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# THE SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE: WHAT ROLE FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?

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# The Sino-Indian Border Dispute: What role for the European Union?

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## Abstract

*Although India and China are experiencing ever-increasing levels of economic interdependence, their political relationship remains frosty, due, in large part, to the Sino-Indian border conflict. With its roots in the British Raj, their disputed boundary is a constant source of tension, not only due to the frequent incursions and incidents, but also the military infrastructure development being undertaken by both parties in the border regions, which aggravates relations. Tibet plays an important role in their inability to delineate the border, because it is a region with enormous strategic significance. This has created an obstacle to cooperation, as a result of Chinese insecurity over its control in the region, and a confused Indian policy, involving recognition of Chinese sovereignty in Tibet, but also moral and material support to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. The Tibet issue has also provided incentives for India, and particularly China, to prolong the territorial dispute as leverage over the other. However, an end to the Sino-Tibetan conflict would not guarantee the resolution of the border dispute due to the broader factors in the Sino-Indian relationship which create deep-rooted distrust and suspicion. These include their regional rivalry and their postcolonial attitudes to foreign policy. Ultimately, the border dispute will only be resolved when this is overcome. The European Union (EU) can play a role in this, by using its weight as a normative actor to encourage Sino-Indian cooperation, and improve the dynamic of the relationship to help mitigate the security dilemma and eventually resolve the border dispute.*

This paper expresses the views of the author and not the views of the European Institute for Asian Studies.

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## 1. Introduction

The Asian economic and political landscape today is increasingly shaped by the so-called 'Asian Giants' India and China. These vast nations not only boast ancient civilisations, but both once dominated global trade and commerce. Although recent years have seen increasing economic interdependence, and efforts to advance their bilateral diplomatic engagement, since regaining their independence from colonial powers, the Sino-Indian relationship has been far from smooth. One of the greatest barriers to sincere cooperation between the two giants has been the border dispute, which remains unresolved to this day.

The fact that the border dispute continues to simmer is puzzling, in light of the fact that China has been able to resolve disputes with Afghanistan, Mongolia, Burma, Nepal, North Korea, and Russia, often at a disadvantage. Particularly frustrating for India is China's settlement of its dispute with Burma on the basis of the very same McMahon Line which it refuses to accept in its dispute with India.[2]

It is ostensibly in both Chinese and Indian national interests to resolve their conflict; for their part, the Indians are concerned that the continued territorial conflict would provide a *casus belli* for China to launch a war on India, thus, as part of its rapprochement with China, India aims to resolve the border dispute.[3] From the Chinese point of view, the deepening of the strategic partnership between India and the US, as well as the continued growth of the Indian economy, has meant that India is fast becoming a real regional power. One way of preventing an Indo-US partnership, or even an Indo-Japanese agreement, would be to improve relations with India by settling the territorial dispute.[4]

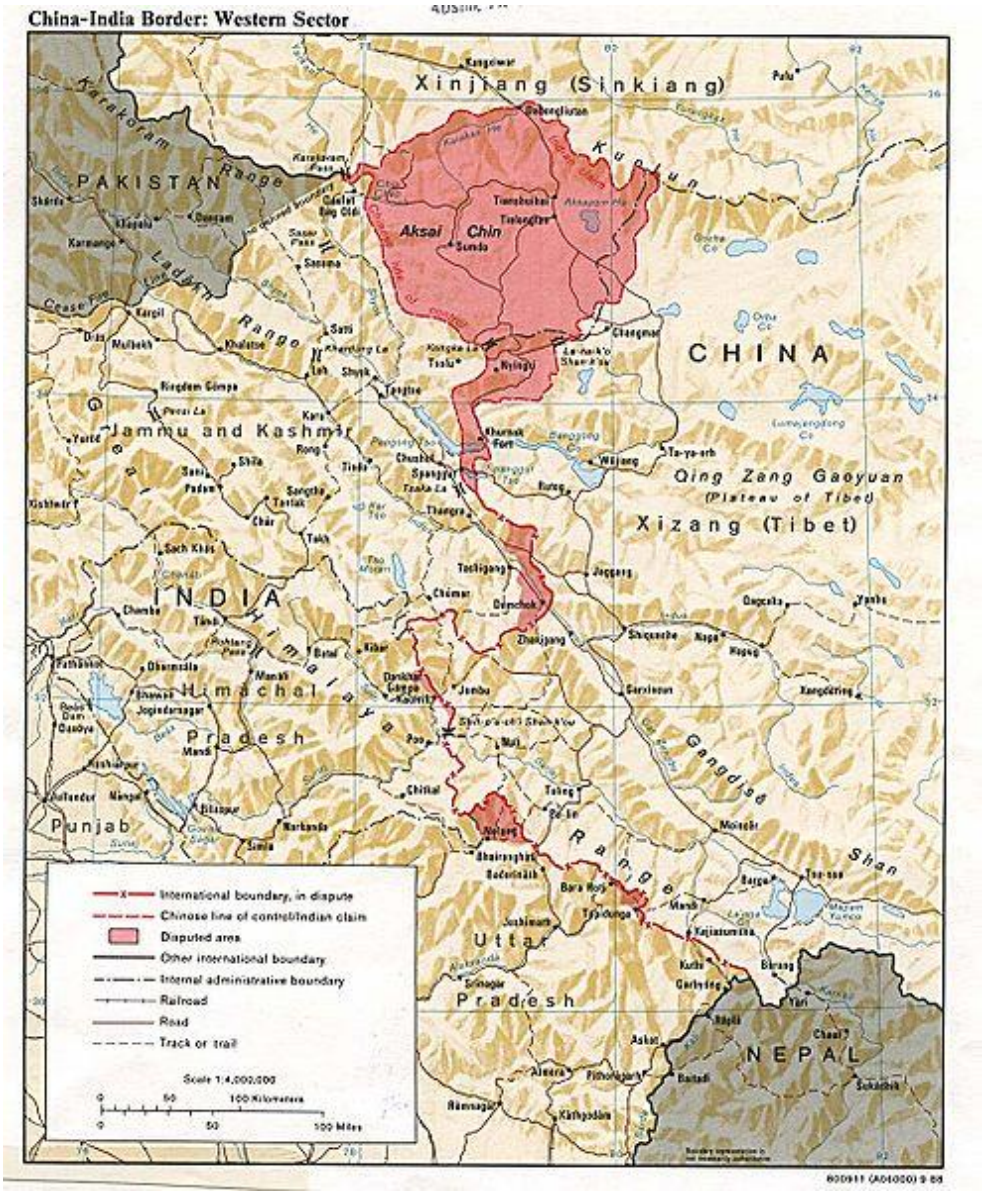
However, despite the large number of agreements, summits, and confidence-building measures, the border dispute endures because it has never been tackled at its root.[5] Growing economic interdependence has not neutralised the military security dilemma that still exists between India and China, making it difficult for either side to make concessions. The Sino-Tibetan conflict is crucial in this respect because it provokes the nationalistic, great-power sentiments within the Indian and Chinese leadership. The issue of Tibet not only presents an obstacle to the resolution of the dispute, but as a strategically crucial region, it also provides the incentive for both China and India to perpetuate the border dispute in order to maintain an element of leverage over each other. Nevertheless, it does not follow that a resolution of the Tibet issue would lead to a border agreement, because at its heart, the conflict is based on mutual distrust and suspicion, and a fiercely protective view of sovereignty. The broader factors at play within the Sino-Indian relationship – such as their designs for regional power, and their nascent rivalry in the Indian Ocean – foster this distrust and complicate the resolution of the conflict.

[2] Topgyal, T. (2011). Charting the Tibet Issue in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute, *China Report* 47(2), p. 115.
[3] Garver, JW. (2011). The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation, *China Report* 47(2) p. 100.
[4] Garver, *The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation*, p. 101.
[5] Holslag, J. (2010). *China and India: Prospects for Peace* Columbia University Press, p. 1.

## 2. Historical background

There are two main disputed borders between India and China. One is at Aksai Chin, administered by the Chinese, but claimed by India as part of the Ladakh district of Jammu and Kashmir.

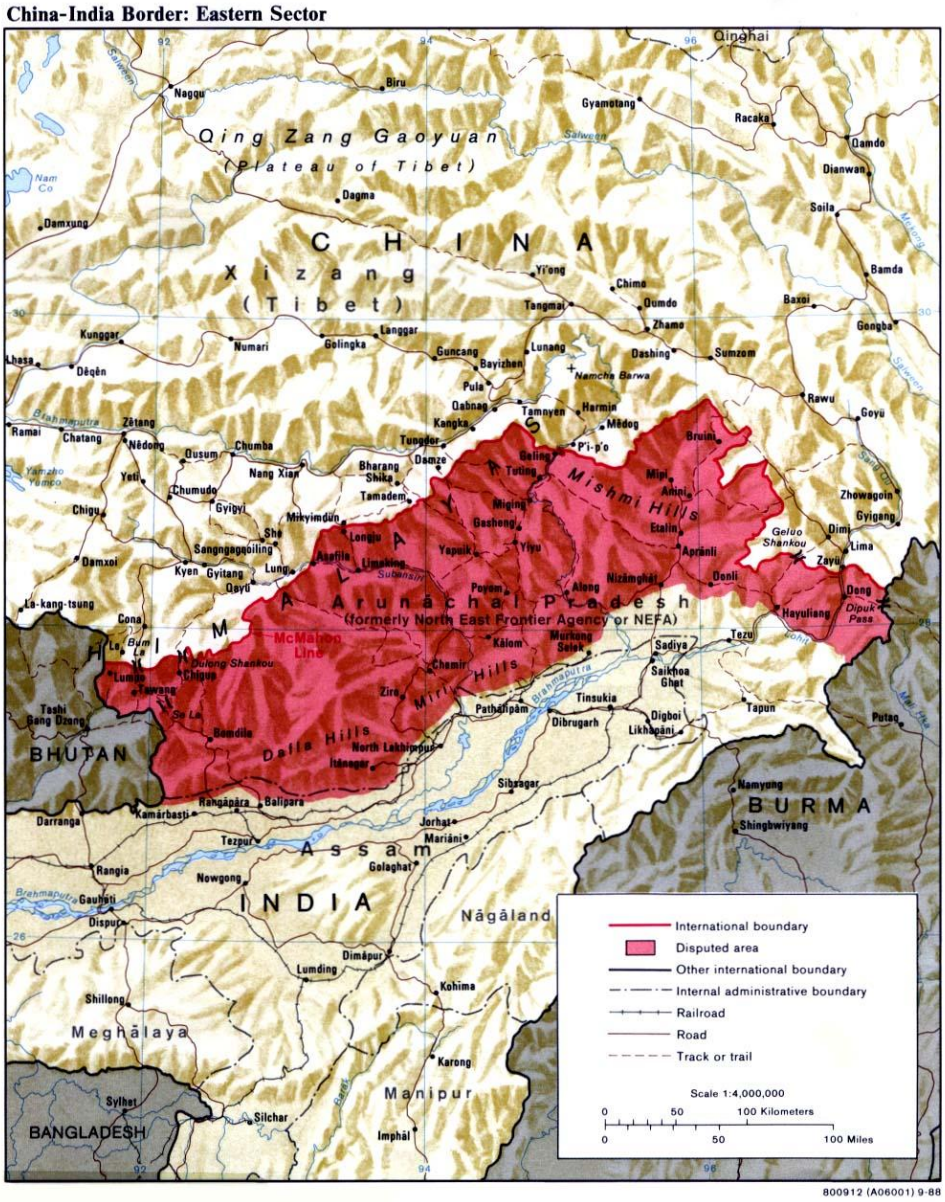
*Image 1: Map of Aksai Chin – western sector of disputed Sino-Indian border.*[6]




[6] Wikimedia Commons. (2005). *China India Western Border 88.* Retrieved from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_India_western_border_88.jpg.

The second, more contentious disputed border is the McMahon Line, which is considered a legal national boundary by India, but is not recognised by China. The boundary, between the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet is hotly debated due to the added controversy of the status of Tibet.

*Image 2: Map of Arunachal Pradesh – eastern sector of disputed Sino-Indian border.*[7]




The McMahon Line was negotiated between Great Britain and Tibet at the Shimla Conference 1913-1914, and was named after the chief negotiator, Sir Henry McMahon. Although Chinese representatives were present at the conference, they refused to sign or recognise the accords, on the basis that Tibet was under Chinese jurisdiction, and therefore did not have the power to conclude treaties. This has been the official Chinese position ever since.

[7] Wikimedia Commons. (2007). Central Intelligence Agency, *China India Eastern Border 88.* Retrieved from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_India_eastern_border_88.jpg.

Indian independence was followed by a brief period of cordial relations, which quickly turned sour in the midst of Nehru's inexperienced foreign policy decision-making, and Mao's weakened domestic position after the failed Great Leap Forward. Tensions between the nations escalated, and finally erupted into a Sino-Indian war in 1962, in both Aksai Chin and along the McMahon Line. The conflict lasted a mere thirty days, and was a national humiliation for India. It resulted in the demarcation of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which is the effective boundary between India and China. Despite the fact that Arunachal Pradesh is controlled by India, and China unilaterally withdrew to the McMahon Line following the 1962 war, thus implicitly recognising its legitimacy, China has still refused to officially accept the boundary, and Arunachal Pradesh remains a disputed territory.

While neither party has attempted a sequel to the 1962 war, tensions and occasional violence on the border have continued to this day.

## 3. Activity on the disputed border

### 3.1. Border incursions[8]

There has been no large-scale military activity on the border since 1991, however repeated incidents and incursions have continued to aggravate the Sino-Indian relationship.[9] In the last decade, Chinese activity on the border has been fairly aggressive, including arresting an Indian intelligence team miles inside the Indian border, and firing unprovoked on Indian military positions.[10]

Over the last five years, the Chinese military has regularly crossed over the Line of Actual Control.[11] As a result, India has begun stepping up its patrols, and developing infrastructure along the border. According to the Indian government, the Chinese made 400 incursions into Indian territory in 2012.[12] Usually, when detected, the troops return to their side of the border. However, in April 2013, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) refused to cross the border, instead pitching three tents on the Indian side. After New Delhi protested, the Chinese soldiers pitched two more tents, and erected a sign saying "You are in [*sic*] Chinese side". Meanwhile, the Chinese Foreign Ministry denied that troops had even crossed the border, affirming its opposition to the crossing of the LAC. [13]

Although the troops ultimately withdrew in May, eliciting little comment from or within China, the timing of this bizarre incident was puzzling. Sino-Indian relations were improving, and in light of Beijing's tense ties with Tokyo, a strained relationship with Pyongyang, and cyber-espionage antics with Washington, antagonising New Delhi was a

[8] It should be noted that the majority of reports on incursions come from the Indian side. It is unclear whether this is because China simply does not report them, or whether the Indian incursions into China are infrequent.
[9] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 123.
[10] Singh, N. (2012). How to Tame Your Dragon: An Evaluation of India's Foreign Policy Toward China, *India Review*, 11(3), p. 146.
[11] Ratner, E. and Sullivan, A. (2013, May 4). The Most Dangerous Border in the World. *Foreign Policy.* Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/03/china_india_most_dangerous_border#sthash.0FOp5UM3.dpbs.
[12] Ratner and Sullivan, The Most Dangerous Border in the World.
[13] Ratner and Sullivan, The Most Dangerous Border in the World.

seemingly inexplicable course of action.[14] This might suggest that the troops had acted independently without orders from above.

Tensions flared up again in October 2013, when two Indian athletes from the disputed state of Arunachal Pradesh were blocked from travelling to China. The problem arose because China refuses to stamp visas in the passports of people from disputed territories, and instead staples them. This is an infuriating practice because even Chinese airlines, like the one being used by the athletes, often reject such visas. Although China released a statement expressing regret over the incident, Indian politicians were furious.[15]

These incursions and incidents are usually relatively inoffensive, and do not provoke strong reaction from the Indian government. Although this helps to keep tensions to a minimum, the Indian foreign policy establishment has drawn criticism from the Indian media for failing to react to these incidents.[16] For example, China objected to infrastructure work in the Ladakh region, and PLA soldiers frequently entered Indian territory and forced villagers to stop work on canals, roads, and even bus shelters. The response from the Indian government was to put a stop to infrastructure projects in the region, thus giving China the upper hand.[17]

### 3.2. Military infrastructure development

Although the number of troops at the border has decreased, this does not necessarily constitute an overall demilitarisation of the border. In China, the military facilities at Chengdu and Lanzhou were significantly modernised, and the troops present in these regions represent 20 percent of China's total military manpower.[18] Overall, China has been building up its military units in Tibet, to improve their rapid reaction capabilities, and has also engaged in counterterrorism operations near the LAC, one of which included the participation of Pakistan. While this is not specifically aimed at India, a potential conflict with India remains a central concern for these units.[19]

On the Indian side, the divisions deployed in the northeast were chronically overstretched, having to deal in particular with the insurgency in Kashmir and the Naxalite uprising. This left India with a reduced capacity for dealing with a potential threat from China. This concern has led to a military build-up on the Indian side, with an increase in manpower for the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, reinforcement for the capabilities of the Eastern Air Command, and expanded air bases.[20] This is targeted specifically at the growing Chinese military capabilities in Tibet and southern China.[21]

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[14] Jaishankar, D. (2013, May 8). The Great Sino-Indian Alpine Tent Party of 2013. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/08/china_india_border_dispute_tent_party_2013#sthash.DZh0EVmF.dpbs.

[15] Reuters. (2013, October 14). *China Regrets Block on Indian Athletes' Travel but Defends Border Stand*. Retrieved from http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/10/14/china-india-athletes-visa-idINDEE99D06X20131014.

[16] Singh, *How to Tame Your Dragon: An Evaluation of India's Foreign Policy Toward China*, p. 154.

[17] Singh, *How to Tame Your Dragon: An Evaluation of India's Foreign Policy Toward China*, p. 154.

[18] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 125.

[19] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 126.

[20] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 127.

[21] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 128.

### 3.3. Diplomatic engagement

The first real breakthrough in Sino-Indian border relations came in 2003, with the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China, when India agreed to consider the 'Tibetan Autonomous Region' as part of the territory of China, if China reciprocated with Sikkim, and agreed to open cross border trade through the state.[22] Since then there have been a series of agreements and confidence-building measures, culminating in the signing of the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) in October 2013.

The agreement was signed during current Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's meeting in Beijing with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, where the two leaders were able to sign the BDCA in the hopes of expanding confidence-building measures in order to reduce border tensions.[23] The agreement includes setting up channels of communication between the two military commands (a hotline between senior officers), increasing meetings between border personnel, and instituting rules such as no tailing of patrols, in order to build trust.

Although the agreement will be useful in preventing minor incidents from escalating, it is not comprehensive. For a start, it does not include provisions for infrastructure development and expansion, which is the main source of tension on the border. More importantly, it does not address the root of the conflict, which is the mutual distrust shared by the Chinese and Indians. The trust deficit in the Sino-Indian relationship makes it very difficult to actually resolve the border issue.[24] Because they don't trust each other's intentions, both sides continue to develop their infrastructure and capabilities in the area. This facilitates border incidents and incursions, for example, by making it easier for soldiers to take action without orders from above. Increased border incidents are then highlighted by the news media and politicians, which not only increases tensions between the populations, it also makes it more difficult for political leaders to make concessions and negotiate a viable settlement.[25] Thus, while the BDCA is an admirable attempt to manage the problem, it is unlikely to affect the ultimate resolution of the conflict.

## 4. The role of Tibet

Tibet plays an important role in the border dispute, because the opposing Chinese and Indian national narratives of the political status of Tibet are a constant source of friction in the Sino-Indian relationship.[26] This presents an obstacle to Sino-Indian cooperation, because of general Chinese sensitivity to any ambiguities over the status of Tibet, exacerbated by certain Indian actions, such as allowing the Dalai Lama to reside in India. Furthermore, Tibet provides incentives for both parties to be intransigent in border negotiations, perhaps China more than India, due to its enormous strategic value, thus making a resolution of the border dispute unlikely.

[22] Singh, *How to Tame Your Dragon: An Evaluation of India's Foreign Policy Toward China*, p. 149.
[23] Krishnan, A. (2013, November 1). China Opens New Highway near Arunachal Pradesh Border. *The Hindu.* Retrieved from http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/china-opens-new-highway-near-arunachal-pradesh-border/article5302068.ece.
[24] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 128.
[25] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 129.
[26] Garver, *The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation*, p. 101.

## 4.1. Strategic importance of Tibet

The region holds such a central role in the border dispute because, due to its location in the middle of two Asian giants, Tibet is a perfect candidate for great power wrangling. One of the foremost causes of conflict between regional rivals is the pursuit of buffer zones. The pre-eminent fear that the Chinese have when it comes to Tibetan autonomy or independence, is that in case of a Sino-Indian war, Tibet would be forced to ally itself with either India or China, and the natural choice would be India, due to the political ties between India and the Tibetan government-in-exile. Thus, in the eventuality of an armed conflict, India, through Tibet, would be barely 100km from central China and Sichuan province. From the Tibetan plateau, India could attack all of China. Therefore Tibet is vital to China as a buffer zone.[27] This is an equally valid fear for India, particularly considering the network of airstrips and airbases that China has built throughout the Tibetan plateau, right up to the Indian, Nepali, and Pakistani borders. Through Tibet, China also controls access to the Brahmaputra, a crucial source of water for India. This features heavily in Indian security calculations. India also fears a possible Chinese intervention in future armed conflict with Pakistan, particularly in light of Pakistan's deepening ties with China.[28]

## 4.2. Obstacle to Sino-Indian cooperation

The most important challenge that Tibet presents is Chinese insecurity about the stability of the region, and its concern that India will try and get involved. While India formerly only accepted Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, with Vajpayee's 2003 visit to Beijing, it changed its position to accepting the 'Tibet Autonomous Region' as part of Chinese territory. However, the Indian position signals to China that it accepts Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, only insofar as Tibet is granted autonomy. This is unacceptable to the Chinese, who demand a less ambiguous recognition of their sovereignty over the region.[29]

The Chinese are concerned that India will be tempted to intervene in Tibet to alter the status quo. This is exacerbated by the fact that India has allowed the Tibetans taking refuge in the country to run a government-in-exile, and even provided material assistance for its projects.[30] This is extremely threatening to the Chinese, who believe that as long as there is a strong exiled Tibetan community, separatism will continue. Moreover, the presence of the Dalai Lama and a strong community of Tibetan exiles in India means that, in Chinese eyes, India remains the hub of Tibetan separatism, which is considered an interference in Chinese internal affairs.[31] Most of all, the Chinese fear that India will cooperate with the United States (US) to overthrow Chinese rule in Tibet.[32]

Cooperation and communication on this issue is hampered by the fact that India has not really formulated a Tibet policy, oscillating between realism and moralism. On the one hand, it accepts its defensive limitations compared with China, and does not want to provoke a border conflict. On the other hand, it cannot bring itself to suspend support for

[27] Topgyal, *Charting the Tibet Issue in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute*, p. 119.
[28] Garver, JW. (2002). The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations, *India Review*, 1(4), p. 2.
[29] Topgyal, *Charting the Tibet Issue in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute*, p. 118.
[30] Topgyal, *Charting the Tibet Issue in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute*, p. 118.
[31] Topgyal, *Charting the Tibet Issue in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute*, p. 118.
[32] Garver, JW. (2002). The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations, *India Review*, 1(4), p. 6.

Tibetan exiles and the Dalai Lama. As a result, Tibet is a constant source of friction in India-China relations.

### 4.3. Incentives for intransigence

Perhaps more importantly, Tibet provides incentives for both the Indians and Chinese to pursue an intransigent stance in negotiations, in order to perpetuate the border conflict. From the Indian perspective, if India were to accept the LAC as the legal, national border, this would be a binding acceptance of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. In this case, it is likely that India would have to withdraw support for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile. If the Dalai Lama were forced to return to Tibet, he would come under pressure to support the Chinese government. However, while he remains in exile in India, he, and other leading Tibetans, lend support to the Indian government, thus conferring it greater legitimacy, particularly on the international stage.

However, it is clear that the Chinese have much greater incentive to perpetuate the conflict, and there is much more evidence for Chinese diplomatic intransigence than Indian. By continuing the border dispute, China always has leverage over India, and has available pressure points if they are needed.[33] It can keep India preoccupied with security issues on the border, so that it is unable to contemplate taking a more active role in Tibet. This is evident by the fact that in 1960, Chinese leaders offered India a deal; India relinquishes Aksai Chin, and in return, China would withdraw from the eastern sector. Then Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, rejected this offer. As pointed out by Zhou Enlai at the time, the deal was optimal because it secured the national interests of both parties. By gaining Aksai Chin, China would be able to secure its lines of communication with Tibet, while India would be able to fortify its defences in the eastern Himalayas, and thus improve its ability to protect its north-eastern frontier.[34] However, in 1985, the Chinese reversed their position, and insisted that India make concessions in the eastern sector. This is unacceptable to Indian security interests, thus making a border resolution much more difficult, if not impossible. Zhou's logic was just as applicable in 1985 as it was in 1960, thus indicating that in reversing their position, the Chinese leaders did in fact want to deliberately complicate the resolution of the border dispute.[35] China remains wary of Indian intentions on their shared border, and thus finds it expedient to maintain leverage over India in the form of the territorial dispute, in order to deter any Indian designs on the Tibet region.[36]

Therefore, the strategic importance of Tibet has not only provided obstacles to effective Sino-Indian cooperation, it has also provided incentives for prolonging the border dispute. Nevertheless, while Tibet is a crucial factor, it is not a decisive one, and is merely symptomatic of a deep sense of distrust and suspicion in Sino-Indian relations which would complicate the resolution of the border dispute even in the absence of the Tibet issue.

[33] Singh, *How to Tame Your Dragon: An Evaluation of India's Foreign Policy Toward China*, p. 147.
[34] Garver, *The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation*, p. 110.
[35] Garver, *The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation*, p. 110.
[36] Garver, *The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation*, p. 112.

## 5. Broader Factors in the Sino-Indian Relationship

There are broader factors at play in the Sino-Indian relationship which foster distrust between the two, making it difficult for them to cooperate on political and security matters, in spite of their growing trade and economic interdependence.

### 5.1. Regional Rivalry

Perception plays an important part in the Sino-Indian dynamic. Each side projects malign and aggressive intentions on the other, which may not always be the case.[37] As a result, regional authority becomes a zero sum game, and the two nations compete to extend their spheres of influence among their neighbouring states. India has traditionally considered the South Asia and Indian Ocean region to be its sphere of influence. Thus, recent Chinese efforts to foster links in this area have been considered a threat to Indian security.[38] The Indians are particularly suspicious of Chinese assistance to Pakistan's military, and military-industrial capabilities, such as the construction of a deep water port at Gwadar. Indeed, it is in Chinese national interests to maintain a strong and hostile Pakistan, because it keeps India distracted. With a hostile Pakistan to the west, India is unlikely to pursue aggressive policies towards China.

The Indians are also wary of the Chinese outreach to Burma, growing involvement in the Burmese transport and maritime sectors, and increased PLA activity in the Indian Ocean, such as ship visits and the establishment of electronic intelligence facilities.[39] China has also been pursuing closer military ties with Bangladesh. Many Indian analysts interpret this as a Chinese 'encirclement' of India. While others are less willing to attribute hostile intentions to their neighbour, there is no doubt that increased Chinese influence in these regions would impinge on India's sphere of influence, and tilt the regional balance of power in China's favour. Thus, it becomes necessary for India to counter Chinese moves.[40]

From the Chinese perspective, its activities in the Indian Ocean are of a defensive nature. China is highly reliant on oil that is shipped through the Strait of Malacca, and if, for whatever reason, the Strait were blocked, China would encounter a severe energy security problem.[41] India could conceivably block the Strait by deploying its military assets from the Andaman and Nicobar Command. India has also managed to secure cooperation from island states in the Indian Ocean such as the Seychelles, Mauritius, the Maldives, and Madagascar.[42] Thus, Chinese actions in the Indian Ocean could be a pre-emptive strategy to protect itself against future Indian aggression.

In this context, prolonging the border dispute is in Chinese interests because with India preoccupied with tensions at the border, it is less able to project its power regionally and internationally. If their territories were to be officially delineated, this would free India to concentrate on consolidating its regional influence, and more importantly, continuing its naval build-up in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, the border dispute serves India's purpose by preventing China from giving full attention to its 'string-of-pearls' strategy of

[37] Garver, *The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations*, p. 4.
[38] Garver, *The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations*, p. 5.
[39] Garver, *The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations*, p. 5.
[40] Garver, *The Security Dilemma in Sino-Indian Relations*, p. 5.
[41] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 136.
[42] Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace*, p. 130.

encircling India. Their regional rivalry demonstrates that even without the added burden of the Tibet issue, there is enough distrust in the Sino-Indian relationship to prevent meaningful cooperation towards resolving the border dispute.

### 5.2. Postcolonial attitudes to foreign policy

The resolution of the conflict is further complicated by the postcolonial undercurrents to national decision-making in the foreign policy establishments of India and China. Both their approaches to the border dispute, and indeed their foreign policies in general, are founded on an underlying sense of victimisation. The Chinese are intent on regaining their former influence in Asia, which was curtailed by foreign meddling during their 'Century of Humiliation'. During this time, China's territorial control had shrunk by a third, its ancient imperial system collapsed, and the country descended into civil conflict.[43] Similarly, the Indians do not forget their colonial past, with the exploitation and destruction of their advanced textile industry, the brutal suppression of rebellions, and the instigation of communal tensions which ultimately led to the partition of India.

Rather than finding solidarity in their shared experiences, this traumatic history has led to the solidification of fiercely nationalistic attitudes, and both countries are determined to protect their hard-won sovereignty.[44] Indeed, this sense of victimisation has impeded cooperation on the border dispute in a very tangible way, as a recent study demonstrated that throughout the immediate postcolonial era, meetings between Indian and Chinese leaders were characterised by repeated arguments over who suffered most from Western interference. Each party felt that its suffering was greater, and thus had a sense of entitlement with regards to the border dispute, expecting the opposite party to make greater concessions.[45] Both India and China see their claimed territories as not only strategically advantageous, but also historically significant, and their mutual intransigence leads them to view each other as a victimiser much in the same vein as the former colonial adversaries.[46]

In light of this, it might seem difficult, even inappropriate, for the European Union (EU) to become involved in the border dispute, due to the former colonial involvement of some member states in the region. In addition, the EU itself has many internal problems which curtail its effectiveness on the international stage, however, it could still play a role in solving the Sino-Indian border dispute.

## 6. The role of the European Union

Although the EU is pursuing a strategic partnership with both India and China, and while there is much dialogue and interaction, substantial gains do not seem to be materialising. This is because while the EU remains an important Asian trading partner, and plays a significant leadership role in climate change-related issues, it is not considered a serious political or security actor.[47] For example, one of the arguments to explain the relative stagnation in EU-India relations, compared to the progress in US-

[43] Kaufman, AA. (2010). The 'Century of Humiliation,' Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order, *Pacific Focus*, 25(1), p. 2.
[44] Garver, *The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation*, p. 103.
[45] Chatterjee Miller, M. (2009). Re-Collecting Empire: 'Victimhood' and the 1962 Sino-Indian War, *Asian Security*, 5(3), pp. 227–230.
[46] Chatterjee Miller, *Re-Collecting Empire: 'Victimhood' and the 1962 Sino-Indian War*, pp. 232, 233.
[47] Cameron, F. (2013). The Evolution of EU-Asia Relations: 2001-2011. In T. Christiansen, E. Kirchner, and PB. Murray (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan. p. 34.

India relations, is the fact that India has become an actor increasingly influenced by realpolitik and strategic considerations. In this sense, the US is much more useful than the EU, which has more weight as a normative actor.[48]

The EU-China partnership is also largely dominated by economic issues.[49] China is not prepared to engage too fully with the EU, because, following the underwhelming response to the US invasion of Iraq, and the uncertainties surrounding the Eurozone, the EU appears to be a less than promising international actor.[50] Nonetheless, there are several shared strategic interests in the Sino-European relationship, which could lead to a more realist relationship. This would allow the EU to begin acquiring real alternatives to soft power, and gain strategic weight in Asia.[51] However, this is obstructed by the EU's internal problems, and the fact that a cohesive, overarching EU foreign policy appears unlikely in the near future.

### 6.1. Internal difficulties

With its vast array of institutions and bureaucratic bodies, the EU does not possess the diplomatic, or decision-making capacity, to construct, communicate or implement clear strategies with bilateral partners, therefore, the US is seen as a much more important strategic and economic partner. For example, although in 2009 the EU was India's largest trading partner, the value of trade between the two is falling over time, as India looks to alternative markets. The Indian economy is growing three times faster than the EU's, and its demographic structure is also more conducive to future growth.[52]

One of the problems for the EU in playing a role in the Sino-Indian border dispute, is that it has limited leverage in South Asia, and thus India and China have little to gain from engaging strategically with the EU.[53] If the EU were able to present itself as a valuable ally to both India and China regarding their border issues, it would gain influence in the region while also helping to resolve a longstanding dispute.

Unfortunately, to do this, the EU itself first needs to define its strategic interests and objectives in the South Asia region, which is made extremely difficult by the multiplicity of interests represented by its member states. As always, there are problems with coordination and consensus – different member states do not necessarily agree on means and ends. In the case of the Sino-Indian border dispute, if the EU were able to clarify its interests in the region, and in particular its policy on Tibet, this would go a long way toward defining the European part in the region.

There is also the core issue – as when dealing with all EU matters – of clarity. The EU is a singularly unique entity, and its organisational structure is often unclear to external politicians and decision-makers. The hierarchy is complex, the processes are arduous, and it is not always obvious which office represents which arm of the bureaucracy. In particular, in order to play a bigger role in Asia, and more specifically in the India-China dispute, the EU needs to improve the effectiveness of its summit diplomacy by

[48] Aziz Wülbers, S. (2010). *The Paradox of EU-India Relations: Missed Opportunities in Politics, Economics, Development Cooperation, and Culture*. Lexington Books. p. 2.
[49] Holslag, J. (2011). The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49(2), p. 298.
[50] Holslag, *The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership*, p. 310.
[51] Holslag, *The Elusive Axis: Assessing the EU-China Strategic Partnership*, p. 294.
[52] Allen, D. (2013). The EU and India: Strategic Partners but Not a Strategic Partnership. In T. Christiansen, E. Kirchner, and PB. Murray (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU-Asia Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan. p. 582.
[53] Allen, The EU and India: Strategic Partners but Not a Strategic Partnership, p. 582.

streamlining the European External Action Service (EEAS), and also finding charismatic and efficient representatives in order to improve its public image abroad.

Despite its internal issues however, the EU has shown that it is capable of acting effectively on the international stage, for example in the area of trade. Thus, there is still scope for European action to have a positive impact on the Sino-Indian border dispute.

### 6.2. Potential for EU action

The deep-rooted distrust and suspicion in the Sino-Indian relationship is both a cause and consequence of the border dispute. Their cynicism over each other's motives makes it difficult for either party to make compromises, thus fomenting further suspicion, and perpetuating a vicious cycle.

Although it would be inappropriate for the EU to become directly involved with the border dispute, there are ways it can indirectly affect the issue, by encouraging greater levels of trust and cooperation in the Sino-Indian dynamic. Trade, in particular is a significant area, because this is the one policy matter in which the EU speaks with one voice. The European Commission has exclusive competence over common commercial policy, and the Commissioner has *de jure* and *de facto* recognition of their authority as the sole negotiator in trade matters, from both negotiating partners and the EU member states.

Trade is also an important aspect of the Sino-Indian border dispute, as a resolution of the conflict would significantly boost the amount of cross-border trade. The EU could use this to foster greater trust and cooperation between the Indians and Chinese, for example, through trilateral trade talks and summits.

There is also the potential for trilateral cooperation in areas of shared interest to help lay the foundation for a stronger Sino-Indian relationship, for example, anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean (particularly off the Somalian coast), joint ventures in Africa, and even joint scientific and research projects.

Thus, despite its various shortcomings as an international actor, the EU can take advantage of its strengths, and particularly its weight as a normative actor, in order to increase its value as an ally in Asia and encourage Sino-Indian cooperation in a variety of issues, as a step towards resolving the border conflict.

## 7. Conclusion

With the steady shift in global balance of power from West to East, it is increasingly important for the Asian giants to cooperate and coordinate their efforts, in order to achieve equitable, sustainable economic growth, and to fully exploit their international political weight. Although Sino-Indian economic interdependence continues to deepen, with both parties aiming to increase bilateral trade to USD 100 billion by 2015, the relationship is characterised more by competition than cooperation.

Although the Sino-Indian rivalry is often not as visible as Chinese competition with Japan and the US, it always simmers below the surface. Escalation in this dynamic would have implications across the continent, and could ignite tensions in the Indian Ocean, and

Central and Southeast Asia. It would also ultimately have a detrimental effect on economic growth in Asia, which would have global implications.[54]

The border dispute plays a significant part in provoking Sino-Indian tensions. There are frequent incursions and incidents in both eastern and western sectors, and the continued development of border military infrastructure by both sides has created a security dilemma, thus increasing the probability of further incidents, and decreasing the probability of a solution to the conflict. While the October 2013 BDCA introduces measures to help reduce tensions at the border, such as implementing a hotline between commanders, it merely represents an attempt at managing the problem, not resolving it.

In this sense, it is important to recognise the role of Tibet in perpetuating the border dispute. The region is strategically crucial, as it would give an enormous territorial and topological advantage to whichever side controlled it in the event of another Sino-Indian war. As a result, Tibet not only poses obstacles to Sino-Indian cooperation, due to Indian support for the Dalai Lama and Chinese insecurity over the status of the region, it also offers incentives to both India and China to prolong the border dispute, in order to have leverage over one another.

However, even if the Sino-Tibetan conflict were resolved, thus placating Chinese insecurity and dashing any Indian designs on the region, it is unlikely that a definite border agreement could be reached. This is because there are broader factors within the Sino-Indian dynamic which cultivate distrust and suspicion, thus preventing meaningful cooperation. One factor is their regional rivalry. By keeping India busy with the border dispute, China can prevent it from projecting its power regionally. Perhaps more important is the nascent Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indian Ocean; as both countries begin building up their navies, and China appears to be pursuing a string of pearls strategy, having leverage over one another in the form of the border dispute will become more important than ever. Particularly from the Chinese point of view, if the borders were to be finalised, then India could shift its attention to its naval build-up, thus increasing its ability to project power in the Indian Ocean, and jeopardise Chinese energy security. Similarly for the Indians, a border agreement would free the Chinese to accelerate their efforts at wooing states like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

The second factor is the effect of their turbulent colonial past on foreign policy decision-makers. Both Indian and Chinese leaders feel a powerful sense of victimisation, and have a postcolonial attitude to foreign policy. They both jealously guard their hard-won sovereignty, thus making it difficult for them to make the necessary compromises in negotiations.

Although it would be inappropriate for the EU to directly intervene in this issue, for example, as a mediator, there are ways in which the organisation can make a difference. By taking advantage of its effective agency in the area of trade, and pursuing more effective summit diplomacy, the EU could encourage a variety of joint trilateral ventures in order to increase Sino-Indian cooperation over a range of issues, and thus help create a productive working relationship, with a view to ultimately resolving the border dispute.

[54] Ratner and Sullivan, The Most Dangerous Border in the World.

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