

China-India relations remain a 'challenge'

Border row could take decades to resolve, but does not stand in way of talks, diplomat says

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The dispute over territorial limits in the Doklam region remains the top source of friction between India and Beijing, the visiting Indian ambassador to China said yesterday even as he insisted bilateral ties were not being held hostage by the issue.

In his first official visit to Hong Kong since becoming India's point man in China last October, Gautam Bambawale also reiterated his government's sharp reservations over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – viewed by New Delhi as an affront to Indian sovereignty.

The veteran China hand, however, said there were silver linings in the relationship after a "challenging" 2017. The rise of China's Xiaomi as the top smartphone brand in India and the roaring success of the Bollywood film *Dangal* in China were evidence that ties were thriving despite the Doklam crisis, the Indian envoy told an audience of business leaders at a lunchtime lecture organised by the Asia Society Hong Kong Centre.

"If the 'boundary question' as India calls it could be resolved, I don't see other difficulties between India and China," Bambawale said. "Both of us have given it very high priority. It is the number one priority because we realise this is the one issue which really separates us."

He declined, however, to offer a timeline for the resolution of the dispute when pressed during a question-and-answer session.



Indian ambassador to China Gautam Bambawale.

"It could be done in a few days or it could take a few decades. Let me not hold out too much promise," said Bambawale, who has had two previous stints in China, including as deputy head of mission.

The career diplomat has also served as India's envoy to Bhutan and Pakistan. Last October, he took over as Indian ambassador to China from Vijay Gokhale, the top civil servant in the Indian foreign ministry.

That handover followed India's months-long stand-off with Beijing over Doklam that was described as one of the worst diplomatic crises between the countries since the brief 1962 war over the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

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The crisis was triggered by Chinese soldiers extending a road through the Doklam area contiguous with Bhutan. India – which has no claim over the area – subsequently deployed troops to halt the project.

Last August, both sides said they were disengaging, but reports of heavy Chinese troop build-ups and construction in the area suggest the People's Liberation Army has dug in rather than retreated from the area.

Observers say India fears China is making inroads into Doklam – a "trijunction" between China's Tibet, Bhutan, and India's Sikkim state – as a way to gain access to India's northeast.

That region is connected to the rest of India by a thin strip of land known as a "chicken neck".

Despite the tensions, Bambawale said it should not be lost on the public "that in the absence of a confirmed boundary line between India and China, we have over the last 30 years maintained peace and tranquillity on the ground including during [the recent crisis]".

Asked about India's cool response to Beijing's "Belt and Road Initiative", Bambawale said the status of CPEC as a "flagship project" of the vast infrastructure-building drive was the main sticking point holding back India's participation. The US\$57 billion CPEC passes through Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which is claimed by India. "We don't have a problem with the rest of the 'Belt and Road Initiative'," he said.

"We have a major problem on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor because we believe it violates our sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The Indian envoy, meanwhile, urged Hong Kong to use its status as an air hub to deepen people-to-people ties between India and China. He said the city should aim to emulate Singapore, which has spearheaded efforts to bring Southeast Asia and India closer through air connectivity.



We have a major problem on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

GAUTAM BAMBAWALE

There are some 500 flights between Indian cities and Singapore each week, fivefold the number of flights connecting the South Asian giant and Hong Kong.

"I think Hong Kong can play the role of a gateway from China to India ... because you understand India much better than the rest of China does," Bambawale said.

The diplomat also called on chief executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, and signed a double-taxation avoidance agreement with financial secretary Paul Chan Mo-po.