



RIPPLES OF UNRESOLVED BORDER DISPUTE BETWEEN INDIA-CHINA: VISA ROWS

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India and China have a long pending unresolved border dispute which causes unfolding of certain events where inhabitants of the disputed region find themselves at the receiving end. This is evidently reflected in the recent incident where young two archers belonging to Arunachal Pradesh helplessly missed the opportunity to participate in youth championships in Wuxi, in the southern Chinese province of Jiangsu. They were prevented from boarding flight to Guangzhou by immigration officials as they were carrying stapled visas on separate paper unlike the normal stamped visas on an individual's passport.ⁱ The point made was the people of Arunachal cannot visit China on an Indian passport. While Arunachal chief minister raised stern voice against such move from Chinese embassy, External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid described incident as perplexed issue that has happened before and been resolved sometimes through diplomatic means and sometimes just by the passage of time. China responded that the issue stapled visas was a flexible move pending resolution of the boundary dispute. Further added that China's position on the east end of the boundary between China and India is consistent and clear cut.ⁱⁱ

The real issue lies at conflicting claims by the concerned parties. India regards Arunachal Pradesh as integral part of India where as China calls Arunachal as Southern Tibet hence part of its territory. Having considered Arunachal as disputed region, China had a stated policy prior 2010 that it would not issue visas to Arunachal residents on the

reasoning that since it regard the state as its territory, residents do not need visas to travel to China. However there was a shift in its policy as it has started issuing stapled visas since 2010. This move had been perceived as relaxing stance on Beijing's part by few analyst while few regarded such move as diluting its earlier stance of not issuing any type of visa.

There is an overwhelming perception that such incidents are neither last nor first. Recalling some of the past incidents, the stapled visa dispute was touched off in 2010 when China insisted that it could only issue a separate-page, "stapled" visa to Indian Lt. Gen. B. S. Jaswal, commander of India's Northern Command. Gen. Jaswal's command includes the disputed Jammu and Kashmir regions, and the general was preparing to attend a meeting in China. China had been issuing stapled visas to Indian citizens who reside in the disputed region since at least 2008. But in the words of one specialist on Indian diplomacy, "India said 'enough is enough'" when Beijing attempted to apply this procedure to a general of the Indian army, and Delhi broke off military-to-military ties, however it was restored after eight months. Although the stapled-visa incident lasted only about eight months, it acted as set back to important mechanisms such as military-to-military ties, which are designed to ease India-China security relations.ⁱⁱⁱ It clearly demonstrates the potential of stapled visa policies impacting one of the highest levels of bilateral mechanisms.

In 2011, two sports officials who were issued stapled visas were stopped at immigration in New Delhi and were unable to attend a weightlifting tournament. And a Karate team from the State was prevented from boarding a flight in New Delhi because its members had been issued stapled visas by the Chinese Embassy. In year 2012 a high-profile visit by a 100-member youth delegation, under an initiative to promote youth exchanges championed by the then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, was surrounded by some controversy after a student from Arunachal Pradesh had to drop out at the last minute. The student had been issued a stapled visa by the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi. Apart from numerous stapled visa issues, India and China were locked up in a dispute over maps last year with Beijing depicting Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as its territories in its new e-passports. In response, New Delhi has started issuing visas with India's map stamped on

the visa stickers, including both Arunachal and Aksai Chin. ^{iv} These are essentially repercussions of unresolved border dispute between two sovereign states.

The recent incident with the Arunachal Pradesh archers may be seen from another Chinese angle. Whenever a major meeting between top Indian and Chinese leaders takes place the Chinese cause an incident. Recent examples include the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) intrusion in Depsang valley ahead of new Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's maiden visit to New Delhi, from where he went to Pakistan and reaffirmed nuclear cooperation. Such incidents have happened before also. The Chinese message is "clear and consistent", as the Chinese would say. It is for the Indian side to see and read. The message is irrespective of a spurt in bilateral trade, cooperation in the WTO and Climate change, Chinese territorial claims have not receded to a position of amicable compromise. In fact, the claim lines are expanding especially in the western sector of the borders.^v Affirming to above mentioned pattern, the timing of this stapled visa incident is crucial as it occurred some days prior to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's scheduled visit to China starting from 22nd October at the invitation of Premier Li Keqiang who had visited India in May this year. It is important to analyse, what do these irritants emanating from China ahead of any significant bilateral meeting between India and China implies and especially what kind of message is China signaling to India.

In the light of these diplomatic rows, it brings out a fact that amidst political understanding at the highest level of leadership, which strives to build and substantiate a strategic and cooperative partnership, the reality of a bitter boundary dispute on the ground (with extant legacies of a bitter conflict half a century ago), which every now and then cracks open a deeply hostile and suspicious vein within the strategic and policymaking elite in both countries.^{vi} . Even though it is unlikely that such incidents would have a significant adverse impact on bilateral relations but these issues cannot be utterly sidelined because these moves from either side signal to its counterpart about their uncompromising stance or seriousness. There is no denying in the fact that China has grown more affirmative and aggressive with regard to its border claims displaying strong arm tactics on the border taking into consideration numerous instances of border

incursions from China's side. About the recent stapled visa issue damage has been done where people of disputed area being victims. China's stapled visa issue has been raised by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's three day visit to China recently, though the details of discussions have not been revealed. However some sort of solution oriented mechanism seems to be in the pipeline given both India and China's willingness towards visa simplification. India's decision not to go ahead with memorandum of understanding on further simplifying visa procedure during the Prime Minister's visit to China in the light of China's stapled visas to Arunachals was a right move from India's side. It would be interesting to observe in the future whether China would cease issuing stapled visa to Arunachals like it did towards people of Jammu & Kashmir in the past, appears remote or will there be continuation of stapled visa.

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End Notes:

ⁱ Arunachal archers detained at airport for stapled Chinese visa http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-10-10/others/42899337_1_archers-arunachal-pradesh-gunjan-abrol

ⁱⁱ China defends move to issue stapled visas to Indian archers http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-10-14/others/43025663_1_stapled-visas-archers-boundary-issue

ⁱⁱⁱ Murray Scot Tanner and others, "Distracted Antagonists, wary partners: China and India assess their security relations, CNA China Studies.

^{iv} Shubhajit Roy, "India, China in passport, map row again." <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/india-china-in-passport-map-row-again/1035633/>

^v Bhaskar Roy, China continues to quick-step India-Analysis, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/17102013-china-continues-quick-step-india-analysis/>

^{vi} Alka Acharya, "The strategic Stasis in the India-China Relationship", EPW, June 2013, Vol XLVIII Nos 26 & 27.