

**JIPA**

THE AIR FORCE  
JOURNAL OF INDO-PACIFIC AFFAIRS

# *Indo-Pacific Perspectives*

**No End in Sight:  
Understanding the  
Sino-Indian Border  
Dispute**

June 2021

# Our Staff

## **Editor In Chief**

Dr. Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell

## **Series Editor**

Dr. Peter Harris

## **Art & Design**

Dr. Achala Gunasekara-Rockwell

# *Indo-Pacific Perspectives*

June 2021

## *No End in Sight*

Dr. Peter Harris, editor

## *India–China Border*

*Disputes and Strategic Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*

Dr. Ashok Sharma

## *Putting the Border*

*Dispute in Historical Context*

Dr. Xuecheng Liu

## *The China–India*

*Water Dispute*

Dr. Selina Ho

*The Pakistan, India, and China Triangle*

Dr. Maira Qaddos

## *China–India Border*

*Crisis*

Jeff M. Smith

*Tracing the Link between China's*

*Concept of Sovereignty and Military Aggression*

Dr. Sriparna Pathak

# 1 No End in Sight

## Understanding the Sino-Indian Border Dispute

Dr. Peter Harris, editor



India and China compromise over a third of the world's population. Both maintain operable nuclear triads in addition to being the planet's second and third highest spenders on conventional military arms. When the two countries' militaries came to blows in May-June of last year, then, it is no surprise that the whole world took notice. Dozens of slain Indian and Chinese soldiers was a tragedy. A wider conflagration between the two

nuclear powers could easily have become a catastrophe.

At stake was disputed territory high in the Himalayan Mountains. For a variety of historical reasons, India and China have never been able to agree upon a border to separate their two states. In the east, China claims much of what is now governed as the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In the west, India claims the territory of Aksai Chin, governed by Beijing as part of Xinjiang and Tibet. In between those two disputed territories runs a 2,500-mile border (punctuated by the independent states of Nepal and Bhutan) that has never been demarcated. Even the so-called Line of Actual Control (LAC) that supposedly separates Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory is the subject of vigorous dispute. Both sides station troops along portions of the LAC and conduct regular patrols. They jockey for position by building infrastructure—camps, roads, lookout posts—and trying to occupy strategic points. But physical clashes are rare. Until last year, fatalities had not been recorded in decades.

In this roundtable, six scholars—some based in the region, the rest longtime analysts of Sino-Indian relations—put the recent border

clashes in context. Liu Xuecheng begins by lamenting the flareup in violence and calling for a return to diplomatic negotiations. Liu is frank that a resolution (or “settlement”) of the border dispute is unlikely to materialize any time soon. The best that China and India can hope for is to “manage” the situation and avoid further bloodshed. Liu encourages readers in China and India to put the border dispute in a wider perspective, urging that this singular issue not be allowed to blind either side to the manifest benefits of political and economic cooperation.

Offering a view from Pakistan, Maira Qaddos agrees with Liu that peaceful co-existence between India and China is both possible and essential for regional prosperity. Qaddos concedes that, in Pakistan, there had been little sympathy for India during the bloody clashes with China. As she explains, it is perhaps overdetermined that Pakistan will always tend to side with China in any conflict with India. Few readers will be surprised by this. But Qaddos warns that such zero-sum thinking can only lead to ruin in the long term. What is needed is for China, India, and Pakistan to all find common ground for the sake of peace and stability across South Asia and beyond. Qaddos is realistic about the

trilateral relationship’s future; she knows that the India-China and India-Pakistan sides of the triangle will remain fraught for the foreseeable future. But she is also hopeful, recognizing that a cycle of conflict, humiliation, resentment, and more conflict will bring nothing good for the people of South Asia.

Sripana Pathak offers a starkly different, less optimistic take on last year’s clashes. According to Pathak, it is unrealistic to expect Indians to subordinate their country’s border dispute to economic or strategic concerns, as Liu wants. There is too much anger. The killing of Indian soldiers—unjustified and unprovoked—will not easily be forgotten. Pathak represents a prominent strand of thought among Indians when she squarely lays the blame for last year’s deadly clashes at the feet of China’s leaders. She argues that it is China’s conception of sovereignty—one rooted in a unilateral concern for restoring China’s former glory rather than an understanding that rival powers each have conflicting claims that must be reconciled—that fuels the bilateral dispute. In the end, it is China that is at fault; it is China that must change for there to be peace.

Ashok Sharma expands on this view to suggest that China’s

actions along the Sino-Indian border did not just provoke a backlash among the Indian public and political class—they also spurred international-level pushback against perceived Chinese aggression. In this sense, Sharma explains, conflict along the LAC must be considered part of a larger Indo-Pacific struggle for mastery. In Sharma’s telling, international opinion seems to have firmly swung behind India and against China—especially among the Quad (and “Quad Plus”) states. Sharma’s analysis leaves little room for optimism that the Sino-Indian border dispute can be managed or resolved bilaterally; if the conflict truly does become regionalized—just another theater in the Indo-Pacific great game—then it surely will become unlikely that a grand bargain between India and China could ever be struck.

Selina Ho adds to the discussion of hope versus pessimism with her analysis of water security in the Sino-Indian borderlands. On the one hand, Ho explains that, against all the odds, both China and India have managed to desecuritize their relationship over water resources—even though access to water ought to be considered one of the highest stakes issues to define the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship. This raises the possibility, perhaps, that the two sides could

desecuritize other aspects of their relationship. Might the border itself be moved outside of the realm of security and into the realm of normal politics and diplomacy? Unfortunately, Ho argues, this might be wishful thinking. While it is promising that China and India have so far found ways to avoid securitizing water management issues, this bright spot in their relations does not provide much of a blueprint for desecuritizing other aspects of the relationship. On the contrary, the trend might well be in the opposite direction: that is, toward the eventual securitization of water rather than the desecuritization of other issues.

Finally, Jeff Smith offers yet another reason to be gloomy about the prospects of a peaceful resolution to the dispute: the fact that Chinese leaders seem to have adopted the position that the question of demarcating the international boundary cannot be divorced from the question of Indian “interference” in Tibetan affairs. From the Chinese perspective, this makes some sense. After all, what use is an agreed-upon international border if New Delhi persists in pursuing policies that meddle in affairs across that border? India, however, is unlikely to abandon the Tibetan exile community as the price of settling its border disputes;

to agree to China's demands in this respect would be nothing better than base appeasement. Viewed in this context, the border dispute is not so much about lines on a map as it is about mutual trust, respect, and toleration of each other's internal politics. Lines on a map would be hard enough. Adding the other issues to the mix makes the problem all but intractable.

These contributions make clear that just as China and India disagree on the border between their states, so too do they disagree over what the border dispute is truly about. As the old adage goes, where you stand depends on where you sit. The view from China looks precious little like the view from India. In many cases, the perspective of those living closest to the border seems to be distorted—quite understandably—by anger, distrust, and a burning sense of injustice. This spells danger ahead. The entire region—indeed, the whole world—has an interest in avoiding a return to violence along the Sino-Indian border. But efforts to manage the conflict failed badly last year. It is not obvious that the world can afford those efforts to break down again. ■

**Dr. Peter Harris**

Dr. Harris is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Colorado State University and Editor of the *Indo-Pacific Perspectives* series.

# 2 | Putting the Border Dispute in Historical Context

Dr. Xuecheng Liu



The Sino-Indian border dispute is left over from history, both the legacy of colonial period and the more recent history of Sino-Indian relations. Since the 1950s, the border dispute has always shadowed the ebb and flow of the Sino-Indian relations. Looking back at the twists and turns of their bilateral relations for the past 70 years, it is clear that the

simmering border disputes have existed along three dimensions: legal arguments, international circumstance, and domestic politics. The interplay of these three dimensions has complicated the efforts to settle the territorial disputes between China and India.

The Chinese and Indian governments have attempted to resolve their border disputes through diplomatic negotiations since the 1980s. The border negotiations have been institutionalized and have generated several meaningful agreements—not least of all, several effective dialogue mechanisms for maintaining peace and tranquility along the border areas. However, the respective positions of the Indian and Chinese governments have never changed.

Although both governments have made efforts to clarify and affirm the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the ground, the disputes over the LAC have often led to violent clashes. The recent bloody clashes in the Galwan Valley and Pangong Lake areas have constituted the gravest flare-up in recent times, with dozens of soldiers losing their lives on both sides. These skirmishes worsened the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship and further eroded mutual strategic trust.

## Lessons Learned from History

The Sino-Indian border has never been defined and demarcated by any bilateral boundary agreement through diplomatic negotiations. No mutually recognized boundary has existed between the two countries. As a researcher on Sino-Indian border dispute and Sino-Indian relations, I prefer to use the term “border dispute” rather than “boundary dispute,” and I also prefer to discuss “management” of the border dispute rather than “settlement” of the border dispute. Furthermore, I refer to “clarification and affirmation” of the LAC, rather than the “definition and demarcation” of the Sino-Indian boundary. Under the current circumstances, my judgment is that any approach to “settle” the border dispute would be premature.

Violent clashes along the Sino-Indian border started in May 2020, continuing into June. Partial disengagement from Galwan, Hot Springs, and Gogra occurred in June-July 2020, while complete disengagement from Pangong Lake’s north and south bank took place in February 2021. The border areas returned to the pre-clash status quo by around March 2021. Overall, what happened in the western sector of the Sino-Indian border proved that military

maneuvering and confrontation cannot solve the fundamental problems that mar Sino-Indian relations. Diplomatic negotiation is the right way forward. Border disputes can be managed only through friendly dialogue and sincere consultation, with occasional resort to the various management mechanisms that have been established to jointly maintain peace and tranquility in the border area.

Looking back at the road the two countries have walked along, the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) emergence as India’s ruling party in 2014 seems to have been a turning point—that is, the juncture at which India and China walked off the normal and constructive track. In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese leaders had always talked about the traditional customary lines transformed from history. India, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of historical lines drawn or unilaterally imposed by British diplomats. The eight rounds of negotiations held in the 1980s led to an agreement to establish a joint working group on the border question and to maintain peace and tranquility along the LAC (even though there was no agreement on the demarcation of the LAC).

With the signing of the 1993

Agreement on Maintaining Peace and Tranquility in the Border Areas along the LAC, the Sino-Indian joint working group made some efforts to clarify and affirm the LAC in the disputed border areas. Under this agreement, both sides appointed diplomatic and military experts charged with advising the joint working group on how to resolve differences regarding the alignment of the LAC, as well as how to address issues relating to military redeployments in the border areas along the LAC. With the conflicting versions of the LAC unresolved, however, attempts to clarify and affirm the LAC were put onto the back burner in the late 1990s.

Since the start of this century, the failure to clarify the LAC has led the two governments to shift their attention to exploring the possibility of border dispute settlement as opposed to mere management. Two new dialogue mechanisms were created: (1) the Special Representative mechanism on the India-China boundary question (SR/SRM) was constituted in 2003 to promote negotiations on a framework for border settlement, including the establishment of political parameters and guiding principles, a framework for arriving at a final settlement, with a view to delineating and

demarcating the boundary; (2) the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination was set up in 2012, during the 15th round of the SR talks. During this period, however, the two sides failed to make progress in pushing forward the border-settlement approach. Meanwhile, border skirmishes erupted frequently in the disputed areas along the LAC.

These border clashes have persisted in recent years. On Indian social media, the disputes and clashes are sometimes manipulated, portrayed as Chinese intrusions into India's territory in a way that stirs up anti-China sentiment among the Indian public. In some cases, Indian officials have had to come out and clarify the facts to the citizenry. Overshadowing the frequent border clashes is the problem of an unsettled LAC. This problem can be managed to an extent using mechanisms such as the China-India Corps Commander-Level Meeting, which has played an important role in facilitating communication between the two sides. Frontline military commanders are committed to maintaining communication and working toward mutually acceptable preventive measures that are conducive to the reduction of tension and the avoidance of any possible incidents in the disputed areas. These

frontline commanders have also jointly agreed to maintain peace and stability on the ground by refraining from taking any provocative moves along the LAC in the border areas.

## **Development Partners or Geopolitical Rivals**

The wider context is that China and India are the largest developing countries in the world. Their combined population is 2.8 billion. India has been regarded as the world's office while China is cast as the world's factory. Their joined hands could multiply their already huge potential for development. China and India are member states in global, regional, multilateral institutions such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping of rising powers, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the East Asia Summit Meeting. All these institutions are focused on cooperative development. When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited India, he agreed with his Indian counterpart to the China-India Plus Approach in jointly developing trade and investment projects in third countries. All these dialogues and cooperative mechanisms have been working toward the partnership for shared

development.

On several occasions, both China and India have agreed that they would commit themselves to expanding and enhancing cooperation and coordination in other fields, while simultaneously seeking the settlement of border disputes through diplomatic negotiations. This is the right approach. It is almost certain that the Sino-Indian border dispute cannot be settled in the immediate years to come. The two countries need to manage the dispute properly and at the same time, expand and enhance their bilateral diplomatic consultations and military coordination so that they might prevent costly incidents in the disputed areas along the LAC. In time, this cooperative approach might create favorable conditions for the settlement of the territorial disputes at some point in the future.

Since the end of the Cold War, the top leaders of the two countries have always stressed that India and China share more common interests than differences and that each will not constitute a threat to the other. With reference to international and regional affairs, the two countries share the same or close positions on a wide range of issues due. China and India can be each other's friends and partners,

not threats or rivals. The two countries should help each other succeed instead of undercutting each other.

The border dispute is one component of the Sino-Indian relationship. In recent years, unwanted skirmishes and clashes along the LAC have been highly politicized, exacerbating antagonistic domestic dynamics as well as furthering the perception of an international competition. To continue intensifying cooperation among China, India, and the rest of Asia, leaders would do well to remember that “divide and rule” remains a powerful strategy in world politics. Indian and Chinese leaders should each avoid falling into that trap. ■

**Dr. Xuecheng Liu**

Dr. Liu is a senior research fellow of China Institute of International Studies and Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *The Sino-Indian Border Dispute and Sino-Indian Relations* (The University Press of America, 1994).

# 3

## The Pakistan, India, and China Triangle

### Pakistan's Place in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute

Dr. Maira Qaddos



It is quite evident from the history of Pakistan's relationship with China that Pakistan views Sino-Indian border disputes through a Chinese lens. This is not just because of Pakistani-Chinese friendship, of course, but also because of the rivalry and territorial disputes that have marred India-Pakistan relations since their independence.<sup>1</sup> Just as China and India have longstanding disputes that led to wars in the past (including, recently, the violent clashes in the Galwan Valley in May-June 2020),<sup>2</sup> so too do Pakistan and

India frequently experience clashes along their shared borders, especially on the *de facto* border of Pakistan-administered and India-administered Kashmir.<sup>3</sup>

The triangular relationship between India, China, and Pakistan is of critical importance to regional and global stability.<sup>4</sup> Managing the relationship is an urgent task. Yet, the place of Pakistan in the triangular relationship has sometimes gone overlooked. When India and China were embroiled in the recent military standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Pakistan was mentioned only because of an expectation (or fear) that Islamabad would exploit the situation to press its interests in Kashmir. At that time, the Indian-administered portion of Kashmir had been experiencing lockdowns and curfews for months, raising expectations that Pakistan might raise the temperature. But although this insight (that the Sino-Indian clashes would affect Pakistan's strategic interests) was correct, it was incomplete. The focus should not have been on Pakistani opportunism, which did not materialize, but on the fundamental interconnectedness that characterizes the South Asian security situation—of which Sino-Indian border disputes are just one part.

## **Strategic Triangle in Contemporary Times**

The India-China-Pakistan relationship is a strategic triangle of three nuclear powers. Given the geographic and strategic factors at play, it is impossible for these three powers to co-exist in complete isolation from one another; they interact with one another as a matter of ongoing political reality. The only option, then, is for all three governments to understand the implications of their behavior on the other states in the triangle. This means working toward a friendly, peaceful, and amicable neighborhood. The worst outcome for all parties would be if any two powers joined forces against the third, which would run the risk of upsetting the balance of power in South Asia and creating insecurity for the entire region.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to the Sino-Indian border disputes, some International Relations experts have predicted that Pakistan will be the big winner of a worsening Sino-Indian relationship.<sup>6</sup> While overstated, this observation rests on the observation that Pakistan and India are engaged in a strategic rivalry while Pakistan and China have maintained a strategic alliance for several decades. Recently, China has expanded its investments and

engagement in various sectors of the Pakistan economy. For example, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is expected to create jobs and infrastructure for the people of Pakistan. Moreover, China is the largest defense and military-equipment supplier for Pakistan, with a full 70 percent of Pakistan's imported weapons coming from China between 2015 and 2019.

From the Indian perspective, a two-front war with both China and Pakistan cannot be ruled out whenever there are tensions along the Sino-Indian border.<sup>7</sup> India's General Manoj Mukund Naravane, Chief of the Army Staff, expressed his concerns about a two-front war in May 2020. He cautioned that it is not just the military that fights wars, but also other pillars of nations like the bureaucracy and elected officials.<sup>8</sup> Dealing with two adversaries at the time—especially at a moment when India, China, and Pakistan were all consumed with the Covid-19 pandemic—would pose a grave security and foreign policy challenge for India.<sup>9</sup>

In Pakistan, meanwhile, the fear is that India might one day provoke a border clash with Pakistan if Indian forces were to suffer humiliation or defeat along the Sino-Indian border. Last year, for

example, Islamabad was concerned that Prime Minister Modi would plan a face-saving mission against Pakistan in response to the embarrassment of a setback in Ladakh.<sup>10</sup>

The distrust runs both ways. During the Galwan Valley clashes, Indian media outlets claimed that Pakistan and China had coordinated a grand conspiracy against India, with Pakistan allegedly deploying around 20,000 troops in Gilgit-Baltistan at the behest of Chinese generals. According to Pakistani officials, however, Pakistan's troop movements were not extraordinary, but rather a reasonable response to a regional security crisis; a prudent move to deal with any unexpected contingencies.

## **The Need for Regional Peace and Stability**

The reality is that Pakistan had no interest in pursuing an aggressive or opportunistic policy during the clashes along the LAC. To do so would have been to undermine Pakistan's own territorial security. To be sure, there was a general feeling of excitement in Pakistan at the sight of its rival's military struggle to contain China. But Pakistan's approach was to let China fight its war with India on its own, while taking steps to lower the temperature along the Kashmiri line of

control.<sup>11</sup> In the end, Pakistan is interested in preserving a stable balance of power in South Asia—a goal not served by a weakened and humiliated Indian neighbor.

Pakistan is exposed to the Sino-Indian border disputes in complicated and cross-cutting ways. In some respects, the Sino-Indian border conflict of 2020 was detrimental to Pakistani interests. For example, the conflict diverted the attention of the global community from India's controversial actions in Jammu and Kashmir, which were regarded as atrocities in Pakistan and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> India's abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, a move that eliminated special status for the Indian-administered states of Jammu and Kashmir, is a topic that Pakistan would like the international community to focus upon. However, the issue garners less attention than would otherwise be the case whenever violence erupts on the Sino-Indian border. On the other hand, Pakistan has benefited indirectly from the Sino-Indian conflict insofar as it has spurred Sino-Pakistani cooperation. In July 2020, China and Pakistan signed a hydropower agreement worth \$2.4 billion, with the project to be launched in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Part of the CPEC, this project is expected to deliver

around 3.3 billion units of reusable energy upon its completion in 2026.<sup>13</sup> Because the project is being pursued in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (claimed by India), this decision can be regarded as bolstering Pakistan's position—a diplomatic and strategic win. Pakistani officials deny that they have wanted to exploit a worsened security situation for economic benefit.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, it may be argued that Pakistan has a strong interest in managing periods of tension and rivalry between China and India. To be sure, there are many factors that push Pakistan toward taking a pro-China position. This cannot be denied. Not only is Pakistan working with China on the CPEC megaproject, but it also has close defense ties with Beijing. Both countries have a strategic partnership that spans various fields and has persisted for several decades. Even so, it is notable that Pakistan tried to maintain a comparatively neutral stance during the Galwan Valley conflict. It instead put great energy into de-escalating the conflict. This is because the spillover effects of bloodshed and rivalry can only sabotage the economic activities, developmental programs, and overall peace process of the whole

region.

The governments of India, China, and Pakistan ought to each realize that their actions and interactions affect one another in profound ways. Right now, the world faces a bigger challenge than border disputes, in the form of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. There is a pressing need to put collective effort into fighting this scourge, instead of waging violent conflicts. Unfortunately, the future of the India-China-Pakistan triangle seems to be quite unstable. A lot of diplomatic work will be required to understand the importance of building a peaceful neighborhood, let alone implement such a vision. ■

### **Dr. Maira Qaddos**

Dr. Qaddos is Lecturer in the Department of Mass Communication at the National University of Modern Languages, Lahore, Pakistan. Her research on the Sino-Indian border dispute has been published in *Policy Perspectives*, the flagship journal of Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Akbar Notazai, "What Does the China-India Standoff in Ladakh Mean for Pakistan?" *The Diplomat*, June 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/what-does-the-china-india-standoff-in-ladakh-mean-for-pakistan/>.

<sup>2</sup> The clashes in Ladakh resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers. See Alyssa Ayres, "The China-India Border Dispute: What to Know?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-india-border-dispute-what-know>.

<sup>3</sup> Notazai, "China-India Standoff."

<sup>4</sup> Monish Tourangbam, "The China-India-Pakistan Triangle: Origins, Contemporary Perceptions, and Future," *Stimson*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/the-china-india-pakistan-triangle-origins-contemporary-perceptions-and-future/>. The history of these political conflicts is grounded in Cold War. Anik Joshi, "China Is Pushing India Closer to the United States," *Foreign Policy*, June 09, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/09/china-india-border-united-states-pakistan/>.

<sup>5</sup> Satyabrata Sinha, "The Strategic Triangle: India-China-Pakistan," *China Report*, 40, no. 2 (2004): 221-25; Haans J. Freddy, "China, India & Pakistan strategic triangle – the Pakistan factor in Sino-Indian relations," *Global Affairs*, 6, no. 4-5 (2020): 559-75.

<sup>6</sup> Claude Rakisits, "Why India-China Border Conflict is Music to Pakistan's ears?," *The Quint*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/india-china-border-conflict-kashmir-issue-benefits-to-pakistan-belt-and-road-cpec-projects>.

<sup>7</sup> Shalini Chawla, "Indo-China Conflict- What's in it for Pakistan?," *Financial Express*, September 16, 2020,

<https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/indo-china-conflict-whats-in-it-for-pakistan/2084091/>.

<sup>8</sup> "First China, now Pakistan: How India's battling on two fronts," *The Economic Times*, Last modified July 03, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/first-china-now-pakistan-how-indias-battling-on-two-fronts/articleshow/76761327.cms?from=mdrSoutik>

<sup>9</sup> Soutik Biswas, "India-China clash: 20 Indian Troops Killed in Ladakh Fighting," *BBC*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476>.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Hussain, "China-India Clash Marks a Huge Regional Shift and Pakistan is its epicenter," *TRT World*, July 01, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/china-india-clash-marks-a-huge-regional-shift-and-pakistan-is-its-epicentre-37775>.

<sup>11</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, "Why Pakistan is keeping mum about India-China LAC conflict?," *The Print*, July 04, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-pakistan-is-keeping-mum-about-india-china-lac-conflict/454034/>.

<sup>12</sup> Maham S. Gillani, "India-China Border Dispute has Implications for Pakistan and Region," *Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies*, July 15, 2020, <https://casstt.com/post/india-china-border-dispute-has-implications-for-pakistan-and-region/229>.

<sup>13</sup> "Pakistan, China sign \$1.5 billion Hydropower Project Agreement," *The News International*, July 06, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/682889-pakistan-china-sign-15-billion-power-project-agreement>.

<sup>14</sup> Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan Benefits from China-India Clash with Hydropower Deal," *Nikkei Asia*, July 06, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistan-benefits-from-China-India-clash-with-hydropower-deal>.

# 4

## Tracing the Link between China's Concept of Sovereignty and Military Aggression

Dr. Sriparna Pathak



The modern concept of territorial sovereignty dates at least to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a set of agreements to end one of Europe's bloodiest wars, but its relevance to international politics shows no signs of waning. This is especially true when it comes to understanding the rise of India and China, and the fraught bilateral relationship that exists between them. Before 2020, India-China relations were largely a

mixture of cooperation and conflict. Since last year, however, the relationship has undergone a sea change. In India, voices in favor of cooperation have been swept away by Chinese aggression along their shared border.

Over a year since the deadly clashes of May-June 2020, the Chinese army still occupies Indian-claimed territory and refuses to budge. At the same time, however, Chinese leaders tell their Indian counterparts not to let the boundary issue—in India's view, China's violation of Indian territorial sovereignty—affect overall bilateral.<sup>1</sup> On its face, this is a puzzling treatment of sovereignty issues from Chinese officials, seemingly ignoring the strength of feeling inside India that the border dispute must be resolved in a just fashion. The question presents itself: What exactly is the Chinese understanding of territorial sovereignty? Is China's appetite for territorial expansion growing, whether in the South China Sea, vis-à-vis Taiwan, or in Central Asia? And does China's understanding of territorial sovereignty breach with that of the rest of the world? An analysis of China's approach to the Sino-Indian border can help answer these questions. Over time, China's emphasis on securing its borders has changed in line with prevailing

domestic and international conditions. This is important for understanding the tactics China has used at the border, from the 1962 border skirmish to the latest deadly conflict at Galwan.

China's position on issues of territorial boundaries and sovereignty is often portrayed as being rooted in China's experience of Western and Japanese imperialism from the middle of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the idea of inviolable territorial sovereignty has been a key component of Chinese nationalism since this period. Although the concepts of sovereignty and nationalism have been used differently across time periods, one common theme is that Chinese leaders portray violations of the country's borders as shameful acts; preserving territorial integrity is therefore a matter of national pride. Whenever China's borders are placed in jeopardy, the central authorities tend to cast China as a victim of unprovoked foreign predation—a pattern of external threats that they trace back to the colonial era.

China invoked the victim narrative to describe the 2020 conflicts along the line of actual control (LAC). This is despite China flouting its prior undertakings to respect the LAC at Galwan,<sup>2</sup> and despite the barbaric methods used to kill

Indian personnel, which included the use of nail-studded rods. China's invocation of the victim narrative fits a pattern of how Beijing has long described its territorial disputes with India and other neighboring states. To illustrate how longstanding this tendency is, consider the transcript of a meeting between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Chinese leaders including Mao Zedong and Chinese Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai.<sup>3</sup> The meeting took place on October 2, 1959. In that year, after India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama after the Tibetan uprising, there had been a series of skirmishes between India and China. When Khrushchev asked why Indians had been killed at the border, Mao replied that India attacked first and fired for 12 hours. Khrushchev then asked how, if India had attacked first, no Chinese had been killed yet numerous Indians had lost their lives. Zhou responded that Chinese Communist Party leaders were not involved in managing the incident at the border, and that it was local authorities who had undertaken all the measures there, without any authorization from the center. Zhou appeared to contradict Mao's confident assertion that India had been the aggressor—an early instance, perhaps, of China reflexively “playing the victim” when it came to

Sino-Indian border disputes.

China's reliance upon the victim card is closely linked to its official usage of the concept of sovereignty. China's foreign policy pronouncements often use narratives like the Century of Humiliation, lost glory, rejuvenation, glorious past, and other such ideas. When Chinese figures use these narratives, they are alluding to China's historical stature as the Middle Kingdom—when several kingdoms from across Asia kowtowed to the Chinese Emperor. During that period, China as the Middle Kingdom saw itself as the center of the world, enjoying a formidable stature in regional affairs owing to its dominance of the Silk Road trade. It was only with the weakening of the Qing Dynasty that China lost this stature and external security, becoming vulnerable to the imperial forces of Britain, Japan, Russia, Germany, and others.

In the twenty-first century, China wants to avenge the humiliation that was inflicted upon it. Chinese leaders seek rejuvenation and to recreate the glorious past of the Middle Kingdom. However, the Middle Kingdom did not operate according to modern (Westphalian) concepts of territorial sovereignty. On the contrary, recreating the Middle Kingdom of old would

require China to violate the territorial integrity and sovereign authority of several neighboring countries. However, Chinese leaders do not seem to empathize with foreign counterparts who fear their own territorial claims being undermined by China's rise and assertiveness. At least along the Sino-Indian border, Beijing has shown itself willing to use force to seize territory that it sees as its own.

How can China enforce its own territorial claims while denying those of other countries? There are obvious problems with this approach. First, an overly aggressive stance would seem to jeopardize China's claims to be a responsible member of the international system. Second, Chinese aggression would complicate domestic justifications for fighting border wars. To solve this problem, perhaps, Beijing has habitually grasped for the victim card, invoking the historical narrative of Chinese territorial dismemberment to justify the contemporary use of force against foreign states—including, in the case of the Sino-Indian border, the forcible occupation of territory claimed by India.

The example of the Senkaku Islands, a Japanese-administered territory claimed by China as the Diaoyu Islands, illustrates how

discrete territories have been made part of China's narrative of national territorial integrity. Aside from 1945 to 1972, when it was administered by the United States, the archipelago has been controlled by Japan since 1895. As some observers have noted, the People's Republic of China only began pressing the question of sovereignty over the islands in the latter half of 1970, when evidence relating to the existence of oil reserves surfaced.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that interests other than reclaiming Qing territory are at play. China's economic growth and increasing appetite for energy might lead to more such territorial claims going forward. Indeed, there are some parallels with the contested territories along the Sino-Indian border.

In conclusion, the Chinese concept of sovereignty is different from how the concept is understood by the rest of the world. It is not conducive to mutual respect and shared understanding. What is common between China's understanding and that of the rest of the world, however, is that territory can be an important index of power. To this end, China is willing to use all tools at its disposal to keep increasing its territorial reach. China uses anti-imperialist narratives to portray itself as the victim in all its active territorial disputes, a

necessary way to justify its uncompromising stances to external and domestic audiences. In this sense, the Chinese concept of sovereignty is a tool of diplomacy and statecraft; a way of preserving China's international image as an historical victim of foreign conquest even as it pursues its territorial disputes with growing confidence and power. ■

**Dr. Sriparna Pathak**

Dr. Pathak is Associate Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, India. She teaches courses on Chinese Foreign Policy, International Relations Theories and the People's Republic of China Before and After World War II. She tweets at @Sriparnapathak.

---

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> TNN, "Keep border dispute & bilateral ties separate, China tells India," *Times of India*, 5 August 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/keep-border-dispute-bilateral-ties-separate-china-tells-india/articleshow/77362414.cms>.

<sup>2</sup> "India-China clash: 20 Indian troops killed in Ladakh fighting," BBC News, 16 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476>.

<sup>3</sup> See Sriparna Pathak, "The Chinese Concept of Sovereignty and the India-China Border Dispute," in *Re-imagining Border Studies in South Asia*, ed. Dhananjay Tripathi (New York: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Seokwoo Lee, "Territorial Disputes Among Japan, China and Taiwan concerning the Senkaku Islands," *Boundary and Territory Briefing* 3, no. 7 (2002), 11.

# 5

## India–China Border Disputes and Strategic Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

Dr. Ashok Sharma



China and India's rise over the last two decades has enabled them to wield increasing amounts of influence on the global stage. Even though they share several characteristics—including being the world's most populous nations, the fastest-growing major economies, and developing status—their relationship has been fraught with skepticism and hostility since their war of 1962.

Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, Chinese and Indian forces clashed in the Galwan Valley on 15 June 2020, the first deadly collision

between the two sides since 1975. China claimed the Indian territory of Galwan Valley as its own, which India rejected as an unfounded and unacceptable unilateral attempt to change the status quo. Though both sides agreed to withdraw troops from the border in February 2021, the situation remains volatile.<sup>1</sup>

At first blush, the Galwan Valley clash is seen primarily in the context of a long-standing border dispute and differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, it is the strategic rivalry between India and China that undergirds the conflict—part of the unfolding geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region, which has become more intense during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After successfully controlling the virus at home, China attempted to use the humanitarian crisis of COVID-19 to advance its geopolitical goal of displacing US primacy, especially in the Indo-Pacific. The United States and its allies reacted to China's diplomatic offensives on economic and strategic fronts. For its part, India has emerged as a strategically significant player in the Indo-Pacific, the only country capable of matching China's manufacturing scale amid the debate over the global supply chain's over-

reliance on China. China’s aggression along the LAC was intended to send a message to India that it was no match for China. This has only exacerbated the already tense relationship between the two nuclear-armed nations and heightened their strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

Concerns about international security and stability in the Indo-Pacific have grown in recent years, as China’s economic and military policies in the region have grown more assertive. China’s bravado over its military and economic might have hinted at its geopolitical intentions in the Indo-Pacific, the region most significant for the global prosperity in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

China’s Belt Road Initiative (BRI) is driven by China’s economic and military intentions: to ensure the economic growth necessary to underpin the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, and to present China as a viable alternative to the United States in terms of global leadership. This is concerning for New Delhi, given the BRI’s visible footprint in India’s immediate South Asian neighbors and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. China’s debt diplomacy (aimed at enticing India’s South Asian neighbors), the China-Pakistan all-weather friendship, and the construction of new ports and bases

across the Indo-Pacific constitute additional concerns from the Indian perspective.

India’s Indo-Pacific strategy is driven by its economic and cultural links in the region, its security concerns, and the larger aim of playing a more pro-active role on the international stage. India has been expanding its presence in the region since Narsimha Rao Government launched “Look East Policy” in the 1990s, which accelerated under the Modi Government’s “Act East Policy.” During the COVID-19 outbreak, the latent geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, as well as China and India, escalated—an unpropitious backdrop for border clashes to emerge.

That the Galwan Valley clash was discussed at the summit-level by Quad leaders is a sign that the India-China relationship has deteriorated to a significant low point. China’s perceived aggression has sparked concern among like-minded democracies, prompting them to take countermeasures. This is a major development: China’s geopolitical ambition is being now countered by the converging strategic interests of like-minded states, of which India is a major strategic player. The reemergence of the Quad in

November 2017 is the surest sign of this new dynamic.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Quad is now moving beyond the military dimension,<sup>4</sup> has developed vertically from the secretariat level to the summit level and is likely to expand horizontally to include more nations concerned with the Indo-Pacific stability such as Vietnam, South Korea, New Zealand (the “Quad Plus” states).<sup>5</sup>

Growing strategic competition between India and China is also visible in New Delhi’s growing focus on strengthening Indo-Tibet border infrastructure, augmenting its naval capabilities, and forging strategic ties with China-wary nations in the region, including Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. This is in addition to India’s deepening and robust strategic partnership with the United States, which has been elevated to the level of Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership,<sup>6</sup> as well as strategic ties with Japan, Australia, and South Korea. Amid heightened tensions with China, both India and Australia have intensified their engagement on the economic, political, and military front. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India and Australia strengthened their defense ties, as evidenced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison signing two defense agreements:

the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement,<sup>7</sup> as well as Australia joining the Quad for a military drill in November 2020. These strategic alignments have received significant US support.

In conclusion, the deadly clash in the Galwan Valley strained already acrimonious Sino-Indian relations. More confrontations are likely unavoidable. However, unlike the 1962 situation, both India and China today have nuclear weapons. They are each well aware of the dangers of full-fledged war and its fatal consequences. India-China relations will be intense and competitive in the post-COVID-19 world, with both vying, in many cases, for the same resources, markets, and influence in pursuit of their great power ambitions. The India-China relationship will be marked by suspicion and mistrust. To overcome this worsening international environment, massive political and diplomatic efforts will be required to restore normalcy to India-China relations. ■

**Dr. Ashok Sharma**

Dr. Sharma is Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Coral Bell School of Asia-Pacific Affairs, Australian National University. He is also a Visiting Fellow at the University of New South Wales in Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy, and the Deputy Chair of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, Auckland Branch.

---

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> “India, China agree to pull back troops from disputed Himalayan lake after months-long standoff,” 11 February, 2021, ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-11/india-china-agree-to-pull-back-troops-from-himalayan-lake/13146658>.

<sup>2</sup> Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The Quad—the US, India, Japan, and Australia—emerged after the Malabar Exercise in 2007 but went backstage after protests from China. See Ashok Sharma, “The Quadrilateral Initiative: An Evaluation,” *South Asian Survey* 17, no. 2 (2010): 237–53.

<sup>4</sup> John Blaxland and Ashok Sharma, “Bolstering the Quad beyond its military dimensions,” 30 April 2021,

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/04/30/bolstering-the-quad-beyond-its-military-dimensions/>.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Grossman, “Don’t Get Too Excited, ‘Quad Plus’ Meetings Won’t Cover China,” *The Diplomat*, 9 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/dont-get-too-excited-quad-plus-meetings-wont-cover-china/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for India-U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership,” 25 February 2020, [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint\\_Statement\\_Vision\\_and\\_Principles\\_for\\_IndiaUS\\_Comprehensive\\_Global\\_Strategic\\_Partnership](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint_Statement_Vision_and_Principles_for_IndiaUS_Comprehensive_Global_Strategic_Partnership).

<sup>7</sup> Department of Defence, Government of Australia, “Australia and India sign Defence arrangement,” 4 June 2020, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/media-releases/australia-and-india-sign-defence-arrangement>.

# 6

## The China–India Water Dispute

### The Potential for Escalation

Dr. Selina Ho



The conflation of the China–India water dispute with larger territorial and political disputes exacerbates water as a source of conflict between them. The waters of the Himalayas are an invaluable resource for the two countries as rapid economic development and population growth stress their water supplies. Among the rivers that cross their disputed border, the Brahmaputra River/Yarlung Tsangpo is the most significant water resource they share. Originating from Tibet, the Brahmaputra crosses the border into Arunachal Pradesh, which is occupied by India but claimed by China as Southern Tibet.

As the upper riparian, China wields significant advantage over India. It withheld hydrological data from India during the Doklam standoff despite an existing hydrological data-sharing agreement between them. In November 2020, China announced plans for hydropower construction on the section of the Brahmaputra closest to India, triggering strong responses from the Indian side. Of greatest concern to India are reports of Chinese plans to build a mega-dam just before the Brahmaputra enters India. News of these plans came at a time when relations between China and India are at a low point, with troops facing off at the Galwan Valley. There were also reports that in the aftermath of the border clashes, China has blocked the flow of the Galwan River, which crosses from the disputed Chinese-administered Aksai Chin region into Ladakh region in India. Indian pundits have accused China of “weaponizing” water and using water for political and strategic leverage over India. They believe that China could cut off water or raise the water levels to flood India should a military conflict break out between them.

The water dispute between China and India is further compounded by the fact that institutionalized cooperation between the two sides is low, consisting only of an expert-level body and a series of memorandums

on hydrological data-sharing. There is no water-sharing agreement or a joint river commission for managing their shared river resources. The difficulties in managing their shared waters, the intertwining of the border and water disputes, and the water scarcity problems they both face have led to predictions of “water wars” between them. Despite these dire predictions, however, armed conflict has not broken out over water. Even when relations are at a nadir, the water dispute did not completely become embroiled with the border dispute even if it did add to the tensions. Why have China and India managed to keep their water dispute from escalating into violent conflict? What are the conditions under which the status quo could change leading to armed conflict over water?

## **Desecuritizing the Water Dispute**

A key strategy both governments have used to prevent their water dispute from boiling over is to desecuritize it. That both sides have desecuritized their water dispute is a bit of a puzzle. Almost all the disputes between them, including the border dispute, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama issue, are painted as existential threats and accepted as such by both sides. Disputes over water are prone to securitization because water concerns basic human rights and survival and is therefore an existential

issue. In fact, “the most obvious resource that is prone to securitization is transboundary water.”<sup>1</sup> Despite these characteristics of water that lends itself to securitization, both the Chinese and Indian government have worked to desecuritize their water dispute. Desecuritization is defined as the “moving of issues off the ‘security agenda’ and back into the realm of public political discourse and ‘normal’ political dispute and accommodation.”<sup>2</sup> Rhetoric, discourses, and narratives are used to neutralize or reduce the security implications of an issue to lower tensions with another country.

The Chinese government has used assuaging rhetoric to reduce perceptions of its dams as a threat. An oft-repeated rhetoric is that the dams are “run-of-the river,” meaning that they are not capable of storing or diverting large bodies of water. This assuaging rhetoric is most clearly observed during the spring of 2010, following an official Chinese announcement that China is building the Zangmu Dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo. During a China–India strategic dialogue, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun assured the Indian delegation that the project “was not a project designed to divert water” and would not affect “the welfare and availability of water of the population in the lower reaches of the Brahmaputra.”<sup>3</sup> The Chinese

applied desecuritizing rhetoric even when the two armies were facing off at Doklam. In response to Indian revelations that India had not received hydrological data from China during the standoff, the Chinese government avoided linking the data disruption to the Doklam standoff, instead offering a technical explanation that the monitoring stations were being renovated. Similarly, the Indian government has sought to downplay the threats posed by Chinese dams. In response to the news that China was constructing the Zangmu Dam, the Minister of External Affairs said in a statement, “We have ascertained from our own sources that this is a run-of-the river hydro-electric project, which does not store water and will not adversely impact downstream areas in India. Therefore, I believe there is no cause for alarm. I would like to share with you the fact that a large proportion of the catchment of the Brahmaputra is within Indian territory.”<sup>4</sup>

The two countries have cause to desecuritize their water conflict. Lowering tensions with each other will allow both sides to focus on economic growth and development. For China, it is aimed at stabilizing its southern periphery, expanding bilateral trade and investment with India, and reducing India’s motivations for aligning with the United States. On the Indian side, a possible

explanation is that India would not want to provoke China, the more powerful state that dealt it a humiliating defeat in 1962. However, these accounts do not explain why desecuritization only took place for the water dispute but not the other disputes between them. I have argued elsewhere that desecuritization of the water dispute is not only the result of these material reasons but because of a set of ideas among the epistemic communities in both countries that values and prioritizes collaboration on water resources and reducing the perceptions of the water dispute as a threat.<sup>5</sup>

## **What Can Lead to Escalation?**

Nevertheless, the position that both governments have taken to desecuritize their water dispute can change. There are already indications from the overall increase in tensions between the two countries in the past few years that keeping a lid on the water dispute has become harder. Water disputes are never about water resources alone. The water dispute between the two countries is linked with larger political issues and the border conflict. In the limited incidents of water wars in history, water had acted as a catalyst or was used as a pretext for war between countries whose overall relations had deteriorated to the point of hostility.<sup>6</sup> The Doklam crisis and the

armed clashes in the Galwan Valley resulting in deaths and casualties on both sides point to the rapidly deteriorating relations between them.

Overall relations between the two countries have soured considerably in the past few years. Apart from border issues, China's blocking of India's ascension to the Nuclear Suppliers Group in 2016, which denied India recognition of its rising status, and refusal to name the leader of the Pakistan-based group Jaish-e-Mohammed, Masood Azhar, as a terrorist in the United Nations, did not go down well with the Indians. China has also displayed insensitivity to Indian concerns with initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. India has been suspicious of China's Belt and Road Initiative. On its part, India has acted in ways deemed provocative by the Chinese, including the former's decision to send in troops to Doklam to block Chinese construction there as well as India's road construction in the Galwan River Valley.

Even more critically, Chinese threat assessment of India has gone up because of India's growing strategic relations with the United States, Japan, and Australia. Competition between China and India has heated up in recent years, as the result of rising nationalism in both countries

and the muscular foreign policies of both President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Indo-Pacific strategy, the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, India's activities in Southeast Asia, and China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia have expanded the arena for engagement and competition between the two sides. Their interests are competing and overlapping, intensifying the rivalry between them. The COVID-19 pandemic and the race between the two sides to provide vaccines for developing countries have further worsened the rivalry and hostility between the two countries. Increasing competition between them and recent border clashes do not augur well for the management of their water dispute. The efforts of the two governments to desecuritize the water dispute and to prevent overall deteriorating relations from spilling over into the water dispute is increasingly untenable. ■

**Dr. Selina Ho**

Dr. Ho is Assistant Professor in International Affairs at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. She is the author of *Thirsty Cities: Social Contracts and Public Goods Provision in China and India* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) and co-author of *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (University of California Press, 2020), in addition to articles in journals such as *International Affairs*, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *Water Policy*.

---

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Itay Fischhendler, “The Securitization of Water Dis-  
course: Theoretical Foundations, Research Gaps and Ob-  
jectives of the Special Issue,” *International Environment*  
*Agreements* 15, no. 3 (2015), 249–50.

<sup>2</sup> Michael C. Williams, “Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003), 523.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Sebastian Biba, “Desecuritization in China’s Behaviour Towards its Transboundary Rivers: The Mekong

River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtysh and Ili Rivers,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, No. 85 (2014), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Satu Limaye, “The Middle Riparian Quandaries: India and the Brahmaputra River Basin,” in *Water Resource Competition in the Brahmaputra River Basin: China, India, and Bangladesh*, ed. Nilanthi Samaranayake, Satu Limaye, and Joel Wuthnow (Arlington: Center for Strategic Studies, 2016), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Selina Ho, Neng Qian, and Yifei Yan, “The Role of Ideas in the China-India Water Dispute,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 2 (2019): 263–94.

<sup>6</sup> Aaron T. Wolf, “Conflict and Cooperation along International Waterways,” *Water Policy* 1, no. 2 (1998): 251–65.

# 7

## China–India Border Crisis

Jeff M. Smith



The crisis that began at the disputed China–India border in early 2020 was not the first - and almost certainly will not be the last - standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC). But the crisis was unique and its implications for China–India relations are likely to be far-reaching. It underscored the degree to which the longstanding border dispute, and the increasingly troubled relationship, have entered a new and more volatile chapter.

A great deal of ink has already been spilled analyzing the standoff, which began in May 2020 when People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers advanced to occupy a “grey zone” near the LAC claimed and patrolled by

both countries on the north bank of Pangong Lake in Ladakh. This was followed by a buildup of military forces at multiple junctures farther north along LAC where Ladakh meets Tibet, including at Hot Spring, Gogra, the Galwan Valley, and, later, the south bank of Pangong Lake.

Brief, nonviolent encounters between Chinese and Indian border patrols are not uncommon along the LAC but are generally well-managed thanks to a detailed set of de-escalation protocols. Prolonged standoffs at the LAC, in which Chinese forces set up camp beyond established patrol lines, are more uncommon. But they have been growing in frequency since 2013, the year Xi Jinping was elected president (and one year after he became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party).

The summer of 2017 saw a new form of border crisis emerge when Chinese and Indian troops engaged in a standoff in territory disputed by China and Bhutan, not far from a sensitive sector of the China–India border. India retains outsized influence over Bhutan’s foreign and security policy and when Chinese forces began extending a road southward into disputed territory, nearby Indian forces intervened, prompting a prolonged standoff.

The ten-week crisis was unprece-

dented in some ways, including the unusually incendiary rhetoric that emerged from official outlets in Beijing, which threatened India with war-like ultimatums if it did not withdraw from the standoff site unilaterally. However, like the prolonged standoffs in Ladakh in the years prior, the Doklam crisis was eventually de-escalated peacefully following the negotiation of a mutual withdrawal agreement.

Then, in 2019, amateur videos began surfacing online showing unusually hostile encounters between Chinese and Indian patrols near the LAC, engaging in fistfights and rock-throwing, including along the banks of Pangong Lake. There are a handful of disputed sectors in Ladakh where the two sides disagree about the precise location of the LAC; the videos helped to underscore how, in recent years, Pangong Lake has become one of the most volatile. The lake also registers a disproportionate share of Chinese “transgressions” of the LAC, according to official Indian statistics.

In years prior, an unstable status quo had emerged on the north bank of Pangong Lake, in a grey zone between an Indian military encampment near “Finger 4” and a Chinese encampment several miles to the east, near “Finger 8.” Both sides patrolled this area, although China enjoyed superior access and

infrastructure. The 2020 crisis began when, following a tense encounter between border patrols, several hundred Chinese soldiers pressed forward toward Finger 4, establishing new camps and staking more permanent claim to the grey zone behind them. Soon after, satellite imagery revealed a major buildup of Chinese forces at other volatile sectors of the LAC farther north in Ladakh. Unusually, this included the forward positioning of tanks and artillery. They were met by a comparable buildup of Indian forces at forward positions and a substantial escalation of political tensions.

Initial attempts at de-escalation turned tragic in June when Chinese and Indian forces engaged in a bout of medieval combat by moonlight, resulting in 20 Indian casualties and an unknown number of Chinese casualties. It marked the first deadly outbreak of hostilities at the border in over 40 years. The multilayered standoff endured through 2020, with India later occupying strategically valuable heights along the southern banks of Pangong Lake. Eventually, negotiators reached terms on an interim de-escalation agreement which saw both sides pull back from forward positions at Pangong Lake. The buildup of forces at the standoff sites farther north in Ladakh persist, even as the two militaries remain on their respective sides of the LAC. The PLA

has also reportedly blocked Indian forces from patrolling near the LAC in the Depsang Plains, though the phenomenon appears to pre-date the events of May 2020.

What does this crisis tell us about the broader relationship and accelerating rivalry? Why is the over-60-year-old China–India border dispute heating up now? And why have the two been unable or unwilling to resolve this legacy dispute? The secrecy surrounding the Chinese Communist Party and its decision-making often leaves analysts with more questions than answers. But the 2020 border crisis was likely precipitated at least in part by India’s attempts to upgrade its infrastructure near the LAC, and China’s attempts to coerce India to halt these projects.

China has long enjoyed an infrastructure advantage near the LAC in Ladakh and in recent years India has accelerated belated attempts to narrow that gap. This has prompted opposition from Beijing and several of the prolonged standoffs in Ladakh in the mid-2010s arose out of attempts by the PLA to pressure India to halt or dismantle new infrastructure projects. In some cases, it worked.

At the outbreak of the 2020 border crisis, India was advancing several new major infrastructure projects, including an important north-south road running parallel to the LAC,

complete with “feeder” roads extending east toward the LAC. When New Delhi refused to heed Chinese demands calls to halt or dismantle this infrastructure, Beijing may have calculated that it could compel such a change through military pressure. If so, China was drawing from a similar playbook it had adopted in years past, albeit with sharper edges and a greater appetite for risk, paralleling a broader trend of Chinese “Wolf Warrior” assertiveness in recent years. It is unlikely, however, that Beijing foresaw the bloodshed that might arise from the adventure, or the considerable blow it might deal to the already tense relationship.

The episode also revives a bigger question about whose purposes are served by the continuation of this border dispute. While the Indian government has not publicly committed to such a position, it is widely believed New Delhi would at least give due consideration to a form of status quo territorial “swap” that more or less enshrined the LAC as the international border. India would give up its outstanding claims to Aksai Chin in the “Western Sector”; China would do the same in the “Eastern Sector” where it claims most of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh; and some minor adjustments would be made to the relatively less contentious “Middle Sector.”

Such an agreement would appear to be eminently practical given that, today, there is very little prospect of either side “reclaiming” Aksai Chin or Arunachal Pradesh short of a major war that neither side desires. Arunachal Pradesh has been an Indian state or Union Territory for nearly 50 years and will not be negotiated away or easily seized by force. And the Indian government apparently has little interest in a conflict with a nuclear-armed rival to seize the relatively barren Himalayan territory of Aksai Chin.

What is obstructing this seemingly practical territorial swap? After registering tangible progress between 1993 and 2005, border negotiations that have been ongoing for roughly 40 years slowed to a halt in 2007. That year, China signaled that any territorial swap would have to include India ceding to China the town of Tawang, a nonstarter for New Delhi. Perched in the Himalayas only a dozen miles from the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh, Tawang carries historical and religious significance as the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. It was also the first refuge reached by the current Dalai Lama when he made a hazardous two-week trek to flee Chinese rule in Tibet in 1959.

As a result, Tawang has become enmeshed in the contentious set of

issues surrounding the 85-year-old Dalai Lama’s eventual reincarnation. In Tawang lies part of the history and traditions of Buddhism and the institution of the Dalai Lama. And in recent years the Chinese government has become increasingly concerned with securing a greater hold over the Tibetan plateau and Tibetan Buddhism, unveiling a wave of repressive measures, hand-selecting Buddhist monks, and claiming sole authority over the selection of the next Dalai Lama.

As many of India’s most astute China watchers have argued, for Beijing the border dispute and Tibet are inextricably linked. China has long expressed displeasure with India for its hosting the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Government in Exile, and a large population of Tibetan exiles. It has repeatedly accused India of interfering in its internal affairs on Tibet-related issues. It is indignant about the possibility the Dalai Lama may identify his successor within India’s borders.

In its own way, China has repeatedly sought to signal to India that the border dispute will remain an issue so long as the question of Tibet goes unresolved. When the LAC was relatively peaceful, the costs of that strategy appeared to be modest. But with the dispute entering a more volatile phase, one more destructive to

the overall bilateral relationship, it is becoming more costly for China to link the border disputes to Tibet. It remains to be seen whether China will double down on its more aggressive border tactics or reassess and re-adjust. ■

**Jeff M. Smith**

Mr. Smith is a Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Cold Peace: China–India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century* (Lexington Books, 2015), as well as numerous pieces of commentary and analysis on the Sino-Indian relationship.

# The Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers

**Dr. Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell**

Director & Editor in Chief

**Patricia Clough**

Deputy Editor in Chief

**Jon Howard**

Assistant Editor in Chief

**Dr. Chulanee Attanayake**

Senior Resezrcher & Writer

**Dr. Hyun-ji Rim**

Senior Editor

**Dr. Indu Saxena**

Senior Writer

**Dr. Nitika Srivastava**

Senior Writer & Researcher

**Lt Col Terence "TV" Vance, USAF, ret.**

Senior Multimedia Specialist & Asst. Senior Researcher

**Maj Kaoru Elliott, USSF**

Senior Researcher

**Maj Matthew House, USA**

Senior Editor

**Maj J.R. Sessions, USA**

Senior Writer

**Thilini Kahandawaarachchi**

Senior Researcher & Writer

**Ashish Saxena**

Senior Artificial Intelligence Liaison

**Donna Budjenska**

Assistant Senior Editor

**Tom Connolly**

Assistant Senior Researcher & Editor

**Mrityunjaya Dubey**

Assistant Senior Editor, Multimedia Specialist, & Writer

**Dr. Achala Gunasekara-Rockwell**

Assistant Senior Multimedia Specialist

**Anvesh Jain**

Assistant Senior Writer

**Leo Mathers**

Assistant Senior Writer

**Emilio Angeles**

Researcher, Multimedia Specialist, & Writer

**Benafsha Attar**

Researcher

**Capt Michael Brodka, USA**

Researcher

**Soumyadeep Deb**

Researcher & Writer

**Lt Col Steve Drinnon, USAF, ret.**

Editor & Researcher

**Prakash Jangid**

Researcher

**Sumnima Karki**

Researcher & Editorial Assistant

**Sunaina Karki**

Researcher & Editorial Assistant

**Aakriti Kumar**

Writer

**Dr. John Lash**

Editor & Writer

**Capt Neil Law, USA**

Writer

**Eleanor Lewis**

Writer

**Maj Christopher Little, USAF**

Editor, Multimedia Specialist, & Writer

**Leo Lin**

Writer

**Capt Peter Loftus, USAF**

Editor

**Dr. Adam Lowther**

Editor

**Asst. Prof. Rubaiyat Rahman**

Editor, Multimedia Specialist, & Writer

**Atandra Ray**

Researcher & Multimedia Specialist

**Rushali Saha**

Researcher & Writer

**Mrittika Guha Sarkar**

Researcher & Writer

**Arushi Singh**

Researcher & Writer

**Mahika Sri Krishna**

Writer

**CDR Michael Tomsik, USN**

Editor

**Fabio van Loon**

Researcher & Writer

**Ankush Wagle**

Researcher

**Sanskriti Yagnik**

Researcher, Writer, & Communications Assistant

CONSORTIUM *of*  
INDO-PACIFIC  
RESEARCHERS



THE SIXTH ANNUAL

# AIR UNIVERSITY

# LANGUAGE, REGIONAL EXPERTISE AND CULTURE SYMPOSIUM

OCTOBER 13 - 15, 2021

## THE GREAT POWER OF CULTURE

### Call for Papers

Below are a few possible presentation topics.

**1** The impact of LREC on operations and engagements

**2** Addressing the “human domain” through LREC concepts and curricula

**3** The power of cultural competence in building partnerships and strengthening alliances

**4** Techniques for improving foreign language competence

More topics and the full call for papers are available on our event website:

[AIRUNIVERSITY.AF.EDU/AFCLC/AU-LREC/](https://AIRUNIVERSITY.AF.EDU/AFCLC/AU-LREC/)

The Air Force Culture and Language Center invites you to attend the sixth Annual Air University Language, Regional Expertise and Culture (AU LREC) Symposium. This year’s LREC Symposium is themed, “The Great Power of Culture,” and calls for participants to address the influence of culture in the workings of power, and to foster conversations about the role of language, regional expertise, and culture in the current U.S. national security and defense orientation to a world characterized by great power competition.

**“ I was excited by the diverse array of topics that speakers presented at this symposium... I hope that future LREC symposia can continue to expand [these] topics and perspectives. ”**

- 2020 AU LREC Symposium Attendee

### QUESTIONS?

THE JOURNAL OF

INDO-PACIFIC  
AFFAIRS

presents...

# *Indo-Pacific Perspectives*

edited by  
Dr. Peter Horris

## Indo-Pacific Perspectives series

The *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs'* Indo-Pacific Perspectives series, edited by Dr. Peter Harris, brings to publication roundtable discussions offering answers to complex geopolitical (and "geolegal") questions. As the name suggests, this new series of will showcase viewpoints from across the Indo-Pacific megaregion (and sometimes beyond). The goal is to facilitate a dialogue between academicians and policy practitioners that will be of great interest to readers, policy makers, and decision makers.