

Border dispute resolution, not direct flights, will improve India-China ties

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June marked the fourth anniversary of the Galwan clashes. The violent skirmishes between the two nations have changed the course of India-China relations. These were the first violent clashes where both sides lost soldiers after 45 years. They also marked the breakdown of the Confidence Building Mechanisms (CBMs) which had worked in keeping the unsettled border peaceful. Even after multiple levels of talks both sides have not made any major inroads, and the situation on the border continues to remain tense.

It was no surprise then that this phase also saw the post of the Chinese ambassador to India remain vacant for almost 18 months and only in May Xu Feihong was appointed to that post. This also indicated the lack of a proper communication channel for a long time. Xu met Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on June 25. Xu hoped that both sides could work towards pushing the India-China ties in the “right direction”. However, the Indian stance continues that the essential need is ‘peace and tranquillity at the border’. In 2023, Jaishankar asserted that India-China relations had reached an “abnormal state”. Since the Galwan clashes, the Indian stance has been that for India-China relations to be normal, the primary criterion is ‘peace at the border’.

Though India has been consistently asserting that border peace is crucial for any forward movement in the relations, it has not shied away from boosting relations with Taiwan. Both sides have been discussing investments and ease of travel for tourists as well. In addition, New Delhi has also been keen to send workers to Taiwan while Foxconn invests in India. The congratulatory messages exchanged between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Taiwanese President William Lai had also upset Beijing.

The last four years have also witnessed a rise in Chinese cartographic aggression. Beijing had undertaken multiple acts of renaming places in Arunachal Pradesh and releasing maps that show India's territory as belonging to China. India, on the other hand, pushed for infrastructure development (Sela Tunnel) which would be helpful for India in any conflict situation. New Delhi has also announced the renaming of around 30 places along the disputed boundary between the two nations.

To further assert its position, India recently allowed a delegation from the United States to visit Dharamshala and meet the Dalai Lama. As a response to Nancy Pelosi's meeting with the Dalai Lama, the Global Times argued that "No matter how the West beautifies the Dalai Lama, he is an out-and-out secessionist who is more and more disdained by the international community" and "The "Dalai card" that US politicians think can win more political capital and create barriers for China is actually a lousy one".

Recently, China has been pushing for the resumption of direct flights with India, which New Delhi has resisted. An article in the Global Times argued that India should refrain from using the tensions in the bilateral ties as a bargaining chip to gain something in exchange from the US. The resumption of flights is in New Delhi's interest as "By continuing to refuse visas and resist resuming direct flights, India risks losing Chinese business and tourism to other destinations. New Delhi should take this into account and resolve it wisely". New Delhi has continued to assert that border peace is critical for any resumption of flights.

On the other hand, one cannot ignore that even though India had banned around 100 Chinese apps after the Galwan clashes, the trade between the neighbours has been booming. The trade figures stand at around \$136 billion, with New Delhi facing \$100 billion in trade deficit. Even though diplomatically New Delhi has been working on posing a stronger stance towards Beijing, it is the economic front where challenges continue. Reports also show that many Chinese tech workers failed to get a visa. This shows that the troubled diplomatic relations are the core factor.

It would not be wrong to conclude that New Delhi has made the border issue central to India-China relations. It is a lesson that close economic ties are no guarantee for smooth bilateral relations and the disputed border can derail these achievements anytime. To make any substantive progress a guarantee of peace at the border from Beijing is mandatory.

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