



17TH ROUND OF INDIA-CHINA BORDER NEGOTIATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS FOR INDIA

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Chinese New Year began on a positive note for India- China bilateral relations. Commemorating the 60th anniversary of the *Panchsheel* Agreement in 2014 and then designating it as the “Year of Friendly Exchanges” are good enough reasons for both countries to celebrate their bonhomie. Seemingly, both countries are moving towards alienating their differences. For instance, most constructive development this year is the launch of the 17th round of border negotiations. Along with border talks, both countries are endeavouring to strengthen their defence cooperation as their annual defence dialogue is scheduled to be held on February 24.

India and China held the fifth meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs early this month. It was accompanied by a two-day border talk at the Special Representatives level in New Delhi on 10-11 February 2014. National Security Advisor, Shiv Shankar Menon and Chinese State Councilor, Yang Jiechi inaugurated the Year of Friendly Exchanges and presided over the first major event of the year between India and China. As per the statement issued at the end of the meeting, “the talks reviewed recent developments in the India-China border areas especially in the Western Sector. Additionally, implementation of the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA), additional confidence building measures and further steps for maintaining peace and tranquility were also discussed”.ⁱ

Evidently, the main agenda behind the talks were to review the military standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and check the implementation of the BDCA which was signed

during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Beijing in October 2013. The agreement was, by and large, the repercussion of the military standoff between India and China in April-May 2013. A month before Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang's maiden visit to India, Chinese troop penetrated 19 km inside the Indian side of the 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.ⁱⁱ However, the unfortunate event did not derail the relations and later, BDCA was seen as a reconciliatory measure.

Noting that this is the 17th round of border talk in 11 years, it can be seen as a way of opening avenues for dialogues from both sides. A number of reasons can be cited for such a change in India-China equation. First, burgeoning economic cooperation has become a determining factor in India-China relations. They are jointly working on the BCIM economic corridor and the Silk Road economic belt. Clearly, both sides do not want any long-standing issue to overshadow their economic relations. However, it is noteworthy that huge trade imbalance favouring China is still a bone of contention for India. Second, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's presence in India last month has visibly made Chinese uneasy. China and Japan are at loggerheads with each other vis-à-vis the East China Sea dispute. One may argue that, at the moment, China seeks to engage India by underplaying the border card to focus on a bigger adversary, i.e., Japan. Finally, the US President, Barack Obama is scheduled to visit South Korea, Japan, Malaysia and the Philippines in April. The US tries to establish its foothold in the Asia-Pacific region through its 'Pivot' to Asia. Seemingly, the US reinvigorated interest in the region makes the Chinese

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leadership a bit insecure. At the regional level, it can be inferred that, China is countering the US 'Pivot' to Asia by maintaining effective relations with India and other countries of the region.

Anyhow, China and India are still not moving towards resolving their prolonged border dispute. While India-China border negotiations are still going on and both sides have numerous reasons to go for border settlement, the talks are not yielding constructive results. However, it may be noted that predicting the timeline for India-China border settlement is not possible at the moment; such moves actually help to ease tension between India and China. Given that India-China border dispute resolution is a long-term process; at present, what India needs to do is to adopt a more pragmatic approach to resolve the long-standing border issue. In order to have stable relations, the focus should be more on enhancing strategic mutual trust.

(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)

ⁱ For details, see, "5th Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs" February 10, 2014, at <http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/22852> (accessed on February 10, 2014).

ⁱⁱ For more details on BDCA, see, Sana Hashmi, "Border Defence Cooperation Agreement: A New Beginning?", *In Focus*, October 29, 2013, at http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS_Infocus_SH3.pdf (accessed on October 29, 2013).