

India and China



THE END OF CHINDIA?

Nunziante Mastrolia

However, the Arunachal Pradesh remains the main cause of stalling the talks¹ between the two great powers. India considers the region as an integral part of its territory and gives it a great strategic value². As for Beijing, the Indian State remains historically and culturally Chinese also due to the presence of the ancient Buddhist temple of Tawang.

These territorial disputes originate from the British colonial period in India and the weakness of the then Chinese empire and thus represent a raw nerve for the collective consciousness of both countries.

For China, the loss of those territories is one of the last memories of humiliation and dismemberment it endured throughout the last 150 years that ranged from the first Opium war until its independence in 1949. For China to obtain control of those territories means to revive its former glory and regain its status as a regional power. At the same time those territories boost the national pride of India still frustrated by the defeat during its war with China back in 1962 and which often evokes the crumbling of the country's national unity. Contrary to the Chinese case, ceding those territories can represent a severe blow to the Indian ambitions to emerge as a super power and its aspiration to play a boarder role on the international scene by showing that it has no real consistency.

It is for this reason following the Chinese activism in Tibet which, had led to an increase in troops and a massive work of infrastructure throughout the territory³ (one of the greatest examples of all is the railway which reaches Lhasa), New Delhi, which had always kept a low profile role in the region in order not to arouse suspicions by Beijing, adopted the opposite attitude.

In fact, over the past four years India has launched a broad infrastructure program⁴. The decision of the Asian Development Bank to finance some projects in the region of Arunachal Pradesh aroused a sense of indignation in Beijing. Recently New Delhi has also taken steps to

¹ Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman, "The 90000 sq kms Sino-Indian tangle", IPCS, September 8th 2009

² Subhash Kapila, "India: The Strategic Importance of Arunachal Pradesh", South Asia Analysis Review, September 17th 2009

³ Subhash Kapila, "China stiffens Military Intransigence on India – Tibet Border", South South Asia Analysis Review, September 10th 2009

⁴ CT Niles, "tensions between India and China increase in the reign of Cindia", Asia News, September 14th 2009. Also see "Work to resume soon on Kashmir rail link project", Daily Excelsior, August 29th 2009

India and China

increase the presence of its armed forces in the area. In July, 2009 two mountain divisions⁵ of circa 30 thousand men were stationed in the region. In June, four Sukhoi 30 MKI were stationed at the base of Tezpur in the Assam region and their number is expected to rise to thirty by the end of October 2009. A second squadron will be stationed in the airbase of Chabua (also in the Assam region)⁶. Additionally, India is transforming the numerous *Advanced Landing Ground* constructed along the *Line of Actual Control* until now accessible only by helicopters into a full-fledged airbase for fixed wing transport aircraft⁷.

The Indian Government is not only limiting its activities on the implementation of land infrastructures and strengthening its air and ground forces: the government has also been applying political attention on the State of Arunachal Pradesh. The visit of the Indian Prime Minister Singh to the region last October highly irritated the government of Beijing. It is worth mentioning that this was the second visit to the area by an Indian Premier over the last twelve years (the first of which only took place a year before in 2008). As in the past, this shows how the Indian authorities have been careful to keep a low profile on the issue precisely in order to not create tension with Beijing and also highlights how that attitude has now changed⁸. India's renewed presence and attention towards the North Eastern border regions has aroused strong official reactions in Beijing that triggered an intense media campaign by semi - official organs, characterized by mocking tones that are nearly disparaging towards India and its ambitions⁹.

Perhaps the event that had a major echo in India and which brought the country to file an official protest against the Chinese government was an article published in August 2009 on the website of the China International Institute for Strategic Studies that suggested the aim of the Chinese foreign policy towards its neighbour: the dismemberment and Balkanization of India by leveraging on its internal divisions and weaknesses. Other editorials, especially the *Global Times*, owned by the *People's daily*, have mocked India's ambitions to play a key role as a global power. According to China those ambitions would eventually lead India to adopt an aggressive and provocative approach on a regional level. No matter how moderate or harsh the Chinese press campaign against India varied in its tone (depending on its authors) they all agreed that Beijing cannot tolerate the existence of another super power in the region. In other words, "in Asia only one sun can shine"¹⁰.

These tensions are not an occasional event nor temporary but are part of a broader framework of competition and strategic rivalry, of under surfaced tensions and attempts to approach each other.

In fact, in recent years the relationship between the two countries has been mostly measured

⁵ Nirmalya Banerjee, "New N – E division with eye on China?", *The Times of India*, September 11th 2009

⁶ IAF to up vigil along LAC to counter China", *The Times of India*, September 26th 2009

⁷ "Ladakh – Nyoma Airstrip to be Expanded, Converted to Advanced Landing Ground2, India Defense, September 20th 2009

⁸ Sudha Ramachandran, "China opens new front in Kashmir", *Asia Times*, October 16th 2009. Also see M. K. Bhadrakumar, "The Dragon spews fire at the Elephant", October 24th 2009

⁹ B. Raman, "China- India: Non- Governmental Hostility Behind Facade of Governmental Cordiality", *South Asia Analysis Review*, August 14th 2009

¹⁰ See Bhaskar Roy "Chinese Perception of India In The Frame Of Sino – Us Strategic Game", *South Asia Analysis Review*, July 2nd 2009. By the same author "CHINA: Back to Containing India?", *South Asia Analysis Review*, July 7th 2009

India and China

through rivalry and competition, mutual suspicion and envy and not through cooperation. The reasons behind this attrition are increasing alarmingly to an extent that the now famous Chindia appears to be nothing but a fake myth.

Just consider a few cases: in addition to border tensions India is particularly worried about the increasing Chinese influence in Pakistan and Sri Lanka; China exploited India's reluctance to arm Colombo by massively supplying the country with weapons in its fight against the Tamil Tigers. Similarly, concern is growing in India over the Chinese influence in Myanmar and the increasingly close ties between Beijing and Islamabad. On this regard in October 2009 India accused China of compromising the success of the talks for the definition of territorial disputes, for the financial and technical assistance it provides to Pakistan for the construction of various projects and for the installation of a hydroelectric plant of seven thousand megawatts in Bunji, situated in the disputed Kashmir area, which India still considers illegally occupied by the Government of Islamabad¹¹.

This is the first time in which India takes a clear stance on this collaboration process that was initiated in August 2009 in occasion of the visit of the Pakistani President to China: “ we had complained to them in private but this time it had to be made clear that there cannot be different standards on disputed areas”.¹²

Even with Pakistan the situation seems to be quite critical¹³; beyond the stalemate in peace talks in the aftermath of last November's terrorist attacks, New Delhi fears that the new American AF – Pak strategy could supply Islamabad with weapons that could be used against India¹⁴.

Moreover, it might be sufficient to mention that India has launched a wide debate on its own nuclear policy. This all started with a speech by the Chief of Army Staff, General Deepak Kapoor, who has raised the possibility that his country is obliged to review its no-first use policy¹⁵ as a reaction to the increase of Pakistan's atomic arsenal. This also explains India's decision of not to participate, after years of advanced talks, in the construction of the Iran – Pakistan – India pipeline, which would have been the pipeline of peace. Furthermore, India continues to accuse Pakistan of maintaining a soft attitude towards those who committed the Mumbai attacks and also Singh's attempts to restart peace talks, even before the condemnation of the terrorists of Mumbai, failed due to the strong criticisms by the opposition and part of the Congress Party¹⁶.

Finally, the growing Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean is a cause of great concern for India, also because of the missions to patrol the sea lines of communication in the Gulf of Aden, an activity that China started last year. Great apprehension was also aroused as a result of the Chinese ASAT test. According to India, these are all pieces of a broader strategy which aim is to prevent the rise of the subcontinent, to contain and shut India within its own borders.

On the other hand China never approved the American clearance to India as a nuclear power and thus backing its ambitions to play a leading role both regionally and globally. On regard to

¹¹ “India asks China to stop development activity in PoK”, The Hindu, October 15th 2009

¹² “India, China will continue talks to resolve differences”, The Hindu, October 16th 2009

¹³ “Security threats from Pakistan have not lessened: Chidambaram”, The Hindu, September 12th 2009

¹⁴ “India conveys concern to US over Harpoon modification by Pak”, The Times of India, September 5th 2009. Also see “Pakistan illegally modified missiles”, The Hindu, August 31st 2009

¹⁵ “May have to revisit nuclear no – first use policy: Army chief”, The Times of India, September 6th 2009

¹⁶ “Terror Suspect Cleared Again in Pakistan”, The New York Times, October 13th 2009

India and China

this in July 2008 India accused China of suspicious attempts to obstruct it at the NSG.

On this perspective the decision to activate a direct “red line” of communication between the two governments should not be taken as a sign of relaxation, on the contrary could be the perfect picture of the risks those tensions that characterizes the relationship of those two countries.

The biggest risk associated to those tensions, expressed in the words of Robert Kagan, is the return of history: the struggle for power and the conquest of influence by the great powers. Kagan believes that this phenomenon is already occurring and could not be far from the truth: “The United States remains the sole superpower. But International competition among great poker has returned. With Russia, China, Europe, Japan, India, Iran, the United States, and others vying for regional predominance. Struggle for status and influence in the world have returned as central features of the international scene”¹⁷.

Moreover, the question to ask is why only now New Delhi has decided to put so much emphasis on this issue? Certainly the answer cannot be clear and definitive but an attempt for an interpretation can be sketched out. It seems that top Indian politicians foresee a series of narrow and uneven passages in the future, starting with the nuclear issues, the climate, the revival of the Doha Round looming on the horizon. Generally speaking there is the fear of a new international isolation, in front of a growing terrorist threat: both internally, particularly by the Naxalite movement which it intends to combat even by engaging Armed Forces¹⁸ and internationally: the October 8th terrorist attack against the Indian embassy in Kabul¹⁹ and the ongoing tensions with Pakistan²⁰: in addition to what was mentioned earlier, the government of Islamabad accuses India of instigating instability in the region of Baluchistan.

This therefore could mark a new period of isolation. Paradoxically India and China agree on many issues that range from climate to commercial issues, economic integration has been increasing but the tensions arising from territorial disputes and the intense Chinese activism in the Indian Ocean might lead to infect those sectors where cooperation is strong²¹.

Since its independence, India has had a special relationship with Russia a country with a powerful defence industry: Moscow is India's main weapon supplier and its main partner in the development of new military technologies: Russian exports of weapons to India from 2000-2008 reached 11 billion dollars. England comes second with 720 million dollars followed by Israel, Uzbekistan, Poland, France and Germany. The United States are only ninth with 146 million dollars.

Yet, as many experts pointed out, there have also been a setback in the relations between India and Russia during the visit of the Indian President Pratibha Devisingh Patil in Russia²².

Some frictions were recently surfaced particularly on regard to the issue of weapons supply. On this behalf the case regarding the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov is quite emblematic. In 2004 India and Russia agreed on the delivery of the Gorshkov for a total cost of 1.6 billion dollars by

¹⁷ Robert Kagan, *The Return of History*, Vintage Books, 2008, New York

¹⁸ “Manmohan: naxalism the greatest internal threat”, *The Hindu*, October 11th 2009

¹⁹ “India hints at Pakistani link to Kabul attack”, *The Hindu*, October 10th 2009

²⁰ “Situation not conducive for talks with Pakistan: Farooq”, *Hindustan Time*, October 14th 2009

²¹ “Peter J Brown, “China's navy sails past India's dock”, *Asia Times*, October 5th 2009

²² “Investing in India – Russia relationship”, *The Hindu*, September 30th 2009

India and China

2008. However, the Russians have repeatedly delayed the deliver by citing technical problems and increased the price for unforeseen additional costs to a total of 2,7 billion dollars. These technical issues can, however, be a signal of some tension between the two nations due to certain choices made by India on international policy choices particularly its increasing cooperation with Washington: *"Russia was playing hard ball partly because it was uneasy about India's growing ties with the United States and its plans to buy more weapons from Washington"*. According to Manoj Joshi of the Hindustan Times *"clearly, the Russians do appear to be now sending a message to India. They are saying that they are not happy with Indian moves to get closer to the U.S."* As for Ashok Mehta Moscow is trying hard to keep away other competitors from the highly profitable Indian weapon market: *"the Russians are unhappy that India is moving closer to the U.S. who have just entered the market, while India does not want to put all the eggs in the Russian basket"*.

With this in mind China, South Korea and Japan are increasing their political and economic coordination to the extent that at a recent summit held in Beijing on October 10th, the three nations pledged to establish a common integration path similar to the European model.

On a similar note the relations between Russia and China are following the same approach both within the context of SCO and bilaterally and this was quite evident during the visit of the Russian Premier to Beijing last October. Pakistan has been exploiting India's isolation by increasingly relying on the ever growing Chinese support. The Government of Islamabad has opened a new chapter of bilateral relations with Moscow²³ and with Obama's AF – Pak strategy it has reconquered a central role in managing the Afghan crisis, as mentioned earlier.

The relations between India and Washington, on which India had invested great deal of efforts in recent years, have been less idealistic particularly on regard to the strong desire of the new Democratic Administration to strengthen the international non- proliferation regime, which for India can only mean an increase in pressure for it to accede the Non – Proliferation Treaty and the CTBT.

India seems to fear a change of attitude by the United States during the transition process from George W. Bush to Obama as a "hit and run"²⁴ game. What India mostly fears is for the US not to fulfill its commitments to transport weapons as planned and promised, as already occurred in the past²⁵. In other words they nurture serious doubts on the reliability of the United States as a long term weapon supplier. The new US ambassador to India Timothy J. Roemer has repeatedly addressed the delicate issue: "I know that some are apprehensive about reliability of the United States as a supplier of military equipment to India. I can tell you that our relationship is far different than it was even a few years back."²⁶ And if India does not prevent the Dalai Lama from visiting the Tawang temple, President Obama does not receive the spiritual leader during his recent trip to the USA in order not to compromise his visit to China.

In conclusion, not only seems to be coming together, paradoxically, in a period of dangerous

²³ "PM Gilani meets Russian counterpart in Beijing", Asia news, October 14th 2009

²⁴ Joshua Cooper Raomo, "Il secolo imprevedibile", Elliot, 2009

²⁵ For in depth look at this matter see Teresita Schaffer, India and the United States in the 21st Century: Reinventing Partnership focuses on the two countries, CSIS Press, 2008

²⁶ "US will be a reliable military item supplier to India: US Ambassador", The Times of India, October 19th 2009

India and China

stalemate in most negotiating efforts, but considering India's rush to regain its status of influence and increase its capacity to control and defend the bordering regions, tensions might probably soar again and the situation might very well get out of control²⁷.

It is always worth to remember that Asia continues to be the arena in which the Leviathans compete and makes of it the real global powder keg, a region where the logic that control regional relations is that of a modern Westphalia state, with the insisting thought of prestige, glory, national security and where it is of vital political priority to regain control of those territories that have once been under their indirect influence.

²⁷ B. Raman, “India – China: Dangerous Hysteria”, South Asia Analysis Review, September 22nd 2009