

# An Analysis of Sino-Indian Border Dispute: The Perspective of Realism

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## Abstract

Realism theory believes that the international system is driven by the power competition among countries, and emphasizes the self-serving behavior of countries. The border dispute between China and India has been going on for a long time, and the two sides have played a long and complex game around the disputed areas. From a realistic perspective, the dispute reveals the competing powers and interests of the two countries, and the self-serving tactics adopted by the two countries in pursuit of their own security and territorial integrity have been the reason why the dispute has not been resolved. This article will analyze this reason from a realistic perspective, and at the same time, it is expected to provide a new thinking and understanding framework for similar geopolitical disputes.

**Keywords:** realism, Sino-Indian relations, border dispute

## 1. Introduction

Realism theory, based on the basic principles of state self-interest, power competition and security dilemma, provides a profound analytical perspective for explaining the interaction between state actors. It attempts to explain the nature of state behavior. Within the framework of realism, several basic principles exist:

Firstly, national self-interest is one of the core concepts of realism. Realism holds that states are major players in international relations, and their behavior is often driven by self-interest. States tend to prioritize safeguarding their own security, prosperity, and power over moral or international cooperation motivations. This self-interested pursuit has played a dominant

role in the international political arena, influencing the interaction between nations.

Secondly, competition among nations is another key element of realist theory. In the realist view, the international system is made up of competing powers and interests among states. Countries enhance their relative power through different means, such as military strength, economic resources and political influence, in order to safeguard their national interests. This competition often leads to tension and conflict in international relations, as each country seeks to gain an advantageous position in this competition.

Moreover, the national security dilemma is an important concept in realist theory. Countries pursuing their own security can get into a

dilemma where they protect themselves by increasing their own military power, but may trigger the alarm of other countries, which in turn leads to more arms races and armed conflicts. This dilemma stems from mutual mistrust, which often makes it difficult for countries to find a balance in the competition for power.

Realist theory covers a range of key concepts to explain phenomena and changes in international relations. Power politics is one of them, emphasizing that international relations are influenced by the power and power of states. Relative gains are a key factor in international decision-making, and countries often make decisions based on comparisons with the gains and losses of other countries. At the same time, realism emphasizes that international relations often present a zero-sum game situation, that is, one country's gain means other countries' loss. In this sense, the theoretical framework of realism provides an alternative perspective for analyzing the Sino-Indian border dispute, integrating the power competition between countries, national interests, security dilemmas and other factors to help reveal the nature and evolution of the dispute.

From the perspective of realism, the Sino-Indian border dispute can be interpreted as a power game, the pursuit of national interests and the challenge of security dilemmas. The historical roots and current situation of the Sino-Indian border dispute show that the two countries are pursuing geopolitical advantages in the region. Both countries possess significant economic and military power, and the struggle for territorial control represents an important aspect of the power struggle between them. For example, the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh (the southern part of Tibet) involves control over a strategically located and resource-rich region, embodying the essence of power competition. The two countries' claims on the boundary issue also show that national interests are the core factor in the dispute. China has stressed its claim to the southern Tibet region, while India has steadfastly defended its territorial integrity. This drive to pursue national interests has pushed both sides to take a hard line in the dispute and try to achieve their own strategic and security objectives by controlling territory. The realist theory emphasizes the existence of security dilemmas. This dilemma refers to the fact that the increased security of one country may pose a

threat to others, leading to an escalation of tensions. In the Sino-Indian border dispute, military actions and arms race on both sides may trigger mutual security concerns, and an increased military presence on one side may be interpreted as a threat from the other, leading to the risk of mutual military confrontation.

To sum up, the analysis of the Sino-Indian border dispute from the perspective of realistic theory can help to explain the driving factors of the two countries' dispute behavior and the reasons why the border issue has been stuck in a stalemate, with a view to providing new thinking.

## **2. Background and Current Situation of the Sino-Indian Border Dispute**

The roots of the Sino-Indian border dispute can be traced back to the late 19th century, when the boundary between the British colonial rule of India and the Chinese Qing Dynasty had not yet been formally demarcated with regard to the Tibetan region. During the chaotic period when the Qing government was busy with foreign wars and the succession of old and new governments, Britain invaded Tibet by force. At the same time, it also signed a number of treaties with the Qing government to delimit the boundary, laying the groundwork for future boundary territorial disputes. The Sino-Indian border issue mainly involves disputes over the traditional customary line, the so-called "McMahon Line" and "Johnson Line", as well as the Line of Actual Control. Up to now, the disputes are concentrated in the Aksai Chin area in the western section (Xinjiang) and the southern Tibet region in the eastern section (referred to as Arunachal Pradesh by India). Since the emergence of the Sino-Indian border issue, the relationship between China and India has been extremely complex. Before withdrawing from India, the British colonial authorities assigned the Chinese territory they had occupied to India. Since then, this has become the basis for India's territorial claims against China. The two sides have had long-term frictions in the disputed areas, which escalated into a direct war conflict in 1962. Although China won the war and the two sides signed a ceasefire agreement, the boundary issue has not been completely resolved. Since then, there have been several rounds of border negotiations between China and India, but no agreement has been reached, and occasional border clashes have broken out in the past

decades, leading to tensions and relations.

After the new century, China and India were still inseparable on the boundary question, and a series of confrontation incidents and negotiation deadlock occurred. Among them, the two most prominent confrontations occurred. In 2017, India's cross-border road construction triggered a confrontation between Chinese and Indian troops in the Doklam area, which was eventually eased through diplomatic consultations between the two countries. Then, in June 2020, Chinese and Indian troops clashed again in the Galavan Valley, this time killing 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese personnel, and triggering mass protests and nationalist sentiment in both countries. Although China and India agreed to seek a solution through dialogue and diplomatic channels, they failed to achieve complete disengagement within two years, and the two sides still disagree on issues such as the demarcation of the actual boundary line.

Since then, the two sides have held many high-level talks, including several BRICS and G20 summit meetings after 2021, and several rounds of China-India military chiefs' talks. However, the border standoff since June 2020 has not been resolved, and no new progress has been made in the settlement of the boundary question. Even though both China and India have expressed their willingness to resolve the dispute through diplomatic means, it will take a long time to overcome the differences and mistrust that have accumulated over the years.

### **3. An Investigation of the Sino-Indian Border Dispute Based on Realistic Theory**

#### *3.1 National Interest and Power Struggle: The Driving Factors of Sino-India Border Dispute*

Realist theory emphasizes that power competition in international politics is inevitable, while geopolitical factors play a key role in strategic decision-making between countries. In the context of the Sino-Indian border dispute, power competition and geopolitical factors are intertwined, profoundly influencing the behavior and attitudes of both sides.

First of all, the pursuit of national interests has become the root cause of border disputes and border power games. National interests are the fundamental consideration and driving factor of state behavior, and territorial integrity is the primary factor of national interests. Whether a

country can successfully defend territorial integrity and safeguard national interests has a profound impact on its internal stability, reputation and geo-strategy. Therefore, contests on boundary or territorial issues are actually contests of national interests. China and India have highly similar definitions of national interests on the border dispute, that is, they firmly assert sovereignty over the disputed areas and regard them as part of national unity and territorial integrity, and safeguarding territorial integrity is an important part of national interests.

As major countries with a long history and cultural tradition, China and India have a deep understanding of territorial integrity and national dignity. In border disputes, the territorial issue is not only a political issue, but also a core issue involving national identity and national dignity. China insists on safeguarding its sovereignty over the disputed areas, which reflects its pursuit of national dignity and territorial integrity. Similarly, India has strongly asserted its sovereignty over the disputed areas, seeing them as a symbol of national unity. State leaders of the two sides have repeatedly stated in public that they will never tolerate the slightest encroachment on their territory, which further highlights the importance of the territorial issue in the national interests of both sides. In this context, the actions and attitudes of the two sides in the border dispute clearly demonstrate their great concern for territory and national dignity. This concern stems from national historical, cultural and social perceptions and forms a strong recognition of territorial integrity. For example, China emphasizes historical territorial ownership in border disputes as part of its national identity; India, through its religious history as well as its colonial legacy, has also closely tied territorial issues to national unity and cultural identity, which to some extent shapes its behavior in disputes.

As regional powers, the two countries have a clear pursuit of geostrategy and influence in the disputed region. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the construction of an economic corridor in Pakistan, China is deeply expanding its influence in South Asia. No matter whether its deep goal is to India or not, it inevitably forms a hedge with India's influence in the region in reality. India also strives to maintain a balance in the region, avoid

being dominated by any single country, and safeguard the status quo of the region and its own interests. From this perspective, the pursuit of influence is closely related to the strike of the two sides' policies in South Asia, and the maintenance of national interests has shaped different geostrategic strike.

The domestic environment is also an important factor affecting the Sino-Indian border dispute. In the face of rising nationalism, any success or failure on the border issue will become a trigger for extreme emotions, so the two governments need to consider domestic public opinion and political pressure when making decisions, and strive to strike a balance between domestic public opinion and diplomatic needs. Therefore, there is a direct link between the domestic environment and national interests, and both China and India are facing calls from domestic public opinion for their governments to firmly safeguard national territory and dignity. Any compromise in disputes may be seen as a betrayal of national interests and domestic public opinion, thus triggering instability.

Secondly, power struggles over border areas are the main cause of repeated conflicts. From a realist perspective, power competition and geopolitical factors are the key elements to analyze the Sino-Indian border dispute. These two aspects are intertwined, revealing the motives of the two countries' actions in the border dispute and the strategic considerations behind it.

Power competition between countries is a natural trend. In order to strengthen their own interests, countries will seek to obtain more resources, territory and influence from outside. International politics is the arena for these countries to compete with each other, and countries seek the position of comparative advantage to ensure their own security and geopolitical interests. China and India, as important emerging powers in the world, both uphold the goal of national rise and strategic status. The border dispute between the two countries is a clear manifestation of this power competition, and the struggle for control of the border area shows the power competition between them. In particular, the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh (the southern Tibet region) involves areas of strategic location and rich resources, and is regarded as an important geopolitical interest. The historical roots of the Sino-Indian border dispute can be traced back to

the late 19th century, when the boundary between British India and the Qing Dynasty in this area caused conflicts. The historical entanglements also highlight the impact of geopolitical competition between the countries. In order to safeguard their territorial rights and interests and strategic position, China and India have increased their military deployment in the disputed areas, which has contributed to the escalation of geopolitical tensions.

Moreover, geopolitical factors play an important role in international relations, especially in border disputes. Geographic location, territorial control and strategic resource allocation have a direct bearing on a country's security and interests. Both China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's "Go East policy" show that both countries are seeking to expand their strategic space through geopolitical influence. For example, regarding the issue of the southern Tibet region, for India, Arunachal Pradesh (the southern Tibet region) is close to China's Tibet Autonomous Region and is of great geopolitical significance. Controlling this region not only means having the ability to monitor China's security and activities, but also provides India with a strategic passage to Southeast Asia. Such geopolitical interests have led to India's close attention to the disputed area. China, on the other hand, regards the Tibetan region as its core territory, and its claim to sovereignty over South Tibet is part of its efforts to preserve its national integrity. The Tibetan region is also an important link between China and South Asia and plays a key role in China's geopolitical strategy. Therefore, China's emphasis on its sovereign position over South Tibet is also a safeguard of its own geopolitical influence and national interests.

China and India are competing to expand their geopolitical influence and military deployments on the border dispute, but clearly this competition has gone beyond the basic need to ensure national security. International prestige, strategic location and resource control are also taken into account. Measures taken by the two countries to strengthen military deployment and build military Facility in the border areas have directly affected the continuation and escalation of the Sino-Indian border dispute, which is enough to lead to tension in the border areas, increase the risk of strategic miscalculation and military conflict, and thus fall into a geopolitical security dilemma.



### *3.2 The Emergence of the Security Dilemma and Its Impact: The Leading Factor of the Unresolved Impasse*

The realistic security dilemma is reflected in the possibility that the efforts of the two sides to pursue their own security and interests may cause mutual doubts and worries. One country's increased military presence in a disputed area may be perceived by the other as a threat to its security, leading the other to take similar actions to protect itself. This working cycle could lead to an escalation of military deployments and tensions on both sides, which could eventually lead to conflict. In this case, even if a country's intention is for self-defence and security, its actions may still be misinterpreted by other countries as hostile threats. Such misunderstandings can heighten tensions and may even lead to an escalation of military confrontation. On the other hand, if both countries try to avoid being threatened by military action, it may eventually lead them into an uncontrollable arms race and dangerous situation. Therefore, in exploring the Sino-Indian border dispute, it is crucial to understand and respond to this security dilemma in order to avoid further escalation of the situation and the outbreak of conflict.

In the Sino-Indian border dispute, the two countries' perception and response to national security threats reflect their respective strategic interests and security considerations. Differences between China and India in terms of geopolitics, territorial disputes and external alliance relations have led to differences in how the two sides view and act on the dispute. This difference is an important reason for the persistence and intensification of China-India border disputes. For China, the territorial issue of Tibet has always been a sensitive issue in China's diplomacy and national defense, and India's activities in the border area are regarded as a military threat, which is the main reason why China's Western Military Region has strengthened logistical and equipment support for troops in the border area in recent years. China has always been concerned that India's actions will affect the stability of Tibet, especially in the face of separatist activities by the Dalai Panchen Lama and other Tibetans in exile, and the growing sensitivity of the Dadan issue, China's sensitivity to the Tibetan issue has continued to increase. India-US cooperation in the Indian Ocean has also had a detrimental

impact on tensions over this issue; India, in turn, views China's territorial claims as a direct violation of its territorial integrity. India maintains that China's claim to the disputed territory violates historical agreements based on British colonial conditions, and that the increased presence of People's Liberation Army troops in Aksai Chin, an equally sensitive disputed area adjacent to Kashmir, further heightens its threat to India. In addition, India also sees the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project and the China-Sri Lanka Port Cooperation Project as geopolitical challenges, and believes that China is trying to penetrate into South Asia and divide India's influence and cooperation relations there, posing a threat to India's geopolitical interests.

In this context, the escalation of strategic means and strategic threats in the border confrontation between China and India has aggravated the security tension in the border area. Since the 1962 Sino-Indian War, both sides have maintained a limited degree of border patrol and infrastructure Facility construction. Since the outbreak of multiple conflicts between China and India during the Modi government, the military deployment and infrastructure facility construction of both sides in the border areas have increased significantly, forming a certain degree of military competition. In the past decade, the Indian army has paid more attention to its ability to strike ground targets, deploying rocket artillery regiments and Brahmos missile regiments in the northeastern periphery of Assam to optimize its precision strikes in the mountains. Armoured and mechanised units have been advanced to Ladakh and northern Sikkim. Army special forces and front-line infantry have added drone detachments to enhance their ability to conduct out-of-sight reconnaissance and guide precision strikes. The Indian Air Force (IAF) has deployed more than 330 deployable fighter jets and ground attack aircraft in the Eastern and western regions, and procured five self-propelled S-400 surface-to-air missile systems from Russia to enhance its air defense system. China also began to deploy its third-line forces after the 2017 standoff, and accelerated the construction of its defense line in 2020. Among them, the first and second line troops have strengthened the replacement of tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, increased the deployment of self-propelled anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank missiles, and mountain

combat troops have maintained a front-line along the China-India border. Up to now, China has deployed three heavy composite brigades along the border line.

In terms of infrastructure, as of October 2020, India had approved the construction of 73 strategic roads and 125 bridges in different areas on its side of the Line of Actual Control. Up to now, more than 35 roads have been completed, with the key roads concentrated in Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh (the southern Tibet region). Otherwise, India has approved the construction of nine “strategic” railway lines and the modernization of eight forward airfields along the border with China, which will allow the Indian military to carry heavy armour quickly to designated locations. Since 2017, China has built and upgraded a total of 37 airfields and heliports in Xinjiang and Tibet, most of which are near disputed areas with India, filling a previous lack of airfields along the China-India border and improving the quick response time of its airborne and aviation units.

In addition, extraterritorial interference in the process of Sino-Indian rivalry has also complicated the border issue, especially the interaction between India and the United States. With the deterioration of Sino-US and Sino-Indian relations and the improvement of India-US relations, the willingness of the US to participate in and intervene in Sino-Indian border disputes is gradually increasing, so the interaction with the US has become an important part of Sino-Indian composite competition. On the one hand, countries outside the region, mainly the US, have strengthened their inducements and co-lures with India, providing material support for India’s provocative acts on the border issue and creating a stir through the “front-line visits” to the sensitive border areas between China and India by the US ambassador in India. On the other hand, the US also supports India’s deployment of border forces by deepening and expanding military cooperation with India. Through the “2+2” high-level talks and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation, the US has helped the two countries share military bases, communication systems and intelligence, and encouraged the India-US alliance in the field of military cooperation, which has seriously worsened the security situation between China and India.

The evolution and tension of the Sino-Indian border dispute have not only affected bilateral relations, but also triggered tensions in neighboring relations and threatened regional stability within the region.

The level of tension in neighboring relations will be directly affected by the Sino-Indian border dispute. Neighboring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, although not directly involved in the dispute, are also feeling the unease and uncertainty caused by the dispute. As small countries in the region, especially those bordering China and India, they are more likely to be affected by their own national security and interests. For example, parts of Nepal are affected by the Sino-Indian border dispute, which has forced Nepal to carefully balance its relations with the two countries. Although these countries are not directly involved in the border dispute, they do not want to be forced to take sides because of the dispute between India and China. Their direction dip to remain neutral and avoid being dragged into conflict is essential for regional peace and stability. However, as the border situation continues to escalate, these countries may also feel under diplomatic pressure to carefully manage their relations with China and India to avoid the collateral risk of getting caught up in disputes between the two countries.

Moreover, the border dispute between China and India poses a potential threat to regional stability. South Asia has always been a region fraught with geopolitical complexities, with historical territorial disputes and political contradictions among numerous countries. Tensions over the Sino-Indian border dispute could exacerbate these regional problems and lead to threats to regional stability. Against this backdrop, an unstable South Asia region will have a major impact on the whole of Asia and the international community. Conflicts and tensions within the region may lead to instability in many fields, including politics, economy and society. This will not only weaken the economic growth and social development of countries in the region, but may also trigger transnational security problems such as refugee problems and terrorist threats. In times of tension, countries may be more direction dip to give priority to their own security and interests, and member states’ distrust of each other will rise significantly, which may temporarily slow down or suspend cooperation projects, thus

adversely affecting regional cooperation and development mechanisms and hindering opportunities to solve regional problems. This has taken a toll on the development of the entire South Asia region and hindered the common efforts of countries in the region to pursue prosperity.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper combines the realism theory with the Sino-Indian border dispute, and briefly discusses the driving factors of this dispute and the reasons for the impasse. According to the analysis, the territorial issue involves the core interests of the country, and the pursuit and maintenance of national interests is the fundamental motive of the border dispute, which is also the reason why China and India hold different attitudes towards the historical agreement. In this context, the sovereignty contest over the disputed areas has become the direct cause of the decades-long dispute between the two sides, which involves the power and prestige of the country and its international status. At the same time, due to the continuing confrontation between China and India, both sides intend to strive for a favorable situation in the confrontation by strengthening military deployment and infrastructure facility construction in the border area, in exchange for a favorable position at the negotiating table. However, this process has been repeated in a working cycle, forming a de facto "military race" in the border area, resulting in a geopolitical security dilemma between the two sides, and a sense of disagreement and mistrust, which has become the cause of the deadlock and the inability to make progress on this issue.

At present, there has been little progress on the Sino-Indian border issue. This deadlock is difficult to break within the foreseeable future, so the actions that both sides can take are extremely limited. However, it is still possible to provide some detailed suggestions on this matter. First, establish a clear agreement on border contact procedures, thereby reducing the risk of direct conflict arising from the uncertainty of the situation; Second, enhance military transparency and enhance balanced consultation on military deployments in the minister-level talks, which can reduce distrust and the risk of war caused by military escalation. Finally, a long-term strategic plan to clarify the roles and interests of both sides in international affairs will help reduce

unnecessary misunderstanding and competition.

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