

South Asia: The Escalating Crisis on the India-China Border

Thursday 25 June 2020, by [VANAIK Achin](#) (Date first published: 23 June 2020).

In the last week, simmering tensions on the Indian-Chinese border in the Himalayas have escalated to open conflict, with fatalities on both sides. India's foreign policy, and not just China, deserves much blame for the escalation.

Contents

- [Action-Reaction at Two Levels](#)
- [Current Responses and the](#)

Tensions have been simmering on the border between India and China since early May, with each side accusing the other of incursions into their territory. On June 15, however, in subzero temperatures, face-to-face fighting between both sides' patrol units broke out in the Galwan Valley, where the Galwan River (a tributary of the Indus River) flows.

A 1996 agreement had prohibited the use of firearms or explosives along this stretch of the border, but iron rods and batons were reportedly used by both sides, and the dangerous conditions of steep terrain and icy cold waters caused several deaths. India has reported twenty deaths — either immediately or from injuries later on — with around twice that number hospitalized; China has not yet disclosed its casualty figures. Not since 1975 have such fatal clashes taken place on this border, making this month's fighting the most serious face-off between the two countries in decades.

To understand why these hostilities have broken out now, one must look beyond the immediate conditions on the border to the shifting bilateral relations between the two countries. This, in turn, cannot be separated from a survey of the historically evolving geopolitical ambitions of the two countries, and their respective ties and arrangements with other powerful states.

Indeed, it is precisely different understandings of this deeper and wider historical context that has lead to differing perspectives on how to proceed from here. Almost all voices among India's strategic and foreign policy establishment (and among our establishment journalists) see China, to some extent, as the villain — not just in causing the current clash but also in the longer post-WWII history of Indian-Chinese relations. That being said, there is no clear consensus among policy figures on how to move forward, even though all operate within a broadly realist framework.

One group (the largest) argues that India must further consolidate and deepen its relations with the United States and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue — QSD or the "Quad," consisting of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. A second group somewhat problematically proposes that India pursue closer relationships with the United States and the Quad, yet also seek to maximize its strategic autonomy and thereby achieve better relations with China, as if both courses of action are compatible through some form of brilliant diplomacy. A third group (easily the smallest) call on India to reconsider and reframe its current relationship with the United States and the Quad to become much more independent and nonaligned.

Action-Reaction at Two Levels

The border between India and China, has no agreed demarcation. Each side has its own interpretation of the territorial boundary or Line of Actual Control (LAC), which runs from east to west for some 4057 kilometres, and separates Chinese-controlled territory from several North Indian border states. It is the western part of this long border separating Tibet from the Indian region of Ladakh that is most tense, and is the site of the current conflict.

Due to the ambiguity on the exact coordinates of the LAC, there are overlapping claims to territorial enclosures both big and small. As a result, Indian and Chinese border patrols periodically confront each other directly, and higher-level military meetings are required to ease tensions.

For some time now, both sides have been developing their infrastructural facilities along the LAC but what appears to be new is the Chinese stationing of troops and construction activity in the Galwan River valley, which it had hitherto left to Indian patrolling, as well as an alleged Chinese intrusion in the Pangong Tso area.

The Indian government insists that not an inch of Indian ground has been ceded, thereby implicitly affirming the Chinese claim that the Galwan area, in particular, belongs to them. At the same time New Delhi's assertion that China is trying to change the status quo does give the game away. Insofar as this suggests that it was China's initial and calculated action that led to an Indian reaction that precipitated the unfortunate clash, this is correct.

Furthermore, if, as is likely, the Chinese did in the past consider the Galwan River valley as lying on the India side (despite the ambiguity surrounding the LAC), then their action is highly condemnable, even as one must try to understand why they took this step. Here, it is a combination of more material factors pertaining to matters of direct military control plus wider ideological-political considerations that are at play.

Compared to their predecessors, the governments of Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping have behaved much more aggressively — both domestically and internationally — in keeping with their distinctive nationalist ideologies.

In China's case, given its authoritarian character and the tensions in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the ever present irritation of Taiwan, nationalism is the main weapon it has for rallying its Han population behind it. In regard to its neighbors and its maritime behaviour in the South China seas, its interests are motivated by a desire to counter the pressures imposed on it by the United States, from which much of its foreign policy behavior flows.

India is not China's primary strategic concern, though it certainly resents India's strategic alliance in the Quad, and sees Pakistan as an important partner in extending its Belt and Road Initiative in the region — specifically with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) — and as a pragmatic diplomatic counterweight to India. The current border dispute has no wider strategic ramifications beyond China's need to protect its military control and access Tibet, Xinjiang, and the CPEC.

In India's case, Hindutva's essentialist Islamophobia has meant the severe erosion of democracy in India, and a generally more hubristic and aggressive foreign policy. It is not Pakistan, but China that is seen as the main strategic problem for India. It is China that restricts Indian dominance over Bhutan and Nepal, as well as an Indian expansion of influence over Bangladesh and Myanmar. India's strategically crucial foreign policy decisions — like nuclearization and its alliance with the United States and the Quad — flow from this perception of China.

The border issue is not seen as simply a local issue but as an enduring violation of India's "territorial unity and integrity," which for the the right-wing nationalist party, Sangh, constitutes the Congress party's betrayal, and must never again be repeated. It is bad enough that Jammu and Kashmir were partitioned by an inconclusive war with Pakistan. It is in this broader background of historically felt humiliation and a greater Hindutva assertiveness that one must trace the measures that pushed China to up the ante on the border.

In 2014, Modi fast-tracked the building of the all-weather Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO or DBO) road that runs parallel to the LAC for 255 kilometers, ending very near to an Indian military base — also the site of the world's highest-altitude airstrip. Though completed in 2019, adverse weather and ground conditions caused damage requiring repair as well as the building of bridges, while new branch roads — passing through spurs that jut out behind Chinese defence lines — are now being constructed, and are due to be completed by the end of 2020.

Thus India is carrying out military-related infrastructural developments that give it direct access to a section of the Tibet-Xinjiang highway, as well as enabling it to oversee the Gilgit-Baltistan region through which the CPEC passes. Since such preparations have been going on for some time, on its own it would not have been enough to ignite the border clash. Clearly other developments in and around the Modi government have set newer and more strident alarm bells ringing, prompting the Chinese to behave as they have. These can simply be listed.

1. A much deeper military alliance between India and the United States has been formalized in agreements such as 1) LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), which concluded in August 2016 and became operational a few months ago, 2) COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement), signed in September 2018 to allow much closer sharing of information and the transfer of advanced communications technology, and the forthcoming 3) BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation).
2. The Quad's implicit strategy to contain China. India under Modi has deepened the strategic ties with Japan, and is working on an Acquisitions and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) to allow logistics support at shared military bases. A similar agreement was signed between Indian and Australia earlier this month.
3. The August 5, 2019, annulment of Jammu and Kashmir autonomy and the bifurcation of this former province into two Union Territories (UTs) rules out any future compromise with Pakistan, thereby making it a permanent This means a hardening of foreign policy more broadly, which sends a message to China as well. This was heightened in August last year, when the government's de facto Number Two, the Home Minister Amit Shah, spoke in Parliament about "taking back" Aksai Chin and all of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, including Gilgit-Baltistan and areas leased and ceded by Islamabad to China. The latest maps (since the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir) showing Aksai Chin as part of India are nothing new, but given the change in context, it has been read by Beijing as signalling a more belligerent intent.
4. In September last year, a well-known public commentator and observer of political-military affairs, Lt General (Ret.) Harcharanjit Singh Panag, declared that India has carried out a "strategic policy shift" which will "force Beijing to open a second front anywhere along LAC." Others such as Phunchok Stobdan, ex-diplomat and currently senior fellow at the government-supported Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), has talked of India's "new forward policy."
5. More significantly, Seshadri Chari, former editor of the RSS magazine, Organiser, and former head of the Foreign Affairs Cell of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is currently serving on the National Executive Committee of that party. Since before the latest skirmish, he has been calling for

a revision of India's acceptance of the One China policy. Accordingly, he calls for a more critical attitude toward China, including in regard to CPEC, Tibet (including giving the Dalai Lama India's highest civilian award), the Bharat Ratna, and Taiwan. In a clear departure from the diplomatic past, two BJP MPs "virtually attended" the swearing-in ceremony of Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen on May 20, 2020, and sent their congratulations. This was strongly objected to by Beijing.

Current Responses and the Future

There is a widely held view in India that strengthening the country's position in regard to China will require some show of military force. There are points along the LAC where India can give a "bloody nose" to the Chinese, though China could similarly retaliate at other points where it is better positioned. Such tit for tat, say others, carries the threat of escalation that is best avoided, and India's desire to show its "resoluteness" must be expressed in some other way.

What has confused matters greatly is the latest broadcast by Modi on June 19 in which, even as he has hailed the Indian soldiers, he insisted that there had been no transgression into Indian territory, let alone any takeover. Modi's need to maintain his image as the strong leader means he also needs to control the narrative as much as possible, so opacity comes naturally to him.

The silver lining is that this denial of any intrusion — or successful intrusion — could mean that the government will not want to escalate matters militarily, and that for some time at least, a degree of tranquillity on the border will be restored. But there is no certainty in this. In such situations, even if the high commands don't want it, unanticipated flare-ups can happen because of uncontrollable local circumstances.

Can there be an enduring settlement of the border question? For that there would have to be some give-and-take, which is why the rhetoric that even the mainstream left parties indulge in these days about defending territorial "unity and integrity" only guarantees that there will be no justice for Kashmiris, who want the right of self-determination and no resolution of the border issue with China.

A few sane voices have argued for this territorial compromise, pointing to the 1960 Chou Enlai offer of trading Aksai Chin in the West for Chinese acceptance of the McMahon Line in the East. This offer was again made in the late '80s when the Rajiv Congress was in power. Had that have happened, things would have turned out very differently, for unlike the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, here there is no such thousand-year history of enmity.

It further bears mentioning that China, which shares a border with fourteen countries, has resolved its land-border disputes with all but India. Of India's six land neighbors, disputes remain with five of them — excluding only Bhutan.

The very nature of India's national movement for independence, which did not seek the forcible overthrow of colonial rulers but a *transfer* of power, meant that the country would adopt the "forward defence" policies of Britain, which had imposed borders during Empire.

In turn, this has led to Indian intransigence on several fronts, including the Sino-Indian border, the Jammu and Kashmir imbroglio, and the country's ugly paternalism (at best) in its attitude and policies towards the Himalayan crest kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan. Nonalignment, formally adopted in 1961, was a pragmatic foreign-policy perspective that cannot and should not be allowed to hide Indian hypocrisies and crimes.

China's "national communism" (more the first term than the second) has its own share of crimes,

however, not least its takeover of Tibet, its alignments with the United States and Pol Pot against Vietnam, its opposition to Cuba and to progressive national-liberation movements in Portuguese Africa, and to socialist struggles in Latin America more generally. More recent examples include its policy in regard to Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Xinjiang.

Nevertheless, India's foreign policy deserves much blame for the decaying relations between the two countries. The 1962 war was meant to be a very limited one to secure what China felt was its due. This is why it unilaterally retreated from its most advanced positions achieved and on its own released all Indian prisoners. In 1965 it gave verbal support but nothing else to Pakistan.

In 1971, when Pakistan was being dismembered, again no second front (despite Henry Kissinger's pleading during his secret trip to Beijing) was opened up and only verbal support provided. After the end of the Cold War, significant advances were made between the two Asian powers — hence the peace and tranquillity pacts. President Jiang Zemin first visited India then Pakistan in 1996, where to the shock of his hosts he declared Kashmir to be a bilateral issue.

India's nuclearization in 1998 was dubiously justified as a counterweight to China's nuclear experiments, but the latter had nothing to do with Sino-Indian relations and everything to do with it the Sino-Soviet and Sino-US enmities of the time. It was before this, in the early nineties, that the Indian turn toward the United States established the decisive contours of world politics as it stands today.

The Chinese no longer want to hold out the old Zhou Enlai offer. Instead, they see value in retaining political leverage from an unsettled border situation. On its part, an increasingly chauvinistic India has negligible interest in accepting such an offer were it now to be made.

The India-Pakistan military face-off has rightly been seen as the most dangerous one in South Asia; and by comparison, the skirmish on the Indian-Chinese border is less threatening. But there is no hiding the fact that relations have taken a further turn for the worse, and even a temporary assuagement of border tensions will not alter this fact.

Achin Vanaik

P.S.

- Jacobin. 06.23.2020:

- <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/06/china-india-border-modi-galwan-conflict-asia>

- One correction has been done 26 June 2020. The word "Tamizhaga" (Tamilian or Tamil-like) had been added by mistake on the Jacobin article before the reference to the Rajiv Congress (Rajiv Gandhi of the Congress party in power at the Centre and he was then the PM). It has been removed.

- Achin Vanaik is a writer and social activist, a former professor at the University of Delhi and Delhi-based Fellow of the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam. He is the author of *The Painful Transition: Bourgeois Democracy in India* and *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism*.