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China-India equation still uncracked

By Jian Junbo

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Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram last month accused [China](#) of using the ongoing crisis in [Sri Lanka](#) to "expand its sphere of influence", adding that this had "impacted on [India's](#) response to the situation". Meanwhile, China in April blocked India's loan efforts at the Asian Development Bank on territory that both nations claim.

Such allegations and suspicion only damages trust between these two Asian giants, which both have reasons to develop a more constructive and friendly partnership. China and India have rapidly growing economies, but they are still developing countries with sizeable segments of the population living in poverty. If there were fruitful bilateral cooperation and a peaceful regional environment, then people's livelihoods could be improved and both nations' economies be strengthened.

As developing countries striving for modernization, China and India could in theory be closer with each other than each is with Western countries. And any confrontation between them instantly becomes leverage for other world powers to use and gain influence over them.

Many people in the two countries, especially in India, like to compare the nations' achievements in various aspects of modernization. Some compare the development of [Mumbai](#) to that in Shanghai, while others like to compare levels of industry or political systems. But critics say these types of comparisons only lead to nationalistic emotions overtaking the more important aspects of bilateral relations.

There is a danger of Sino-India relations becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, with the attitude of one country leading the other to take the same attitude. Unfortunately, issues such as the decades-old border dispute are not easy to resolve.

China claims India has occupied more than 90,000 square kilometers of its territory since the 1940s. In 1913, the British-Indian authority signed a secret agreement with the then Tibetan authority in China to draw the so-called McMahon border line between China and India,

which ceded several large parts of Chinese territory to India. Neither the Republic of China (ROC) or the People's Republic of China (PRC) recognized the legitimacy of the McMahon Line.

In 1947, India's Jawaharlal Nehru administration, encouraged by the idea of a great Indian federation, declared its compliance with the McMahon Line. In 1962, partly supported by the Soviet Union, Indian troops invaded the area. A border war broke out. India swiftly lost, but China's military pulled out of the disputed areas to minimize the impact of the war and to avoid superpowers becoming involved.

China has hoped India would withdraw from the territories. But India has controlled them since and many Indian nationals have migrated there, with one large part of the territories becoming an Indian state - [Arunachal Pradesh](#) - that China does not recognize. For the sake of solidarity among developing countries, the then-Chinese government under Mao Zedong showed tolerance towards India, just as it ceded the sovereignty of a small area to North Korea and rented out an [island](#) to Vietnam, both of which were so-called brothers of the "great family of socialism".

But the wounds of the brief Sino-India border war have not healed. China has often been cited as a potential enemy of India's military, with ties worsened by China's friendship with Pakistan. India's defense minister publicly stated the threat after India's first successful nuclear-bomb test in 1998.

Any small action on one side of the disputed section of the border arouses the other's suspicion. India, for example, is sensitive to China's infrastructure projects in Tibet or even in Hainan province, assuming that they could be used in any potential conflict against India.

This mutual suspicion runs counter to the long history of good Sino-India relations. As Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said during a visit to India in 2007, the history of China-India relations is more than 2,000 years old. The long history consists of cultural communications based on Buddhism. Thus, to some degree, China and India share similar cultural values.

The friendship was also consolidated in the last century in two different stages: through fighting colonialism and seeking independence in the 1920s to the 1940s to co-advocating the five basic principles among sovereign states in the 1950s.

The current level of trade between the nations is too low, given the huge size and fast growth of the Chinese and Indian economies, and economic exchanges are still imbalanced. It was reported in 2008 that India was only China's 10th-largest trade partner and the eighth export market. However, in the same year, China was India's biggest trade partner and the third-biggest export market.

Important international issues could also be resolved through cooperation between China and India. For example, the Indian Ocean has increasingly become an important thoroughfare amid more frequent economic exchanges between Asian, African and Arabian countries. With more and more pirate activities on these waters, China and India could jointly help police the waters. Other issues, such as international infrastructure projects and anti-terrorism cooperation, could be achieved through effective cooperation.

Fortunately, both countries have realized the importance of good relations for national

interests and regional prosperity. The Chinese government in 2002 issued the "three policy principles toward neighboring countries - harmony, security and prosperity", which included India as an important neighbor of China.

India in the 1990s started to implement the "Look East" policy, which partly aimed at the expansion of India's influence in Southeast Asia. Yet the policy at the same time implied that India was paying more attention to East Asia, including China. As Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said when he visited China in January, China was one focus of the Look East policy.

These overtures indicate that the countries have gradually begun to understand the importance of having each other as a neighbor. Perhaps India should not be too sensitive to Chinese activities overseas, especially in the Indian Ocean and its neighboring countries, as these are mainly related to China maintaining its fast-growing economy.

China and India should look beyond seeing each other as strangers or enemies, and look towards the ideal Indian Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh encapsulated in the word "Chindia". He coined the phrase to describe a future in which China and India are united peacefully and together keep regional stability and promote regional prosperity, an idea which be a continuation of a great historic relation and shared culture.