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Sino-Indian Border Conflict

By

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Abstract

This paper encapsulates the evolution of Sino-Indian strategic relationship. The historic boundary issue between India and China has posed serious threats to the overall bilateral relationship. The recent deadly clash between the PLA and the Indian Army in Galwan Valley has caused severe damage to the trust between the neighbors. The current dynamics have dramatically altered the peacebuilding measures built over three decades and has exposed the loopholes of the previous agreements. While the standoff continues, diplomatic channels are still open emphasizing on a systematic disengagement and de-escalation process at the border. However, the impact seems to be missing on the ground with both the armies preparing for the approaching winter.

Keywords: Security Strategy, History, Border Agreements, LAC, Diplomacy, Military confrontation.

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Table of Abbreviations

BECA: Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

CBMs: Confidence Building Measures

COMCASA: Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement

CPEC: China - Pakistan Economic Corridor

EAM: External Affairs Minister

IAF: Indian Air Force

JWG: Joint Working Group

LAC: Line of Actual Control

LEMOA: Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement

LoC: Line of Control

MHA: Ministry of Home Affairs

NEFA: North-East Frontier Agency

NSA: National Security Advisor

PLA: People's Liberation Army

PRC: People's Republic of China

QUAD: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

WMCC: Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India - China Border Affairs

“The wise win before the fight, while the ignorant fight to win”

Zhuge Liang

1. **Introduction**

The remarkable rise of India and China is a stale saying now. The two most populous countries have changed the game of the rise of the third-world. These two Asian giants share a deep and consequential relationship based on the imperatives of history, geography and contemporary geopolitics. With the changing world order and the birth of an Asian century, the Sino-Indian relation is constantly evolving. There is immense cooperation and interdependence between the two.

Nonetheless, the contested border has always been an issue plaguing the Sino-Indian association. The key issue lies in the ambiguity due to differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Failed historical efforts based on evidence and claims have brought this relation at the crossroads where frequent scuffles and skirmishes at the border are inevitable.

The recent flare up at the border marks year 2020 a dark year for Sino-Indian relationship. The multidimensional impact of such a situation impacts many facets be it military, economic, political or international standing of both Indian and China. The military response of the Indian side to Chinese transgressions has been substantial. However, a prolonged conflict comes with a heavy cost not only due to the economic slowdown but also because of the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The present border situation presents a political challenge for both leaders due to their weighty nationalists' sentiments as neither will back down and diminish their domestic political stature. Thus, poses grave implications on the possibility of a solution between the two. The future of Sino-Indian relations is surely on a downward trajectory. The strategic framework between New Delhi and Beijing on the border issues is hanging by a thread. And as both sides continue to blame each other for provocation, a comprehensive and responsible solution seems distant.

2. **Background of India - China Strategic Relationship**

India and China share a rather adventurous history of strategic relations. The two Asian giants have experienced a concoction of turbulence and peace since the mid-1940s till the present day.

The foreign policy of a nation reflects its domestic interests framed keeping in view the realities of the external environment. And since both India and China were liberated at a similar time as India gained its independence in 1947 and China in 1949, it was a crucial time for the two to form their policies towards each other in a way that was going to reflect the future trajectory of their association. The notion of “*non-alignment*” in the Indian foreign policy since independence and China’s “*leaning to one side*” strategy after liberation were poles apart. However, a visible shared sense of suffering and oppression faced by them in the past led to a friendly start to their relationship.

Nehru, a seasoned foreign policymaker and an internationalist, had a positive view of China and the communist leaders even though the same was not reciprocated to him (Sikri 2011, p. 57). He displayed a welcoming attitude to the resultant formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Arif 2013, p.131). Nehru’s strategy was to contain communism in Asia by developing closer relations with China as according to his understanding, Chinese nationalism prevailed more strongly than communism (Arif 2013, p.131). His key foreign policy elements were the strengthening of the third world and acting as a mediator in the Cold War along with developing warm relations with China.

However, the Mao Government was wary of the historically cordial relations between Tibet and India. The communist party was under the impression that independent India is continuing with its British policies towards Tibet. Following the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950, the relationship between India and China changed dramatically as now the countries shared a border. The spillovers from Tibet protests were high on the Sino-Indian relationship. The Indian Government did not oppose the Chinese Government openly (Arif 2013, p.131). Nehru prioritized relations with China rather than Tibet as a part of his pragmatic foreign policy, even though he personally supported Tibet’s cause. The huge exodus of Tibetan refugees to India put the Indian Government in an uneasy position. The Chinese Government grew suspicious of India’s stance on the Tibet issue.

Hence, what started with a warm friendship ended in the early 1960s and thus, came a series of serious tensions and confrontations between the two. Following a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese military, India prioritized its military development which was later dubbed as “*militarism*” by China (Arif 2013, p.132). Nehru suffered humiliation at home and consequently, a pause button was hit in the Sino-Indian relationship.

Nehru, a pragmatic idealist, assessed China erroneously. The Sino-Indian war in 1962 was considered a watershed movement as Nehruvian idealism was replaced and closer ties were developed with the Soviet Union (Malone & Mukherjee 2010, p.141). The colossal issue of the downturn in the relationship was not even the territorial claims but the thirst for ideological dominance (Jaishankar 2020, p.138). China’s polemics with the Soviet, its issues with Tibet, and the closer relationship between India and USSR formed the rationale behind the changing nature of the association between India and China (Jaishankar 2020, p.138).

India’s growing closeness with the USSR was considered “*anti-China*” by the Chinese leaders (Arif 2013, p.132). And Chinese close association with Pakistan made that clear. The Sino-Pakistan axis also influenced the course of Sino-Indian strategic relations. As the situation between China and India was downright critical, the association between China and Pakistan improved remarkably. As Kautilya said, “*Your neighbor is your natural enemy and the neighbor’s neighbor is your friend*” and it seems that China has imbibed this into its coercive tactics to influence the territorial politics. During the 1965 India - Pakistan war, Beijing supported Islamabad and diplomatically pressurized India (Malone & Mukherjee 2010, p.142).

However, since the end of the cold war, Indian policymakers remarkably shifted their approach towards China. With the introduction of new economic reforms and the opening up of the economy, India’s relations with China improved. Bilateral agreements to resolve the border tensions were initiated.

2a. **The Geographical Aspect**

Geography is a crucial player in understanding Sino-Indian relations. Both countries share a similar geopolitical arena be it South Asia, Asia-Pacific, or the Indian

Ocean. The territorial claims of both these countries influence a significant part of the power dynamics in Asia.

India and China share the highest border in the world and the longest undemarcated one for that matter. They share a land boundary of 3,488 kilometers running along with Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh on the Indian side (MHA 2017). China and India did not share a historical boundary until the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950 ensuing a series of territorial claims and border skirmishes.



Figure 1 (Khalid 2020) (Halem 2018)

There are broadly three sections where the dispute is present:

- The *Western Sector* primarily comprises the *Aksai Chin* plateau, an area with very difficult terrain and perpetually uninhabited. The Himalayan region of Ladakh with the highest altitude of 5300 meters comprises a significant part of the disputed area that India shares with China (Mapping India and China's Disputed Border 2020).

For the British, Aksai China was a strategically crucial buffer zone in the larger game of geopolitics of Central Asia and the balance of power (Hoffmann 1990, p.12). Historically, the British administration in India made some attempts to create a clean borderline. The *Ardagh-Johnson line* was the first one proposed in 1897 to the

British government in India by Major General Sir John Ardagh along with W.H. Johnson (Hoffmann 1990, p.12). This line constituted the Aksai Chin area touching till the Kuen Lun range as a part of British India (Hoffmann 1990, p.12). Another attempt made at demarcating the Himalayan borders was the *Macartney-MacDonald line*. This line placed a significant part of Aksai Chin on the Sinkiang side (Hoffmann 1990, p.12). Britishers also proposed the Karakoram Range as the natural border.

During 1907 and 1908, Indian and British officials presented the Macartney-MacDonald line as the official international border for British India (Hoffmann 1990, p.14). However, in 1911, the Indian Army favored the Ardagh line and was officiated in 1912 (Hoffmann 1990, p.15). In 1947, when India became independent, the official maps were drawn in reference to the Ardagh-Johnson line. The Chinese Government never accepted that border. After 1950, China started strategically increasing its presence in the area by undertaking infrastructural activities.

Aksai Chin dispute was never formally settled before 1947 and so until 1954, it was shown as “*undefined*” in official Indian maps (Krishnan 2020, p.223). After that, Nehru unilaterally declared it as an international boundary (Krishnan 2020, p.223). Even though neither India nor China has a strong claim on the area and in fact as it remained no man’s land for much part of the history, India has a better claim due to the presence of historical evidence in the form of cartographic data but China does not have even that proof (Krishnan 2020, p.223). And thus, the dispute continues.

Yet another disputed area in the western sector is the *Shaksgam valley* which was ceded by Pakistan to China in a border agreement in 1963 but is claimed by India. This move has been declared illegal by the International Court of Justice.

- The *Middle Sector* covers the Doklam Plateau at an altitude of 4,600 meters, with the shortest distance of 89 kilometers (Mapping India and China’s Disputed Border 2020). It is at the tri-junction of Tibet, Bhutan, and Indian state Sikkim. This region is exceptionally crucial as it gives China easy access to the *Chicken’s Neck* which is an area at the crossroads of Bhutan, Bangladesh, and connects the northeastern states of India with the rest of the country.

- The *Eastern Sector* comprises the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh [previously known as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA)]. According to the Indian government reports, Arunachal Pradesh shares a border of 1126 kilometers with China (MHA 2017). China claims it as a part of South Tibet. The historical significance in this sector is represented by the *McMahon Line*. This line was a product of the Simla Accord signed between the British Administration in India and Tibet in 1914 (Sikri 2011, p.59). The Chinese Government till present repudiates the legitimacy of the agreement as according to them, Tibet was not in a position to sign an agreement with British India in the past whereas India considers the McMahon line as the boundary between the two. China attaches the cultural importance of Tibetan roots in the area.

2b. **Timeline of Military Confrontation**

India - China relation has a rather active history of military confrontations. The boundary question has always been a bone of contention and has posed grave setbacks to the overall Sino-Indian association. As Steven A. Hoffmann puts it, it was the British ambiguity that led to post-colonial tensions between India and China (Hoffmann 1990). In 1959, the “*honeymoon period*” of the Sino-Indian association ended, and what started turned into a fatal war. India’s claims to Aksai Chin and Chinese claim to Arunachal Pradesh forms the crux of this entire dispute.

A road between Xinjiang and Tibet crossing through the Indian side raised Nehru’s concern, following which he wrote to the Chinese Government claiming the Aksai Chin area (Zhang & Li 2013, p.5). In 1959, Premier Zhou Enlai presented Nehru with a solution to work out the border issue which stated that if India waives its claim over Aksai Chin, China would be ready to legitimize the McMahon line (Zhang & Li 2013, p.6). However, Nehru outrightly rejected it. India had a better claim to Aksai Chin due to the traditional agreements with Tibet and such a swap was unrealistic for India (Krishnan 2020, p. 230). While Enlai, during his visit to New Delhi, came up with the idea of a “*Line of Actual Control*” (LAC) and presented a six-point statement for negotiation and settlement of the border dispute in the eastern and western sector, Nehru was in no position to make such a negotiation which was also partly shaped by public discourse during that time (Krishnan 2020, pp.229-230). The exodus of Tibetan refugees to India made the matters worse which ultimately resulted in a war in **1962**.

Chinese troops crossed the McMahon Line and dispersed widely in the Indian Territory (Goldman 2020). The war lasted for over a month and resulted in the casualties of more than 1,000 on the Indian side and less than 800 on the Chinese side (Goldman 2020). India suffered a defeat. Premier Zhou unilaterally called for a ceasefire and the then positions of the Chinese Army became the LAC (Goldman 2020). The wounds of this war are still plaguing relations between New Delhi and Beijing.

In **1967**, tensions developed at **Nathu La** pass connecting Sikkim (then, a protectorate of India) and Tibet Autonomous Area (Goldman 2020). The scuffle escalated and heavy firing took place killing more than 150 Indian soldiers and 340 Chinese soldiers (Goldman 2020). However, here India prevailed and pushed the PLA further back from Nathu La to Cho La (Goldman 2020).

Yet another serious incident occurred in **1975** at **Tulung La** in Arunachal Pradesh. According to the Indian Government, Chinese forces crossed into the Indian territory in the south of Tulung La (Shukla 2020). Chinese forces fired at the Assam Rifles jawan and ambushed four Indian soldiers (Shukla 2020). This was also the year when Sikkim officially became a part of India fueling Chinese Government antipathy.

Salt was again poured on the old wounds when New Delhi decided to have a strong posture in defending Tawang, a major monastery in Arunachal Pradesh in 1983 (Joshi 2017). In 1984 and 1985, an Indian Intelligence Bureau team camped at **Sumdorong Chu**, however, when they came back in **1986**, Chinese troops were present there (Joshi 2017). This led to protests by the Indian side and the situation escalated which led to the launch of Operation “*Falcon*” by the Indian side (Joshi 2017). Here the Indian forces had an advantage and things calmed down after a flag meeting (Joshi 2017). And New Delhi took this opportunity to give Arunachal Pradesh a status of a full-fledged state of India (Joshi 2017).

While there was no significant military confrontation after 1986, an incident occurred in **2013** at **Daulat Beg Oldi**, an important geostrategic area between Ladakh and Uyghuristan (Panda 2013). A serious violation of the LAC was done as a Chinese platoon set up a camp on the Indian side of LAC (Goldman 2020). Attempts were made by India to resolve the issue diplomatically (Panda 2013). Despite the best efforts of the foreign

ministry, the Indian government had to agree to Chinese demands to destroy bunkers in the Chumar sector (Panda 2013).

In **2017** another unprecedented incident took place in **Doklam**. PLA's encroachment by building a road towards the junction was not met by much resistance from the ill-equipped Bhutanese Army (Krishnan 2020, p.191). However, the area is of critical importance to India due to the presence of the Siliguri Corridor near it (Krishnan 2020, p.191). Indian Army confronted the PLA and after a long haul, the matter got settled and China stopped the construction of the road (Goldman 2020). The end message of such surreptitious moves by the Chinese military was clear to India which became aware of China's "*salami-slicing*" tactics (Krishnan 2020, p.191).

2c. **Cooperation?**

India and China established their diplomatic ties on December 30th 1949, making India the first non-socialist bloc to do so (Li 2010, p.6). This led to the beginning of a new journey of association between the two. The period 1950 - 1958 witnessed a remarkable cordial phase in the Sino-Indian relationship (Ruisheng 2010, p.1). The ***Panchsheel Agreement*** or "*Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*" was established during Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to India in 1954 to shape the future course of the relationship. The slogan "*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*"¹ reflected the sense of brotherhood between the two. This phase served China better as it was more diplomatically isolated (Jaishankar 2020, p. 137). India actively advocated China's representation at the UN (Jaishankar 2020, p. 136). PM Nehru also supported China to be a part of the Bandung Conference in 1955 (Ruisheng 2010, p.3).

However, Nehru's 1959 visit to China was problematic as it has caused serious tensions regarding the contested border as Chinese leaders stated that they did not recognize the colonial frontier (Aljazeera 2020). And when in 1959 Dalai Lama fled Tibet and took asylum in India, the matter became worse for Indian leaders (Malone & Mukherjee 2010, p.140). The 1960 visit by Zhou Enlai to discuss the Tibet situation was also unsuccessful (Malone & Mukherjee 2010, p.140). The relationship was severely strained as a result of the 1962 war and the subsequent border clashes. Moreover, Beijing

¹ Translated as "Indians and Chinese are brothers."

expelled two Indian Diplomats in 1967 on charges of “*espionage activities*” added to the already frozen relation (Arif 2013, p.132).

The thaw in the relationship came in 1988 when Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Beijing and met Deng Xiaoping (Sikri 2011, p. 62). Xiaoping reiterated keeping the border affairs separate from the overall bilateral relationship and work on the areas of common interests (Krishnan 2020, p. 164). Hence, this visit opened up many avenues for the Sino-Indian relationship.

Since the end of the cold war, New Delhi and Beijing have shown immense desire to work out the differences at the border peacefully and strengthen the foundation of their relationship. A Joint Working Group (JWG) was set up to resolve the border issue and to maintain peace and tranquility at the LAC (Arif 2013, p.133). Tensions were reduced through *Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)* including military-level talks, troop reduction at the border, and military exercises (Arif 2013, p.134).

A series of diplomatic visits took place and many agreements were signed to build trust and peacefully settle the border dispute. In 1993, the Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility in Border Areas along the LAC was signed wherein both the sides agreed to jointly check the alignment of LAC and for the troops to exercise self-restraint (Arif 2013, p.134). Another agreement was signed in 1996 during President Jiang Zemin’s visit to New Delhi which reaffirmed that both the armies shall not use force against the other by any means (Arif 2013, p.134).

Stepping into a new century, the canvas of Sino-Indian relations displayed a positive message. The bilateral trade and economic relations took a flight. Many high-level exchanges took place. In 2005, Premier Wen Jiabao officially recognized Sikkim as a part of India (Malone & Mukherjee 2010, p.144). An Agreement on “*Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the settlement of India-China Boundary Question*” was also signed during his visit to India (Arif 2013, p.135). The following year was declared as the “*India-China Friendship Year*” and cooperation was further strengthened between the two nations (Malone & Mukherjee 2010, p.144).

A Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India - China Border Affairs (*WMCC*) group was set up in 2012 to oversee the border issues by the then NSA, Shivshankar Menon, and his Chinese counterpart Dai Bingguo for resolving the

differences on the perception of LAC and aim for timely communication and handling of border incidents (UN Peacemaker 2012). Yet another agreement was signed in 2013 called “*India - China Border Defense Cooperation Agreement*” wherein New Delhi and Beijing agreed “to not follow or tail patrols” in areas near LAC where there is no common understanding regarding the borderline (Samanta 2020).

Since 2014, the face of Indian Diplomacy has changed. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping had several rounds of diplomatic summits. Both leaders met on the sidelines of various multilateral meetings like BRICS, SCO, and G20. However, the engagement between the two countries remains loose at multilateral forums.

The optimism with which Modi and Xi dealt with each other was evident from the summits between the two. These visits showed a promise for cooperation and mutual growth but they coincided with skirmishes at the Sino-Indian border. During President Xi’s visit to India, in 2014, Chumar standoff occurred in Ladakh which mirrored a similar incident in Depsang Plains during the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in the previous year (Krishnan 2020, p.167). This invited a lot of criticism for Modi. Nevertheless, this “*Hometown diplomacy*” reached its second leg when Modi went to Xi’an in 2015 which dampened the negative effect of the border incidents (Krishnan 2020, p.164).

The *Wuhan Summit* in 2018 was the first informal summit between the two nations after the Doklam standoff. It was a crucial step to revamp the ties following a serious situation at the border. During the summit, both sides agreed on managing the boundary tensions and preventing escalations in any form (Godbole 2018). Another informal summit in Mahabalipuram, India took place in 2019 reflected the success of Modi’s diplomatic style.

Thus, the Sino-Indian relationship has experienced a fair number of rises and falls. Boundary issues being the primary reason for the plunge between the two countries. New Delhi’s bid for UNSC Permanent Seat, Nuclear Suppliers Group and its growing closeness with the West, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and CPEC being secondary issues put strains in the relationship. With growing asymmetries between the two, the Sino-Indian orbit is prone to be volatile.

3. **Contemporary Developments**

3a. **Ladakh Standoff**

The ghosts of history came again haunting the Himalayan border between India and China. Sixty years have passed and the border conflict persists. On the night of May 5th, 2020, a face-off occurred between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Indian Army in Eastern Ladakh resulting in a few injuries on both sides (Peri 2020). The presence of large troops on the Chinese side and accusations by the Indian government of hindering the regular patrolling of the Indian Army are the supposed reasons for the skirmish (Khalid 2020).

Another incident took place at an altitude of 16,000 feet in the Naku La sector, ahead of Muguthang in Sikkim on May 9th when soldiers from both sides engaged in an aggressive melee (Peri 2020). According to the Indian Army, at least seven Chinese and four Indian troops were injured in the scuffle (Peri 2020). However, the issue was resolved locally by agreeing on the set protocols.

The flashpoint occurred on *June 15th*. The consensus reached by the two sides on June 9th was broken wherein New Delhi and Beijing agreed to a phased disengagement of the troops (Dutta 2020). As per the high-level military talks, before this deadly clash, Army chief General MM Naravane announced that the situation was under control and the PLA has started withdrawing from Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley, and Hot Springs face-off sites (Dutta 2020).

However, contrary to the agreement, PLA built a structure on the Indian side of the Galwan Valley which resulted in the scuffle (Basu 2020). A small patrol party was sent to monitor the situation led by Colonel B Santosh Babu (Dutta 2020). Things went haywire and Chinese soldiers attacked the Indian side with stones and metal clubs spiked with nails (Dutta 2020). The clash between PLA and the Indian Army resulted in casualties on both sides. According to the officials of the Indian Army, at least twenty Indian soldiers died but the Chinese Government did not reveal the number of casualties (Ayres 2020).

Galwan valley was also the flashpoint in the 1962 war after PRC constructed a road connecting Tibet and Xinjiang without India's consent (Ojha 2020).

And the current infrastructural development on both sides of the disputed border has again caused bloodshed as both sides continue to blame each other. This development at the Sino-Indian border is the most deadly one in the last five decades. The basis of the current border dispute is historic as the disagreement on the definition of Line of Actual Control between India and China persists. Additionally, a few theories put forward by analysts behind such a move by the PLA are India's growing closeness with the US and New Delhi changing the status of Ladakh by making it a union territory (Madan 2020). So, such a strained relationship is far from being resolved any time soon.

3b. **Diplomatic Talks**

The year 2020 marks the completion of seventy years of diplomatic relations between India and China. It is a milestone in the relationship between these two nations. However, confrontation and clashes at the Himalayan border have caused major setbacks. Xi's and Modi's Wuhan Spirit now seems to be of a bygone age.

Serious talks were held followed by the deadly clash and emphasis was placed on disengagement from both ends. The leaders from both India and China have stressed restoring "*peace and tranquility*." Foreign Ministerial-level talks were held in Moscow where a ***five-point consensus*** reached between S. Jaishankar and Wang Yi (Mohan 2020). The Ministers agreed that there should be a continuous dialogue to de-escalate and not let "*differences*" become "*disputes*." The vagueness of the statements is very much evident as both sides keep blaming each other for provocation. While the statements from the Chinese side saying that border tensions do not affect the overall relations were released, Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) made a clear stance that "*If peace and tranquility at the border is not a given then the rest of the relationship cannot be on an upward trajectory. Peace and tranquility is the basis for the relationship.*" (Mohan 2020).

Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh met his Chinese counterpart General Wei Fenghe at the SCO meeting in Moscow. Both Ministers decided to arrive at a peaceful solution in the western sector. Several Working Mechanism Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) has been held wherein some in-depth talks on disengagement at the friction points have taken place. However, all these ministerial and

diplomatic talks have failed to achieve a concrete result on the ground as the standoff continues.

A series of sharp statements have been made from both sides. A recent statement by Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian commented that China does not recognize Arunachal Pradesh and the Union Territory Ladakh, which has been set up illegally by India (The Quint 2020). The South Block has made a decisive reply that these are integral parts of India and China has no locus standi to make any comment on India's internal matter (The Quint 2020). In his latest address, EAM said that this incident has left the Sino-Indian relationship "profoundly disturbed" (Roy 2020b). Nevertheless, diplomatic dialogue remains a silver lining in the current cold-blooded Sino-Indian relation.

Diplomatic engagement must be adequately assimilated with ground realities to achieve a breakthrough at the border. It puts to test the much-appreciated diplomacy of the Indian Prime Minister and how he handles the wolf-warrior diplomacy of the neighbor. While diplomatic channels take their time to materialize, it is important to keep the communication running to ensure no further escalation between the forces.

3c. **Security Strategy**

From a security perspective, a nation's foreign policy should gauge all the possible threats and develop a coherent strategy to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. National security policy functions efficiently at a robust nexus of political, economic, military, and diplomatic power.

The Sino-Indian relationship is conditioned by geography. Both India and China form strategic parts of Asia as they significantly influence its geopolitics. However, their respective conduct in their immediate neighborhood is diverging. India's "*neighborhood first policy*" reflects its aspirations to create a friendly neighborhood for mutual growth and development (Verma 2020). On the other hand, Xi's "*Chinese Dream*" is representative of his global aspirations to counter the west and assert dominance in Asia (Maizland 2020).

The long non demarcated border between the two places the strategic relationship at a tight spot. India's territorial security is perpetually deep in turbulent

waters due to two of its aggressive neighbors. The core security interests which India has been maintaining border integrity, keeping terrorism in check, and deal with the sensitivities of the Indian Ocean (Hooda 2019). And this puts India in a strategic dilemma vis-à-vis China. While India considers China as an equal, Chinese strategic thinkers resent any sort of equivalence between the two (Krishnan 2020, p.158). The not-so-parallel rise of both nations poses a challenge for them to sync their respective strategies towards each other whilst fulfilling their national objectives.

There is also a sheer asymmetry in the military strategy of India and China not just because of varied political structures but also due to the differences in technological advancement and quantum. The expeditious expansion of the PLA and rapid reform of the Chinese military strategy under Xi is exceptional (Singh 2015). His vision of creating a “*world-class force*” by 2049 is well underway as there is continuous modernization of defense equipment and weaponry to become a dominant power in Asia-Pacific (Maizland 2020). By contrast, Indian military strategy has failed to keep up with changing realities and is still very much dominated by ground forces (Tarapore 2020).

The recent Eastern Ladakh incident has exposed Chinese intentions to alter the status quo at various points along the claim line. The provocation by the PLA has once again challenged India which is already grappling with Covid-19. However, the move by PLA in Galwan Valley was met with a visible comeback as opposed to what happened in the South China Sea. Ambassador Kanwal Sibal stated that the Chinese have miscalculated its move at LAC and were not prepared for the kind of resistance shown by the Indian Army (RUSI 2020).

As the standoff at the border continues, both the armies have achieved some advantageous stances. As per reports, the Indian Army has carried out major readjustments in its positions along the LAC to counter the adversary’s transgressions (Swarajya 2020). PLA’s presence between Finger 4 and Finger 8 area² (See Figure 2) on the northern bank of Pangong Tso was problematic as it hindered patrolling on the Indian side (Gokhale 2020). Nonetheless, the astuteness shown by the Indian Army by occupying heights along the Kailash Range in Chushul has checkmated Chinese moves and has provided them a long-term strategic advantage (Gokhale 2020). This gives the Indian Army a clear sight of

² There are 8 major finger areas along the banks of the Pangong Tso lake and the area between Finger 4 and Finger 8 which is 8 kilometers apart is disputed pertaining to differing claims for LAC (Malik 2020). The Indian side can patrol upto Finger 8 (Malik 2020).

the Chinese garrison at Moldo and has now thwarted any possible Chinese transgressions through the Spanggur gap (Gokhale 2020).



Figure 2 (Gokhale 2020) (Malik 2020)

Several Corps-Commander level meetings have been held since June 2020. Both sides have stressed a disengagement process but the terms of disengagement differ. As per the Chinese disengagement process, tanks and artillery should be moved away first to avoid any form of vertical escalation (Gupta 2020). According to military experts, thinning out artillery support puts India at a disadvantage as Chinese side roads are better built and have much more capacity for faster deployment of armor (Gupta 2020). The delegation from the Indian side reiterated its principle of “*first in, first out*” for a systematic “*disengage, de-escalate & de-induct*” process to restore status-quo ante as of April 2020 (Gokhale 2020). Though the meetings failed to provide any concrete breakthrough on the ground, delegations from both sides have agreed to keep the dialogue and communication channels open and not let differences turn into disputes (PIB 2020).

Winter is approaching which poses a huge risk of mobility and survival in these difficult terrains. The rules of warfare are different at high altitudes due to extreme climatic conditions. The possibility of a long winter stay in the hostile terrains of the Himalayas is the looming apprehension. Now, both the armies are preparing for a long stay

at these heights. And since there is a huge trust deficit now, a temporary consensus between the two seems chimeric (Prakash 2020). Ambassador Vishnu Prakash stated that it would be a huge logistics nightmare to temporarily vacate strategic heights and come back to see it being occupied (Prakash 2020). Moreover, Indian Security forces have a tactical advantage over Chinese soldiers due to their experience of operating at higher altitudes in extremely cold conditions. “*So, China needs to get a taste of its own medicine*” (Prakash 2020).

The recent skirmishes in Ladakh are evident that even after the Doklam Incident in 2017, the Indian Government and defense officials failed to preempt the possibility of such an attack (Shivane 2020b). India needs to focus on operational efficiency and an efficacious intelligence and surveillance mechanism. An adequate focus should be on targeting Chinese fault lines and applying their strengths to disrupt those (Shivane 2020b). India should learn from its mistakes in the 1962 war and should adequately prepare the Indian Air Force (IAF) this time for aerial reconnaissance. Furthermore, an alignment of the political, military, and diplomatic forces is critical to revamping the overall defense management system (Shivane 2020a). Greater technological advancement and stable defense equipment procurement are essential which needs to be decoupled with the political bureaucracy (Shivane 2020a).

While military strategy needs a recalibration, it is also imperative to look for non-kinetic options like economic warfare and psychological warfare. India should also turn its attention towards cyber deterrence and use it for strategic advantage in dealing with its belligerent neighbors. India must also strengthen its engagement in bilateral and multilateral forums to develop its security mechanisms.

3d. **International Reaction**

As the world is grappling with the pandemic, international cooperation only made a small appearance. The world today is more divided than ever. A constant geopolitical realignment is taking place due to the collective effect of the biggest health crisis, disruptions in global supply chains, vaccine diplomacy, and a massive economic downturn. The United Nations Secretary-General has called for a global ceasefire during such unprecedented times. However, the recent skirmish at the border between India and

China has gained adequate spotlight on the global stage and has attracted adequate international reaction from key global players.

The *US-China-India* nexus is crucial for the current situation. What looks almost like a cold war between the United States and China sort of puts India at a niche. The US has also throughout the standoff condemned Chinese actions at the Himalayan border and has made some solid statements in support of India. Mike Pompeo openly criticized China for flouting international commitments and bullying its neighbors (Rajagopalan 2020). He also reiterated Chinese coercive behavior, disinformation, and bad-faith diplomacy and that the US stands in full solidarity with India to counter China (Rajagopalan 2020).

India now sees the US as both an internal and external balancing factor. Washington has helped in enhancing military capabilities and providing intelligence support to New Delhi (CFR 2020). The US and India signed a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in October 2020 in addition to two previous security pacts LEMOA and COMCASA (Roy 2020a). This deal is pivotal as it will give India access to American geospatial intelligence and assist India in navigation and surveillance through real-time intelligence sharing (Roy 2020a).

The mutual concern of both India and the US of the growing dominance of China in regional and global affairs foster this friendship. However, India should not overlay its bet on Washington as the upcoming elections can influence its stance on the issue considerably. Additionally, India should be vigilant of not getting caught in the tensions between the US and China.

Moreover, the recent rapprochement between India and the *European Union* provides a potential opportunity for India to leverage it in countering China's foreign policy and security strategy. The renewed focus of the EU towards developing bilateral relations with India can be seen as a move driven to reduce its dependence on China, for creating digital transformation and diversify Europe's export market (Hua 2020).

EU's Spokesperson Virginie Battu-Henriksson made a statement reflecting the need for continuous dialogue between the two countries to resolve the issue peacefully (Rajghatta 2020). Moreover, India's close strategic ties with France come to the rescue.

French Defense Minister Florence Parly expressed “*deep solidarity*” with India after the violent clashes in Ladakh (Laskar 2020a). German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas has also shown his concerns over aggressive Chinese behavior. The support from two powerful European countries provides great leverage to India for diplomatic ways to counter China and increase its influence in the Indo-Pacific area.

Another such international player that supports India in this clash is the **QUAD**. The resurrection of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is of many advantages to India. QUAD countries have come out openly in criticizing Chinese maneuvers at the LAC. “*The way Australia has reacted, Hats off. Their dependence on the Chinese economy is huge. But their dignity was challenged, and they've hit back.*” stated Ambassador Vishnu Prakash. Japan has also displayed solidarity and opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo on LAC (Laskar 2020b). Thus, the very foundation of the QUAD to have a strong security mechanism in Asia-Pacific has turned into an advantage for India in the present scuffle with China.

Russia’s stance on this contemporary development is non-partisan. Russia has maintained its stance that Delhi and Beijing should solve the issue domestically without any third-party involvement which reflects that for Moscow, both countries are strategically important and it will not take sides. Moreover, Russia’s current presidency in multilateral fora like BRICS and SCO has presented it with a challenge to stabilize the Sino-India relation (Lukin 2020). A teleconference between the Foreign Ministers of all three countries was an attempt to bring the officials of the two countries together amid the tense relations (Lukin 2020). Another meeting held on the sidelines of SCO between the Defense Ministers of India and China in Moscow was yet another effort by Russia to act as a stabilizer in the situation (Lukin 2020). Russia is an important arms supplier to India and its cordial relations with Beijing signals high stakes for the Kremlin in the current face-off.

Pakistan – China - India is another complex matrix that requires close examination. The enduring geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan is not unknown to the world. On the other hand, Pakistan and China’s relationship is like what some people in China call it “*Ba tie*” or “*Iron Brother*” (Krishnan 2020, p.203). As Sino-Pakistan relations continue to flourish, India finds itself in a tight spot as it poses the biggest security challenge. China has made calculated moves vis-à-vis Pakistan to serve its motives and counter India. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, China - Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC), its Gwadar Port project in Pakistan, all challenge India's strategic interests. Pakistan's Foreign Minister has held India responsible for the current situation. Moreover, the recent deployment of troops by Pakistan near the LoC (Line of Control) is alarming for India and puts additional responsibility on the Indian Army to protect both fronts (Pubby 2020).

Hence, the interplay of states at the international level vis-à-vis India and China creates more imbalances than creating an equilibrium as it opens up many avenues for international actors to take advantage of this downturn in the India - China relationship. Both these nations must leverage their allies to thwart any aggressive action of the opponent and resolve the issue diplomatically.

4. The Way Forward

The current face-off between the elephant and the dragon in the Himalayas, the roof of the world, is a movement of great uncertainty not just for the bilateral relationship but also for geopolitics of South Asia. South Asia is a geostrategic area for India to create a more stable regional order, a safe neighborhood, and to counter Pakistan. China's increasing penetration in South Asian affairs needs to be checkmated by India's focus on South-East Asia through its "Act East Policy." China's development and connectivity projects like the BRI initiative and its increased presence in the Indian Ocean have exposed Indian security on all sides vis-à-vis China. And thus, Indian scholars are wary of the contemporary strategic setback to the already lopsided bilateral relationship. China's rising influence in regional and world affairs is not unknown. And it is a matter of apprehension for Indian strategists as they fear that India will be forced to acquiesce to China's dominance.

The present juncture of the Sino-Indian relationship demands to be assessed through a more multi-dimensional lens. The Chinese maneuvers at the border reflect Xi's coercive tactics to diminish India's geopolitical stature (Shivane 2020b). India's notion of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*," a Sanskrit phrase which means "*The World is one family*," seems to be in an uneasy position due to growing scuffles with its neighbors. Whereas Xi's dream of rejuvenating China and creating a sino-centric order is gaining momentum. And the new Chinese phrase "*fen fa you wei*" which underlines its desire to "*proactively shape*" its external environment has also affected India largely (Krishnan 2020, p.158).

In the orbit of Sino-Indian relations, the Galway Valley clash is another turn to a bumpy road. "*The three decades of painstakingly developed Confidence Building Measures and trust has been destroyed in one stroke*," said Ambassador Vishnu Prakash. There is a need for building a new framework, a framework based on the changing realities and common interests. However, the first step towards an agreement is for China to restore the status quo ante. "*The ball is in China's court. As an old Chinese saying goes- he, who unties it, ties it. So it is for them to do.*" said Ambassador Vishnu Prakash. China needs to reassess its behavior of creeping expansionism. The coercive tactics need to be abandoned.

The current geopolitical scenario is unfit for the Indian security strategy towards China to work effectively. It is also urgent for India to reassess its counter-strategic

framework towards China. A comprehensive approach and a reformed security framework are required to arrive at a mutually beneficial solution and achieve normalcy in the future.

Indian policymakers need to incorporate a distinct policy for all its neighbors as one is not enough to deal with them similarly. As Indian EAM Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has reiterated that there is a need for strategic updates concerning the changing power matrix. While New Delhi has taken some non-kinetic measures by banning Chinese apps and limiting Chinese investment, it is strategically crucial for India to pressurize China via third party routes. India's counter strategy for China has to be played by using its powerful cards in form of societal contacts (Jaishankar 2020, p.147). It is a pressing priority for India to gain confidence of its periphery states in the Indian subcontinent. India's companionship and strategic ties with the West can prove to be an effective tool to counter China. It is important to develop counter leverages diplomatically. For India, it is imperative to get closer to the QUAD countries for intelligence support, ammunition, and creating diplomatic pressure.

Even though the diplomatic channels are still open, the fate of the LAC stand-off is punctuated with uncertainty. Nonetheless, the current situation is an opportunity to change the narrative of the Himalayan border. Both sides need to carefully choose their positions. The only option which can bring peace and tranquility to the table is defining the LAC accurately.

When assessing their global footprint, it is pressing for both India and China to look beyond the differences and focus on the areas of cooperation. A common understanding is required to channel internal capacities to strengthen the bilateral relation. To have a more stable Sino-Indian relationship, it is crucial for both the countries to accept the growing multipolarity and mutuality, building on a larger foundation of global rebalancing (Jaishankar 2020).

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