the talk. One, the two countries have not allowed a current issue of dissonance to disturb the peace process. Two, they have compiled a report on the progress made in their negotiations so far.*

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## **Introduction: Mystique of Progress**

The importance of being China and India as two rising neighbouring powers is amply reflected in the fact that their proliferating meetings, with or without definitive results, become noteworthy.

Emphatically, this observation applies to the latest meeting between the Special Representatives of the two countries – Dai Bingguo of China and Shivshankar Menon of India – in Beijing on 3 December 2012. A degree of masterly vagueness about the exact status of this “informal meeting” – China’s official categorisation – added to the political mystique of this round of dialogue.

Since 2003, when India and China set up this mechanism of problem-solving dialogue on their complex border dispute, Special Representatives of the two countries have held 15 rounds of formal negotiations. Instead of being categorically characterised as the 16<sup>th</sup> round, the latest “informal” talks between Mr Dai and Mr Menon produced a confidential up-to-now progress report on the border negotiations.

In a change of metaphor, the two interlocutors came up with an agreed snapshot of the diplomatic strides that India and China have made in regard to the convergences and divergences in the discussions over the boundary dispute since 2003. However, as the two asymmetric countries are inclined to keep their cards-in-play close to the chest, it is futile to guess at this stage the possible end-result of the endeavours of successive Special Representatives on either side.

## **Stalemate versus Settlement**

In fact, diplomatic sources conversant with this complex process say that even the Special Representatives themselves will not be in a position to predict the final contours of an eventual agreement, which indeed is hoped for. All that can now be said, with a degree of certainty, is that China and India will enter into a border settlement when both recognise that the cost of not settling the issue outweighs the cost of a continuation of stalemate, sources say.

For the present, with Mr Dai slated to shed his Special Representative status by March 2013, in line with the ongoing political transition at the helm in China, his latest meeting with Mr Menon acquired an unusual sense of urgency. Mr Menon, who is also India’s National Security Adviser, stays as the country’s Special Representative for border talks with China.

It is abundantly clear from the latest Dai-Menon talks that Beijing has signalled a policy of continuity towards India. China has now signalled its political will to uphold the Special Representatives process during and after the current transition at the highest echelons of governance in Beijing. In addition, China has once again pledged to maintain peace and stability along the disputed border with India. These two aspects are discernible in the latest statements by Official China on the India issue.

Beyond such diplomatic and personnel facts, what must not be overlooked at this stage is the overall trend line of improved China-India political atmospherics even amid signs of some dissonance on certain day-to-day issues. At the highest political echelons of the two countries, there is, for the present at least, a shared preference to try and, if possible, prevent any emerging episode of dissonance from spiralling into a new and intractable row.

Political will to stay the course of the overarching bilateral efforts at rapprochement has been emphasised by the leaders of India and China during their frequent meetings on the margins of international conferences. Unsurprisingly in this context, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and China's Premier Wen Jiabao re-endorsed the overall bilateral peace process, when they met during the East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh in November 2012.

### **Three-Stage Process**

The future-relevant aspect of the Dai-Menon exercise (in early December 2012) is that China and India have now confirmed the points of confidential agreement already reached. As part of a three-stage process, the two sides are now trying to fashion a framework for the final settlement of their Himalayan border dispute. These complicated efforts form the core of the ongoing second stage, the first stage having yielded in 2005 a Sino-Indian accord, or more precisely a mini-accord, on the political and guiding principles for the quest of a final solution.

However, with the ongoing second stage likely to be enormously tough by any standard, it is pretty difficult, even for the negotiators themselves, to predict the timing of onset of the third and concluding phase. Cartographic and field-level finessing of an agreed boundary is likely to be undertaken during the future-specific concluding phase. All these broad and general aspects of the Special Representatives process are really common knowledge among seasoned diplomats and expert-observers.

Given the highly privileged nature of the Special Representatives process, the matter-of-fact official comments on the latest "informal meeting" in early December 2012 are also no guide to the way forward. Shortly after the latest Dai-Menon meeting, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said: "Both the Chinese and Indian sides spoke highly of the important

progress in China-India relations. The two sides agreed that as the world's two largest developing countries, China and India face important opportunities and common challenges and enjoy broad prospects for cooperation".<sup>2</sup>

### **A Sweet Must-Do Wish-List**

For good measure beyond such a no-frills statement, the Chinese spokesman went on to set out a must-do wish-list in equally general terms. "The two countries should enhance political mutual trust, deepen economic cooperation, and boost people-to-people and cultural exchanges in a bid to promote their common development, bolster friendship between the two peoples, and uphold peace of the region and beyond".<sup>3</sup> Such a sweet must-do wish-list is reminiscent of the old Mao-era enunciation of first principles in international politics minus, significantly minus, the thunderous polemics of hostility of that period.

On the current situation along the disputed Sino-Indian border, the latest version from Official China is replete with positive sound bites: "The border areas between China and India have maintained peace and stability in general for many years. The two countries have reached a lot of common ground on settling the boundary question through consultation in a peaceful and friendly manner and achieved positive progress in the [latest] meeting of Special Representatives for the boundary question".<sup>4</sup>

As for the defining characteristics of the Special Representatives process, "China is ready to press ahead with the negotiation on China-India boundary question in the spirit of peace, friendship, equal consultation, mutual respect, and mutual understanding; and [China is ready to] seek a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable solution".<sup>5</sup> Each of these catch-phrases may have lost much of its political lustre through constant usage by countries across the world over long periods. However, these catch-phrases cannot be dismissed as inconsequential in the continuing China-India context of a huge unresolved dispute.

China's commitment to seek a peaceful settlement of the border dispute with India is, therefore, no less resonant than the commitment reflected in the following affirmation by Beijing for peace during the pre-settlement negotiations too: "Pending the final settlement, China is willing to

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<sup>2</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t996129.htm>. Accessed on 8 December 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t994392.htm>. Accessed on 8 December 2012.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

work with India to jointly uphold peace and stability in the border areas between China and India”.<sup>6</sup> The usage of commonplace words should not detract from the value of this affirmation.

### **Tranquil Stability**

Long-time observers of the China-India scene will quickly note that the standard phraseology of “peace and tranquillity” along the disputed Sino-Indian border has been replaced by “peace and stability” in this particular statement. However, it is possible to conceive of ‘stability’ as a more easily measurable political attribute than ‘tranquillity’. It can be argued that ‘peace and tranquillity’ will denote a certain sense of serene atmosphere, a hugely qualitative attribute, especially when applied to the situation along a disputed border in truly forbidding climatic conditions. By contrast, ‘peace and stability’ can denote a relatively easy-to-detect state of affairs that is well under the control of both China and India at the same time along their disputed boundary.

To recognise such a nuanced distinction between ‘peace and tranquillity’ on one side and ‘peace and stability’ on the other is not to assume that China is resorting to word-play in engaging India. This nuance is not of such importance to Beijing as the importance explicit in the recent shift from ‘peaceful rise’ to ‘peaceful development’ as the banner of China’s internal and external policies with “Chinese characteristics”.

On the present course of China’s overall engagement with India, Mr Hong Lei’s comment is noteworthy, although this statement too bristles with hackneyed phraseology. “China-India strategic partnership of cooperation [as in the official nomenclature of this relationship] has maintained a good momentum of sound and stable development, with frequent high-level exchanges, major breakthrough in economic cooperation, and active people-to-people and cultural exchanges. As leaders of China and India [have] said, the world is big enough for their cooperation and common development”.<sup>7</sup>

To be noted seriously in this maze of fine words is the Chinese official view that conflict between China and India is not inevitable if they cooperate in this “big world” for their shared aspirations of economic development at home. Moreover, China is pleased that a “major breakthrough” has occurred in Sino-Indian economic relations.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

## **Competition over Core Interests**

Such a Chinese perspective echoes the views voiced by India's Ambassador to China, S Jaishankar, in his address and follow-on dialogue at a symposium organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) in Singapore on 23 November 2012.<sup>8</sup> Dr Jaishankar spoke of the rising comfort level in the economic interactions between India and China and their political will to make common cause over some global concerns such as climate change. At the same time, he drew attention to the duality of narratives in the Indian discourse on China-India relationship now, half-a-century after they fought a border war in 1962. The Indian narrative flowing from the 1962 war is still focused on the perceived difficulties in the bilateral ties with China. However, the other narrative, driven by economics and global issues, reflects a more sanguine view of the way forward in Sino-Indian engagement. Dr Jaishankar drew attention to a third narrative of Sino-Indian competition as well, citing this as a natural phenomenon in international politics.

In this author's way of thinking, it is such competition over core national interests that lay at the heart of potential dissonance on issues other than the Sino-Indian border that Dai and Menon navigated through in their latest meeting.

Significantly, the Dai-Menon meeting in Beijing on 3 December 2012 took place amid potentially disconcerting dissonance on a couple of serious issues of day-to-day importance in the bilateral sphere. However, the two leaders did not allow themselves to be swept off their feet and carried on as if these issues had stirred up no more than a storm in a teacup.

Both issues flowed from China's act of 'cartographic creativity' or 'cartographic aggression' (depending on the standpoint of the parties concerned) around 22-23 November 2012. China began issuing to its citizens new-look passports with pages carrying indelible watermark-imprints of maps that fully depict Beijing's land-and-sea territories or 'claims' (depending on the standpoint of the parties concerned). These maps show Beijing in possession of those areas of the South China Sea that some of China's neighbours, all in Southeast Asia, claim as their own.

## **Talks Not Torpedoed**

This aspect does not directly impinge on India's territorial or political sovereignty. However, China was certainly not amused at certain coincidental remarks which the media in India

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<sup>8</sup> Dr S Jaishankar spoke on 'India and China: 50 Years After', at the ISAS Symposium in Singapore on 23 November 2012. ISAS Director Professor Tan Tai Yong chaired the meeting. For details, please see ISAS Special Report 09 – India-China Comfort Level in Economic Affairs: Good News for Asia's Stability, by P S Suryanarayana, 28 November 2012.

attributed to the Chief of Indian Naval Staff, D K Joshi. Answering Indian media queries, Admiral Joshi was reported to have affirmed that the Indian Navy had trained for and would be willing to deploy forces in the South China Sea in defence of India's economic interests in that sensitive area. Now, the point to note is that Mr Dai and Mr Menon did not allow their talks to be torpedoed by Adm. Joshi's reported remarks. It is a different matter altogether whether or not the Special Representatives did discuss this issue behind the scenes and did decide to let it slip off their radar-space for the sake of a future Sino-Indian border settlement.

For New Delhi, the reported remarks by Adm. Joshi, formerly Defence Adviser in the High Commission of India in Singapore, pertain to the protection of oil exploration by an Indian entity, ONGC Videsh, in the South China Sea. The exploration is being carried out by this Indian entity for Vietnam, which has a territorial dispute with Beijing in the relevant segment of the South China Sea.

Asked to comment on Adm. Joshi's reported remarks, the Chinese spokesman, Mr Hong Lei, said as follows on 5 December 2012, after the conclusion of the Dai-Menon meeting. "China opposes any unilateral oil and gas exploration activities in disputed areas in South China Sea and hopes relevant countries respect China's sovereignty and national interests – as well as the efforts of countries within the region to resolve disputes through bilateral negotiations".<sup>9</sup> While China's message to India on this score is unmistakable, it is equally noteworthy that Beijing has not adopted a strident tone against New Delhi in this statement. In a sense, such a qualitative aspect is in tune with the positive political atmospherics of the latest Dai-Menon meeting.

From India's point of view, a critical aspect of China's latest 'cartographic creativity' or 'cartographic aggression' is that Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin are also depicted as part of Chinese territory in the new-look passports. In a quick tit for tat, as it were, Indian Embassy in Beijing has begun issuing visas that depict India's territorial expanse in all its amplitude, inclusive of areas claimed by China. It is truly a measure of China-India political maturity during their current wave of engagement that such an issue too has not been allowed to rock the Dai-Menon meeting in early December 2012.

### **Subtle Nuance over 'Noise'**

The prime and nuanced signal from the latest round of India-China dialogue on their border dispute, held in an ambience of apparent political maturity on both sides, is that the two countries

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<sup>9</sup> *Global Times*, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.as...>  
Accessed on 8 December 2012.

do not want to be disturbed by external “noise”. Mr Dai did suggest that China and India should not allow their relations to be affected by such “noise”.<sup>10</sup>

In the absence of a detailed blow-by-blow account of the Dai-Menon conversations in early December 2012, it is not possible to be sure of what would constitute “noise” in the China-India climate of dialogue. Going forward, it will be useful to ascertain whether the possible or potential US factor in the China-India engagement could be sensed by Beijing as the disturbing “noise”. A popular theory is that New Delhi is a possible or potential pawn that the US might deploy suitably against China by bolstering India’s capabilities. At the other end of the spectrum, there is little or no direct evidence, in diplomatic circles at the moment, to indicate that the US and China might together seek to checkmate India’s rise.

In the opinion of this author, China and India can indeed ward off “noise” by genuinely upholding their independent preferences for “strategic autonomy” or “independent foreign policy”, an essential attribute of state sovereignty. This certainly is no wisdom from another Planet.

And, it will be easier done than said, if state sovereignty is tempered by “the spirit of peace, friendship, equal consultation, mutual respect, and mutual understanding” in the China-India quest for “a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable solution”. China has now advocated such principles in this peace process and India is known to reciprocate these sentiments for going forward. So, it is time for these two Asian mega-states, now on the rise asymmetrically, to walk the talk of statesmanship all the way ahead in their border negotiations.

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<sup>10</sup> *Xinhua / Agencies in Global Times*, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.as....> Accessed on 8 December 2012.