
THE SINO-INDIAN BORDER TALKS, 1981–1989

A View from New Delhi

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Rajiv Gandhi's visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in December 1988 was the first undertaken by an Indian prime minister since 1954. Though marked with considerable fanfare, including the inevitable trip to the Great Wall, the accomplishments of the visit were modest, primarily the creation of a Joint Working Group mandated to seek a solution to the long-standing border dispute. The two nations also agreed to broaden cultural, education, and scientific contacts. Finally, as stated in the ambiguous language of a diplomatic communiqué, New Delhi and Beijing agreed to maintain "peace and tranquility" along the border. From the Chinese standpoint, the most significant accomplishment was the explicit acknowledgment by Prime Minister Gandhi that Tibet is an internal affair of China. Chinese keenness to obtain this Indian endorsement was no doubt closely linked to the recent political stirrings in Tibet.

To knowledgeable observers of Sino-Indian relations, the meagre outcomes of Gandhi's visit were not entirely unexpected. Though preceded by eight rounds of border talks at the bureaucratic level, which began in 1981, a prime ministerial visit could not rapidly resolve an issue that continues to provoke heated debate in India. To understand why the Sino-Indian border question has remained unresolved after nearly 30 years, it is necessary to examine not only what transpired in the talks but the larger political context in which they were held. The border dispute has a long and complex history.¹ It led to a border war in October 1962 in which the

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1. The only comprehensive study of the border conflict (although blatantly anti-Indian in tone) is by Neville Maxwell, *India's China War* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972); a more

Indian side suffered a humiliating defeat. We will confine ourselves here to a discussion of efforts since the 1962 war to improve relations and resolve the conflict. According to the official Indian claim, the Chinese are occupying some 14,500 square miles of Indian territory. The Chinese, in turn, claim more than 30,000 additional square miles as their own.

Evolution of the Talks

While both China and India withdrew their ambassadors after the border war, diplomatic relations were never formally severed. But Indian humiliation over the 1962 defeat, as well as Chinese support for the Naga and Mizo insurgencies in India's troubled northeast, inhibited any prospects for improved relations. Chinese involvement with the Naxalite Marxist guerrillas in West Bengal and their attempts to intimidate the Indian charge d'affaires in Peking during the Cultural Revolution also strained relations. The first possibility for ameliorating this tension-ridden situation was raised by the Chinese in 1970 when Brajesh Mishra, the Indian charge d'affaires, was approached by Mao Zedong in a receiving line and warmly greeted. The episode came to be known as the "Mao smile." In the view of most analysts, this interest in cultivating India was closely related to the border clashes on China's Siberian border and Chinese isolation in the world. Despite this overture, there was considerable hesitation in India on the question of normalizing relations. The memory of 1962 and the continued hostile Chinese posture on the border made officials in the Ministry of External Affairs rather circumspect. Accordingly, the first demand India made was that the Chinese news agency, Xinhua, drop what Indians saw as a vicious propaganda campaign in order to create a better climate in which to deal with the border issue.

Following the Indian national elections in March 1971, Zhou Enlai spoke once again to Brajesh Mishra, conveying congratulations to Indira Gandhi on her reelection. This goodwill, however, was to dissipate quickly in the forthcoming months. With the flight of some ten million refugees from East Pakistan into West Bengal, India was drawn into the Pakistan crisis. The Chinese, nominally the loyal ally of Pakistan, felt compelled to adopt a public posture inimical to India's position. Chinese intransigence toward India over the crisis increased with the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in August 1971. The treaty was signed owing to the common hostility of the two parties toward China and it also grew out of India's search for reassurance against possible Chinese aggression in the event of a war with Pakistan.

balanced account will be found in Steven Hoffmann, *India and the China Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

It is not entirely clear what prompted Mrs. Gandhi to restore ambassadorial-level relations with the PRC in 1976. Two possible explanations appear plausible. The first might lie in her perception that the strategic environment in South Asia was taking an adverse turn for India, which had suffered a direct setback in Bangladesh with the overthrow of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in August 1975. Not only had India helped Mujibur Rehman come to power, it subsequently had played an important role in keeping his political opponents at bay. His assassination by certain disaffected members of the Bangladeshi military was seen as a major setback for Indian foreign policy in the region. In a changing and possibly adverse subcontinental environment, Mrs. Gandhi might have deemed it prudent to improve relations with a long-standing regional adversary.

A second and perhaps more compelling explanation can be found in Sikkim's change of status in 1974, becoming an "associate state" within the Indian union. In 1975 it was granted full statehood. The Chinese not only vigorously protested these actions but beefed up troops at strategic points along the northeastern border. One of the key positions included Longju—the site of the first Indian-Chinese armed clash in 1959. Noting the obvious Chinese displeasure with India's actions, Mrs. Gandhi decided it was important to initiate border talks, and to do this, Indian diplomats contend, it was necessary to upgrade the level of diplomatic representation. Another development that could have encouraged restoration of relations was that by 1976 there had been a change in the Chinese leadership—both Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, the two principal protagonists during the 1962 border conflict, had died—which probably eased the possibilities of holding discussions on the border question.

Despite the exchange of ambassadors, little more was accomplished in the next two years as Mrs. Gandhi was voted out of power in 1977 owing to the harshness of the "state of emergency" she had declared and which had been in effect for 18 months. It was not until late 1979 that the Janata government sent Foreign Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyi to Beijing to discuss the normalization of relations and the border question. This visit, however, was marked by striking Chinese insensitivity, as the Chinese attacked Vietnam during his visit and spoke of teaching Vietnam a lesson, just as they had taught India a "lesson" in 1962. It appears reasonable to infer that the Chinese felt that the Janata regime was a passing phase in Indian politics and they could well afford to treat its representatives callously. The issue was to lie dormant until the second coming of Mrs. Gandhi in 1980. Chinese Premier Hua Guo Feng raised the issue with her at a meeting in Belgrade in May 1980, and the usual platitudes about the need for Sino-Indian friendship and the necessity for avoiding border clashes were stressed in the joint communiqué. Despite this seemingly routine ex-

pression of pious sentiments, the exchange did mean that both sides were interested in groping toward a solution.

In June of the same year, Deng Xiaoping reiterated his interest in improving relations in two separate interviews with Indian journalists, Krishna Kumar and G. K. Reddy. External events, however, continued to impinge on any attempt to improve relations. Foreign Minister Huang Hua, who had been scheduled to visit India later in 1980, delayed his visit because of Indian recognition of the Vietnamese-supported Heng Samrin regime in Kampuchea. The Indian commitment to the diplomatic normalization process was apparent from Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao's carefully worded explanation of the delay. Refusing to take umbrage, he simply claimed that it was a routine postponement owing to prior commitments. He also reiterated India's desire to improve Sino-Indian relations. The Chinese overcame their pique and in June 1981 Huang Hua visited New Delhi. The very decision to hold talks entailed some concessions on both sides. After stating that the "border issue was central to the relations between the two nations," Huang Hua departed from the position that the issue be shelved if China's "package deal" was unacceptable. (The package deal involved settling the dispute along the lines of actual control with minor adjustments in both the eastern and western sectors.) The Indian government in turn moved from its original position (as expressed in a 1963 parliamentary resolution) that it would not hold substantive discussions with China until the Chinese vacated every inch of Indian territory.² Huang Hua, obviously with an eye toward influencing Indian public opinion, also announced that the Chinese would open two ancient Hindu pilgrimage sites in Tibet—Mansarovar and Kailash.

The Eight Rounds

Most of the Indian officials who were closely connected with the process of border talks between 1981 and 1988 cluster the eight rounds into two groups. Though the specific division varies, they all agree that the first four dealt with "basic principles" and the last four with "the situation on the ground."³

The first round. The first round of talks began in December 1981 with the Chinese offering the so-called package proposal, a suggestion Deng Xiaoping had put forth via the two visiting Indian journalists. Pared to the bone, this proposal entailed freezing the status quo on the ground, with minor concessions by both sides. Its seriousness can be questioned be-

2. *Asian Recorder*, August 6–12, 1981, pp. 161–62.

3. Interview with a senior Indian foreign service officer (hereafter FSO), June 1988, New York City.

cause, when pressed by the Indian side, the Chinese refused any cartographic examination. In fact, according to a senior Indian official closely connected with this round, the Chinese did not appear interested in turning it into anything more than a propaganda exercise.⁴ When the Indian side appeared less-than-enthusiastic about the package proposal, the Chinese suggested that the border issue be frozen and progress be made on other matters such as scientific and cultural exchanges.

Foreign Minister Rao rejected the Deng package proposal, contending that it equated the aggressor with the victim, denied the legality of the MacMahon Line, and in no way assuaged India's 1962 humiliation. Furthermore, it was felt that the package would legitimize Chinese gains made through the use of force. Additionally, there was a historical problem associated with this proposal as, in many ways, it was a reprise of the one made by Zhou Enlai in 1960. It had been rejected then because of Chinese claims to significant portions of land claimed by India. To accept the proposal in 1978 would have meant further territorial concessions.⁵ India's minimal expectation was that the Chinese would concede that they were occupying a modicum of Indian, or at least disputed territory. From a negotiating standpoint, this position could hardly be deemed particularly helpful, but it needs to be borne in mind that many in the Ministry of External Affairs had strong memories of the humiliating defeat inflicted on India by China in 1962 and this had strongly colored their perceptions. In fact, in the words of an Indian diplomat who has been associated with the border talks, there are the so-called "settlers" (of the dispute) and "non-settlers" in the Ministry of External Affairs.

The second and third rounds. The first round ended without accomplishing much beyond agreeing to meet again. By the second round, which was held in New Delhi, Chinese ardor had cooled considerably and little transpired then or in the third round. India's position was that it would not discuss the legality of the case as the legal positions of the two sides had been fairly well documented in the Officials' Report of 1960.⁶ The one tangible concession that the Indian side was willing to make was that it would seek some common ground without abandoning its legal position.

The fourth round. In this round of talks the Indian side agreed to the Chinese suggestion that normalization should proceed in other spheres without necessarily linking them to the border talks. The round led to a

4. Interview with a senior (retired) FSO, July 1988, New Delhi.

5. Interview with an Indian FSO, March 1988, Washington, D.C.

6. Ministry of External Affairs, *Report of the Officials of the Governments of India and the People's Republic of China on the Boundary Question* (New Delhi: Government of India, February 1961).

substantial expansion of exchanges in a range of areas including science, culture, and trade. A major agreement was also reached on how the talks would be conducted, namely, that they would proceed on a sector by sector basis. The success of this round may have had something to do with the gradual improvement in bilateral Sino-Soviet relations. Shortly before this round of talks in 1982, Brezhnev had made overtures to Beijing and in October 1983 the Chinese held their third round of negotiations with the Soviets. Though this argument rests entirely on a process of inference and attribution, it does appear reasonable to suggest that the Indians may have perceived a greater need to move on the border question in the light of improved Sino-Soviet relations.

The fifth round. It now appeared that there was a real likelihood of a breakthrough. The Chinese position had softened somewhat and according to an Indian official closely connected with the talks, the Chinese appeared amenable to settling the dispute along the MacMahon Line in the eastern sector with minor Indian concessions. They also wanted certain pieces of Indian territory in the Aksai Chin area. This proposal was discussed at some length, but in the end Indian domestic politics led to an abandonment of the proposal. Mrs. Gandhi was concerned about the forthcoming election in 1985 and did not wish to convey the appearance of Indian weakness. Subsequently, following her assassination in October 1984, the government appeared unwilling to take a bold initiative to try to resolve this contentious issue.⁷

Between the fifth and sixth rounds, considerable contact took place between the two sides but little was accomplished when the actual talks got underway. Just prior to the sixth round, Foreign Minister Bali Ram Bhagat met with his counterpart, Wu Xuequin, in New York and both sides expressed considerable optimism about the forthcoming round of talks. Wu, in fact, stated that the border question was the "only outstanding problem" and that the dispute could be settled with a spirit of "mutual accommodation and mutual understanding." This seemingly innocuous language is fraught with meaning, suggesting that both sides were equally at fault in the 1962 war. Wu also conveyed Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang's desire to hold talks with Rajiv Gandhi, and in due course these talks were held (October 1985) in New York. Zhao renewed the invitation to Rajiv Gandhi to visit China, but Gandhi stated that little would be

7. Interview with a senior (retired) Indian FSO, August 1988, New Delhi.

achieved by such a trip unless the proper preparatory work had been done.⁸

The sixth round. The Chinese returned to the package proposal in the sixth round. They also put forward their long-standing claim that the traditional boundary line to the east ran well south of the MacMahon Line, that is, the Himalayan crest. Thus, far from the expected breakthrough, the Indians perceived that the Chinese had simply toughened their position. In December 1985 the external affairs minister stated in the Rajya Sabha that the resolution of the border problem was a prerequisite for a complete normalization of relations.

In 1986 relations with China deteriorated. There were allegations of Chinese involvement in Pakistan's nuclear program, and the Annual Report of the Indian Defense Ministry, which had a new section on national security, included a discussion of the security threat from the PRC. But hopes for an improvement in relations were once again raised in May when Xinhua carried an article that suggested a softening of the Chinese position on the MacMahon Line. Essentially, the Chinese suggested that as a consequence of British and Indian forward policies "an actual line of control between the two sides has taken place on the Chinese side of the boundary." There was a prompt Indian response to this perceived Chinese softening, including statements to the effect that grounds had finally been found for an acceptable settlement and that the foreign minister might visit Beijing at the end of the year, although it should be noted that this belief in a Chinese "softening" was not universally shared in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.⁹

If indeed the portents had seemed propitious for movement toward a border settlement, they were quickly rendered meaningless. In an interview with visiting Indian journalists in mid-June 1986, the Chinese vice-foreign minister and leader of the delegation to the border talks stated that no settlement could be reached unless India made concessions in the east. He added that the eastern sector was the biggest dispute of all and said that, in his view, India was in occupation of as much as 90,000 square miles of Chinese territory. This new stand marked a critical departure from a previously held position, which had sought to press Chinese claims in the Aksai Chin region in the west. In effect, the Chinese appeared to

8. Mira Sinha Bhattacharjya, "India-China: The Year of Two Possibilities," in *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy, 1985-1986*, Satish Kumar, ed. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1987), p. 153.

9. Interview with an Indian FSO, March 1989, Washington, D.C.

convey the message that they would raise the costs of negotiation if the Indians adopted what was perceived as an uncompromising attitude.¹⁰

To complicate an already muddled picture, the Chinese, shortly before the start of the seventh round of border talks, made incursions in an area known as Sumdurong Chu in Arunachal Pradesh, an area of east-west mountain ranges that forms the trijunction of India, Bhutan, and China. This incursion reportedly was a response to an Indian probe in the area the previous year. The Indian army had sent a small patrol into the region to test both Chinese preparedness and the response of the Soviet Union. India was particularly interested in the Soviet response because of recent Soviet overtures toward China. It is not entirely clear how the Soviets reacted but the Chinese reaction demonstrated the dangers of possible escalation from these probes and counterprobes. It is interesting to note that there had been a degree of institutional learning as a consequence of the 1962 disaster. Unlike in the late 1950s when Prime Minister Nehru had kept Parliament largely uninformed about Chinese road-building activities in Aksai Chin, Minister of State for External Affairs K. R. Narayanan promptly announced to Parliament the difficulties with the Chinese at Sumdurong Chu.

The seventh round. Despite this episode, the seventh round of border talks were held as planned in July 1986. The Sumdurong Chu incident, which had made the Indian side quite circumspect and the Chinese side intransigent, was actively discussed in this round. The package proposal was simply not mentioned and little substantive agreement was reached.¹¹ The only positive development was removal of a minor irritant—a settlement over the acquisition of some property for the Indian embassy in Beijing as compensation for some land seized by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution.¹² Following the round, the new Indian foreign minister, Shiv Shankar, met with Wu Xueqian in New York where both agreed on the need to prevent incidents of the kind that had just occurred. It is believed that Shiv Shankar proposed that one way of defusing tension in the area might be for the Chinese to withdraw from Wangdong in the Sumdurong Chu valley in winter and, by the same token, it was agreed that the Indian patrols would not return to the area until the snows melted.

Between the seventh and the eighth and final round of talks, an important episode punctuated relations between the two nations. On December

10. Ibid.

11. Interview with a senior (retired) Indian FSO, January 1989, New Delhi.

12. Ibid; also Nancy Jetly, "Sino-Indian Relations: A Quest for Normalization," *India Quarterly* 47:1 (January-March 1986), p. 56.

8–9, 1986, the Indian Parliament conferred full statehood on Arunachal Pradesh, the disputed area in the eastern sector. From the Indian standpoint, this was simply a logical evolution of the administrative process. The Chinese, however, saw it as a possible legal erosion of their claim in the eastern sector. (In 1982 they had protested vigorously after Arunachal Pradesh sent a company of dancers to perform at the New Delhi ASIAD.) Despite the statehood and the demonstration of Indian military capacity by General Sundarji's Operation Checkerboard, the eighth round of talks were held as planned.¹³ Though precise details about Operation Checkerboard remain unavailable, some observers contend that its significance lay well beyond an attempt to test India's defense preparedness along the Sino-Indian front. Like its predecessor, Operation Brasstacks, Checkerboard may have been an attempt to test the responses of both superpowers in the event of a Sino-Indian border conflict. It may also have been an attempt to test the continuing vitality of the Indo-Soviet relationship in the wake of Mikhail Gorbachev's July 1986 Vladivostok speech in which he had attached greater significance to Soviet relations with China and Japan than with India.¹⁴ On a more positive note, India carefully (some argued too carefully) continued to avoid giving China any grief on the Tibetan uprising by defining it as an internal affair of the PRC.

The eighth round. The need to avoid military confrontation was apparently stressed on both sides in this round of talks, and greater interest in economic cooperation and trade was expressed. Clearly, the upshot of the talks seemed to be that the border issue could not be settled at the bureaucratic level and that a political initiative was necessary. In the words of a prominent Indian political commentator, writing shortly after the completion of the round:

What seems to have been achieved is the awareness of the need for a political initiative. At the same time, there has come about an understanding on the steps to de-escalate armed confrontation on the ground, a move which will be facilitated in this season of heavy snows in the concerned area. It is also agreed on both sides that conscious efforts need to be made for stepping up trade and economic cooperation, while more activity in the field of cultural cooperation will certainly help better understanding at the popular mass level. Exchange of ministerial-level visits seems to be on the agenda.¹⁵

13. Very little exists in the public domain about Operation Checkerboard. The only book on the subject is Ravi Rikhye's polemical and disjointed account, *The War that Never Was* (New Delhi: Prism India paperbacks, 1989).

14. Nayan Chanda, "Heading for a Conflict," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (hereafter *FEER*), June 4, 1987, p. 42.

15. Nikhil Chakravarty, "There Is a Distinct Thaw in the Chinese Mood," *The Telegraph*, November 22, 1987.

To that end, after much deliberation, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi decided to visit Beijing in December 1988.

Rajiv Gandhi's Visit and Its Aftermath

Rajiv Gandhi's decision to visit China stemmed from a variety of concerns. First, the talks, in the words of a prominent Indian diplomat, "had reached a diplomatic cul-de-sac." Without political intervention little more could be accomplished. Second, the specific timing of the visit was influenced by considerations of domestic politics. The prime minister had lost a great deal of popularity due to two persisting domestic issues—failure to quell the rising tide of violence in the Punjab despite considerable expansion of the coercive machinery of the state, and the barrage of accusations from the opposition charging his government with receiving large kickbacks on defense contracts, especially the purchase of Swedish Bofors guns. The second issue had acquired greater salience after the resignation of Gandhi's defense minister, V. P. Singh, who had called for a thorough investigation of the Bofors deal. In this weakened domestic context, the prime minister needed a major foreign policy success to boost his sagging political fortunes. The time was ripe to use the Sino-Indian border issue both to seek such success and to strengthen Gandhi's political position. Admittedly, this strategy was not without risk. If the prime minister returned empty-handed from China, the political costs would not be small. Yet, the costs of inaction were no doubt deemed to be worse. Gandhi's decision to move ahead on the Sino-Indian border question was probably also reinforced by the shifting character of Sino-Soviet relations. The long-standing hostility that had worked to the benefit of India in the past showed small but significant signs of change. With the Deng-Gorbachev summit looming in the not-so-distant future, it behooved India to take steps to improve relations with the Chinese. In the context of a Sino-Soviet rapprochement, however gradual or partial, India could no longer count on unstinted Soviet support on Sino-Indian differences.

The China trip appears to have achieved three specific objectives. First, it addressed a long-standing Chinese complaint that an Indian prime minister had not reciprocated Prime Minister Zhou Enlai's 1960 visit. Though merely a matter of protocol, Indian diplomats claim this was an important matter to the Chinese. Second, the visit led to the creation of a Joint Working Group to deal exclusively with the border question. Third, it has contributed to a more relaxed climate in Sino-Indian relations, and while this may not seem like a substantive accomplishment, there may be significance to it. Though Indian diplomats were reluctant to divulge any details during the course of numerous interviews conducted in New Delhi in January 1989, they hinted that measures to maintain "peace and tranquility

on the border” might include prior notification of military exercises and other confidence-building measures. This is not a minor accomplishment given the rapid escalation of military forces on both sides during the Sumdurong Chu incident of 1987.

Despite these accomplishments, Rajiv Gandhi’s trip was criticized by both newspaper columnists and members of the opposition. They zeroed in on his statement that “Tibet is an internal affair of China.”¹⁶ In the view of his critics, this amounted not only to a betrayal of the Tibetan cause, but also a failure to extract similar concessions from the Chinese on India’s disputed territories. They have argued that Gandhi should have sought a similar statement from China on Kashmir, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. Indian officials closely associated with the visit take a markedly different view, contending that the prime minister’s statement was the mere reiteration of a long-standing Indian position that dates back to 1954 when India formally acknowledged Chinese sovereignty in Tibet. Furthermore, they argue it would have been foolish to seek a similar endorsement on disputed Indian territories¹⁷ because a sovereign state does not need outside parties to affirm its national boundaries; that the Chinese needed to obtain Indian reiteration of the legal position of Tibet was an indication of Chinese weakness, not strength. But unless the government can forcefully articulate this argument, which has both intuitive and logical appeal, Indian elite opinion is likely to be swayed by the critical charges leveled by the journalistic community.

The critics have also focused on the Joint Working Group. They point out that a similar organization was created in 1960 after Zhou Enlai’s ill-fated visit that year. It produced a document known as the Officials’ Report, which adduced all the legal, historical, and customary evidence that the two sides could muster on their respective claims to the disputed border. As the political deadlock persisted, the Officials’ Report amounted to little more than an academic exercise. The present misgiving is that the Joint Working Group’s efforts will meet a similar fate. But diplomats closely associated with this process are eager to stress the differences between the two groups. First, they contend that, unlike in 1960, the necessary political will exists on both sides to reach a settlement, and second, they claim that the Joint Working Group will not only present the available evidence but actively seek a political settlement.¹⁸

Government officials have successfully addressed most of the criticisms. The one they cannot entirely answer deals with the prime minister’s public

16. For example, Megnad Sen, “Deuce, Advantage China,” *Indian Express*, January 26, 1989, and Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, “The New Diplomacy,” *The Statesman*, January 8, 1989.

17. Interview with an Indian FSO, January 1989, New Delhi.

18. *Ibid.*

statement on the status of Tibet. Many have stated that the same effect could have been achieved in private without referring to the 1954 Sino-Indian agreement. Unfortunately, this explicit Indian endorsement of the Chinese position on Tibet undermines the scope of politico-diplomatic maneuver for the Tibetans. Having granted asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959 and having provided sanctuary to over 100,000 Tibetans since then, the prime minister's public avowal of the Chinese position undermines the Tibetan cause.

Conclusion

What general conclusions can be drawn from these protracted negotiations? Three quickly come to mind. First, if one looks closely at the border talks, it becomes apparent that the Chinese have taken the vast majority of the initiatives, ranging from the package proposal to the opening of Mansarovar and Kailash. These initiatives have had little substance, but they have created the impression that the Chinese are far more flexible and willing to settle the border dispute. In contrast, the substantive gestures on the Indian side, such as the restoration of ambassadorial-level relations, have not received adequate attention. India, determinedly focusing on the legal/moral merits of its case, has not been nearly as deft in engaging in public posturing. For the most part, it has both given the appearance of being reactive and has, in fact, been so, largely responding to Chinese initiatives. From Deng's package proposal to Rajiv Gandhi's most recent visit to China, the suggestions have come from the Chinese side. Even small, arcane gestures on the Chinese side have prompted much activity in New Delhi. In this regard one can recall how reports in the Chinese press shortly before the seventh round sent Indian officials scurrying about, attempting to fathom what the Chinese meant with the changed language.

Second, it is apparent that there are divisions within the Indian External Affairs Ministry about how best to settle the border dispute. As alluded to earlier, there are "settlers" and "non-settlers" in the ministry. Both privately and publicly, former Foreign Secretary A. P. Venkateshwaran has spoken of "lost opportunities" for settling the dispute.¹⁹ Yet others in the ministry contend that no such opportunities have ever materialized. Finally, the dispute has persisted this long largely because neither side has a compelling need to settle it. Even if the dispute is resolved, India and the PRC will retain a competitive relationship in Asia. Both have self-images as great powers in Asia and have markedly different political systems, driv-

19. A. P. Venkateshwaran, "Just Neighbours, or Friends?" *Indian Express Magazine*, July 5, 1987.

ing them to support different nations and causes. The Chinese will continue to support Pakistan at varying levels and India will continue its pro-Vietnamese policy. Resolution of these disputes may lead to improved bilateral relations, perhaps even a reduction in levels of defense expenditures, but the competitive character of the relationship will remain.²⁰

Despite the structural limits to improvement of the relationship, it is apparent that India is determined to move toward resolution of the border dispute. In early June 1989, Chinese troops ruthlessly suppressed the student-led prodemocracy movement in Beijing. While most of the world reacted quite sharply to the massacre, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a carefully worded statement that avoided direct criticism of the Chinese leadership. Furthermore, India did not postpone the first meeting of the Joint Working Group.²¹ Both of these gestures clearly conveyed a message to Beijing that the Indian leadership was prepared to continue doing business with the Chinese despite their diplomatic isolation after the events in Tiananmen Square.

As to what lies in store for the future of the Sino-Indian border question, much depends on the domestic political leadership in both countries. The defeat of the Rajiv Gandhi government in the November 1989 parliamentary elections in India and the uncertainty concerning the continued dominance of Deng Xiaoping and his group in the PRC raise some problems for the Joint Working Group. But there is certainly no basis as yet in assuming that the new government in India and the emerging collective leadership in the PRC will be any less interested in resolving the boundary question. Thus, the Joint Working Group may continue to slowly inch its way toward a political settlement.

20. John W. Garver, "Chinese-Indian Rivalry in Indochina," *Asian Survey* 27:11 (November 1987), pp. 1205-18.

21. Robert Delfs, "Tiananmen Massacre," *FEER*, June 15, 1989, pp. 10-11.