



The Border as a Speech Act: Securitization of the Sino-Indian Frontier in Contemporary Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines the securitization of the Sino-Indian border through the lens of speech act theory, analyzing how language and discourse transform geographical boundaries into existential security issues. Utilizing the Copenhagen School's securitization framework, this research investigates how political elites, media narratives, and academic discourses have constructed the Sino-Indian frontier as a security concern requiring exceptional measures. Through discourse analysis of official statements, media coverage, and policy documents from 2017-2023, the study identifies key securitizing moves that frame border issues as threats to national identity, territorial sovereignty, and regional stability. The findings reveal that securitization processes have intensified following the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, with distinct patterns in Indian and Chinese securitizing narratives. This research contributes to understanding how borders become securitized through discursive practices and how these constructions influence bilateral relations and regional security dynamics in South Asia.

Keywords: Securitization theory, Sino-Indian relations, border disputes, speech acts, security discourse, Copenhagen School.

Introduction

The 3,488-kilometer boundary between India and China represents one of the world's most contested and militarized frontiers. Beyond its physical manifestation, this border exists as a discursive construction—continually produced and reproduced through language, symbols, and social practices. The manner in which this frontier is articulated in political speeches, policy documents, media narratives, and academic discourses has profound implications for bilateral relations and regional security dynamics.

This paper examines how the Sino-Indian border has been securitized through speech acts—defined as utterances that not only describe reality but actively construct it (Austin, 1962). Drawing on the Copenhagen School's securitization theory (Buzan *et al.*, 1998), this research investigates how political elites and other actors have framed border issues as existential threats requiring emergency measures beyond normal political procedures. The central argument is that the process of securitization transforms a geographical demarcation into a site of exceptional politics through discursive practices.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to unpack how language shapes security realities, particularly in the context of one of Asia's most consequential bilateral relationships. By critically analyzing securitizing moves in contemporary discourse, this paper aims to contribute to a

more nuanced understanding of Sino-Indian border tensions beyond material factors.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- i). How has the Sino-Indian border been constructed as a security issue through speech acts in contemporary political, media, and academic discourses?
- ii). What securitizing narratives and counter-narratives have emerged in response to key border incidents, particularly following the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes?
- iii). How do these securitizing moves influence policy outcomes and bilateral relations?

The paper proceeds as follows: First, it reviews relevant literature on securitization theory and border studies. Second, it outlines the methodology employed for discourse analysis. Third, it presents findings on the securitization patterns observed in official statements, media coverage, and policy documents. Finally, it discusses the implications of these findings for understanding Sino-Indian relations and offers conclusions about the role of discourse in constructing border security.

Literature Review

Securitization Theory and the Speech Act Approach: Securitization theory, as developed by the Copenhagen School, provides a framework for understanding how issues

become security concerns through discursive processes. Buzan *et al.* (1998) define securitization as the process whereby actors "frame an issue as an existential threat to a referent object, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure" (p. 23). This approach emphasizes the performative nature of security language—utterances that do not merely describe security concerns but actively constitute them.

Wæver (1995) conceptualizes security as a speech act, arguing that "by saying 'security,' a state representative declares an emergency condition, thus claiming a right to use whatever means are necessary to block a threatening development" (p. 55). This perspective shifts attention from objective threats to the processes through which security meanings are constructed intersubjectively.

Recent contributions to securitization theory have expanded its scope beyond elite discourse to examine the role of images, practices, and audience reception (Balzacq *et al.*, 2016; Hansen, 2011). Williams (2003) examines how visual representations contribute to securitization processes, while Balzacq (2005) emphasizes the importance of context and audience acceptance in successful securitization.

Border Studies and Discourse Analysis: Border studies have increasingly incorporated discursive approaches to understand how boundaries are socially constructed. Newman (2006) argues that borders are "not merely physical lines on the ground but sets of social and cultural practices" (p. 143). Paasi (1996) emphasizes the role of discourse in border-making, noting that boundaries are continually produced and reproduced through narratives of identity, sovereignty, and security.

In the context of Asian border disputes, Fravel (2008) examines the conditions under which China has escalated or compromised in territorial disputes, while Smith (2015) analyzes how border narratives in South Asia intertwine with national identity construction. More specifically on the Sino-Indian border, Hoffmann (2018) traces how colonial cartographic practices continue to shape contemporary border conflicts, and Jacob (2017) examines how historical memories inform current border discourses.

Sino-Indian Border Discourse: Several scholars have examined discursive dimensions of the Sino-Indian border dispute. Garver (2001) traces how competing historical narratives about the frontier have shaped bilateral relations, while Maxwell (1999) analyzes how divergent cartographic interpretations contribute to persistent tensions. More recently, Saran (2017) examines how national security discourses in both countries have hardened territorial positions.

Studies examining media representations of border incidents include Mukherjee (2018), who analyzes Indian media coverage of the 2017 Doklam standoff, and Zhao (2020), who examines Chinese media narratives during the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes. These studies highlight how media frames contribute to public perceptions of border issues as existential threats.

However, there remains a gap in systematically applying securitization theory to analyze how the Sino-Indian border is constructed through speech acts across multiple domains of discourse. This paper seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of securitizing moves in contemporary narratives about the frontier.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis approach

to examine securitizing moves in contemporary narratives about the Sino-Indian border. The analysis focuses on texts produced between 2017 and 2023, a period encompassing major border incidents including the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes.

Data Collection

The research analyzes three categories of texts:

- i). **Official Discourse:** speeches by political leaders, diplomatic statements, parliamentary debates, and policy documents from both India and China (n=45)
- ii). **Media Discourse:** news articles, editorials, and opinion pieces from leading publications in both countries (n=120)
- iii). **Academic Discourse:** journal articles, think tank reports, and books analyzing the border dispute (n=35)

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the data corpus by category and country of origin.

Table 1: Distribution of Analyzed Texts by Category and Country

Text Category	Indian Sources	Chinese Sources	International Sources	Total
Official Discourse	25	20	-	45
Media Discourse	60	45	15	120
Academic Discourse	15	10	10	35
Total	100	75	25	200

Analytical Framework

The discourse analysis employs a three-step analytical process derived from securitization theory:

- i). **Identification of Securitizing Moves:** Statements that present the border as an existential threat to a referent object (e.g., territorial integrity, national security, regional stability)
- ii). **Analysis of Linguistic Features:** Rhetorical devices, metaphors, and framing techniques used to construct security narratives
- iii). **Contextual Analysis:** Examination of how securitizing moves respond to specific incidents, historical narratives, or broader geopolitical developments

Additionally, the analysis differentiates between successful and unsuccessful securitization attempts based on evidence of policy outcomes, exceptional measures, and audience acceptance.

Coding Scheme

Texts were coded according to the following categories:

- **Referent Objects:** What is presented as being threatened (territorial integrity, sovereignty, national identity, economic interests)
- **Securitizing Actors:** Who articulates the security threat (political leaders, military officials, media commentators, academics)
- **Threat Framing:** How the border issue is characterized (military threat, strategic challenge, civilizational clash)
- **Proposed Measures:** What actions are justified in response to the perceived threat
- **Historical References:** How historical narratives are invoked to legitimize security claims
- **Audience Reception:** Evidence of public or institutional acceptance of securitizing moves

Methodological Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis predominantly examines elite discourse and may not fully capture grassroots narratives. Second, translation issues arise when analyzing Chinese-language sources, potentially affecting nuanced interpretation. Third, access to certain official documents, particularly from China, was limited by confidentiality restrictions.

Findings

The analysis reveals distinct patterns in how the Sino-Indian

border has been securitized through speech acts in contemporary discourse. This section presents key findings organized by thematic categories and temporal evolution.

Evolving Patterns of Securitization (2017-2023)

The analysis identifies a significant intensification in securitizing moves following the June 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, which marked the first deadly border confrontation between Indian and Chinese forces since 1975. Table 2 presents the frequency of securitizing statements across different periods and discourse types.

Table 2: Frequency of Securitizing Statements by Period and Discourse Type

Period	Official Discourse	Media Discourse	Academic Discourse	Total
Pre-Doklam (Jan-Jun 2017)	8	22	5	35
Doklam Standoff (Jun-Aug 2017)	42	87	14	143
Post-Doklam to Pre-Galwan (Sep 2017-May 2020)	23	53	18	94
Galwan Crisis (Jun-Dec 2020)	68	153	27	248
Post-Galwan (Jan 2021-Dec 2023)	45	106	31	182

These findings indicate clear spikes in securitizing discourse during crisis periods, with the Galwan incident generating more than 70% more securitizing statements than the Doklam standoff across all discourse types. Furthermore, the post-Galwan period shows a sustained higher baseline of securitization compared to the pre-Galwan period, suggesting a lasting impact on security discourse.

Referent Objects in Securitization Narratives

The analysis identifies several key referent objects that are presented as threatened in securitizing narratives about the border. Table 3 illustrates the frequency with which different referent objects appear in the discourse.

Table 3: Frequency of Referent Objects in Securitizing Narratives

Referent Object	Indian Discourse (%)	Chinese Discourse (%)
Territorial Integrity	87	72
National Security	78	84
Economic Interests	45	53
Regional Stability	38	62
National Identity/Honor	73	56
International Status	51	68
Sovereignty	92	95

While sovereignty and territorial integrity are prominent referent objects in both Indian and Chinese discourse, there are notable differences in emphasis. Indian securitizing narratives more frequently invoke national identity and honor (73% vs. 56%), while Chinese narratives place greater emphasis on regional stability (62% vs. 38%) and international status (68% vs. 51%).

Dominant Securitization Frames

The analysis identifies five dominant frames through which the border is securitized in contemporary discourse:

- i). **Historical Injustice Frame:** Emphasizes historical grievances and portrays current border tensions as continuations of past injustices. This frame appears in 68% of Indian texts and 57% of Chinese texts.
- ii). **Strategic Competition Frame:** Positions border tensions within broader geopolitical rivalry between rising powers. This frame appears in 75% of both Indian and Chinese texts.
- iii). **Sovereignty Violation Frame:** Emphasizes infringement of sovereign territory and presents border incursions as existential threats. This frame appears in 87% of Indian texts and 82% of Chinese texts.
- iv). **National Honor Frame:** Links border defense to national prestige and identity. This frame appears in 62% of Indian texts and 48% of Chinese texts.
- v). **Regional Stability Frame:** Presents border tensions as threats to regional peace and development. This frame appears in 41% of Indian texts and 66% of Chinese texts.

Linguistic Features of Securitizing Moves

The analysis identifies several linguistic features characteristic of securitizing moves in border discourse:

- i). **Temporal urgency markers:** Words and phrases indicating immediacy and emergency (e.g., "imminent threat," "critical juncture," "urgent response needed")
- ii). **Militarized metaphors:** Metaphorical language drawing on warfare terminology (e.g., "line of defense," "strategic battleground," "frontline of national security")
- iii). **Historical analogies:** References to previous conflicts to frame current situations (e.g., invocations of the 1962 war in Indian discourse)
- iv). **Sovereignty lexicon:** Repetitive use of terms related to sovereign rights and territorial integrity
- v). **Othering language:** Discursive construction of the adversary as aggressive, untrustworthy, or expansionist

Table 4 presents examples of these linguistic features from official statements following the Galwan Valley clashes.

Table 4: Examples of Securitizing Language in Official Statements (June-July 2020)

Linguistic Feature	Indian Official Statements	Chinese Official Statements
Temporal Urgency	"This situation requires urgent diplomatic and military responses to protect our territorial integrity" (Indian MEA, June 17, 2020)	"The frontier situation demands immediate attention to prevent further escalation" (Chinese MFA, June 16, 2020)
Militarized Metaphors	"Our border is the first line of defense for our civilization and sovereignty" (Indian Home Minister, June 28, 2020)	"The frontier is a shield protecting China's core development areas" (Chinese Defense Ministry, July 3, 2020)
Historical Analogies	"We must remember the lessons of 1962 and maintain constant vigilance" (Indian Defense Minister, July 5, 2020)	"History has proven that those who attempt to violate China's territorial sovereignty will face consequences" (Chinese Foreign Minister, June 24, 2020)
Sovereignty Lexicon	"Any attempt to unilaterally alter the status quo along the LAC is unacceptable and constitutes a direct violation of our sovereignty" (Indian PM, June 20, 2020)	"China's territorial sovereignty is sacred and inviolable" (Chinese President, July 7, 2020)
Othering Language	"Expansionist forces have been taught a befitting lesson by our brave soldiers" (Indian PM, July 3, 2020)	"Certain countries with hegemonic tendencies are attempting to challenge China's legitimate rights" (Chinese MFA Spokesperson, June 19, 2020)

Securitization Outcomes

The analysis identifies several policy outcomes that resulted from successful securitization of the border, including:

- i). **Exceptional economic measures:** Following the Galwan clashes, India implemented unprecedented economic measures against China, including banning over 200 Chinese mobile applications, restricting Chinese investments, and excluding Chinese companies from infrastructure projects.
- ii). **Military buildups:** Both countries significantly increased troop deployments and infrastructure development along the border. India deployed approximately 50,000 additional troops to the LAC in 2020-2021.
- iii). **Institutional changes:** India established a specialized China-focused diplomatic desk within its Ministry of External Affairs and restructured military commands with a greater focus on the China border.
- iv). **Budget allocations:** Defense spending priorities shifted toward border infrastructure and capabilities specifically designed for the Himalayan frontier.
- v). **Diplomatic realignments:** Both countries intensified alliance-building efforts with regional and global partners, framing these as responses to border security concerns.

Counter-Securitization and Desecuritization Attempts

While securitizing narratives dominated the discourse, the analysis also identifies counter-securitization and desecuritization attempts:

- i). **Economic pragmatism discourse:** Business groups and economic commentators in both countries attempted to desecuritize the border by emphasizing economic interdependence and the costs of confrontation.
- ii). **Diplomatic normalization narratives:** Foreign ministry officials occasionally employed desecuritizing language emphasizing dialogue and peaceful resolution.
- iii). **Partial securitization containment:** Both governments sometimes attempted to contain securitization to military domains while protecting economic cooperation.

These desecuritization attempts were particularly evident during diplomatic meetings and economic forums, but their success was limited, especially following the Galwan clashes, which triggered intense securitization across multiple domains.

Discussion

The findings reveal how the Sino-Indian border has been

transformed through speech acts from a geographical demarcation into a site of exceptional politics requiring emergency measures. This section discusses key implications of these findings.

Speech Acts as Border-Making Practices: The analysis demonstrates that borders exist not only as physical realities but as discursive constructions continually produced and reproduced through language. The intensification of securitizing discourse following the Galwan clashes illustrates how speech acts transform the meaning and significance of geographical boundaries. When political leaders declare that "every inch of sacred territory will be defended," they are not merely describing an existing security situation but actively constituting the border as a site requiring exceptional measures.

This finding aligns with Newman's (2006) conceptualization of borders as social and cultural practices rather than merely physical lines. The securitization of the Sino-Indian frontier demonstrates how discursive practices make certain interpretations of the border dominant while marginalizing others. For instance, economic and cultural interpretations of the frontier as a zone of exchange and interaction become subordinated to security interpretations once successful securitization occurs.

Audience Reception and Successful Securitization: The findings indicate varying degrees of successful securitization depending on audience reception. In the Indian context, securitizing moves by political leaders following the Galwan clashes received broad acceptance across political, media, and public domains, as evidenced by bipartisan support for government measures against China and sustained media amplification of security narratives. This acceptance facilitated exceptional measures including economic restrictions that would have been politically challenging under normal circumstances.

In the Chinese context, audience dynamics differ significantly due to state control of media and civil society. Securitization success is more evident in policy outcomes than in measurable public acceptance. However, the analysis of Chinese social media discussions (where accessible) indicates that nationalist narratives framing India as threatening territorial sovereignty gained significant traction among online audiences.

These findings support Balzacq's (2005) emphasis on the importance of audience acceptance in successful securitization while highlighting how audience dynamics vary across different political systems.

Securitization as Identity Construction: A significant finding is how border securitization intertwines with national identity construction. Securitizing moves frequently invoke notions of civilizational continuity, national honor, and collective historical memory. In Indian discourse, the border is often framed not merely as a line on a map but as the frontier of an ancient civilization that must be defended against encroachment. Similarly, Chinese securitizing narratives frequently reference the "century of humiliation" and frame border defense as part of national rejuvenation.

This finding supports Campbell's (1992) argument that security practices are fundamentally about the production and reproduction of identity. By securitizing the border, political actors simultaneously reinforce particular conceptions of national identity while marginally excluding alternative identity constructions that might facilitate cooperation or compromise.

Institutional Consequences of Border Securitization: The findings reveal how successful securitization of the border has profound institutional consequences. Following the Galwan clashes, both countries established new institutional mechanisms specifically focused on border management. India created specialized diplomatic and military units focused on China, while China reorganized its Western Theater Command with greater emphasis on the Indian border.

These institutional adaptations reflect what Bigo (2002) describes as the materialization of security discourse in bureaucratic practices and structures. Once successfully securitized through speech acts, the border becomes institutionalized as a security concern through organizational changes, budget allocations, and standard operating procedures. These institutional adaptations then tend to perpetuate securitized interpretations of the border, creating path dependencies that are difficult to reverse.

Media Amplification of Securitizing Moves: The analysis reveals the critical role of media in amplifying and legitimizing securitizing moves. In both countries, but particularly in India where media enjoys greater independence, news organizations significantly amplified official securitizing narratives through editorial choices, framing techniques, and selective emphasis. Indian media coverage of the Galwan clashes predominantly adopted military framing (76% of articles) and employed emotionally charged language emphasizing sacrifice, honor, and threat.

This finding supports Williams' (2003) argument about the importance of examining how security threats are visually and narratively mediated. The media does not merely report on securitization but actively participates in the securitization process by selectively amplifying certain interpretations of events while marginalizing others.

Limitations of Desecuritization Attempts: The findings indicate that desecuritization attempts have had limited success in the Sino-Indian context. While economic pragmatists and diplomatic moderates in both countries have attempted to frame border issues as technical matters that can be resolved through normal political processes, these efforts have struggled to gain traction against dominant securitizing narratives.

This suggests that once successful securitization occurs, particularly when reinforced by violent incidents like the Galwan clashes, desecuritization becomes increasingly difficult. This aligns with Hansen's (2012) observation that desecuritization often faces significant discursive and institutional obstacles, particularly when security framings

have become embedded in organizational practices and public consciousness.

Conclusion

This research has examined how the Sino-Indian border has been constructed as a security issue through speech acts in contemporary discourse. The analysis reveals that the border exists not merely as a geographical reality but as a discursive construction continually produced and reproduced through language and social practices. Through securitizing moves by political elites, media narratives, and academic discourse, the frontier has been transformed from a disputed boundary into an existential security concern requiring exceptional measures.

Several key conclusions emerge from this analysis:

First, securitization of the border intensified significantly following the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, with measurable increases in securitizing speech acts across official, media, and academic domains. This securitization has facilitated exceptional policy measures including unprecedented economic restrictions, military buildups, and institutional adaptations.

Second, securitizing narratives differ notably between Indian and Chinese discourse. Indian securitizing moves more frequently invoke national identity and historical memory, while Chinese narratives place greater emphasis on sovereignty principles and regional stability. These differences reflect broader distinctions in strategic culture and historical experience.

Third, successful securitization depends significantly on audience reception and contextual factors. The receptiveness of audiences to securitizing moves increased dramatically following violent incidents like the Galwan clashes, demonstrating how physical events interact with discursive constructions to shape security realities.

Fourth, attempts at desecuritization face significant challenges once the border has been successfully securitized, particularly when securitized interpretations become embedded in institutional practices and public consciousness.

These findings contribute to theoretical understanding of how borders are constructed through speech acts and how security meanings emerge through discursive practices. They also have practical implications for policymakers seeking to manage border tensions, suggesting that addressing securitized narratives may be as important as resolving physical demarcation disputes.

Future research could expand this analysis by examining grassroots and subaltern discourses about the border, investigating how securitization processes differ across various regional and linguistic contexts within each country, and conducting comparative analyses with other disputed borders globally.

Understanding the discursive construction of the Sino-Indian border is essential not only for academic analysis but for practical conflict management. As long as the border remains highly securitized through speech acts, opportunities for cooperative management and dispute resolution will likely remain limited. Recognizing the power of discourse in constructing security realities is a necessary step toward transforming one of Asia's most consequential bilateral relationships.

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