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Chinese Perspectives on the India-China Boundary Question

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Abstract.

India-China Boundary issue is a complex issue with a long history. The process to resolve the boundary problem started in 1958, but despite prolonged negotiations, the issue remains unresolved. The article tracks the Chinese negotiating position on the boundary issue since the beginning of negotiations, including lessons from the Sino-Burma boundary deal, which became the template for Chinese negotiations on border issues with other countries. Sourcing extensively from Chinese material, the article tracks official positions, scholarly views, as well as Social Media opinions to get a full perspective. The article aims to provide a brief but thorough understanding of Chinese perspectives on the India-China boundary issue.

Introduction

The unresolved India-China border is a long-standing contentious issue between India and China. The entire border is divided into three Sectors. Western Sector is along the Union Territory of Ladakh, the Central Sector along the states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and the Eastern Sector along the states of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. In the Eastern Sector, the Chinese side claims almost the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh, while in the Western Sector, India's claim line includes the entire Aksai Chin plateau and Shaksgam Valley, which was illegally ceded by Pakistan to China. Overall, the gap in official positions of both sides is largest in the Eastern and Western Sectors. The boundary between areas actually administered by both sides is known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Going back in history of boundary dispute, as per Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Compilation of Correspondence Between China and India on the Question of Relations Between the Two Countries in the Tibet Region of China, the Sino-Indian Boundary Question and Other Questions： August 1950—April 1960 (中国和印度关于两国在中国西藏地方的关系问题，中印边界问题和其他问题来往文件：1950 年 8 月 –1960 年 4 月)," the first document confirming discussions on boundary question at highest level was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's letter to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai on December 14, 1958. In this letter, Prime Minister Nehru referred to his earlier conversations with Zhou Enlai in 1954 and 1956 on border-related issues and asserted that, to avoid any misunderstanding between the two sides, the Chinese side should clarify their stand on the boundary issue.[1] In his reply on January 23, 1959, Zhou Enlai disagreed with Nehru's understanding of previous conversations and proposed to maintain the status quo, pending consultation on the boundary issue.[2] This started the long process of negotiations on the India-China boundary question.

To understand Chinese negotiating perspectives in a wholesome way, the article is divided into three parts: first, Chinese Template of Boundary Negotiations and Lessons from Sino-Burma Boundary Deal; second, Chinese Negotiating Position on India-China Boundary Issue between the years 1956-2026; and third, Chinese Social Media opinions on Boundary Dispute.

Chinese Template of Boundary Negotiations and Lessons from Sino-Burma Boundary Deal

In 1960, Burma (now Myanmar) was the first country with which China resolved its boundary dispute. Since this was communist China's first boundary negotiation, the Chinese side made it a template for negotiations with other countries. During the Sino-Burma boundary negotiations, the Chinese side proposed a package solution (一揽子解决) in 1956, wherein all sections of the boundary were to be considered as one package for concluding a deal. Chinese side also suggested a two-step approach to resolve the issue, wherein "The first step is not to discuss specific issues, but rather to establish a principle for resolving them, align our views, and pave the way for an overall solution." It was only in the second step that specific issues were to be discussed.

The negotiations and delimitation process involved withdrawal of troops of both sides from selected disputed areas, joint surveys and delimitation. It is notable that Chinese claims in Burma ranged from 75,000-92,500 square kilometres, but the actual deal was limited to the exchange of

territory within a few hundred square kilometres along territory actually controlled by both sides. Due to long being accustomed to maps with large claim lines, the boundary deal faced tremendous challenges in satisfying public opinion. It is interesting that a part of the Sino-Burma boundary followed the alignment of the McMahon Line. Chinese side accepted this alignment but chose to refer to it as the Traditional Customary Line rather than calling it the McMahon Line. Lastly, the boundary deal with Myanmar was preceded by the "Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Burma."

Overall, the Sino-Burma boundary deal provides three lessons relevant to the India-China boundary issue. These are: - Securing a bilaterally beneficial relationship is deeply linked to the resolution of boundary disputes; in boundary negotiations, real control of territory is the most important basis of settlement and satisfying public opinion is a major requirement for any boundary deal.

Chinese Negotiating Position on India-China Boundary Issue between Years 1956-2026

Chinese Negotiating Position between Years 1956-2002

Similar to the Chinese negotiating position with Burma, in 1956, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai advocated the template of "package solution (一揽子解决)" for India as well as other nations with whom China had a boundary dispute. During his visit to India in April 1960, Zhou specifically proposed "six points" for resolution of the border issue between India and China. These principles acknowledged the border dispute, accepted that there was a "Line of Actual Control (LAC)" between the two sides and stressed that the same geographical principles for delineation of the border should be applied across the entire boundary. Subsequently, the boundary negotiations broke down and became the precipitating factor for the 1962 India-China War. Post-war, it was only in 1976 that ambassadorial relations between India and China were resumed.

In 1979, during the visit of then Foreign Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the boundary issue was again discussed. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping confirmed this in 1982, when he met an Indian delegation from the Indian Council of Social Science Research. Deng said, "As long as both sides adopt a reasonable and fair approach, I do not think the border issue is difficult to resolve. When I met your former foreign minister in 1979, I proposed a 'package solution (一揽子解决)': you make some concessions, and we make some—that would settle the matter. After all, this is a legacy of

history; you have to consider the sentiments of your people, and so do we. Only by adopting a 'package solution' can each side persuade its own people."

Subsequently, between 1981 and 1987, India and China held eight rounds of boundary negotiations at the diplomatic level. It is reported that during the fifth round of negotiations in 1984, the Chinese side appeared amenable to settling the dispute along the McMahon Line in the eastern sector with minor Indian concessions; in return, they wanted certain pieces of Indian territory in the Aksai Chin, but no deal could be signed. In 1988, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited China. This visit resulted in the formation of a Joint Working Group, which met 14 times between 1988 and 2002. These negotiations focused on finding the guiding principles for resolving the boundary issue, but no agreement could be reached. Essentially, between 1985 and 2002, the focus shifted to border management rather than resolution of the boundary question.

Chinese Negotiating Position between Years 2003-2026

In 2003, to speed up resolution of the boundary issue, a Special Representative (SR) mechanism was established at the initiative of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. This mechanism made quick progress between 2003 and 2005 when a three-step roadmap for resolution was negotiated by both sides. Chinese Special Representative (SR) for border negotiations from 2003 to 2013, Dai Bingguo, writes in his book *Strategic Dialogue: Reminiscences of Dai Bingguo* (战略对话--戴秉国回忆录), that, "I suggested that the resolution of the China-India border issue could be broadly divided into three steps: first, to formulate political guiding principles in a short period, while simultaneously exchanging formal views on the framework for resolving the border issue; second, to reach an agreement on the framework when necessary; and third, to complete the specific demarcation work over a period of time."[3] This three-step roadmap was also agreed by the Indian side, and the first step, of agreeing on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles of Settlement, was signed in 2005.

After 2005, negotiations continued between both sides until 2019 but made little progress. In 2020, despite a number of border management mechanisms, the occurrence of the Galwan incident severely fractured the relationship. Among other things, the fallout of the incident also included the stoppage of meetings under the Special Representative mechanism. It was only in 2024 that the meeting of the Special Representatives for boundary negotiations was resumed, and the 23rd round of negotiations was held in Beijing in December 2024.

During the 24th meeting of SRs in August 2025, both sides agreed to set up a Working Group for effective border management and an expert group to explore early harvest of boundary delimitation in appropriate sectors. In the 25th meeting of SRs in August 2026, the joint statement tasked the Expert Group on Boundary Delimitation and the Working Group on Border Management to advance discussions on an early and substantial harvest of boundary delimitation and Border Management. The first task for both these groups is to agree on their respective Terms of Reference. Overall, the progress in negotiations is notable.

Chinese Stand in Border Negotiations and Dissenting Views

Regarding China's stand in these SR-level border negotiations, Dai Bingguo writes that, "both sides should make meaningful and mutually acceptable adjustments to resolve the issue through a package settlement(一揽子解决)."[4] On what "adjustments" the Chinese side was looking for, former National Security Advisor (NSA) and Special Representative of India, Shivshankar Menon, writes in his book *Choices* that in 1985 the Chinese side had specified that it was seeking concessions in the Tawang Sector.[5] Dai Bingguo also confirmed this in an interview in 2017. Thus, the views of these eminent personalities directly involved in border discussions confirm that the Chinese official stand in negotiations is to seek Tawang in the Eastern Sector for "unspecified" concessions in the Western Sector.

While the apparent Chinese official stand is to seek Tawang in the Eastern Sector, some Chinese scholars and experts have openly expressed reservations about the practicality of such a request. Mao Siwei, a senior Chinese diplomat who had formerly served extensively in India, including as Consul General in Kolkata, wrote that "during the 25 years from 1959 to 1984, China hoped to 'solve based on status quo' but could not; from 1985 to the present, Chinese request to 'change the status quo' was even more hopeless". Mao asserted that a solution based on the status quo is the only viable solution to the boundary question. Similarly, Zhang Xudong, a researcher at Tsinghua University, wrote that "Although the "package solution" proposed by Comrade Deng Xiaoping could not be realised at the time due to the constraints of historical conditions, it is possible that, in the end, the political wisdom of both sides will converge toward this very approach."

But what are the Chinese difficulties in agreeing to a status quo solution? Ma Jiali, a respected Chinese Scholar on India, is quoted in Ananth Krishnan's book *India's China Challenge* as saying that "People will criticise Xi Jinping for mai guo (selling the country) if he gives up claims. The key

question is how to educate people and handle national sentiment." He further adds, "With Russia, we started with joint research with Chinese and Russian scholars; I think that's one possible way to start. You need, on both sides, scholars with enough authority to come out and say something. Maybe Indian and Chinese scholars need to take the lead to work towards the basis of a final settlement."[6]

Chinese Social Media opinions on Boundary Dispute

Public opinion has always influenced the resolution of border issues, as evident from China's difficulties in managing dissenting views against the Sino-Burma boundary deal. Despite restrictions and censorship of political views on Chinese social media platforms, many users do express their views on the boundary issue. In addition, compared to the views of diplomats and scholars, social media users on *Weibo* (Chinese equivalent of *X*) and *Zhihu* (Chinese equivalent of Quora) are more unrestrained in their views.

These views can be broadly placed in two categories. Views in the first, predominant category are hawkish and propose pushing the resolution of the boundary issue to a later date. The views in the second category are more nuanced. After a keyword search such as India-China border problem (中印边界问题) and border problem (边界问题) on *Weibo* and *Zhihu* in September 2026, representative answers were selected based on the details presented and the originality of ideas from a total of 30 top results. A sample of these views is given below.

Discussing the India-China border issue, a user claims that China's overall strategic situation is favourable vis-à-vis India. He specifically claims that relations with Russia and the United States (US) are now considerably more favourable for China vis-à-vis India. In addition, better Chinese infrastructure and military equipment also give it an edge over India. Another user writes that China has strengthened its control of border areas through a combination of infrastructure construction, deployment of modern military equipment and legal strengthening through the renaming of places. Thus, the cumulative effect of all these systemic measures allows China to delay the resolution of the border issue as a preferable option because it will further reduce India's bargaining power. Interestingly revealing of a mindset, this user claims that China could construct a water storage facility in Aksai Chin to regulate the Water flow downstream, thus creating a serious vulnerability for India.

A third user who regularly comments on military issues and has excellent knowledge of terrain and history of border areas (as evident from detailed maps shared by him) professes that along India-China border areas, "one who controls, rules (实控为王)." The user also mentions that ground control is often the most critical basis of settlement for negotiations of border problems. A fourth user claims, "the current reality is that India controls [Arunachal Pradesh], while China controls Aksai Chin and the Karakoram Corridor—a status quo that is unlikely to change." On Tawang, the user claims that even if China is willing to make the Tawang area a demilitarised zone, it is unacceptable to India from a military perspective.

This user provides two suggestions for the exchange of territory. In his first suggestion, he proposes that if India cedes the entire Tawang district in the Eastern Sector, China can cede land at two places in the Western Sector: up to the Kailash Range in the southern part of the Ladakh Sector and half of Pangong Lake in the central part of the Ladakh Sector. Under his second proposal, if India cedes half of Tawang district, China should return land up to the Kailash Range in the Western Sector.

Conclusion

It's worthwhile to recall three main points from the entire article. The settlement of the Sino-Burma boundary based on "actual control of territory," the suggestion of Chinese scholar Mao Siwei about the futility of maximalist claims and the opinion of a well-informed Chinese social media user who says that "one who controls, rules (实控为王, shi kong wei wang)." The point being that in boundary negotiations, real control is often the most important basis of settlement, and any hopes of significant exchanges of territory are futile.

Reading through the long history of border disputes between India and China, it is clear that a running boundary dispute is disadvantageous to both countries. With the rise in stature of both China and India in the 21st century, the dispute is likely to drag both nations down, making it evident that there is a need to envision a new relationship. Thus, even though the official positions on the boundary dispute are moving forward, there is a requirement for scholars on both sides to engage in finding common ground and mobilise public opinion towards possible solutions to the border issue.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies [CAPSS])

Author Biograph

Col. **Anoop Singh** is a Special Forces veteran. He has served extensively in Jammu and Kashmir as well as North East India. After his voluntary retirement from service in October 2026, Anoop has dedicated himself to studying China and its military from an Indian perspective. He is a Mandarin speaker and extensively uses Chinese literature for his research work. His writings can be accessed at the publication China View on the Substack Application. The author can be reached at **@newreck** on X.

Notes:-

[1] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Compilation of Correspondence Between China and India on the Question of Relations Between the Two Countries in the Tibet Region of China, the Sino-Indian Boundary Question and Other Questions: August 1950—April 1960," pp. 172-175

[2] Ibid., pp. 176-179.

[3] Dai Bingguo, *Strategic Dialogue: Reminiscences of Dai Bingguo* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016), p. 279.

[4] Ibid., p. 281.

[5] Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2016), p. 21.

[6] Ananth Krishnan, *India's China Challenge*: A Journey Through China's Rise and What it Means for India (New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2020), p. 282.