China: Succinctly broadening the border issue with India

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Sun, 09/29/2013 - 04:24

Paper No: 5570 Dated 29-Sep-2013

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Media heat is yet to start over Indian prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh’s visit to China in late October. A prime ministerial visit cannot rest on mere dialogue and photo opportunities. This will be Dr. Singh’s last visit to China as prime minister of India. He will at least sign the bilateral “Border Management Agreement” (BMA) a Chinese proposal to start with but reportedly reconstructed with Indian inputs.

Little or nothing is known to the Indian public about the contents of the BMA. The people and political parties will be looking towards what the prime minister bequeathes to the nation on the very critical India-China border issue through the BMA. It would be recalled that during his visit to China in 2003 Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had signed off on Tibet as per China’s demand, hoping China will do so on the Sikkim issue on reciprocity. But that was not to happen. The Chinese did not sign any agreement to accept Sikkim as a sovereign territory of India. In 2005, the Chinese showed one map to their Indian counter parts with Sikkim as part of Indian territory. But this was the only map of the kind the Indians had seen. Soon after, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman stated in Beijing that the “Sikkim issue” will be resolved along with the “boundary issue”. In plain language, India was tricked. From the Chinese point of view, it was negotiated on the basis of equality. This is also correct.

It boils down to the determination of each side concerned and superior tactics. It involves periodic pressure and periodic friendliness; bursts of aggressive propaganda followed by tactical silence; denial and deception; finally indirectly demonstrating immense military power to make the other party step back and consider. Recently, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi remarked at a South East Asian conference that it was a fact that China was “big” and the others were “small”. He did not have to elaborate any further. China’s detailing of its growing military might to counter the US, the world’s only super power, reinforced Wang Yi’s message. Where bilateral issues, especially on territory are
concerned, China has ditched its old policy of putting them away. Now with massive economic and military strength Beijing is not going to put territorial issues in cold storage and behave like an angler catching a fish with a fishing rod.

Since the April 2013 BRICS conference in South Africa where prime minister Manmohan Singh met Chinese president Xi Jinping, China has stepped up its psychological war on India regarding the border issue. President Xi gave a message to their official news agency Xinhua that he would like to see India and China work for an early solution to the border. New Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s first visit to India was scheduled for May 22. Great expectation was created. But it was suddenly discovered that a battalion plus Chinese soldiers had pitched tents in India controlled Depsung Valley along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western sector of the India-China border. Next came Chinese intrusion in Chumar destroying cameras and surveillance equipment of Indian soldiers. India decided to compromise in both cases.

After a lapse of some weeks, the Chinese official English language daily, the Global Times (Sept. 08) told India how to deal with border issues. The article titled “Provocative border posts add to tension”, takes a swipe at the Indian media for already creating unnecessary controversies. Apart from things which are generally written in the Chinese media on the subject, this article suggests two options Indians are debating to counter Chinese military pressure. One is building a strong navy to interdict Chinese trade routes through the Indian Ocean, especially its energy import line. The other Indian option it mentions is building strong military and solid infrastructure along the border and airforce, capable of a strong counter attack in the event of an armed conflict.

A third issue that bothered the writer of this article, Liu Zongyi, research fellow at the prestigious Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), is the Indian plan to create 35 new border posts as reported in the Indian media. Here, Liu Zongyi issues a veiled warning. He writes the LAC (in the eastern sector) is located north of the MacMahon line, and the new posts to be established by India may cross the line, triggering a tense situation.

In fact, Mr. Liu warns “Indians with insight and vision” to understand that establishing these posts would be akin to prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s “forward policy”, which he claims was “responsible for the China-India border war of 1962”.

The Chinese authorities do not recognize the MacMahon Line, drawn by the British. Yet, they agree to the perception that the LAC runs approximately along the Mac Mahon Line. But another question put by the Chinese side in the past is that the ‘illegal” Mac Mahon Line is a broad line, drawn, but not accurately, because of the relative underdeveloped state of cartography in 1914.

The article raises a number of issues as well as consequences packed almost as briefing points. Writings in the Chinese media cannot be compared to the free media in India and other democratic countries. The Chinese media is party and state controlled as enshrined constitutionally. In the last several months the party has repeated more than once that the media serves the party, which is supreme in China. Editors and journalists who transgressed this line have paid dearly.
It is, therefore, fair to conclude that this article and previous articles on this line are dictated by the communist party of China. Particularly, the *Global Times* which is a subsidiary of the *People’s Daily*, the party’s official mouthpiece. Hence, the contents of the article are to be taken seriously by the Indian government, and the people of India of which the Indian media is a representative.

A deeper look at Mr. Liu Zhongyi’s article will reveal that Beijing is concerned over the Indian decision to try and strengthen it border defense and does not fall in the category of “forward policy”. Having well established its military infrastructure along the India-China border to a level of “offensive action” it wants to restrict India’s defensive capability. It is known that the Chinese military has constructed “sand models” or practice/training replicas of the Indian territory in the western sector to prepare for an offensive if required. Across this sector, certain activities of the Chinese armed forces suggest possible deployment of missiles.

Beyond the above, the article insinuates that India is considering, or there are thoughts in India, on interdicting Chinese trade through the Indian Ocean and deploying massive ground forces and air power along the border. This is actually a strategic exercise ongoing in China but put on India’s shoulders.

All things taken together the article suggests a veiled message from Beijing that India must acknowledge China’s big power status which is rapidly moving to a super power status, and defer to China’s positions. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh may like to consider these ideas before visiting China.

Apart from direct India-China border issue, questions are being raised by Russian and Asian strategists about China’s quest to regain territory. The Russian’s feel that in spite of the Russia-China border agreement, Beijing may raise old claims and call the current agreement unequal when it is strong enough to do so. This is not an idle thought but goes up to Kremlin.

In South East Asian and East Asian countries like the Philippines, Vietnam and Japan are wondering when China will occupy disputed territories by force. Under these conditions, Taiwan may be overrun by China sooner than expected.

That should wake up India to Mao Zedong’s claim from Ladakh to Sikkim, part of Bhutan and Arunanchal Pradesh.

Worrying thoughts indeed, but nothing will help if Indian foreign minister says publicly that he would like to live in China.

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