

India-China talks: why soft border is not an option

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The Special Representatives (SR) talks between India and China on February 11, 2014, the seventeenth in the series that commenced in 2003, to find a political settlement to the boundary dispute yet again failed to come out with a resolution. Increasingly, the meetings have boiled down to merely “management” of the border rather than resolution. While the talks at the political level have not seen any breakthrough, the two governments have opted for a vigorous trans-border economic cooperation as instanced in the BCIM corridor that had its first meeting in December 2013 in China.

Apparently, such trans-border economic cooperation seems to complement the border dispute resolution mechanisms. However, such mechanisms leading to the creation of soft borders, which some experts strongly urge for, will not make the borders irrelevant. In fact, soft border is neither an option nor a means to resolve the India-China border dispute. This is because of the differing rationale underlining the soft borders in China.

Quite notably, China is pursuing its soft border strategy in the underdeveloped regions of the Yunnan province. The province falls under the rubric of the Western Development Strategy (*Xibu Da Kaifu*) launched in 1999 to spread development and prosperity to the Western and Southwestern regions of China. The Yunnan province had been on the margins of economic development that ushered in the eastern coastal region post the 1978 reform under Deng Xiaoping. Evidently, the urgency for reform in the Western and Southern regions featured only when the Chinese government saw the linkage between underdevelopment and ethnic unrest. In fact, China is surrounded by a minority-dominated periphery in its north, west and southwest forming a crescent that constitutes 63.72 percent of China’s landmass. Explicably, the periphery is vulnerable not merely because of underdevelopment and associated ethnic unrest but more so, it abuts India with 3500 kilometers of disputed boundary.

For China, the periphery presents a security challenge. It has therefore, responded by initiating security-oriented strategy. The Western Development Strategy (WDS) that was devised to close the gaps of regional disparity essentially underscores the idea of defence through development envisioned in Deng’s notion of economic development culminating to political integration. In fact, the WDS is a manifestation of the classic Chinese security

paradigm of *neiluan-waibuan*, meaning internal chaos would invite external invasion. The significance of *neiluan-waibuan* could be gauged from the fact that the developed coastal region of China comprising 41 per cent of the population covered 14 per cent of land while the underdeveloped Western region comprising 28.1 per cent of the population covered a huge 71.4 per cent of China's land mass. Significantly, security of the core is dependent on the security of the periphery. The WDS has, thus, been envisaged to erase poverty and bring the periphery at par with the core.

Given the logic of defence through development, China has entered into several sub-regional mechanisms like the BCIM, Greater Mekong Programme and others. These sub-regional initiatives have apparently achieved two major foreign policy objectives. One, through development and growth the sub-regions have spurred greater economic interdependence. Two, this has also necessitated a good-neighbourly policy that would support internal growth and stability. Thus, the creation of soft border emanates from this security paradigm. In other words, soft border in the Chinese parlance is not limited to the liberal notions of economic interdependence and harmony but primarily geared to *realpolitik* and that the defence of the periphery could only be ensured through development of the periphery.

This notion of defence through development is rooted in the Chinese ancient strategy of periphery consolidation right from the Han dynasty (206 BCE) that devised a model for frontier development. Of course, a sense of a clearly demarcated boundary was absent in the pre-modern times where states like India and China were civilizational entities rather than nation states. Nevertheless, the idea of periphery and the need to define and defend it has been integral to Chinese security policy right from the imperial times. This essentialization of the periphery has principally evolved from the political notion of the state unlike India where the state has been understood from a cultural prism. China claims Tawang on the basis of the birth of the sixth Dalai Lama and seeks to territorialize it. While India does not claim Mansarowar from China, the abode of the Hindu God, Lord Shiva and where every year Indians seek Chinese visa for pilgrimage. Despite India's rightful claim on Mansarowar, it does not even table the issue while China's claim on Tawang is not only historically invalid but doubly faulty as its claim is based on the claim on Tibet. Nonetheless, this indicates not just China's *lebensraum* but more specifically its strategic culture where periphery and borders have always mattered, irrespective of historicity, legality and cultural specificities. In the modern era, owing to the century of humiliation that the West had inflicted on China in the post-Opium War, strategic culture has fused with Chinese nationalism and borders have acquired a sacred national mission.

In Chinese conceptualization where borders are innately strategic frontiers, the idea of soft border is a misnomer. India should keep a distinction between the notions of soft border and boundary resolution. Certainly, soft borders would "advance multi-modal connectivity, harness the economic complementarities, promote investment and trade and facilitate

people-to-people contacts” it is not going to make borders irrelevant and also not going to resolve the vexed boundary question. India, therefore, should focus on soft borders from the same realpolitik premise of internal consolidation of the underdeveloped northeastern states that are critical to its Look East Policy. To resolve the disputed border, it should speak from the position of strength by focusing squarely on roads and infrastructure development and military modernization.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.