

INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS BETWEEN CONFRONTATION AND COOPERATION

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 Analysis

Recently, India and China have clashed at the border in eastern Ladakh's Galwan Valley; according to Indian media 20 Indian soldiers including a colonel have been killed in fighting with Chinese soldiers, while there is no information about the casualties from China's side. India and China both are neighbors and aspiring global powers, both have a long history of tension and conflict at their lengthy border, but no one has imagined such a sudden outbreak of conflict between the two neighboring countries because they have not experienced any deadly clash for four decades.

Between 2013 and 2019 Delhi and Beijing have organized nearly five official meetings. First of them was held between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi. Since then several bilateral meetings followed to solve the border problem, but they couldn't develop the mechanism to resolve the 3,800 kilometer-long contentious

border issue. The current China-India standoff at the border brought multiple issues that we need to discuss.

Brief History of India-China dispute

For two hundred years, there is an unresolved border problem between India and China. The border demarcation between India and China is defined as the Line of Actual Control (LAC); and as far as the Line of Control (LOC) is concerned, it is associated with Pakistan, and the issue kept changing according to the paradigmatic shift in International order.

The genesis of the border dispute in Ladakh can be traced back to the creation of the Dogra state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in the second quarter of the 19th century. The state was created by the colonial ruler to reward its Hindu courtier for its support to the British rule in South Asia.¹



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Despite the 1914 conference that was organized between India, China and Tibet to solve the border dispute, Beijing did not accept the “McMahon Line” - a line designed by the colonial master - nor left the claim of 90,000 square kilometers of the territory that include Arunachal Pradesh, currently part of the Indian union.²

The border dispute between India and China first resurfaced when India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Beijing in 1959, in which he raised the question regarding the boundaries shown on the official map of China. In response, his counterpart Zhou Enlai said that China would never accept the frontier drawn by a colonial power. The difference between India and China regarding their borders linger despite diplomatic efforts to solve it peacefully. That is until Chinese troops began to assemble near the China-India border in 1962, violating the law that led to the war between the two states. In this war, thousands of Indian soldiers lost their lives, and Beijing snatched the Aksai Chin territory from India, an area that is strategically significant for both countries because it links Tibet with western China.

India’s successive governments maintained the view that Aksai Chin along with Shaksagam valley, currently under the control of China, belongs to India. Nathu La and Cho La witnessed another bloody conflict between India and China. The regions are two of the highest mountain passages in northeast India’s protectorate-state Sikkim. In 1967, this area became another flashpoint between India and China, where there was an exchange of fire between Indian and Chinese troops. China claimed it lost 32 plus ‘unknown number’ of troops and India 101, while India claimed it lost 88 troops and China 340 in both clashes.

In 1975, yet another fight broke out between the two countries in Arunachal Pradesh in which four Indian soldiers lost their life. New Delhi accused Beijing of entering the Indian Territory, a claim denied by Beijing.

In 2017, India and China had another confrontation in the Doklam region of Bhutan when China started to construct roads in the region and Indian troops tried to stop them. No casualty was reported in the event. The location of Doklam height is important for India because it connects India with its northeastern neighbors.³

The recent standoff in Ladakh’s Galwan valley reflects a growing tension and mistrust between the two countries despite having so many diplomatic efforts to cool the problem.⁴ Again China refuted India’s claim on Aksai Chin and accused India of challenging China’s sovereignty by changing the Jammu and Kashmir special status for a narrow gain that was enshrined in the Indian constitution.

Bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir and India-China border problem

In 2019, the Indian government’s decision to dismantle the Jammu and Kashmir state has effected Delhi’s relations with Beijing. The Indian government did not realize the consequences of its abrogation of Article 370 that had given the special status to J&K and its bifurcation of Ladakh from J&K.⁵

This move of the Indian government created more instability in the region because the current Indian leadership ignored the disputed nature of J&K. The bifurcation of J&K was even unacceptable to India’s firm ally the United States as well as the European Union; they also preferred the statuesque in the region.⁶

Now Ladakh has become a new contentious frontier between India and China. China was alarmed by India’s claim of the 37,000 square-kilometer Aksai Chin plateau. Although India tried to convince China that changing the Ladakh’s status is an internal matter of India, it would not affect the LAC. But it seems that Beijing was not ready to buy India’s argument. Beijing even brought the issue to the UN Security Council.⁷

In addition, the Hindu Nationalist Party (BJP) has been consistent in claiming their recapture of the Gilgit and Baltistan regions. More recently the BJP-dominated Indian Parliament repeated this claim on May 21 2020 when they decided to bifurcate the Jammu and Kashmir region.⁸

It is perceived that this act of the Indian government has not only jeopardized China's claim on Aksai Chin and its control over Shaksgam valley; but it also jeopardized China's effort to contain its investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of China's most celebrated Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) project. By making these kinds of decisions, the Indian government cannot deny their share of increasing the geopolitical tension in the region.

Shifts in geopolitical reality and its impact on India-China relations

The Hindu Nationalist Party (BJP) always claimed that J&K is not a disputed region but an internal matter of India that it can solve unilaterally. In the process, the matter of J&K was transformed from a bilateral dispute into a multilateral one and now it has become a global matter of concern. Without thinking, the Indian government has made J&K as part of global geopolitical discourse.

Changes in the geopolitical reality of global affairs are also affecting the trajectory of India-China relations. China has emerged as an assertive and aggressive power that has kept itself engaged with multiple fronts. China's policy towards the South China Sea for one is creating much anxiety in Southeast Asian countries; meanwhile, Taiwan and Hong Kong are afraid to lose their independence and internal autonomy respectively. Trade conflict with the United States is also harming the flourishing global trade. Simply put, China is increasingly growing into an aggressive power according to many analysts.

In order to contain China, India has also started to enhance its relationship with the

United States under the Trump presidency who consistently criticizes China's trade policy. This reflects India's policy shift in terms of reshaping geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region. The current standoff with China has also forced India to build strong relations on the basis of mutual interest with countries such as Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, France and the United Kingdom.⁹

Recently New Delhi has also adopted some aggressive stands to challenge Beijing on a number of issues, one of them to harden its foreign direct investment laws. New Delhi also agreed with the group of nations that demand an independent inquiry on the origin of the coronavirus; not to mention the fact that two Indian MPs participated in Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen swearing virtually.¹⁰

Jingoistic nationalism & conflict resolution in the region

India and China both have the problems of jingoistic and masculine nationalism as dominant discourses in their respective countries. These kinds of nationalism played a major role in sustaining border tensions. As far as China is concerned, it has emerged as wolf warriors in recent history. China has never been so powerful economically and militarily as it is today. The country is using its economic and military power to boost their nationalism. China's communist party sees this momentum as the right time to pursue its geopolitical interests while the entire world is dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

To divert people's attention from a slow economic growth that led to growing domestic tensions, border clash with India provided a good opportunity for China to avoid mounting pressure on its Communist Party and President Xi Jinping, as there is also a lot of criticism in relation to the country's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.¹¹

The same can be said about India, particularly its Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his die-hard supporters who believe in chauvinistic

nationalism that is based on hatred towards minorities in general and Muslims in particular. They see China and Pakistan not only as India's opponents but also as arch enemies of the Indian nation, as far as the electoral benefit is concerned, propagating jingoistic nationalism will benefit the Hindu Nationalist Party (BJP) in a divided society like India. But it cannot help India to manage its national interest in the region. One elephant in this room is Nepal that happened to be a Hindu majority country, yet currently it is not on good terms with India.¹²

The spreading of jingoistic nationalism in the region against each other is the main reason

why border conflicts linger. Those who are at the helm of power failed to convince their countrymen that without compromises, it would be impossible to solve such problems with their neighbors permanently.

Therefore India must review China's proposal of the trilateral partnership that includes China, Pakistan and India, as president Xi proposed to his Indian counterpart to engage China-India, China-Pakistan and India-Pakistan.¹³

All major stakeholders in the region must work together for the sake of regional peace and stability so they could succeed to achieve common development and prosperity.

Endnotes

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