The 22nd Meeting of the Special Representatives for Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question was held on December 21, 2019 in New Delhi. Interests of the PRC were represented by Foreign Minister Wang Yi, while those of India by Ajit Doval, the National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister.

The readers of the New Eastern Outlook are most likely aware of the existence of such issues, and the fact that they have been discussed by representatives of various ranks (including the highest ones) from both nations. As a result, we can expect their reaction towards the aforementioned piece of news to be fairly skeptical: there have already been too many meetings between the highly respected Special Representatives as it is.

We could also add to the general skepticism by mentioning that a substantial number of different bilateral documents has been approved in the past nearly 3 decades. There are also inter-governmental agreements among the above. One example is the 2005 document, with the long title of “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question”.

In fact, the document refers to earlier (also) inter-governmental pacts (from 1993 and 1996), within whose frameworks a number of working groups were established to resolve the aforementioned border issues.

However, none of these authoritative agreements were able to prevent a number of border incidents. For example, based on indirect evidence (which includes some words put together using stones), in September 2014, a group of Chinese border guards entered India’s territory and travelled for some distance in what is currently known as the
Union territory of Ladakh (separated from the state of Jammu and Kashmir in the summer of 2019), which is located in the high-altitude Himalayan region. The PRC lays claim to part of the Ladakh lands.

It remains unclear whether it was a mere coincidence that the aforementioned incident occurred during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to India and his first meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It will suffice to say that the initial period of their leadership over the two Asian giants was marked by fairly poor relations between these nations.

An even more serious dispute was the 3-month Doklam standoff that occurred 3 years later (also in the Himalayan region). At the time, there was a direct confrontation between border guards of both nations, but it was limited to mutual insults and them sling stones at each other. However, the possibility of this incident transforming into an armed conflict (whose scale would have been hard to predict) seemed distinctly real.

Hence, we reiterate: there are valid reasons behind the skeptical views on how effective the numerous meetings between the Special Representatives for Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question actually are.

Still, let us not rush to conclusions. After all, none of the different incidents that have occurred since 1962 have led to armed conflict. Thus, these talks do provide an effective means of maintaining contact between the two sides especially if the complexity of the overall border issue within the framework of India-China relations is taken into account.

If we were to be even more careful with our words, above the political surface, the problem supposedly does not exist as is stipulated in several agreements, including those mentioned earlier on. And during their meetings, Special Representatives discuss relatively “minor details” with regards to the Line of Actual Control (LAC), established after the war in 1962.

However, since the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, when the issue first arose within the framework of relations between British India and the Chinese Qing government, part of the leadership in India has kept it alive beneath the political surface. We would like to remind our readers that, at the time, Chinese territories were up for grabs to anyone who was willing and able. From the beginning of 1950s, leaders of the newly independent Republic of India continued word games, started by the British establishment, in its discussions on whether or not Beijing had “sovereignty” or “suzerainty” over Tibet.

The word “Tibet” (and most likely “Pakistan” and probably “Bangladesh” and “Myanmar” too) is, we reiterate, part of the “subconscious” of those in the Indian government who consider themselves to be the successors of British India’s establishment. It would be best for everyone concerned if these words were to snugly remain there from now onwards, without ever making their way into the political landscape.

Undoubtedly, modern-day India would feel much more comfort if it were separated from present-day China by Tibet that Beijing had “suzerainty” over. In other words, if the region was a quasi-state with no PRC forces in its territory.

However, this has not been the case since 1951, and the situation is unlikely to change. And former and current leaders of China have definitively spoken about this on more than one occasion. It must also be noted that some part of India’s modern territory is in the “subconscious” of the PRC leadership too.

We are referring here to Arunachal Pradesh (with an area of 84,000 square kilometers) or one of the Seven Sister States in the northeast of India. All seven states are connected to the rest of the nation via the Siliguri Corridor (or Chicken’s Neck), which is only 50 km wide in its narrowest section.

Similarly, India’s leadership does not view the ownership over Arunachal Pradesh as a subject for negotiations. As early as the middle of the last century, PRC’s leaders made unsuccessful attempts to exchange the Aksai Chin region (located in the western part of the LAC) for the aforementioned state.

And again we reiterate: these days Special Representatives are engaged in talks about various “minor details”, which are still extremely important.

As for example is the establishment of the border that will pass through the Doklam plateau (only 150-200 km from the Chicken’s Neck). This means that if a military conflict against the PRC was to erupt, all seven of India’s northeastern states would be just one offensive away from being cut off from the rest of the country. And this explains the urgency of the situation that arose in the Doklam region in the summer of 2017.

Finally, it is also important to note that, during the process of resolving the border issues, there is no other option
but to, by and large, treat the present circumstances that have come to pass as the starting point of the negotiations, and to completely eliminate any “phantom limb pain” from policies currently pursued.

So let Special Representatives from India and China continue with their annual meetings and their discussions about issues that may be viewed as “small potatoes”. After all, the final aim of these negotiations is to agree on and subsequently ratify the appropriately drawn up border treaty (with the boundary replacing the current LAC). The pact will become an important means of ensuring stable relations between the two Asian giants, and will also serve as the basis and an example for resolving equally complex territorial disputes plaguing the relationship between India and Pakistan.

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