

India, China and the Depsang Valley quagmire

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2013/07/10/india-china-and-the-depsang-valley-quagmire/

2013-7-10

LSE's **Raj Verma** deconstructs the Depsang Valley border conflict between India and China in April and its implications for bilateral relations between the rising Asian powers.

India and China have a longstanding border dispute dating back to the 1950s. This led to a brief border war in 1962 in which India was defeated as well as several armed skirmishes between the two countries in the 1970s and '80s. However, President Xi Jinping's presidency might offer an opportunity to address this dispute—on coming to power in March 2013, he suggested that the boundary conflict could be resolved in the medium to long term. Subsequently, at the BRICS summit in Durban, President Xi stated that the dispute needs to be resolved as soon as possible.



Despite these public statements, tensions between the two countries surfaced in April this year when China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) transgressed 19 kilometres into Indian territory in the Depsang Valley. Chinese soldiers pitched tents for three weeks inside Indian-claimed areas in eastern Ladakh. To date, the Chinese government has not provided an explanation for the offensive action by the PLA. The dust seems to have settled and the countries achieved an amicable solution without resulting in a conflagration as in the past. According to a mutual agreement, the PLA retreated from the Valley and India announced that its military would not patrol the area or construct bunkers there.

The Depsang crisis transpired a month before Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's state visit to India in May raising many questions. Analysts and foreign policy experts offered various explanations for the timing of this border transgression, including domestic constraints on China's foreign policy, bureaucratic politics involving disparate actors, and differences in hard power between India and China. The timing of the incident is particularly confounding given that Chinese economic growth has considerably slowed in the financial year 2012-13 – especially in the last two quarters due to a fall in exports to the United States and European Union – and China is trying to restructure its economy with a new focus on the BRICS. Premier Li's visit to India should be seen in this context.

Some analysts aver that the Depsang episode is much ado about nothing. They argue that the border has not been properly demarcated and since both countries lay claim to the territory, the PLA's presence does not violate Indian sovereignty.

Others argue that the PLA wanted to embarrass the Chinese leadership following President Xi's announcement of military reforms—these reforms prohibited the top brass from throwing expensive banquets and mandated that they spend at least two weeks with troops, sharing their rations among others. Along similar lines, some analysts suggested that the PLA orchestrated the border transgression in order to make a case for increasing the defence budget.

However, there are many voices arguing that the Chinese government orchestrated the event for one of several – often contradictory – reasons. Some say China triggered the dispute in order to make it the focus of Premier Li’s visit and to signal its willingness to settle the issue. Others aver that the Chinese government ordered the PLA to enter the Depsang Valley to gain further legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese people and feed off the rising nationalism within China. China-bashers, meanwhile, argued that the Depsang incident was yet another instance of China flexing its muscle and seeking to embarrass the Indian government without having any intention of resolving the boundary issue.

It is too early to identify the correct explanation for the Depsang episode. After all, different explanations continue to be provided for the Indo-China border war in 1962: Indian analysts believe that Prime Minister Nehru’s ‘forward policy’ led to the war while scholars like [William C. Wohlforth](#) posit that it was the failure of the Great Leap Forward that forced Chairman Mao to start the war with India in order to restore legitimacy for his rule.

Whatever the reasoning, the Depsang episode raises questions for India regarding China’s intentions and its foreign policy decision-making process, particularly as the two countries recently held [the sixteenth round of border talks](#) to build confidence building measures to settle the border dispute. It also highlights that China is not a monolith, and that there is chaos behind the order—clearly, multiple factors, including domestic constraints, bureaucratic politics, and competing centres of power, influence and constrain decision-making in China. Going forward, India should be aware that there are numerous factors and actors that can put a spanner in the wheel when it comes to seeking an amicable solution to the Depsang Valley quagmire.

On the other hand, if the Chinese government does not want to resolve the border dispute and is merely biding time, India can expect more cross-border incursions. Owing to this possibility, the Indian government should be cautious and take all the necessary measures on the diplomatic and military front to protect its territorial integrity.

In the second scenario, relations between the two Asian giants and rising powers will continue to be characterised by ‘hot economics and cold politics’ or ‘co-optation’, that is, economic cooperation and political and military confrontation. The past will repeat itself and the relations will be marred by distrust, estrangement, conflict and containment. This does not augur well not only for India and China but also for the Asia-Pacific region as a whole.

About the Author

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