

## **Escalating Tactics: China's Stapled Visa Regime.**

Sonika Gupta, Assistant Professor & Coordinator, IITM China Studies Centre

Chinese embassy in India issuing stapled visas to Indian citizens from certain parts of the country is contributing to increasing mistrust in bilateral relations. This is the most recent low point in a series of actions and counter actions by both sides in the last two years. Starting with issuing of stapled visas to Indian citizens from Jammu and Kashmir in 2008, the Chinese embassy has extended the practice to what it calls other "disputed areas" such as Arunachal Pradesh. The issue has already resulted in suspension of high-level defence talks in July 2010 over the issue. Defence exchanges have recently resumed but the issue stands unresolved. This step is regressive to say the least and has the potential to becoming a major roadblock in building mutual trust.

Despite assurance from the foreign secretary Nirupama Rao earlier this year that the issue of stapled visas has been raised with Premier Wen Jiabao, China continues to issue stapled visas challenging India's territorial claims over its own borders. Rao had made it clear that the issue of stapled visas is one that India expects China to resolve keeping in mind core Indian concerns. However, given the current state of relations and tensions over Chinese troop presence and defence infrastructure in border areas, the Chinese are not likely to play ball. The issue is now likely to be raised in the next meeting later this year between National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon and Chinese State Councillor Dai Bingguo, special representatives of India and China respectively.

Issuing stapled visas to residents of Arunachal Pradesh is part of the recent Chinese strategy to revitalize its claim to Arunachal as part of China. As part of this strategy, in 2009, China objected to the Asian Development Bank funding a watershed management project in Arunachal Pradesh claiming the state to be part of its own territory. India successfully foiled the Chinese objection at the ADB and the Bank approved the loan for a watershed project. However, China has continued to argue its claim over Arunachal at ADB and other fora.

Extension of the stapled visa regime to Arunachal is arguably in response to New Delhi's unwillingness to prevent The Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh in November 2009. The Chinese strongly objected to the visit coming as it did after a similar visit to Taiwan. For China, since The Dalai Lama is a "splittist" the choice of Arunachal sent a strong message of challenging Chinese sovereignty. The visit had the unfortunate impact of linked Tibet, Taiwan and Arunachal, issues that China is most sensitive about.

This is a rather interesting situation under which both India and China are protecting their territorial integrity and neither is willing to make concessions. At the same time, India has, on the face of it, not changed its policy of not allowing The Dalai Lama to engage in political activities on its soil. Similarly, China has not ostensibly made any

new claim with regard to its claim on Arunachal. However, by issuing stapled visas to people from Arunachal China has added another tactic to its overall strategy to claiming Arunachal or “South Tibet” as its own territory.

India and China have successfully constructed a dialogue process over their mutually disputed border. While it is arguable that pace of the border negotiation is slow, it must be understood in the context of the stability in India-China relations. For China to raise issues that are extraneous to the jointly agreed upon process of dialogue by flagging ‘disputed areas’ in India through this special visa process is indicative of the downward turn in bilateral relations.

India has responded to Chinese claims to Arunachal by the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh making tour of the state in 2008 with a slew of development projects sanctioned. Prime Minister’s visit was significant as it was the first visit of a PM to the state in over last fifteen years. In 2009 the Indian Air Force also announced the renovation of an airbase in Tezpur in Assam to station a fleet of Sukhoi-30s. Recent reports indicate a broad modernization of the entire eastern air command including upgradation of airfields, network-centric operations and air defences along the border with China.

In India’s case it is important to build domestic political consensus on the any eventual bilateral agreement between India and China. Lacking a domestic political consensus there is little likelihood of any agreement being actually carried out. In this context, it becomes crucial that the perception of China in India not carry the negative image of presenting new challenges to India’s territorial sovereignty, which this new Chinese visa regime does.

With regard to India’s domestic political considerations, the Congress-led UPA government cannot risk taking a conciliatory stand on this issue under the present circumstances. It is already under fire from the main opposition party BJP not letting the recent bombings in Mumbai affect the peace process with Pakistan. Not taking a strong enough stand with regard to the stapled visa issue will allow the opposition to argue that the government is following a weak foreign policy when it comes to dealing with India’s most important neighbours and the national security concerns with regard to them.

The author can be reached at [sonika@iitm.ac.in](mailto:sonika@iitm.ac.in)