

SINO-INDIAN RELATIONS: TIBET IS THE KEY

BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY

The increasingly complex relationship between the Asian giants China and India is exacerbating long-standing territorial disputes, which may ultimately be defused only through a resolution of the Tibet question.

The recent Sino-Indian spat over India's Arunachal Pradesh state triggered by the Chinese ambassador's pronouncement in November 2006¹ has brought home the truth about the core of the India-China divide. That issue is Tibet, and unless a resolution is found, the chasm between the two demographic titans will not be bridged.

Beijing's claim to Arunachal Pradesh, or more specifically, to its Tawang district, stems from Tibet's putative historical or ecclesiastical ties with Arunachal. Tibet thus lies at the heart of the dispute. To focus on Arunachal or even Tawang is not only to miss the wood for the trees, but also to play into the hands of China's attempts at incremental territorial annexation. Having gobbled up Tibet, the historical buffer between the Indian and Chinese civilizations, Beijing now lays claim to Indian territories, not on the basis of any purported Han connection to them, but because of supposed Tibetan Buddhist ecclesiastical influence. A good analogy to China's expansionist territorial demands was Saddam Hussein's claim, following his 1990 invasion of Kuwait, to areas in Saudi Arabia on the basis of alleged Kuwaiti links to them.

Another reminder that Tibet remains the central issue was the recent shooting by Chinese border guards of unarmed Tibetans fleeing to India via Nepal through the 5,800-meter-high Nangpa-La Pass.² There have been instances in the past of Tibetans being shot at by the paramilitary People's Armed Police or the People's Liberation Army at border crossings, but this was the first such incident captured on film and shown across the world on television and the Internet.

Beijing, having wrung the concessions it desired from India on Tibet, is now publicly presenting Arunachal as an outstanding issue that demands "give and take," cleverly putting the onus on India to achieve progress in the border negotiations. Lest the message be missed, New Delhi is being especially exhorted to make concessions on Tawang—a critical corridor

between Lhasa and the Assam Valley of immense military import.

The choice before India now is stark: either to retreat to a defensive, unviable negotiating position where it has to fend off Chinese territorial demands centred on Arunachal, or to take the Chinese bull by the horns and question the very legitimacy of Beijing's right to make territorial jurisdiction claims on behalf of Tibetan Buddhism when China has yet to make peace with the Tibetans.

Neither option augurs well for the border talks, already the longest between any two nations in modern history. A quarter-century of border diplomacy has yielded no concrete progress on an overall settlement, nor has it removed the ambiguities plaguing the 4,057-kilometer frontline; Beijing has not even fulfilled its 2001 promise for an exchange of maps of each country's versions of the eastern and western sectors by the end of 2002.

The subtle and measured revival of Tibet as an unresolved issue will arm India with international leverage on any Chinese effort to dam the Brahmaputra River and reroute its waters. With water likely to emerge as a major security-related issue in southern Asia in the years ahead, India can hardly ignore the fact that the Indus, Sutlej and Brahmaputra originate in occupied Tibet.³

Beijing's new hardline focus on Arunachal/Tawang is

Tawang, located in northwestern Arunachal Pradesh, borders the Line of Actual Control between India and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) under PRC rule. Traditionally inhabited by the Monpa (Monba) ethnic group as part of the Mon kingdom, Tawang had historically close ties with Tibet, and most of its residents are Tibetan Buddhist by religion. The sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso (1683–1706), an ethnic Monpa, was born there. Tawang is south of the much-maligned McMahon Line that was established in 1914 as the Indo-Tibetan border. India asserted its administrative control over Tawang only in 1951, after China annexed Tibet. In 1962, during the Sino-Indian War, Chinese troops occupied Tawang for a time before withdrawing voluntarily, and the territory reverted to Indian control. However, China continues to claim Tawang as part of the TAR's Cona County.



Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (center) with monks at the Tawang Monastery during a visit in October 2002. Photo: Reuters

apparent not only from its failure to accept the Indian proposal for a new round of border talks prior to President Hu Jintao's India visit, but also from Chinese Ambassador Sun Yuxi's extraordinary remarks on Indian soil that an entire Indian state belongs to his country. It is highly unusual for an envoy not only to make bellicose remarks, but also to do so on the eve of his president's visit, unmindful of roiling the atmosphere.

Ambassador Sun followed up his statement with an interview to an Indian wire service a couple of days later during which he insisted that Arunachal was "a disputed area" and demanded that India agree to "mutual compromises" and "some give and take" in relation to that state. The Chinese foreign ministry has made no effort to contradict the statements of its ambassador, but has repeated its now-familiar slogan—"a solution that is fair, rational and acceptable"—even as it blocks progress in the border talks.

Imperceptive or tactless statements or actions can hardly advance any country's interests, but Communist China, being a closed system, has a tradition of acting in ways unfavorable to its own long-term interests. One recent example is its condoning of anti-Japan mob protests in April 2005, which has made Tokyo more determined than ever not to allow Beijing to call the shots in East Asia. Likewise, China's brassy assertiveness on Arunachal Pradesh will only reinforce India's resolve not to cede further ground to China. Indian officials take an oath of office pledging to "uphold the sovereignty and integrity of India," and it is unthinkable that any Indian government would gift Tawang to China. As Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee has already put it, "Every inch of Arunachal is part of India."

That Tawang is a Monpa, not Tibetan, area is a conclusion that British surveyors Bailey and Moreshead painstakingly reached, leading Henry McMahon to draw his famous red line to Tawang's north on the Survey of India map-sheets. Earlier at Simla in October 1913, the British Indian government and

Tibet, represented by McMahon and Lonchen Shatra respectively, reached agreement on defining the frontier at that meeting. The Chinese delegate at the Simla Conference was not invited to this discussion because all parties at that time, including China, recognized Tibet's sovereign authority to negotiate its boundary with India. Even Ivan Chen's map presented at the Simla Conference clearly showed Tawang as part of India.

An ecclesiastical relationship cannot by itself signify political control of one territory over another. In any case, China forcibly incorporated two other regions where Tibet exercised undisputed ecclesiastical jurisdiction and political control—

Amdo (the birthplace of the present Dalai Lama) and Kham—into the Han provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan. Before claiming Tawang as part of Tibet, China should first be required to restore Amdo and Kham to Tibet.

Instead, a disturbing pattern of belligerent Chinese statements is emerging without apparent provocation. For example, a diplomat-cum-senior researcher at a Chinese foreign ministry-run think-tank recently suggested that India kick out the Dalai Lama if it wished to build "real and sustainable" relations with Beijing. In an interview with an Indian newspaper, Zheng Ruixiang of the China Institute of International Studies said, "The Tibet problem is a major obstacle in the normalization of relations between India and China. India made a mistake in the 1950s by welcoming the Dalai Lama when he fled Tibet. It is now time for correcting the past mistake and building a real and sustainable relationship with China."⁴

The pattern suggests that under the hardliner Hu Jintao, who made his name in the Chinese Communist Party by ruthlessly quelling the 1989 anti-China protests in Lhasa with martial law, Beijing may be striving to adopt a more forthright stance vis-à-vis India on issues such as the border disputes and the presence of the Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India. Having consolidated his hold on power in the past year, Hu has begun suppressing dissent at home, strengthening the military and shaping a more nationalistic foreign policy. Hu may believe his regime can exert more strategic pressure on India, now that the railway to Tibet has been built and Pakistan's Chinese-funded Gwadar port-cum-naval base is likely to be opened in the near future.⁵

China's resurrection of the past and highlighting of bilateral disputes in public should provide an opportunity for India to re-evaluate its policy and add more subtlety and litheness to its stance of unilaterally accommodating China on Tibet and other issues. India needs to first grasp the damage to its China policy

caused by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who as prime minister acquiesced to Chinese demands both on Tibet and the border talks during his visit to Beijing in 2003.⁶ He signed a document formally recognizing Tibet to be “part of the People’s Republic of China,” and agreed to a new framework of border talks focused on an elusive “package” settlement that effectively rewarded Beijing for its breach of promise to fully define the frontline through an exchange of maps.

China may have ceased its cartographic aggression on Sikkim through its maps, but the important point, often overlooked, is that it has yet to expressly acknowledge that Sikkim is part of India. While it now makes India accept in every bilateral communiqué the Vajpayee formulation that Tibet is “part of the People’s Republic of China,” Beijing has to date declined to affirm, either unilaterally or in a joint statement with New Delhi, that Sikkim is part of the Republic of India. Sikkim was never an issue in Sino-Indian relations until Vajpayee made it one. He then ingeniously flaunted the Chinese “concession” on Sikkim as a cover to justify his kowtow on Tibet.⁷

Tibet is India’s trump card, yet Vajpayee capriciously surrendered it to gain a dubious concession on Sikkim, over which China has never claimed sovereignty, but has simply depicted as an independent kingdom on its official maps. An Indian concession on Tibet could only be justified in the context of making Beijing give up its claims on Indian territories, formalize the present borders and reach a deal with the Dalai Lama to bring him home from exile.

When China annexed Tibet, India not only surrendered its extra-territorial rights over that buffer, but also signed a pact in 1954—the infamous “Panchsheel Agreement”—accepting Chinese sovereignty over Tibet without seeking any quid pro quo, not even the Chinese recognition of the then existing Indo-Tibetan border. That monumental folly stripped India of leverage and encouraged the Chinese Communists to lay claims to Indian territories on the basis of Tibet’s alleged historical links with those areas.

The Panchsheel accord recorded India’s agreement to fully withdraw within six months its “military escorts now stationed at Yatung and Gyantse” in the “Tibet Region of China,” and also to “hand over to the Government of China at a reasonable price the postal, telegraph and public telephone services together with their equipment operated by the Government of India in Tibet Region of China.”

If India still has any card against Beijing, it is the Dalai Lama, who by maintaining a base in Dharamsala has become a great strategic asset for India. The Tibetans in Tibet will neither side with China against India nor accept Chinese rule over their homeland. If, following the death of the present 71-year-old Dalai Lama, Beijing were to take control of the institution of the Dalai Lama (in the way it has anointed its own Panchen Lama), India will be poorer by several army divisions against China.

The only way India can build counter-leverage against Beijing is to quietly reopen the issue of China’s annexation of Tibet and Beijing’s failure to grant the autonomy promised to Tibetans in the 17-point agreement it imposed on Tibet in 1951. This can be done by India in a way that is neither provocative nor confrontational, and that recognizes that

building a mutually beneficial relationship with China does not demand appeasement on India’s part.

India can start by diplomatically making the point that China’s own security and well-being will be enhanced if it reaches out to Tibetans and grants genuine autonomy to Tibet through a deal that allows the Dalai Lama to return from his exile in Dharamsala. If the Chinese ambassador to India can publicly demand “mutual compromises” on Arunachal—a statement portrayed by the Indian press as an attempt to “play down” his unabashed claim on Arunachal—is it too much to expect the new Indian ambassador in Beijing to genially appeal to China’s own self-interest and suggest it pursue “mutual compromises” with the Tibetans on Tibet?

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NOTES

1. Chinese ambassador Sun Yuxi publicly reiterated Beijing’s claim to Arunachal Pradesh shortly before Chinese President Hu Jintao’s visit to India in November 2006. See “Arunachal Pradesh is our territory: Chinese envoy,” *Rediff India Abroad*, November 14, 2006, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/nov/14china.htm>; and Seema Guha, “China claims Arunachal Pradesh as ‘Chinese territory,’” *DNA World*, November 13, 2006, <http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=1063888/>.
2. For a detailed examination of this incident, see “The Death of Kelsang Namtso,” *China Rights Forum*, No. 4, 2007, http://hrichina.org/public/PDFs/CRF.4.2006/CRF-2006-4_Kelsang-Namtso.pdf.
3. For more on the water resource issue and its international implications, see Wang Weilluo, “Water Resources and the Sino-Indian Strategic Partnership,” *China Rights Forum*, No. 1, 2006, http://hrichina.org/public/PDFs/CRF.1.2006/CRF-2006-1_Water.pdf.
4. See Saibal Dasgupta, “India should dissolve Dalai Lama’s govt: Beijing think-tank,” *The Times of India*, January 9, 2007, posted at <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=14685&t=1&c=1>.
5. Pakistani authorities were reportedly keen for Hu to visit Gwadar during his visit to Pakistan, and to inaugurate the commercial port, which was built with Chinese assistance, but the trip was ruled out for security reasons due to tensions in the region. In addition, some construction projects are not expected to be completed until April 2007. For the strategic role of the Gwadar port, see B. Raman, “Hu’s Visit to Pakistan: Mixed Results,” *South Asia Analysis Group, China Monitor*, Paper No. 4, December 3, 2006, <http://www.saag.org/%5Cpapers21%5Cpaper2048.html>.
6. Vajpayee was Prime Minister of India briefly in 1996, and then again from March 1998 until May 2004.
7. Sikkim, formerly an independent kingdom bordering Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan as well as India, became India’s twenty-second state in 1975 through a popular referendum. China and India agreed on the opening of trading posts on the Sikkim-Tibet border in the first-ever Sino-Indian joint declaration, signed in June 2003. While the joint declaration was initially expected to include precise formulations on the status of Sikkim and Tibet, India’s acknowledgement of Tibet as part of China was not matched by an explicit Chinese recognition of Sikkim as part of India. See M.K. Razdan, “Agreement on trade through Sikkim,” *The Tribune* (Chandigarh, India), June 23, 2003, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030624/main1.htm>; Harvey Stockwin, “India and China, Repeating Old Habits,” *The Jamestown Foundation, China Brief*, Volume 3, Issue 15, July 29, 2003, http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=19&issue_id=680&article_id=4755.