

There is a Global Dimension to the India-China Confrontation in Ladakh

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Far from delivering the promised resolution of J&K as India's "internal" affair, the BJP government has brought the former princely state's geopolitical locus back into fashion after a hiatus of almost half a century.

It has been a frenetic five weeks of a suddenly "[unquiet front](#)" in Ladakh between India and China. The saga began with simultaneous reports of a helicopter chase on May 5 and scuffles around [the high-altitude Pangong Lake](#). There followed reports that the Chinese had doubled (to six) the number of boats on the lake, which is bisected by the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Then, in the second half of May, there were more reports of unsoldierly tussles and a week later dramatic visuals of Chinese Air Force planes on the tarmac of an airport [built in 2010 in Ngari, across the LAC](#). Indian electronic media was quick to protest the confrontations, albeit at a lower decibel than if it had been on the country's western front. Meanwhile, Nepal, citing Indian maps published in the last few months, objected to alleged [cartographic encroachments of Nepalese territory by India](#). Washington [supported its strategic partner, India](#), with a strong anti-China statement. Russia weighed in with a combative op-ed [suggesting that Washington was using Delhi as its tool](#) but Moscow's official response [was milder](#), stating that it was, "of course,...worried".

As it began to sink in that the incidents were not of the usual scuffle and flag-meeting variety, it turns out that the PLA has opened several fronts along the LAC. On May 26, the episodes were capped by high-level meetings in Beijing and Delhi. President Xi Jinping is reported to have urged "battle preparedness" on the part of the PLA. Prime Minister Modi's meeting, with his military chiefs and national security advisors on the same day, concluded without any comment to the media. All of these occasions may have been pre-scheduled, but the Ladakh situation added a visible dimension.

In the early phase of the confrontations, the ground reactions and expert opinions were muted, soft, predictable even. The altercations in early May, which hospitalised eleven soldiers on both sides, were reported as resolved by the next morning after "[dialogue and interaction at the local level](#)". Military reactions from the ground tended to attribute the multiple face-offs to the "undemarcated" boundary. Some analysts argued that the reasons for the incursions were entirely China-centric: its imminent economic collapse, Beijing's problems in Hong Kong and Taiwan and President Xi's wish to impress his domestic audience. These developments, implied this line of reasoning, [demanded diversionary tactics](#).

More objective observers compared the confrontations to the 2017 Doklam hostilities, suggesting that they may have to do with India's cartographic rush to show Aksai Chin as part of its territory and [China's objections to the construction of a road](#) near the Galwan River Valley just south of Daulat Beg Oldi. Astute practitioners and cautious pundits characterised the confrontations as "[predictable Chinese behavior](#)", even berating Delhi for its [lack of foresight](#).

But these analyses are comparable to someone trying to tell the time by looking at the second hand of a watch. They grope for Chinese intent in immediate causes and tactical posturing rather than as strategic pursuit, using geography and history to advantage. The observation by Gautam Bambawale, India's former ambassador to China, Pakistan and Bhutan, [comes closest to a statement of realpolitik scrutiny](#): "One cannot discount that the [Chinese] actions are guided by concerns regarding the Indian UTs [or "Union Territories"] of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh." It is a perceptive observation that intuitively addresses both historical idiosyncrasy and legal confusion through a geostrategic lens.

However, it could do with some elaboration.

A brief history of a boundary dispute

The Sino-Indian boundary dispute is a geopolitical conundrum that has been almost two hundred years in the making. In that span of time, the region defined by the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and its twin, the Line of Control (LOC) with Pakistan has flared up as a global (I use the term advisedly) political issue each time there has been a paradigmatic shift in the global world order.

The genesis of the conundrum was the creation of the modern Dogra state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in the second quarter of 19th century South Asia. The birth of the state was against the backdrop of the rise and rule of European colonial regimes in South Asia. When, a century later, British colonial rule in South Asia collapsed, it ushered an ambiguity in the status of the state, even as it quickly, between 1947 and 1955, fell into the Cold War regime, despite India's lead role in the "non-alignment movement" at the time. In the past 72 years, J&K has resurfaced with each major shift in geopolitics.

The briefest of summations must suffice here for a geopolitical understanding of the history of a boundary that refuses to succumb to what has been aptly called the "organised hypocrisy" of the modern world's state-system.

As the British Empire firmly ensconced itself in South Asia, its imperial policy towards its territorial holdings began to re-define a clutch of states along the seam of the Central Eurasian and South Asian divide that slopes eastwards, along the mountain systems of the Pamir Knot, the Hindukush Massif and the Himalayan Range.

Some of these were the larger traditional states of Assam, Bhutan, Nepal, pre-annexed Sikkim and several toparchies around and between them. These re-definitions were negotiated between the sovereign states and the British; they took place within the context of the British Empire's well-known strategies of "forward" advance and "masterly inaction" policy choices in its South Asian colony.

It was in this geopolitical milieu, with encouragement from the Sikh monarchy, that the small Dogra principality of Jammu conquered Ladakh and Baltistan between 1834 and 1842, and incorporated them into its territories. In 1846 – and not unconnected to the Russo-British rivalry in Central Eurasia called the "Great Game" – the then Sikh-controlled valley of Kashmir was "made over" by the British to the Dogra Raja Gulab Singh. It was an exploit that midwived the modern state of J&K. It was also studied opportunism prompted by British strategic aims, catalyzed by regional trade interests and crystallised by Gulab Singh's creative ambition.

Three important historical facts must be highlighted regarding this convergence of geo-political interests.

(i) The creation of the J&K state was riding on the shoulders of an ancient and already existing relationship between Ladakh, Baltistan (which then included Kargil and Skardu) and the Kashmir Valley. Their affiliations were more than a thousand years in the making, during which the three nations were connected by trade, kinship, politics and language. As an example of the last, the two languages between them – Kashmiri and dialects of Tibetan – are replete with word borrowings as they acted as reciprocal intermediaries to other languages including Persian and Turkic.

(ii) When the three nations – Ladakhi-Balti, Kashmiri and Dogra – were welded into the modern J&K state in 1846 it was a unique multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural monarchy, with Gulab Singh, now maharaja, as the facilitating interloper. In effect, he had institutionalised a *pre-existing* traditional relationship between nations by including Jammu, through conquest and statecraft, into a 19th century monarchic state.

(iii) Between the late medieval (early 14th) and early modern (late 16th) centuries, the civilisational pulls for Baltistan-Ladakh and Kashmir had been towards Central Asia to the north and Tibet to the east.

However, the Mughal conquest of Kashmir in the late 16th century, and its subsequent familiarity with Ladakh and Baltistan thereafter, initiated a political gravitation of this geopolitical seam of nations between Central Eurasia and South Asia towards the latter. The creation of the Dogra state in 1846 cemented and preserved this southward pull, albeit not to the exclusion of its older traditional networks of political economy. Significantly, British India did not tamper with the older relationships, until it suspected a compromise of its interests.

In 1947, this Himalayan weld, as it were, was stressed and broken by the creation of the coeval modernist states of India and Pakistan from the remnants of British South Asia. The territorial cupidity of the two freshly minted states over a smaller but *much older* third modern state, Dogra J&K, spawned the first war between India and Pakistan that lasted until the end of 1948.

Meanwhile, the peoples belonging to the state of J&K were consigned to political uncertainty, economic inequity and cultural inertia. In the 72 years since then, the dispute has morphed into a conundrum that has rendered South Asia a dysfunctional region, arresting the political, economic and national potential of all its peoples, not least the 13 million peoples of the erstwhile state of J&K.

71 years of a geopolitical dispute: 1949 to 2020

In the years between 1949 and 1971, J&K remained firmly entrenched in the Cold War model of world order, with the Soviet Union supporting India and the United States backing Pakistan.

The 1972 Simla Agreement, curated by Indira Gandhi, shrewdly sought to extract the dispute from the template of bipolar power politics, re-position it as a bilateral “issue” between Delhi and Islamabad and eliminate any role for J&K other than as territory – with its peoples as an accidental part of that landscape. The “issue” remained there, unresolved and without significant advance for twenty years. But the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 signalled a re-definition of global geopolitics. Meanwhile, in a yet unstudied convergence with and foreshadowing of the ruptures that were about to take place worldwide in 1991, the J&K dispute asserted itself on the international stage in late 1989 with an early “Kashmir spring” challenging India’s sovereignty.

The end of the Cold War and of communist USSR as the capitalist West’s primary enemy, was followed by the identification, in the US and much of Europe, with a phobic interpretation of Islam as the enemy as a fresh policy hypothesis. India embraced this mood of Islamophobia, abandoned its alliance with Moscow and allied itself with Washington. It was a strategic shift catalysed by a failing

Indian economy and a rising tide in Hindu and Hindutva nationalist aspirations, represented not insignificantly by the violent denouement, in 1992, of the Masjid-Mandir controversy in Ayodhya. The episode also marked the advent of rising majoritarian populism in Indian politics. The September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, a U.S. led coalition in “war against terrorism” replaced Islamophobia as an overt policy with a more nuanced stratagem of “good Muslim” versus “bad Muslim”.

India, however, did not forsake Islamophobia in its cruder form, in the face of the Kashmiri armed rebellion of 1989 and Delhi’s intensifying rivalry with Islamabad. It was a tactic that responded to the challenges of the rebellion in Kashmir on the one hand and to the India-Pakistan rivalry on the other. Meanwhile, arguably with nudges from Delhi and Islamabad, the noise and optics of the rebellion in Kashmir were quickly transformed from one of a challenge to political injustice to a religious identity “issue”. The moot point, however, is that regardless of partisan definitions, J&K has remained stubbornly visible and unresolved during the thirty-years (1991-2020) search for a “new world order”.

The shift in 2014

That said, Delhi’s J&K policy was marked by two significant changes after the second coming of a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government in 2014. First, the government adroitly sought to make the J&K dispute a unilateral problem, internal to India. Its instrument for that objective was to abandon any nuanced paradigm of Islamophobia as a policy frame and to replace it with a monomaniacal hatred of Islam and Muslims. This served to strengthen its demographic and electoral base in the name of a Hindutva nationalism. To wit: by promoting a thousand years of the presence of Islam and Muslims in South Asia as the cause of India’s ills; by helping to define India’s rivalry with Pakistan as a civilisational one; and to sharpening the demonisation of the seven *million* Kashmiris of the Valley as the vanguard of an existential threat to the one *billion* Hindus of India.

The second mood change was the BJP’s ideological zealotry, political impatience and deficit in geo-strategic sensibility. This resulted in the BJP government pursuing an internal policy of brutalising Kashmiris, a bilateral policy maximally alienating Pakistan and, in its external policy, triggering a clumsy choreography of statecraft in its messaging on J&K.

It is these blind spots of smug ideological certainty, arrogant confidence of power and tetchy methodology in communications that produce the governmentality that led to the August 5, 2019 action on India’s side of the LoC – the ending of J&K autonomy and its partitioning into two separate Union territories.

China’s long march to the Galwan River valley

To be fair to the BJP, China’s long march to Galwan River Valley in 2020 is not of recent origin. Chinese geopolitical memory is long by any standard and, in this case, appears to have begun in the 1950s, with many ground advances of its argument at several stages since, including in 1962.

The first was in the early 1950s, when India’s then ambassador to Beijing was negotiating the future of the traditional trade routes between the two countries. He reported that China [“virulently objected”](#) to keeping open the traditional route through Demchok on the Tibetan plateau or even “any reference” to Ladakh. These objections were akin to a demurrer to references to Ladakh that would suggest China’s acceptance of Ladakh as a part of India. What probably irked Beijing further was New Delhi’s decided tilt towards the Soviet Union – in exchange for the latter’s support to India’s position on J&K in 1955. It takes little to untangle the fact that the growing alliance was at the expense of China, with whom India shared an extensive undefined and disputed boundary. This

at a time when China's boundaries with *both* India and the Soviet Union were still unsettled. In the event, the 1962 war (regardless of the controversy over "who started it first") cannot be ruled out as one that was prompted by the then rapidly growing relationship between New Delhi and Moscow.

From 1962, the dispute over the boundary line along the LAC remained relatively dormant. Until 1993. That year, not entirely removed in timing from the geopolitical earthquake caused by the demise of the Soviet Union just earlier, Beijing and New Delhi signed a protocol agreeing to ["Peace and Tranquility in the Border Regions"](#). But implementing the "peace" has not been an entirely "tranquil" exercise [if we consider incidents of incursions](#) just before 1993 – and the 1025 officially registered "transgressions" between 2016 and 2019.

The evidence would not fault the assumption that Delhi's 1990s tilt away from Moscow and towards Washington, continued to irritate Beijing with its still unsettled Sino-Indian boundary in several places, including in Ladakh. Russia's diminution, however, lessened the urgency for the next few years. However, Delhi's growing relationship with Washington, its snubs by ignoring invitations to discussions on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its acceptance of Washington's 2017 Indo-Pacific Strategy, its claims during the Doklam standoff on sovereign Bhutanese soil and Delhi's discouragement, if not veto, of [Thimphu's participation in the BRI forums](#) of 2017 and 2019 must have grated on Beijing's sensibilities even as it bolstered hubris in Delhi.

Beijing's strategic response to Delhi's stratagem

The dismantling of the state of J&K on its side of the LoC was enabled by the BJP's ideological zealotry, administrative subterfuge, political arrogance and military force. But Delhi has been bereft of a consistent external strategy on J&K other than intransigence. In that context, it must be admitted, the August 5, 2019 decision was unexpected, bold and clever. In one fell stroke, the government hived off Ladakh so that it could be ruled directly by Delhi and gave Ladakhis what (Ladakhis thought) they wanted. Simultaneously, in declaring Kashmir and Jammu a Union Territory, it brought mostly Muslim Kashmir under Delhi's thumb, while positioning mostly Hindu Jammu to dominate it as power becomes incrementally concentrated in Delhi under a muscularly centralising Indian state.

However, Delhi did not anticipate the implications of its action for China's and Pakistan's territorial interests along the LAC *and* the LoC respectively. It was amateurish to think that Beijing and Islamabad would not respond strategically to this shrewd stratagem. Well, they have. Pakistan, with an uncharacteristic silence that has a stereotypically "inscrutable oriental" quality to it and China with an uncharacteristic wave of a big geopolitical stick along the length of the Himalaya. It is this crisis that Delhi is facing in Pangong Lake, the Galwan River Valley and the other parts of the Himalayan borderlands as it continues to cling to old models of power politics and naïve conventions in inter-state relations.

One wonders: what was the real agenda for the May 26 meeting, mentioned above, between the prime minister, his military chiefs and the national security advisor? One line of analysis should surely have been this: that in the six years between 2013 and 2019, Delhi and Beijing have had [no less than five summit meetings](#), all but the first of them between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi. That is a lot of bilateral meetings by any standard, especially between neighbours who have been unable to find common ground despite a 3,800-kilometre-long boundary between them; and a relationship that finds itself rife with strategic dissonance and territorial disputes. It would be an astounding omission if President Xi and Prime Minister Modi did not signal, at a minimum, each other's concerns on the boundary questions during the much publicised bonhomie between them. What is it that the Indian side missed, one wonders, before its radical and internally unconstitutional decision to dismantle the state of J&K, redrawing maps to suit its advantage in an action involving

both China and Pakistan? Did the Modi government not understand the strategic implications of the phrase [“Pakistan is China’s Israel”](#) – coined by the PLA two decades ago?

Much of the hubbub and clamour of Indian commentaries in the last month have been [tactical analyses about “incursions”](#) along a “phantom” called the LAC and, belatedly, the grazing rights of nomads, both symptoms rather than causes, of a geopolitical concern. Meanwhile, China’s methodology for forcing dialogue has been by the PLA actions that translate into a tacit claim of Beijing’s territorial rights in the Ladakh trans-Himalaya and connect the LAC to its cousin, the LoC.

While the hypothesis of J&K’s role in the geopolitical swings in Eurasia and South Asia in the last 180 years is helpful for perspective, how does that fit in with today’s ground situation? The answer lies in focusing on the last two decades and especially the last six years, which are coterminous with the BJP’s time in office. A quick glance at the latter period divulges an alarming absence of the awareness of anything other than party ideology, rather than knowledge of the complexity of ideas and nations in a deeply interconnected world. In this, the BJP is clearly out of step with the strategic need of the times, which is so desperately needed for a South Asian contribution to a “new world order” following the end, three decades ago, of the bipolar power structure of the Cold War.

J&K and Central Asia

Until a month ago, the elephant in the room that no one would talk about in any discussions on the J&K “issue” was China. The shakeup at the LAC has abruptly brought home the fact that the LAC and the LoC – lines that overtly admit to seeking to control territory – converge and overlap to impact people living on either side. It should give pause to allow a glance at the new “elephant” in the room – Central Asia. This geographic entity consists of what were traditionally called Western and Eastern Turkestan which, together, have been called “Central Asia” in both colloquial and technical geopolitical terminology for the last three hundred years.

As we have seen, the formation of the state of J&K in the mid-nineteenth century was linked to Russia’s colonial expansion in Eurasia towards today’s Uzbekistan and the British colonial expansion north of South Asia. The third player of this Great Game was Qing China (1644 – 1911) which had a tentative hold over today’s Xinjiang. The three-way contest was to safeguard or expand, depending on the year, the territorial possessions of the three empires.

However, the new global great game has been re-defining itself after the mid-1970s consolidation of the oil producing countries and great power energy needs seeking to monopolise sources of energy. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States highlighted the West’s dependence on Middle Eastern oil. It led to George W. Bush’s convenient and falsely rationalised Middle East war of 2003. When it faltered, the demands on energy for economic growth resulted in a race for alternate sources of energy. They were found in west Central Asia’s Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the last of which shares a brief boundary with undivided J&K. It highlighted the strategic importance of the Central and South Asian territorial contiguity and, arguably, a reorganisation of administrative changes in the US Department of State.

Until 2005, the United States had an assistant secretary of state as its top official for South Asia. The next year the administrative structure was changed so that a single assistant secretary of state was appointed for [both South and Central Asia](#). This, in turn, led to Washington’s strategic partnership with Delhi being defined overtly and unambiguously. It was not coincidence that it was articulated by the launch of the “U.S. – India Energy Dialogue in 2005 to promote trade and investment in the energy sector”.

Now consider this: even a cursory glance at the map is enough to flag the importance of stability in

Gilgit, Baltistan, Ladakh and Kashmir – all part of the disputed erstwhile J&K and forming the seam of the Central Asian and South Asian divide – for the India-US strategic alliance to fructify. But two factors have diluted the focus of this policy since the 2014 election of the BJP-led government.

First, in its eagerness to embrace the United States, particularly after Trump's virulently anti-Muslim policies starting in 2016, Delhi initiated a policy trajectory of a rapid expansion of its relationship with an unstable White House. So, when the latter came up with its 2017 Indo-Pacific Strategy, Delhi's eager embrace of that initiative left its already susceptible Himalayan boundary even more vulnerable, especially considering the PLA's infrastructural fortifications along that boundary. This factor goes some way in explaining the [1,025 boundary incidents between 2016 and 2019 along the LAC](#). Second, the Kashmir issue refused to go away despite the BJP government's hardline domestic policy in Kashmir and its confident braggadocio in the international arena since 2014.

Today the ten-month old dismantling of the J&K state is witnessing far-reaching consequences in Delhi's relations with Beijing. Its cartographic assertiveness ignores the reality that the territory of erstwhile J&K is disputed, even by its strategic ally the United States, let alone China. Moreover, the boisterous claims by BJP ministers for many months now, most recently on May 21, 2020, that all that now remains is for India to [regain Gilgit and Baltistan](#) – clearly endangering not just China's claims on the Aksai Chin and its conditional occupation of the Shaksgam valley, but also its not-small investment in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) portion of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Add to this Ladakh's territorial contiguity to Xinjiang directly to the north and we have the full sense of the meaning of a geopolitical dispute.

Current talks are geopolitical mediation, not tactical face-off

It is no accident that the nub of Delhi's negotiations with China today are focused on ambiguities along the LAC in "eastern Ladakh". The Indian media's emphasis of "eastern" is an assertion meant to exclude "western" Ladakh, which, of course, would drag the LoC into the discussion and link Islamabad to its all-weather friend. Few would have imagined this scenario even two months ago. So, unlike routine flag meetings following bellicose chest bumps and stone pelting skirmishes, or even protracted talks such as the ones following the more serious 2017 Doklam confrontation, this altercation is far from over. In effect, Beijing has expanded the canvas to include the LAC, and itself, in future talks on the J&K conundrum. As a result, it has forced statements of support for India from United States, coaxed Russia to act as a calming voice between Washington and Beijing, and even emboldened a claim of Indian cartographic aggression by Nepal.

It is a stark irony that this has happened during the BJP government's watch; a party that has consistently and vociferously claimed that J&K is not a dispute and sought to reduce it to a unilateral, internal affair. Instead, it finds itself facing a discourse that has catapulted the J&K dispute from its tacitly accepted bilateral dispute into a multilateral one and, indeed, now, a global "issue". In doing so, the BJP government has brought the former princely state of J&K's geopolitical locus back into fashion after a hiatus of almost half a century.

All because someone did not keep one eye on the map and the other eye on sources of fossil fuel.

In the meantime, the dissension to Delhi's August 5, 2019 action has spread from Kashmir to Ladakh to Jammu, in each case for very different reasons, complicating the BJP's domestic politics on this side of the LoC.

But that is a different, more complex and much larger story.

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