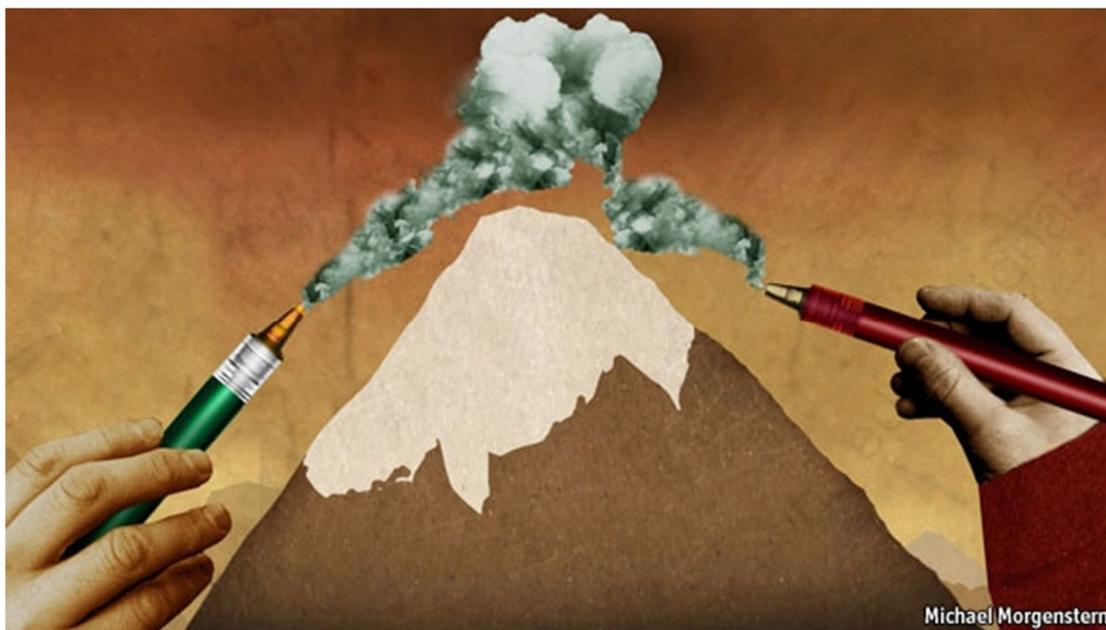


Smoke without fire?

A bad press is one explanation for the perennial tensions in China-India relations



Against the insistent throb of a threatening drumbeat, an Indian television report set out a history of more than five decades of “systematic” Chinese build-up on India’s borders. Roads have been extended to India’s “very doorstep”. Glaciers have been tampered with, affecting India’s water supply. And now, in the latest “provocation” in April, China was planning an astronomical observatory in the Aksai Chin, a remote area adjoining Indian Ladakh that is claimed by India. Japan and South Korea had been asked to help. So China was not just “muscle-flexing”; it was “internationalising” its claim to disputed territory. This is the China with which Indians are familiar in their press: one that nurses the long-term aim of doing India down.

The problem is that the report about the observatory was not true. This was grist to the mill of those critics who blame the media for souring India’s relations with China. They include China’s prime minister, Wen Jiabao, who 18 months ago accused the Indian press of sensationalising tensions. One Indian report of Mr Wen’s remarks could justify the coverage only with the rather feeble claim, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

Critics of the press point out that 50 years have passed since China humiliated India in a short war over borders, including the Aksai Chin. It is 25 years since they agreed to set their disputes aside and get on with other things. And get on they have. China is now India’s biggest trading partner. And the two countries co-operate on issues ranging from climate change to seabed research. Both governments insist they want good relations.

In India an apparent anti-China bias can be subtle. In August 2010, for example, there was a fuss when an Indian general was refused a visa to China. The Indian press suggested it was because he had been posted in Kashmir, and took it as evidence of a hardening of Chinese support for Pakistan’s side of that bitter dispute. But Kanti Bajpai, an expert in India-China relations at the National University of Singapore (NUS), points out that this largely ignored another plausible explanation: tit-for-tat retaliation for India’s refusal to allow a Chinese diplomat to fulfil a speaking engagement in a troubled north-eastern state, Manipur.

On the Chinese side, too, the press is not uniformly friendly. Indeed, as in India, it can be much more aggressive than the party line. Chinese journalists, disingenuously, argue that this reflects public opinion. True, it is no longer obvious what constitutes an “official” view. Global Times, for example, is a newspaper owned by the Communist Party’s People’s Daily. Yet it

takes a strongly nationalist line, sometimes implicitly critical of the government. The Chinese blogosphere is even more confusing. It is far from an ideological free-for all, and remains heavily policed. So the dividing lines between "outrageous-but-tolerated", "officially sanctioned" and "official policy" are blurred.

For their part, those Indians inclined to fret about China's intentions can look at the views of Chinese bloggers and panic. A study of online Chinese opinion of India and Indians published last year in the *China Quarterly*, an academic journal, by Simon Shen of the Hong Kong Institute of Education, found Chinese netizens "more nationalistic, xenophobic and chauvinistic" than official policy. A good example came in 2009 when a Chinese website, the official-sounding "China International Institute for Strategic Studies", posted an article arguing that "If China takes a little action, the so-called Great Indian Federation can be broken up into 30 pieces." The Indian press duly reported this as a threat, from an "authoritative" site. In fact it was an unofficial group.

In an effort to help bridge the media divide, the Institute of South Asian Studies at NUS in May convened a workshop on the role of the press in India-China relations. It brought together practitioners and experts from China and India. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was no trans-Himalayan meeting of minds. The Chinese journalists were frank that their role in bilateral relations was to promote them. The Indians thought theirs was to report and analyse them.

Some consensus was reached, however, in identifying problems. Only four Indian reporters are based in China, and only a dozen or so Chinese reporters in India. Indian commentary on China tends to be monopolised by government spin and a few loquacious hawks, including retired spy chiefs. One, for example, warned on May 1st that China "may wish to try a limited border war sooner [rather] than later."

A useful scapegoat for Chinese journalists at the forum was the Western press, which they accused of playing up frictions and influencing perceptions in both countries. Take the reporting of India's launch in April of an Agni 5 missile. India, as any government would, said the Agni's development was not aimed at anyone. China reacted mildly. Yet almost all foreign coverage noted that the missile put many Chinese cities within India's range. For the Chinese reporters, this was subjective and alarmist. For most of the Indian reporters, it was useful context.

Inconvenient untruths

It also happens to be true. Nor is it alarmist to point out that India's strategists have contingency plans for conflict with China, however unlikely. It was the perceived Chinese threat that India cited to justify its nuclear test in 1998. And China still goes out of its way to remind the world that it has not dropped its claim to "south Tibet", in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

At an event in Singapore linked to the workshop, Sunanda Datta-Ray, an Indian journalist, recalled an earlier incident in the Aksai Chin, where in the late 1950s China built a road linking Tibet and its north-western region of Xinjiang. Both governments denied the road's existence. An Indian reporter went to look and saw it was there. Today some Indian press reports about China may seem paranoid. But mutual suspicion between the two governments is not the messengers' fault.

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 403, n. 8787, p. 54, 2-8 Jun. 2012.