



## **BORDER DEFENCE COOPERATION AGREEMENT: A NEW BEGINNING?**

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There are ample positive signs to believe that just concluded high-level Indian leadership visit to Beijing was one of the most successful exchanges happened between India and China in the recent past. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was on a three-day State Visit to Beijing from October 22-24, 2013. Given that the last Indian high level leadership visit to Beijing by the then Indian President Pratibha Patil took place in 2010, Dr. Singh's visit attaches greater importance to India-China bilateral ties. It is noteworthy that it was after 59 years that the exchange of visits by the Indian Prime Minister and Chinese Premier occurred in the same calendar year. Last time, it was in 1954 when Zhou Enlai and Jawaharlal Nehru exchanged visits in the same year which led to the signing of the landmark *Panchsheel* (Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence) Agreement.

Notwithstanding the prevailed skepticism about Dr. Singh's visit in the different sections of the society, the visit has undoubtedly proven to be a stepping stone in India-China bilateral relations just before the end of the UPA II term. Unlike, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's Visit to India in May 2013, Dr. Singh's visit was not overshadowed by any unfortunate incident. A month before Keqiang's maiden visit to India, Chinese troop penetrated 19 km inside Indian side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and established tents for three weeks in India's Depsang Valley. Apparently, the transgression by Chinese side had generated debates of being at peace with China vis-à-vis half-a-century old border dispute.

The significance of the visit lies in the fact that it took place at the time when China just witnessed its once-a-decade leadership transition; whereas, this was, most probably,

Dr. Singh's last official visit to Beijing before his term as Indian Prime Minister expires in 2014. Apparently, his visit was important in re-exploring vistas that would rectify India's equation with China in many spheres. All in all, nine agreements were inked between India and China including Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) and MoU on strengthening cooperation on Trans-border Rivers on October 23, 2013. One of the main purposes of the visit was also to promote Chinese investments in India. Agreements for cooperation in road transports and highways, power equipment service centres in India and for establishing sister city relationships between Delhi-Beijing and Bangalore and Chengdu and Kolkata and Kunming were also signed.<sup>i</sup> As expected, no agreement on visa liberalisation between India and China was signed. This was a reiteration of India's stance against the Chinese claim over Indian Territory of Arunachal Pradesh and its issuing of stapled visas to the citizens of Arunachal Pradesh.

Amongst all the agreements that were inked during Dr. Singh's Beijing visit, conceivably, the most important and talked about the document is the BDCA. Needless to say that Dr. Singh's visit was successful enough to touch upon the most prolonged issue hindering the relations by inking the BDCA. Signing of the BDCA is propitious to maintain the status quo by addressing future flare-ups along the border. It is no hidden fact that there is a lack of coordination and understanding between Indian and Chinese armies. The full implementation of the BDCA would ensure maximum self-restraint from both Indian and Chinese armies and prevention of tailing of each others' patrol along the LAC. It is imperative to the stability of India-China relations as the pact has the potential to manage the day-to-day differences along the border without the high-level intervention in the matter.

Though the current arrangement is built on 1993, 1996 and 2005 agreements; however, unlike the 1993 'peace and tranquility' agreement which for the first time suggested 'no use of force' by both sides or the 1996 Confidence Building Measures in the military agreement which specified the interactions between border personnel of the two countries, the current BDCA suggested the possibility of 'establishing a Hotline between the military headquarters in all the sectors, initiating 'small scale tactical exercises along the LAC' and 'joint military training exercises' along the 4,000 km long India-China border.<sup>ii</sup>

This much needed initiative was largely seen as a consequence of April-May 2013 Chinese intrusion into India's Depsang Valley and perceived as a reconciliatory measure towards differences stemming from contradictory perceptions of India-China border. Highlighting on the importance of maintaining peace and tranquility on the India-China border, Dr. Singh stated that the BDCA will strengthen maintenance of stability on the border.<sup>iii</sup> He further stated that peace and tranquility on India-China borders must remain the foundation for growth in the India-China relationship which would be the strategic benchmark for both.<sup>iv</sup> Noting their burgeoning cooperation at almost all internal fora, the signing of the BDCA was timely and crucial for India and China. There are immense possibilities that the progress on the border issue, which had been stalled for long, will be rejuvenated through this agreement.

The just-concluded India-China Summit and for that matter Keqiang's visit to India in May 2013 show that both countries figure prominently in each other's foreign policy calculations. While the BDCA is a major milestone in India-China relations; it is, no way, an assurance of the border dispute resolution. In fact, there are enough evidences indicating towards intractability of India-China border dispute. The signing of the agreement does not mean that incidents like Depsang incursions won't occur again in future. There are no guarantees. Undeniably, the protracted border dispute still looms large over India-China relations. Nonetheless, positive developments should not be overlooked and more importantly, India-China bilateral relations should not only be seen through the prism of boundary question. Given that New Delhi and Beijing are endeavouring to at least maintain status quo at the border by adopting pragmatic approach, it can be articulated with conviction that the pact, which helps curtailing provocative actions by either side, is indeed a step towards realising their mutual aspirations by minimising tension in border areas.

*(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 Air Power Studies CAPS)*

### **End Notes:**

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<sup>i</sup> "India China Pact to Avoid Skirmishes, No Visa Power as New Delhi Refuses to Sign Agreement", *The Economic Times*, October 24, 2013, at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and->

nation/india-china-pact-to-avoid-skirmishes-no-visa-power-as-new-delhi-refuses-to-sign-agreement/articleshow/24628670.cms (accessed on October 24, 2013).

ii Srikanth Kondapalli, "Can Chinese be Trusted This Time", *Rediff*, October 24, 2013, at <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/slide-show-1-can-the-chinese-be-trusted-this-time/20131024.htm> (accessed on October 24, 2013).

iii For details, please see *Joint Statement- A Vision for Future Development of India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership*, October 23, 2013, at <http://www.pmindia.nic.in/press-details.php?nodeid=1736> (accessed on October 23, 2013).

iv For details, please see, "Prime Minister's Statement to Media after Delegation Level Talks with the Chinese Premier", October 23, 2013, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?22365/Prime+Ministers+statement+to+media+after+delegation+level+talks+with+the+Chinese> (accessed on October 23, 2013).

