



Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute

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Principal Findings

What's new? A deadly clash on the India-China frontier in 2020 has caused a fundamental shift in relations between the two Asian giants. Anxieties arising from competition for influence in South Asia and globally have spilled over into their border dispute, fuelling military build-ups and heightening the risk of fresh fighting.

Why does it matter? Nationalist governments in both countries are hardening their stance on the border dispute. The lack of clarity as to where the line lies means that hostile encounters are bound to recur, potentially even leading to interstate conflict, with far-reaching consequences for regional and global security.

What should be done? While resolution of the dispute remains elusive, China and India should hedge against risks by creating more buffer zones between their armies and strengthening crisis management mechanisms. The two sides should also resume regular political dialogue to modulate the developing rivalry in their relationship.

Executive Summary

The border dispute between India and China has again become a thorn in the two Asian giants' sides. Rival claims as to where the frontier lies first flared into war in 1962, poisoning relations until a slow rapprochement began in the 1980s. Built on a willingness to set aside the quarrel given other shared interests, the precarious peace wobbled as China surged economically and militarily. Intensifying competition fuelled nationalism in both countries as well as fear of losing territory and status. A fierce round of fighting in 2020, the first in many years, seriously damaged Sino-Indian ties. A resolution of the dispute appears unlikely, but New Delhi and Beijing should explore how they can assure mutual security along a heavily militarised frontier and mitigate the risk of skirmishes escalating into full-blown clashes. They should establish extra buffer zones in well-known contested areas and build on existing border protocols, particularly the ban on firearms. Most importantly, they should return to more regular dialogue at the highest levels, the best way to manage the distrust between them.

Since the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India established relations in 1950, the importance of the border dispute to broader ties has ebbed and flowed. The India-China boundary runs along the Himalayas, with the discrepancy in claims starkest at the range's two ends. To the west, China controls 38,000 sq km of territory that New Delhi also claims; to the east, India holds 90,000 sq km that Beijing says belongs to China. The 1962 war, which saw more than 7,000 Indian soldiers killed or captured, represented a victory for Beijing and a chastening experience for New Delhi. Its legacy reverberates today. Ever since, India has been leery of China's intentions, while China has been convinced that occasional shows of punitive force are necessary to deter Indian territorial ambitions.

Despite high tensions and occasional altercations, the countries made strides toward keeping the peace. The two governments engineered a détente in 1988, agreeing to delink the boundary issue from their overall bilateral relationship and work toward its political solution. Over the two decades that followed, they agreed on measures to maintain the status quo, a working boundary called the Line of Actual Control (LAC), protocols to reduce the risk of escalation and limits on garrisons along that line. But obstacles in the way of an agreed-upon border also became stark. Clarifying the status quo – or where the LAC lies – proved a huge challenge. Moreover, as Chinese confidence and ambition grew in the late 2000s, Beijing hardened its position on the question. Hostile encounters between troops increased in tempo.

Frictions continued to rise under President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, both nationalists who see their political reputations as intimately connected to sovereign assertiveness and power projection abroad. Growing rivalry between the two big powers magnified the fears of each about the other's actions along their main shared flashpoint. Deepening security cooperation between the U.S. and India made China uneasy; China's growing political, economic and military clout in India's neighbourhood, as well as its evergreen support for Pakistan, jangled nerves in India.

The mutual suspicion soon saw border incidents resurface, in 2013, 2014 and 2017. The 73-day standoff in 2017 at Doklam, a strategic location at the trijunction

where India, China and Bhutan meet, appeared to mark a new low, with Indian and Chinese troops forming human chains to stare each other down. Soon thereafter, Beijing ventured a display of force, miscalculating that it could discipline what it perceived to be India's bolder approach on the border. In 2020, thousands of Chinese troops advanced in different locations at the west of the border, triggering clashes with Indian soldiers. Twenty Indians and at least four Chinese died in combat, many in hand-to-hand fighting with crude weapons.

The border seems to have stabilised in the last three years, but dangers remain. The two sides have established buffer zones in areas where standoffs occurred in 2020. They have, however, also fortified their positions with fresh troops, who now number over 100,000 (counting those on both sides), and infrastructure. Roads and settlements, on the Chinese side in particular, mean reinforcements can arrive quickly. The build-ups make clear the cost of escalation, encouraging restraint. Still, the 2020 clashes marked a setback in relations, heightening sensitivities to possible threats along the frontier and suspicions, particularly on the Indian side. India now considers China its primary security threat above Pakistan, long its core preoccupation. It has deepened cooperation with the U.S. and strengthened ties to other Indo-Pacific countries in Washington's orbit, including Japan and Australia. China, by comparison, appears comfortable with the degree of control it has of the border, due to its fortifications. It is more content than India with the larger relationship as well, though distrust remains entrenched.

Without improvements in the tone and substance of the bilateral relationship, the threat of fresh outbreaks of fighting persists. The 2020s will present sterner tests than the last few decades did, due to heightened nationalism on both sides as well as geopolitical tensions. Through existing dialogue mechanisms, the two sides should seek to adapt the principle they agreed upon in 1996 of "mutual and equal security" – namely, military deployments of mutually acceptable size near the border – to the reality of a heavily militarised frontier. They should reaffirm their commitment to and explore how to strengthen protocols meant to prevent escalation at the border, including the ban on firearm usage. They should consider returning to discussions to set up hotlines at top military levels to defuse tensions when they arise and establish more buffer zones along stretches of the frontier that have seen sharp confrontation.

Resuming dialogue between the two leaders – largely frozen since 2019, except for meetings at multilateral summits – is vital to managing distrust. It will be difficult, given New Delhi's concern that such talks offer legitimacy to Beijing's characterisation of the border situation as normal. But New Delhi can make clear that reopening communications is intended to manage a competitive relationship and to assert Indian prerogatives – not to paper them over. While political leaders in both states assert the primacy of national interests, neither country's security would be served by more fighting between armies bristling with modern weaponry.

New Delhi/Taipei/Washington/Brussels, 14 November 2023

Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute

I. Introduction

Stretching across the Himalayas, the Sino-Indian frontier is the longest disputed border in the world. It has strained relations between the two Asian giants for the last seven decades. A de facto border, known as the Line of Actual Control, or LAC for short, was first proposed in 1959 by China, though not officially accepted by India until 1993 as an interim means of managing the quarrel. This working boundary has yet to be demarcated, however, meaning that the two sides differ as to where exactly it lies. India and China do not even agree on its length: India claims it to be 3,488km long, while China says it is only 2,000km.¹

The LAC has three sectors – western, middle and eastern – with the differences between the two countries' views of its location starkest at the two ends (see the map in Appendix A). To the west, where India, Pakistan and China meet, China controls 38,000 sq km of Aksai Chin, which India claims as part of the Ladakh region. The eastern sector runs from the tripartite India-Bhutan-China frontier to the border area of India, China and Myanmar, along the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. New Delhi believes the boundary there is defined by the Tibet-British India 1914 Simla Convention, a line generally following the crest linking the Himalayan chain's highest peaks, known as the McMahon Line.² China, which was not party to that agreement, argues that Tibet lacked the sovereign power to sign it.³ Beijing thus rejects the McMahon Line and, while informally treating it as the LAC, claims 90,000 sq km of land to its south, currently in India's Arunachal Pradesh, as part of Tibet.⁴ The middle sector, where Tibet faces the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, is less contested.

The absence of a demarcated border and lack of consensus as to where the LAC lies regularly leads to accusations of incursions as well as standoffs between the two armies.⁵ For China, the LAC is defined as the status quo on the border on 7 November 1959, when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai first proposed the boundary to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. For India, the LAC corresponds to the status quo

¹ For more, see Manoj Joshi, *Understanding the India-China Border* (New Delhi, 2021).

² Sikkim was an independent kingdom until India annexed it in 1975. The McMahon Line drawn in 1914, under British colonial rule, therefore does not apply to Sikkim though its northern boundary, along with Arunachal Pradesh, is part of the LAC's eastern sector. For more, see *ibid.*, p. 193.

³ For more, see A.G. Noorani, *The India-China Boundary Problem, 1846-1947* (New Delhi, 2011).

⁴ Beijing's willingness to informally treat the McMahon Line as the LAC was first conveyed in a 7 November 1959 letter from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. It was confirmed in talks between the two men in April 1960.

⁵ As an informal border-marking practice, troops on both sides have left items such as cigarette packs, tins or food wrappers at the farthest point to which their patrols reached. Crisis Group interview, Deependra Singh Hooda, Indian lieutenant general (retired), Chandigarh, June 2022.

as it existed on 8 September 1962, including the territorial gains India achieved in 1961-1962 that were then reversed by China in the 1962 war.⁶

This report explores the views in Beijing and New Delhi about how the border crisis is straining bilateral relations and offers ideas for managing the tensions amid the strategic competition between China and India. It draws on dozens of interviews conducted between November 2021 and February 2023. Most Indian experts interviewed are former military officers and foreign ministry officials; others are academics, former senior defence officials and journalists covering India's foreign and defence policy. A cross-section of people in Ladakh were interviewed. Most of the Chinese experts interviewed are affiliated with government or military think-tanks. Four interviewees were women. All interviews with Chinese experts were conducted remotely, via telephone or video conference platforms, and are anonymously attributed.

⁶ This date marked the first clash of the 1962 Sino-Indian war. See Shivshankar Menon, *Choices* (Gurgaon, 2016), pp. 14-17; and Avtar Singh Bhasin, *Nehru, Tibet and China* (New Delhi, 2021), p. 306.

II. The Evolution of the Sino-Indian Border Crisis

Though neighbours, Asia's two huge civilisation-states mostly remained strangers for centuries. But when the People's Republic of China militarily occupied Tibet – which had close ties with India – in 1950, the buffer zone between the two nascent post-colonial states vanished, creating a border thousands of kilometres long. Britain failed to define or clearly demarcate India's boundaries when its rule ended in 1947, while China rejected most of the colonial period's bilateral agreements, including those about the frontier. The scene was thus set for what would become a protracted and still unresolved border dispute.

A. Postcolonial Pangs and Territorial Disputes

In the early 1950s, as countries shedding their colonial pasts and contesting the established Western order, China and India looked to forge Asian solidarity, an endeavour encapsulated on the Indian side by the slogan *Hindi Chini bhai bhai* (“Indians and Chinese are brothers”). India was the first non-communist Asian country to recognise the People's Republic of China, and it backed China's request for recognition by the UN.⁷

Tensions gradually emerged over two issues: Beijing's management of Tibet and the border. With the establishment of the People's Republic, China began to reassert a sovereign claim to Tibet. At the same time, because of Tibet's proximity to India and the deep economic and cultural ties binding the two, India had a particular interest in Tibet's future. In 1952, India formally recognised Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.⁸ Nehru hoped the concession would allay China's sense of insecurity and, therefore, its desire to suppress Tibetan autonomy or establish a large garrison on the frontier.⁹ In 1954, India and China signed an agreement regulating India's relations with Tibet. This accord ended the privileges that New Delhi had inherited from Britain in Tibet, such as the right to trade and travel without a visa.¹⁰ Soon thereafter, India published maps depicting its border with Tibet for the first time. These maps showed some areas claimed by China, such as Ladakh's Aksai Chin plateau, as Indian territory.¹¹

But a popular uprising in 1959 – in which Tibetans rose in revolt against Chinese rule, demanding independence – soured relations. Beijing moved to quash the demonstrations with military force. The Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual and temporal head, escaped on foot to India, which granted him asylum; India also hosted thousands of

⁷ Bhasin, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Avtar Singh Bhasin, scholar and retired foreign ministry official, New Delhi, August 2022. See also Nirupama Rao, *The Fractured Himalaya: India Tibet China, 1949 to 1962* (New Delhi, 2022), pp. 66-67.

⁹ John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-India Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle and London, 2001), p. 51.

¹⁰ Formally, this document was called the “Agreement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on trade and intercourse between Tibet region of China and India”. See Bhasin, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-156.

¹¹ The Survey of India maps published earlier, in 1952 and 1953, depicted the frontier as undefined. “This is the biggest blunder India committed, which Zhou Enlai repeatedly mentioned later”. Crisis Group interview, Avtar Singh Bhasin, scholar and retired foreign ministry official, New Delhi, August 2022.

Tibetan refugees.¹² Beijing believed that New Delhi, and Nehru in particular, played a role in fomenting the rebellion, mistakenly thinking India wanted to establish a protectorate in Tibet.¹³ The episode deepened Beijing's suspicions of New Delhi's intentions regarding the border as well.

A series of minor border incursions, as well as China's publication in 1958 of maps showing major claims on what India considered to be its territory, aggravated the dispute. Chinese and Indian troops clashed on two occasions in 1959 due to perceived border violations.¹⁴ Faced with a failing economy, the rebellion in Tibet and pressure from Moscow – at the time an ally to both parties – to mend fences, Zhou brought an offer of compromise to India when he visited in 1960. He suggested creating a demilitarised zone along the border in the east and proposed a barter, which included India giving up its claim to Aksai Chin in the western sector – already under de facto Chinese control – in return for China giving up claims to Arunachal Pradesh in the east.¹⁵ But distrusting its neighbour and fearing a hostile public, New Delhi disagreed on every point.¹⁶ For Nehru, the western boundary in Ladakh was “traditional and customary”, and the McMahon Line in the east was “the firm frontier, firm by treaty, firm by usage, firm by geography”.¹⁷

This proposal's failure was the backdrop to the 1962 Sino-Indian War. In late 1961, India began gradually moving troops into border areas where neither side maintained a military presence. In the east, it deployed forces toward the McMahon Line. It strengthened checkposts to improve surveillance of Chinese troop movements and told all Chinese soldiers south of the line to withdraw. In June 1962, Indian authorities reported that the country had gained 2,000 sq miles of territory via this “forward policy”.¹⁸

These moves went over poorly in Beijing, which believed that India wanted to occupy Aksai Chin as part of its territorial designs on Tibet.¹⁹ From early 1962, China

¹² Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947* (New York, 1999), p. 286.

¹³ John W. Garver, *China's Quest* (New York, 2016), pp. 150-151; and K. Natwar Singh, *My China Diary, 1956-88* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 94-95.

¹⁴ The first clash, which killed two Indian soldiers, took place in August at Longju in the eastern sector. The second occurred in October at Kongka Pass in Ladakh. Five more Indian soldiers were killed and several were captured. B.N. Mullik, *The Chinese Betrayal: My Years with Nehru* (New Delhi, 1971), pp. 236-242; Rao, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-327.

¹⁵ Neville Maxwell, *India's China War* (Dehradun, 2015), p. xii; and Bhasin, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-268. While conceding India's claim to the McMahon Line, China considered it a colonial-era imposition and wanted a renegotiated accord.

¹⁶ Nehru was under intense opposition and public pressure to stand up to China after the deaths at Kongka Pass (see footnote 12 above). Premier Zhou returned home upset. For more, see Bhasin, *op. cit.*, p. 307; and Ananth Krishnan, *India's China Challenge: A Journey through China's Rise and What It Means for India* (Noida, 2020), pp. 227-231.

¹⁷ Rao, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

¹⁸ Garver, *China's Quest*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

¹⁹ Beijing's response was cautious at first and then more resolute. In the early days of India's “forward policy”, Chinese soldiers were told to withdraw from areas where they were challenged. Beginning in February 1962, Mao ordered troops to stand their ground, but to not open fire; by July, they were allowed to open fire to defend themselves in emergencies. Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (New Delhi, 2010), p. 298.

said it might take military action in response, but New Delhi did not regard the threat seriously, convinced that Beijing would be cautious out of concern with internal problems and the risk of triggering a war that might draw in other powers.²⁰

By October, the Chinese leadership concluded that its warnings were going unheeded: war was needed to convince India to stop advancing. On 20 October, the People's Liberation Army of China launched simultaneous attacks in the eastern and western sectors, wiping out all the new posts India had set up as part of its "forward policy" in just a few days.²¹ Four days later, Beijing offered to disengage, reiterating its 1960 proposal that both armies create a demilitarised buffer zone.²² But despite the Soviet Union encouraging it to accept, New Delhi refused. Instead, during the lull induced by the Chinese offer, India approached the U.S. and Britain for weapons.²³ China, too, had looked for outside aid as part of war preparations, securing Moscow's non-support of India if war were to break out; at the time, Moscow also wanted Beijing's backing in the Cuban missile crisis.

With India refusing to withdraw, China launched the second phase of its operations on 16 November. Within four days, it had broken through Indian defences and almost reached the boundary it claimed in the western sector, as well as the northern edge of the Brahmaputra Valley in the east. The Indian army had suffered a decisive defeat.²⁴ On 21 November, having clearly established its military superiority, Beijing announced a unilateral ceasefire and pulled its forces back north of the McMahon Line in the eastern sector and behind the Chinese version of the LAC in Ladakh, keeping a firm grip on Aksai Chin.²⁵ Over those few weeks, India lost 1,383 soldiers, while another 1,696 were missing and 3,968 had been taken prisoner.²⁶ According to Chinese records, 722 Chinese soldiers were killed and 1,697 wounded.²⁷

²⁰ Beijing threatened military action via foreign governments it knew would communicate the message to New Delhi. From November 1961 to November 1962, China and India exchanged 196 diplomatic notes protesting various border incidents and violations. Nehru, however, kept believing that a Chinese invasion was not even a "remote possibility". Rao, *op. cit.*, pp. 392-404.

²¹ Bertil Lintner, *China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World* (New Delhi, 2018), p. 88.

²² The three-point proposal was as follows: first, India should withdraw its troops 20km from the LAC; secondly, China would do the same once India agreed; and thirdly, the two prime ministers could meet to discuss a solution to the border issue. Raghavan, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

²³ Nehru wrote two letters to U.S. President John Kennedy requesting aircraft as well as pilots to fly them. The U.S. obliged, providing India military assistance by early November – in the form of fighter jets and arms but not personnel, as that would have amounted to a military alliance.

²⁴ The Indian forces put up resistance in Ladakh but collapsed without a fight in the eastern sector. "With Nehru's misplaced convictions ... that there was no dispute to begin with on the boundary – coupled with a mistaken belief that the Chinese would never attack India ... and on the other, Mao's deep paranoia about Tibet, it was the perfect cocktail for an epic disaster". Krishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

²⁵ Since India did not agree to China's disengagement proposal, no official line exists showing the respective troop positions when the war came to an end on 21 November 1962. See Bhasin, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

²⁶ 26 of the prisoners died in prisoner of war camps and the rest were sent back to India in 1963.

²⁷ Larry M. Wortzel, "Concentrating Forces and Audacious Action: PLA Lessons from the Sino-Indian War", in Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75* (Carlisle, 2003), p. 343.

The 1962 war continues to reverberate in the calculations of modern-day policymakers.²⁸ For India, the defeat was a shock and a national humiliation. On the Chinese side, the fact that the war halted Indian advances along the border and brought greater stability for decades reinforced the belief that deterring Indian aggression requires occasional punitive shows of force.²⁹

B. *The Road to Rapprochement*

Despite periodic skirmishes, the border remained tense but largely stable in the years that followed. Deadly clashes broke out again in 1967 and 1975, while China's growing closeness to Pakistan perturbed India.³⁰ By the early 1980s, however, Beijing was focused on economic growth, encouraging it to pursue a low-profile foreign policy that entailed mending ties with its neighbours. First, it agreed to delink the border dispute from the rest of the relationship with New Delhi. Secondly, it indicated – as it had in 1960 – interest in a territorial swap, by which China would give up its claims in the east in exchange for India dropping its claims in the west.³¹ But the *détente* was short-lived. India again rejected the deal, proposing instead to negotiate each border sector separately. China accordingly backtracked on its offer, instead pressing for more concessions from India.³² As border infrastructure improved, meanwhile, both sides inched closer to the LAC, and their patrols ran into each other more frequently.³³

New Delhi's policy on the frontier eventually began to shift under the leadership of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, starting with two major diplomatic missions to Beijing, first by Indian Foreign Minister Narayan Dutt Tiwari in 1987 and then by Gandhi himself in 1988. As a result of Tiwari's trip, bilateral negotiations on troop disengage-

²⁸ The 1962 Sino-Indian war imposed the first *de facto* line that came to be the LAC. See Kyle J. Gardener, *The Frontier Complex: Geopolitics and the Making of the India-China Border, 1846-1962* (New Delhi, 2021), p. 235.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Chinese expert, June 2022.

³⁰ During the 1965 India-Pakistan war over Kashmir, Beijing was prepared to intervene on Islamabad's side and open a second front in the central part of the border between Sikkim and Tibet, while Pakistan fought India in the west. Garver, *China's Quest*, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-195. In 1976, India created the China Study Group, a confidential conclave of senior officials who revised the patrol limits based on satellite imagery and modern cartographic methods, leading to more proactive patrolling. See Menon, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

³¹ Garver, *China's Quest*, *op. cit.*, pp. 440-442.

³² These included the transfer of Tawang district, in Arunachal Pradesh, an important religious site for Tibetan Buddhists. China sees control of this area as linked to its sovereignty over Tibet. Tawang is also a strategic entry point through which Chinese troops could launch an offensive in India's north east, as it did in 1962. For India, giving up the district was unacceptable. "They started taking the line that India must make major adjustments in the eastern sector, that is giving up Tawang, and China will make corresponding concessions in the western sector. It was a revelation and a setback for India". Crisis Group interview, Ashok Kantha, former Indian ambassador to China, Greater Noida, August 2022.

³³ Following a clash on the Arunachal Pradesh border in 1986, India moved in three divisions with combat vehicles, occupied heights and set up outposts metres from Chinese positions. A year later, China deployed 22,000 troops and military aircraft to Tibet, lobbying the U.S. and the Soviet Union to urge India to exercise restraint. Lintner, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-265; Garver, *China's Quest*, *op. cit.*, pp. 442-444.

ment in the eastern sector began in 1987 (the process lasted until 1995). But it was Gandhi's visit to China that marked the start of a genuine thaw in the relationship.³⁴ The neighbours worked out a modus vivendi according to which normalising relations would not depend upon settling the border dispute first.³⁵

Gandhi's trip paved the way for the signature, five years later, of the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, during Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's 1993 visit to Beijing. The landmark accord was the first exclusively focused on the issue, asserting both parties' commitment to draw down the numbers of soldiers stationed along the border, respect the status quo and work toward a negotiated settlement.³⁶ A further agreement in 1996 set limits on deployment of heavy weaponry close to the LAC and forbade the use of firearms in encounters between troops.³⁷ Both sides also agreed to clarify the entire LAC, first by way of exchanging maps showing their views of where it lay.

After several years of relative peace along the border, the two sides started the thorny process of clarifying the LAC, trading maps in September 2000.³⁸ Progress soon faltered, however, as each side sought to exaggerate its claims.³⁹ Beijing also reportedly balked after India sought to include in discussions the question of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir on the western edge of the border, a piece of territory that both Islamabad and New Delhi claim.⁴⁰ The process finally came to a halt in 2002.

Despite this setback, efforts to reach a détente continued. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's 2003 visit to Beijing led to the appointment of special representatives on both sides, and paved the way to a fresh agreement, eventually signed by his successor, Manmohan Singh, during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's stay in New Delhi in 2005.⁴¹ This document created a three-tier structure to streamline negotiations

³⁴ Though diplomatic ties, which were cut with the 1962 war, had resumed with the appointment of ambassadors in 1976, Gandhi's was the first visit by an Indian head of state to Beijing in 34 years.

³⁵ "The 1988 framework became the paradigm to manage relations with China". Crisis Group interview, Ashok Kantha, former Indian ambassador to China, Greater Noida, August 2022.

³⁶ The accord also marked the first time India formally accepted the concept of the LAC. "The thinking was that 'it might be difficult to resolve the border dispute now, so let's have an agreement for peace'. ... Conceptually, it was a major breakthrough". Ibid.

³⁷ This agreement is known as "The Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas".

³⁸ A year-long hiatus in bilateral talks followed India's May 1998 nuclear tests. In a letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton penned just after the tests, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee justified the tests by hinting that China represented a nuclear threat in Asia. Beijing reacted strongly after the letter was leaked to the press. Talks resumed a year later, following intensive diplomatic efforts by New Delhi. See Garver, *Protracted Contest*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

³⁹ Menon, op. cit., p. 30.

⁴⁰ In 1963, China and Pakistan signed an agreement delimiting their border by exchanging territory in Kashmir that was controlled by Pakistan but claimed by India. India alleges that Pakistan illegally ceded about 5,000 sq km to China. Pakistan acquired about 1,200 sq km due to the agreement. See Krishnan, op. cit., p. 180; and Peter Ondris, "Sino-Pakistani Relations from 1960-1974", *Studia Orientalia Slovaca*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2015), p. 91.

⁴¹ The Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question declared that the special representatives "will explore from the political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship, the framework of a boundary settlement".

over boundary issues: the first comprises the heads of state; the second, special representatives; and the third, a working group of Chinese and Indian foreign ministry officials.⁴² Beijing also conceded in the agreement that “the settled populations in the border areas” would not be disturbed, suggesting that China would defer to India’s claim to Arunachal Pradesh, including the sensitive Tawang district.⁴³ On the same day, the sides signed a protocol specifying how troops should behave in case of encounters, agreed to eschew major military exercises near the LAC and pledged to hold additional meetings about the order each year.⁴⁴

C. *China’s Rise and Resurgent Tensions*

Despite the proliferation of bilateral accords, the sides struggled to move on to the next phase: resolving the dispute. In the late 2000s, as China’s strength and ambitions grew, its stance on the border also hardened, while at the same time India drew closer to the U.S. Beijing perceived that New Delhi, far from reciprocating its friendly gestures, had instead shifted into Washington’s orbit.⁴⁵ Indian experts also say China’s rapid recovery from the 2008 financial crisis boosted its confidence, fuelling a more assertive foreign policy.⁴⁶

Differences over the border soon resurfaced.⁴⁷ Beijing conveyed to New Delhi that the 2005 agreement’s clause regarding safeguarding the interests of settled populations along the border did not apply to Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁸ India also reported more aggressive Chinese patrolling, replete with transgressions of the LAC, from 2007 onward. Chinese state media began referring to Arunachal Pradesh as “South Tibet”, and Beijing started refusing to stamp the passports of residents of Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir travelling to China, providing them instead with stapled visas as a symbol of its refusal to recognise India’s sovereignty over these regions. Meanwhile, older causes of mutual suspicion, such as China’s close ties with Pakistan

The two countries also struck a bargain according to which India accepted Tibet as part of China more explicitly than in 1954, while China recognised India’s 1975 annexation of Sikkim.

⁴² For more, see “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question”, 11 April 2005.

⁴³ On Tawang, see footnote 32 above.

⁴⁴ The protocol set up a banner drill to be followed when the two sides’ patrols met in disputed areas. Both sides are to hold up banners that read, “This is Indian/Chinese territory” and “Turn around and go back to your side”. For more, see Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

⁴⁵ According to the historian John Garver, the Chinese logic was that “India responded to China’s friendship not in kind, but by partnering with Washington to encircle and contain China. A firmer approach to India was merited”. Garver, *China’s Quest*, *op. cit.*, p. 754.

⁴⁶ According to former Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale, “by the end of 2009, the Indian side was left in no doubt that the Chinese were consciously seeking to emphasise the differences on the boundary question instead of narrowing them down”. Vijay Gokhale, *After Tiananmen: The Rise of China* (New Delhi, 2022), p. 160.

⁴⁷ “We were alarmed at the pace at which the PLA was building up its military and massive infrastructure in Tibet, which at some stage could be and would be used, if operations happen, against India. So, we needed more forces and better infrastructure”, said a former military officer who was posted in Ladakh. Crisis Group interview, August 2022.

⁴⁸ Jo Johnson and Richard McGregor, “China raises tension in India dispute”, *Financial Times*, 11 June 2007.

and India's continued hosting of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile, continued to haunt the relationship.⁴⁹

A major standoff in April 2013 marked the most significant border incident in over 25 years. A month before Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India, an apparent symbol of Chinese good-will, and with negotiations over a new border agreement put forth by China under way, Chinese troops entered Ladakh in a strategic area called Depsang, setting up an encampment 19km inside the line where India perceives the LAC to lie.⁵⁰ This move violated the spirit of agreements stating that neither side could build or camp in the area without prior consultations. Beijing dismissed New Delhi's complaints, arguing that its troops were patrolling on the Chinese side of the LAC.⁵¹

The timing of the advance into Depsang seemed to be at least partly linked to India's construction of facilities in Chumar, an elevated area in eastern Ladakh that allowed Indian soldiers to observe Chinese movements.⁵² Chinese troops withdrew from Depsang only when New Delhi tore down the observation posts – or “bunkers”, as Indian officers called them – in Chumar.⁵³ Beijing also sought to freeze troop levels and infrastructure along the border in talks during the faceoff and later on, arguably because it wanted to keep the upper hand and was concerned by what India was doing.⁵⁴ India did not concede, but signed a new Border Defence Cooperation Agreement with China ahead of Prime Minister Singh's visit to Beijing in October 2013 – under what many Indian experts felt was duress.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ In particular, China saw the Tibetan government in exile as responsible for the Tibetan uprising that started in March 2008, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympic games.

⁵⁰ Tensions had been building steadily in this area, sensitive for both sides, since 2008. See Joshi, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-163.

⁵¹ “China denies its troops crossed into India”, *The Straits Times*, 22 April 2013.

⁵² Sudhi Ranjan Sen, “India-China pullback: What happened behind the scenes”, NDTV, 7 May, 2013.

⁵³ “India destroyed bunkers in Chumar to resolve Ladakh row”, *Defence News*, 8 May 2013; Sujan Dutta, “Face-off on border on eve of Modi-Xi date”, *The Telegraph*, 17 September 2014.

⁵⁴ China had also formally suggested freezing of troop levels in January 2013. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 160; and Monika Chansoria, “India-China border agreement: Much ado about nothing”, *Foreign Policy*, 13 January 2014.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Pravin Sawhney, defence analyst, New Delhi, August 2022. For more on the Indian viewpoint, see Brahma Chellaney, “China's gameplan to keep India on the backfoot”, *Mint*, 30 July 2013. The agreement's most important clause was that neither side could “follow or tail patrols of the other” in areas where views of the LAC's location diverge.

III. The Era of Major-power Competition

Growing frictions in the bilateral relationship under Chinese President Xi Jinping, in power since 2012, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, elected in 2014, deepened mutual distrust. The ways in which the Xi and Modi governments have exercised power in their near abroad and at home, each with more assertiveness than their predecessors, consolidated belief on both sides in the need to flex military muscle to deter the other from adventurism along the border.

A. *The Indian Perspective*

Despite signs of improvement in ties, not least China becoming India's second largest trading partner by 2012, New Delhi grew increasingly concerned about Beijing's apparent ambitions to shape the regional and global order in ways it saw as detrimental to its interests. New Delhi perceived Chinese attempts to challenge international norms in the South China Sea as endangering Indian efforts to maintain existing maritime rules. Beijing's resistance to Indian membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group and UN Security Council was also seen as an attempt to stall India's rise.⁵⁶

Closer to home, New Delhi viewed China's growing investment and trade with its neighbours, expanding naval presence in the northern Indian Ocean, which it considers its backyard, and commercial and operational involvement in Indian Ocean ports, as threatening both its traditional sphere of influence and its goal of becoming a global power.⁵⁷ India has refrained from joining the Belt and Road Initiative, a trade and infrastructure investment scheme China launched in 2012 to expand its influence by deepening economic ties across the world. In contrast, six of its seven immediate neighbours have signed up to the initiative.⁵⁸ Partly out of concern about China's growing clout, the Modi government in 2014 launched a Neighbourhood First policy that boosted India's economic assistance and infrastructure investment in South Asia, accompanied by more assertive diplomacy.

China's all-weather relationship with India's arch-rival Pakistan – in an October 2021 telephone call with Imran Khan, then the Pakistani prime minister, Xi described the two countries as “iron brothers” – continued to be an irritant. India's military and diplomatic establishment has long believed that China uses Pakistan to cause New Delhi disquiet, while India is the “strategic glue” that keeps China and Pakistan together.⁵⁹ Indian military experts also warn of the threat that a simultaneous two-

⁵⁶ Brookings Institution, “India's China Conundrum: Roundtable with Shivshankar Menon”, 13 May 2016; Tanvi Madan, “Major Power Rivalry in South Asia”, Council on Foreign Relations, October 2021, p. 7; Vinay Kaura, “China on India's UNSC Bid: Neither Yes nor No”, *The Diplomat*, 3 June 2015.

⁵⁷ According to former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, “It is India's neighbourhood that holds the key to its emergence as a regional and global power”. For more on China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, see Christopher Colley, “A future Chinese Indian ocean fleet?”, *War on the Rocks*, 2 April 2021; and Eleanor Albert, “Competition in the Indian Ocean”, Council on Foreign Relations, 19 May 2016.

⁵⁸ The only one that has not is Bhutan. “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative”, Green Finance and Development Center, March 2022.

⁵⁹ See Shivshankar Menon, *India and Asia Geopolitics: The Past, Present* (New Delhi, 2021).

front war with China and Pakistan would pose for New Delhi.⁶⁰ The 2013 signing of a memorandum of understanding on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor between Beijing and Islamabad added to concerns about the two countries' partnership.⁶¹ New Delhi was particularly indignant over the fact that this corridor passes through Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which India claims as its own.⁶² The Modi government also took umbrage at China's efforts to block the listing as terrorists of Pakistani militants targeting India at the UN Security Council.⁶³

Shared concerns about China deepened ties between the U.S. and India. From New Delhi's perspective, working more closely with Washington strengthened its hand in dealings with Beijing.⁶⁴ As for Washington, it has long viewed India as an Asian counterweight to a rising China.⁶⁵ The U.S. and India announced their first Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region in January 2015, and a year later strengthened their security cooperation with the signing of the first of three "foundational" agreements aimed at reinforcing logistical, communications and intelligence cooperation between the two militaries.⁶⁶ The Trump administration's embrace of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept in 2017 – aimed at aligning the strategies of countries in the Indian and Pacific Oceans that have shared interests, such as upholding international law, freedom of navigation and overflight, and peaceful settlement of disputes – underscored the importance India has played in U.S. policy toward China.⁶⁷

After nearly a decade-long hiatus, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, was also revived in 2017, in part because of growing Indian interest. The grouping, which comprises the U.S., Australia, Japan and India, is centred on mutual commitment to establish "a free, open rules-based order" in the Indo-Pacific out of growing worry about Chinese assertiveness.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Nirmal Chander Vij, Robin Kumar Dhowan, Krishan Kumar Nohwar and Krishan Varma, "Two-Front War: What Does It Imply", *National Security*, vol. 1, no. 1 (August 2018).

⁶¹ Crisis Group Asia Report N°297, *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks*, 29 June 2018.

⁶² Vijay Gokhale, "The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China relations", Carnegie India, 2021.

⁶³ Rezaul H. Laskar, "India slams China for blocking UNSC listing of Sajid Mir as 'global terrorist'", *Hindustan Times*, 21 June 2023.

⁶⁴ Madan, op. cit., p. 10.

⁶⁵ Lora Saalman, "USA-India Strategic Continuity in the Biden Administration Transition", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 29 January 2021.

⁶⁶ The three foundational agreements – the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (2016), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (2018), and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (2020) – established the legal framework for the two militaries to transfer logistical supplies, communicate securely, and share geospatial data and intelligence. See Sneesh Alex Philip, "The 3 foundational agreements with US and what they mean for India's military growth", *The Print*, 27 October 2020; and "U.S. Security Cooperation with India", U.S. Department of State, 20 January 2021.

⁶⁷ See, for example, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 16 May 2022.

⁶⁸ White House, "Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: 'The Spirit of the Quad'", 12 March 2021.

B. *The Chinese Perspective*

China, for its part, views the border dispute with India as a secondary concern. Its main strategic theatre is its near seas in the Pacific, and its primary external threat is the U.S.⁶⁹ Beijing's long-time objective is to keep the Indian border quiet so that it is not distracted, nor compelled to divert resources, from its more important eastern front. Its nightmare scenario is a two-front war: in the Pacific with the U.S. and to the west with India.

Beijing's definition of border stability is maintaining the dominant position that it has enjoyed since the 1962 war and deterring Indian threats thereto.⁷⁰ Its tolerance for Indian challenges along the frontier is low, as it reasons that a strong China should not have to make the concessions it was forced to accept when it was weak.⁷¹ China, in effect, presumes that, since Beijing sits at the top of the regional pecking order, any action by India to shore up its own position is a sign of recalcitrance in a lesser power that has forgotten its rank.

The case for better relations with India remains strong in principle. China's national interests would be served not only by securing its south-western border but also by lessening the incentives for New Delhi to forge tighter links with Washington. Stable relations could also lower the barriers to China's projects of building bridges to South Asia and naval strength in the Indian Ocean.⁷² Beijing sees both initiatives as necessary to secure critical trade routes and deny Washington the ability to "strangle Chinese economic lifelines in times of war".⁷³

Yet by the late 2010s, Beijing had begun to see the cost of maintaining friendly ties with New Delhi as prohibitively high and most likely dependent on making territorial concessions. Beijing also perceived the strategic and economic benefits of better ties as fading.⁷⁴ From its point of view, the Modi government's ties to Washington, regional assertiveness and more aggressive posture toward China made a cooperative approach appear increasingly unappealing.

Growing strategic competition between Beijing and Washington also fanned Chinese concerns that it was losing the upper hand with New Delhi. According to one Chinese analyst, the bilateral relationship entered "troubled times" in 2016, when India began to deepen defence cooperation with the U.S.; multiple analysts averred that New Delhi and Washington had become "quasi-allies".⁷⁵ India's development

⁶⁹ Yun Sun, "China's strategic assessment of India", *War on the Rocks*, 25 March 2020; M. Taylor Fravel, "Stability in a Secondary Strategic Direction: China and the Border Dispute with India After 1962", in Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* (New York, 2020).

⁷⁰ Fravel, "Stability in a Secondary Strategic Direction", op. cit.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Chinese scholars, December 2022-May 2023.

⁷² Antara Ghosal Singh, "China's Evolving Strategic Discourse on India", Stimson Center, 4 May 2022.

⁷³ You Ji, "China's Emerging Indo-Pacific Naval Strategy", *Asia Policy*, no. 22 (July 2016).

⁷⁴ From the Chinese perspective, economic ties that once were ballast for the China-India relationship threatened to loosen when Modi came to power because of his focus on economic self-reliance, which led him to try reducing India's dependence on Chinese imports and investment.

⁷⁵ As evidence, Chinese analysts pointed to the U.S. and India signing the Military Logistics Support Agreement and the U.S. designating India as a Major Defence Partner as evidence. See, for instance, Lin Minwang, "New Trends and Challenges in China-India Relations", *China International Studies*, September-October 2017; and Yang Rui and Wang Shida, "India and the 'Indo-Pacific Stra-

of an Indo-Pacific strategy and participation in the Quad was also disconcerting to China, which views both as efforts to contain its rise.⁷⁶

From Beijing's perspective, India's new strategic partnerships emboldened New Delhi, and enabled it to become more assertive toward Beijing, including on the border issue. As evidence of the Modi administration's tougher posture, Chinese analysts pointed to New Delhi facilitating visits by U.S. diplomats to Chinese-claimed Arunachal Pradesh, taking a more public position on the South China Sea disputes and raising concerns over its bilateral trade deficit.⁷⁷ Yet Beijing regarded New Delhi's actions as rooted in a miscalculation. India's wrong-headed assumption, in its view, was that China would opt for restraint for fear of upsetting the bilateral relationship and driving India further into U.S. arms.⁷⁸

The perceived anti-China posturing of the ruling Hindu nationalist party's platform, under the influence of its parent organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has also fuelled Beijing's distrust of New Delhi.⁷⁹ Chinese analysts take note of the RSS's protectionist economic views, which manifest in a push to curb Chinese investment and imports, as well as certain hawkish aspects of Modi's foreign policy, including a more aggressive stance toward Pakistan. New Delhi is also seen as intent on using its sway with smaller neighbours to limit the expansion of Chinese economic and political influence in South Asia.⁸⁰

C. *Defending the Borderlands*

As distrust between the two Asian giants deepened, both leaders pushed to reinforce the border defences, with each side's actions in turn heightening the other's threat perceptions. Under President Xi's leadership, China has stepped up its longstanding efforts to tighten the ruling party's control of restive Tibet and fortify the region's frontier with India, including by pushing to develop a highway network, starting in 2015.⁸¹ It has also become more aggressive about sending patrols into disputed

tegic Conception' – Positioning, Intervention and Limitations", *Contemporary International Relations*, January 2018 [Chinese].

⁷⁶ See, for instance, Yang and Wang, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Lou Chunhao, "Changes in India's China Policy and China's Policy Reflections", *Contemporary International Relations*, November 2020 [Chinese]; Lin, *op. cit.*; Hu Shisheng, Wang Jue and Liu Chuanxi, "Looking at the dilemma of India's landlocked security thinking from the conflict in the Galwan Valley", *Aisixiang.com*, 25 September 2020 [Chinese].

⁷⁸ Lou, *op. cit.*; Lin, *op. cit.*; Hu, Wang and Liu, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ The Hindu nationalist RSS is opposed to communism, China's proclaimed ideology. It holds Prime Minister Nehru, and more generally the Congress Party, responsible for the 1962 defeat, and promotes a far more assertive stance toward China. See Abhishek Pratap Singh, "RSS concern about China has moved on from security to economy. Cultural links don't count", *The Print*, 14 February 2022.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Saibal Dasgupta, "India interfering in Sri Lanka's internal affairs, says Chinese think tank", *Times of India*, 20 March 2015.

⁸¹ Data collected by the Center for Strategic and International Studies show that between 2015 and 2020 Tibet's highways grew in total length by 51 per cent, from 7,840km to 11,820km – the fastest rate in any Chinese province. "How is China Expanding Its Infrastructure to Project Power along Its Western Borders?", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 March 2022.

areas: one dataset suggests the number of Chinese incursions has tripled since Xi took charge.⁸²

The Modi government has also tried to bolster what it perceives as India's weak position on the border, ramping up construction of roads, bridges, tunnels, airfields and the like. "India has done more in the past ten years to strengthen and build border infrastructure and military preparedness, and to create offsetting and asymmetric capabilities, than in any decade since independence", Shivshankar Menon, a former Indian national security adviser, wrote in 2016.⁸³ Patrols by Indian troops have grown more frequent, including in areas that India claimed but lacked the means of reaching earlier, thanks to the infrastructure improvements. The result has been more face-offs with Chinese troops.

Tensions surged a few days ahead of Xi's visit to India in September 2014, just months after Modi had become prime minister. Indian soldiers built an observation hut in Chumar, in north-eastern Ladakh, allowing them to observe Chinese movements in the area. In protest, China sent hundreds of troops into what India considers its territory with road-building equipment.⁸⁴ India mobilised 3,000 soldiers in response.⁸⁵ New Delhi also announced that it would ease environmental protections to accelerate construction of roads and facilities within 100km of the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh.⁸⁶ After Xi had gone home, India agreed to tear down the observation post in Chumar in exchange for China halting road projects.⁸⁷ But the episode set the stage for later flare-ups.⁸⁸

Despite more conversations between Modi and Xi, as well as tentative overtures from India aimed at clarifying the LAC, a more serious standoff followed in 2017.⁸⁹ The two leaders had met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in June 2017, and agreed to hold an informal summit, saying "differences

⁸² The dataset shows that between 2006 and 2012 the average number of border incursions was 3.9 per year, while between 2013 to 2020 it rose to 11.6. Jan-Tino Brethouwer, Robbert Fokkink, Kevin Greene, Roy Lindelauf, Caroline Tornquist and V.S. Subrahmanian, "Rising Tension in the Himalayas: A Geospatial Analysis of Chinese Border Incursions into India", *PLoS One*, vol. 17, no. 11 (November 2022).

⁸³ Menon, *Choices*, op. cit., p. 33. Menon is a member of Crisis Group's Board of Trustees. Though India started building roads along the border around 2005, the project became urgent only after the 2020 clashes, according to a former Indian military officer. Crisis Group interview, September 2022.

⁸⁴ Sanjeev Miglani, "With canal and hut, India stands up to China on disputed frontier", Reuters, 25 September 2014.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Deependra Singh Hooda, retired Indian lieutenant general, June 2022.

⁸⁶ Tommy Wilkes, "With eye on China, Modi's India to develop disputed border region", Reuters, 15 September 2014.

⁸⁷ Rajat Pandit, "India, China set to end 16-day Chumar stand-off by Saturday", *The Times of India*, 26 September 2014.

⁸⁸ Chinese scholars blame India for the standoff. Crisis Group interview, Chinese scholar, March 2023. According to Menon, "China wished to emphasise to the new Indian prime minister its military dominance and ability to embarrass India on the border". Menon, *Choices*, op. cit., p. 35.

⁸⁹ During a visit to China in May 2015, Modi offered to resume clarifying the LAC. Beijing replied that relying on the clarification process alone would not resolve the border dispute, saying a "code of conduct" comprising more "comprehensive measures" was required instead. Ananth Krishnan, "China cool on LAC clarification, wants border code of conduct", *India Today*, 4 June 2015.

shouldn't become disputes".⁹⁰ Days later, however, a border incident – “arguably the most grave in its implications”, according to an Indian parliamentary panel – occurred in Sikkim state.⁹¹

Chinese and Indian forces faced off for 73 days in Doklam, an area where China, Bhutan and India meet, and which is disputed between China and Bhutan (but not technically by India, though it has high stakes there).⁹² After notifying the Indian side twice of their intent, Chinese troops on 16 June 2017 began extending a road in the Chumbi Valley southward to Doka La Pass, toward a Bhutanese post on the Jampheri ridge; China has maintained this road in Doklam since 2005, but until 2017, it had only sent foot patrols toward the ridge.⁹³ Two days later, several hundred armed Indian troops crossed into the disputed area with bulldozers to tear up the new stretch of road.⁹⁴ The two sides deployed hundreds of soldiers facing each other in human chains, moving arms and ammunition stores closer to the border.⁹⁵

For both sides, the stakes were high. Indian sensitivities about the road construction were acute. The Jampheri ridge overlooks the Siliguri corridor, a narrow spit of land north of Bangladesh known as Chicken's Neck, which links India's north-eastern states to the rest of the country. Chinese control of the ridge would give the Chinese military the ability to observe Indian movements in this strategic, but vulnerable area, and, in the event of conflict, to cut off these north-eastern states.⁹⁶ India and Bhutan also regarded the road construction as violating agreements they each have with China.⁹⁷ Incensed, Beijing called the incident “fundamentally different from

⁹⁰ “PM Modi meets Chinese President Xi Jinping, calls for respecting each other's core concerns”, *The Indian Express*, 9 June 2017.

⁹¹ See “Sino-India relations including Doklam, border situation and cooperation in International situations”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 4 September 2018.

⁹² China claims that the tri-boundary point lies south of the Doka La Pass, which cuts along India's border with Doklam at Mount Gipmochi (or Ji Mu Ma Zhen in Chinese), basing its claim on an 1890 convention signed between Britain and the Qing dynasty. Bhutan, which was not party to this convention, says the point lies north of the pass at Batang-la, a position India supports. “The Facts and China's Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops' Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2 August 2017; Ankit Panda, “The political geography of the India-China crisis at Doklam”, *The Diplomat*, 13 July 2017; Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁹³ “The Facts and China's Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops' Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory”, *op. cit.*; “Recent Developments in Doklam Area”, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 30 June 2017; Manoj Joshi, “Doklam: To Start at the Very Beginning”, Observer Research Foundation, 9 August 2017.

⁹⁴ “The Facts and China's Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops' Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory”, *op. cit.*

⁹⁵ According to a senior army officer serving at the time, New Delhi feared that the Doklam standoff would escalate into all-out war. He said close to 500 Indian soldiers were deployed to the front while two battalions and a brigade were available in the rear for support. Crisis Group interview, Chandigarh, September 2022.

⁹⁶ See Krishnan, *India's China Challenge*, *op. cit.*, p. 191. According to a former senior Indian army officer, China's move was aimed at creating a buffer for the Chumbi Valley, a vulnerable area on the Chinese side of the border. Crisis Group interview, Chandigarh, August 2022.

⁹⁷ Bhutan referenced the 1988 and 1998 agreements with China in which the two agreed to refrain from unilateral action to change the status quo; India pointed to a previously unpublicised 2012 understanding in which the two sides agreed to determine tri-junction boundary points in consulta-

past frictions” because, from its point of view, India had crossed a settled, delimited boundary into Chinese territory.⁹⁸

But both sides were also interested in ending the standoff before a BRICS summit in China. Beijing was determined to make the summit a success; New Delhi, which had been threatening to stay away, decided not to dampen the occasion when Xi himself promised to pull back Chinese troops. The two sides set about de-escalating – with thirteen rounds of parley – following a Xi-Modi meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in July 2017. They agreed to withdraw troops from the area in August.⁹⁹

The two sides continue to see the Doklam episode differently. In the eyes of Indian analysts, the Indian army’s move across the border to confront Chinese troops was more reflex than plan.¹⁰⁰ According to the Eastern Army commander in charge of the area at the time, New Delhi had given the army a free hand to stop the Chinese from building the road. “It was purely left to the military commanders to handle the situation”.¹⁰¹ Chinese scholars are sceptical the decision was so spontaneous.¹⁰² Regardless, the incident ratcheted up threat perceptions on both sides amid intensifying hostility along the border in general. Both also began to attach higher stakes to tactical manoeuvres along the LAC.

Indian authorities were alarmed by the realisation that border standoffs could happen anytime, anywhere, even at spots other than those it has long disputed with China. An Indian parliamentary committee on the incident concluded that “China sees it as being in its interests to keep the [border] dispute alive indefinitely for the purpose of throwing India off balance whenever it so desires”.¹⁰³

The incident also came as a big surprise to Beijing because the Indian reaction far exceeded what it had expected. The episode was humiliating, according to one Chinese analyst, because New Delhi was able to halt the road project.¹⁰⁴ Another analyst wrote that Doklam made clear China was at a “grave disadvantage” in terms of its border deployments, adding that Beijing should use military reforms to ensure it could respond more effectively in case of future incidents.¹⁰⁵ Indian experts concurred that

tion with the countries concerned. “Press release”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan, 29 June 2017; “Recent Developments in Doklam Area”, *op. cit.*

⁹⁸ Beijing believes the Sikkim-Tibet border is settled, pointing to the 1890 Anglo-Chinese convention and letters from Nehru to Zhou in 1959 and 1960. While conceding that Doklam is in Bhutan, New Delhi issued a statement saying the road construction not only posed “serious security implications for India” but also affected determination of the trijunction and therefore the alignment of the China-India border in Sikkim. “The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops’ Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector into the Chinese Territory”, *op. cit.*

⁹⁹ Simon Denyer and Annie Gowen, “India, China agree to pull back troops to resolve tense border dispute”, *The Washington Post*, 28 August 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former Indian army officers, Chandigarh and New Delhi, 2022. “Doklam was more accidental than anything else. China didn’t think Indian troops would step across”, one officer said.

¹⁰¹ “ICS Conversation: Doklam revisited”, video, YouTube, 17 September 2018.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Chinese expert, February 2023.

¹⁰³ For more, see “Sino-India relations including Doklam, border situation and cooperation in International situations”, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Chinese expert, December 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Hu Shisheng, “Doklam standoff: India’s myth on the pursuit of absolute security”, *China Today*, 3 August 2017 [Chinese].

the faceoff did not escalate further because China found itself on the back foot in Doklam.¹⁰⁶

Chinese interpretations of the Doklam events also dwelt on the repercussions for bilateral relations writ large. Analysts warned that the Modi government might continue to use the border to exact reprisals against China whenever it felt that Beijing is undermining Indian interests. One argued that the Doklam incident helped New Delhi raise its international standing, spreading the perception that it was on an equal footing with Beijing and strengthening its influence over its neighbours.¹⁰⁷ Another contended that India, driven by anxieties about deepening China-Bhutan relations, had manufactured the incident to “drive a wedge” between the other two.¹⁰⁸ Indian fears about the Siliguri corridor’s security carried little weight with Chinese experts, who said India had tactical advantages in the area and had been informed of the road construction in advance.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former military officers, New Delhi and Chandigarh, 2022. For more, see “ICS Conversation: Doklam revisited”, op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ Liu Chang, “The Doklam incident highlights the ‘cognitive dislocation’ of China-India strategy”, *Guancha.net*, 31 August 2017 [Chinese].

¹⁰⁸ Liu Lin, “India-China Doklam standoff: A Chinese perspective”, *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2017; Lin Minwang, “The Indian army has been illegally staying for so long, is it because they are waiting for the PLA to see off?”, *Sohu*, 7 August 2017 [Chinese].

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Chinese experts, June-July 2022. See also Lin, “The Indian army has been illegally staying ...”, op. cit.; Hu, “Doklam standoff”, op. cit.

IV. A Downward Spiral: The 2020 Clash and Its Aftermath

In the wake of the Doklam incident, Beijing made a push for diplomatic rapprochement, with two leadership summits taking place in close succession.¹¹⁰ At first, China was optimistic that it could encourage the Modi government not to align too closely with the U.S. at a time when its own relations with Washington were turning confrontational. Chinese analysts believed that while New Delhi hoped to extract benefits from participating in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy – including more military cooperation and resources in South Asia and the Indian Ocean – it was not committed to becoming a full U.S. ally or being overtly hostile to China.¹¹¹ The two security establishments had nevertheless grown increasingly wary of each other. Both were primed for a resurgence of the border dispute.

A. Changing Threat Perceptions

Despite diplomatic formalities, due to deepening distrust, both governments continued to assert their territorial claims and strengthen their positions along the border.¹¹² India moved quickly trying to correct the asymmetry in border infrastructure.¹¹³ New Delhi completed the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi highway running parallel to the border, approximately 10km from the LAC, in April 2019. One of several projects, this road improved India's ability to move military hardware along the border – including flat terrain at the road's northern end, an entry point to the Chinese-held, India-claimed region of Aksai Chin.¹¹⁴ New Delhi also revoked the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir state, which included Ladakh, in August 2019, splitting it into two federally administered union territories: Jammu and Kashmir in the west and Ladakh in the north.¹¹⁵

When maps of the new union territories were published, reasserting New Delhi's claim over Chinese-controlled Aksai Chin as part of Ladakh union territory, China's ambassador to the UN dubbed New Delhi's move an act that “challenged the Chinese sovereign interests and violated bilateral agreements on maintaining peace and stability in the border area”.¹¹⁶ In early 2020, various Indian commanders in eastern

¹¹⁰ In 2018 in Wuhan, China; and in 2019 in Chennai, India.

¹¹¹ Yang and Wang, op. cit.

¹¹² Chinese analysts wrote that in 2019 India crossed over on to China's side of the LAC 1,581 times. Hu, Wang and Liu, op. cit.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Indian military experts, New Delhi and Chandigarh, 2022.

¹¹⁴ Nirupama Subramanian, “Explained: The strategic road to DBO”, *The Indian Express*, 16 June 2020; Rahul Singh, “India pushes to complete 61 strategic roads by 2022”, *Hindustan Times*, 7 February 2019.

¹¹⁵ The revocation of semi-autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir was an ideological project of the ruling party, which had made it a plank of its election campaign platform. The government probably did not anticipate China's adverse reaction. Crisis Group Asia Report N°310, *Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, 5 August 2020.

¹¹⁶ New Delhi published new maps that included Aksai Chin, administered by China but claimed by India since 1954 as part of Ladakh, as part of the Ladakh union territory. While India's claim to Aksai Chin was not new, its publishing new maps was seen as an affront, as was Indian Home Minister Amit Shah's assertion in parliament that, according to the constitution, “Aksai Chin is part of

Ladakh sought to improve infrastructure and strengthen patrolling up to India's perception of the LAC, especially close to Aksai Chin.¹¹⁷ Beijing likely saw all these unconnected events as part of an aggressive strategy.

In China's eyes, Modi's strong-willed government had spurred changes that were eroding Chinese superiority on the border. Chinese experts believed that India's more frequent patrols and road improvements were aimed at "nibbling" away at territory China claimed.¹¹⁸ China had always held an edge in terms of border infrastructure, having built a network of highways and railways that can carry troops from the interior to the frontier. It regarded the seeming challenges to its dominance with concern.

Perceived risks to China also arose in part from the fact that the military balance of power on the border – at least before 2020 – favoured India in a few ways. Studies noted that India had the upper hand in terms of troop numbers – which mattered for China because of the ban on firearm usage.¹¹⁹ China was also at a disadvantage in the air. High altitudes on the Chinese side of the border lengthen the ignition times of jet engines and limit planes' payload and fuel capacities, making Chinese air campaigns comparatively more difficult.¹²⁰

Watching the Indian moves, Beijing also pressed ahead with efforts to consolidate control of border areas. According to Indian government figures, Chinese soldiers on foot crossed the LAC as New Delhi perceives it 663 times in 2019, compared to 428 in 2015. Aerial crossings also rose, from 47 incidents in 2017 to 108 in 2019.¹²¹ In July 2017, the Tibetan regional government for the first time issued a plan to build 628 model villages in municipalities bordering India and Bhutan.¹²² Besides highways,

Jammu and Kashmir". "POK, Aksai Chin part of Kashmir, says Amit Shah in Lok Sabha", *The Hindu*, 6 August 2019. Nayanima Basu, "Creating Ladakh UT, Amit Shah's Aksai Chin remarks got China's attention, says MIT professor", *The Print*, 18 July 2020. China raised the issue at the UN Security Council. "Ambassador Zhang Jun Speaks on Kashmir", Permanent Mission of People's Republic of China to the UN, 16 August 2019. A Chinese analyst at the time suggested that New Delhi's intention was to change completely the status quo of the region. Lan Jianxue, "India is playing with fire on Kashmir", *Global Times*, 18 August 2019.

¹¹⁷ See Sushant Singh, "How China outmanoeuvred the Modi government and seized control of territory along the LAC", *The Caravan*, 1 October 2022.

¹¹⁸ Lou, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Chinese scholar, December 2022. The 2020 study argues that while the total number of troops on each side is about equal – up to 230,000 for China and 225,000 for India – a significant proportion of Chinese forces would be on other missions should war break out and would have to be transported from China's interior to the border. On the other hand, India's troops are already forward-deployed and are focused on China. Iskander Rehman, "A Himalayan Challenge: India's Conventional Deterrent and the Role of Special Operations Forces along the Sino-Indian Border", *Naval War College Review*, vol. 70, no. 1 (2017), p. 106; Frank O'Donnell and Alex Bollfrass, "The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide", Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, March 2020.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Sushant Singh, "Big surge in Chinese transgressions, most of them in Ladakh", *The Indian Express*, 22 May 2020.

¹²² Beijing has long relied on model villages as a means of fending off both internal and external threats along its borders. A 2011 national border plan said model villages were "battle fortresses for maintaining ethnic unity and the consolidation of the motherland's frontier defence". "Notice of the General Office of the State Council on Printing and Distributing the Action Plan for Prospering the

China stepped up construction and upgrading of dozens of airports and heliports in Tibet and Xinjiang.¹²³ The airfields and highways are dual-use, serving both civilian and military functions, which enhances China's ability to project power across the frontier with India.

B. *Fighting in Galwan*

The first border dispute-related deaths in 45 years came after Chinese and Indian troops clashed in several locations in Ladakh, in the western sector of the LAC, just as the world was grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. The armies skirmished on 5 May 2020, after which around 5,000 Chinese troops advanced into at least three areas that China claimed but where it had not previously maintained a significant military presence: the Galwan Valley, Gogra hot springs and Pangong Lake. China also reinforced two areas where it already had garrisons: Demchok and Depsang.¹²⁴ These deployments took the Indian army by surprise. To halt a further influx of Chinese soldiers, India immediately launched its own military movements on the LAC.

The standoff was especially acrimonious in the Galwan Valley and around Pangong Lake. In the former, a tacit agreement had been in place between the sides that a big bend in the Galwan river served as a mutual patrolling limit. In May 2020, the Chinese military moved tents, troops and equipment up to the bend in question, where it had not maintained a permanent position before. A Chinese scholar pointed to India's construction of a bridge to the triangular beach on China's side of the Galwan bend as the rationale for the advance.¹²⁵ Indian accounts confirm that a bridge was indeed built but say it was located 7.5km from the LAC.¹²⁶ Around the same time, the Chinese army also moved much closer to India's position around Pangong Lake, south of the valley.¹²⁷

Fighting broke out again on 15 June in the Galwan, just days after the two sides had agreed to withdraw troops from the valley and Gogra hot springs.¹²⁸ The sides blamed each other for breaking the terms of the agreement. New Delhi alleged that

Frontier and Enriching the People (2011-2015)", Office of the State Council, 13 June 2011; Suyash Desai, "China's Next Generation Infrastructure Development in Tibet: Implications for India", Jamestown Foundation, 14 January 2022.

¹²³ Since 2017, China has reportedly upgraded all five of the existing dual-use airports, built four new airports, upgraded two heliports and built five new heliports in Tibet. Three of the four new airports in Tibet are located less than 60km from the China-India border. See "How is China Expanding Its Infrastructure to Project Power along Its Western Borders?", *op. cit.*

¹²⁴ Sushant Singh, "India builds roads north of Ladakh lake, China warns of 'necessary counter-measures'", *The Indian Express*, 21 May 2020; Nathan Ruser, "Satellite images show positions surrounding deadly China-India clash", Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 18 June 2020; "India & China deploy additional troops, fortify more Ladakh areas", *Times of India*, 19 May 2020.

¹²⁵ Hu, Wang and Liu, *op. cit.*

¹²⁶ Snehesh Alex Philip, "New bridge over Shyok river in Galwan Valley now functional amid tension with China", *The Print*, 20 June 2020.

¹²⁷ The two sides' claims are marked by eight mountain spurs – known as "fingers" – extending east to west along the river's northern bank. India claims up to the eighth finger on the eastern edge, while China claims up to the second finger in the west. Historically, both sides have patrolled up to the boundaries of their claims without putting outposts in place. Ruser, *op. cit.*

¹²⁸ Suhasini Haidar, Ananth Krishnan and Dinakar Peri, "Indian army says 20 soldiers killed in clash with Chinese troops in the Galwan area", *The Hindu*, 16 June 2020.

Beijing had built a solid structure on its side of the LAC, while Beijing asserted that observation posts on both sides of the big bend were allowed under the withdrawal arrangement.¹²⁹ According to Chinese sources, violence erupted after Indian soldiers crossed into an area controlled by China to check on the demolition of the observation post, burning Chinese tents along the way.¹³⁰ Details of what happened remain murky. But there is little doubt that the clash was exceptionally brutal, involving hand-to-hand combat, including with nail-studded clubs – a tactic used to bypass the no-firearm rule established in 1996 (see Section II.B).¹³¹ The fighting left at least twenty dead on the Indian side and four on the Chinese side, some of whom drowned after falling into the freezing river.

Both sides seemed keen to avoid escalation.¹³² Chinese scholars say the fighting broke out by accident.¹³³ Chinese state media was noticeably muted in its coverage of the incident. The government acknowledged the four soldiers' deaths only eight months after the fact, suggesting a degree of concern about domestic criticism of the loss of life.¹³⁴ Indian analysts believe the confrontation was planned and state-sanctioned.¹³⁵ Prime Minister Modi nonetheless played it down, possibly with an eye on mollifying his support base. He denied that Chinese troops had ever crossed into India or seized any territory, even though the foreign ministry's early statements claimed the clashes occurred when Chinese forces were trying to erect outposts on the Indian side.¹³⁶ Another defence ministry report, later withdrawn, noted that "Chinese aggression has been increasing along LAC and more particularly in Galwan Valley since 5 May 2020. The Chinese transgressed in areas of Kugrang Nala, Gogra and Pangong Tso on 17-18 May".¹³⁷ Since then, officials have adhered to the line that India did not lose any territory.

¹²⁹ "Phone call between External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar and Foreign Minister of China, H.E. Mr. Wang Yi", Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 17 June 2020; "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Speaks with Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar of India on the Phone", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Singapore, 17 June 2020. Hu, Wang and Liu, op. cit.

¹³⁰ Hu, Wang and Liu, op. cit.

¹³¹ "Galwan Valley: Image appears to show nail-studded rods used in India-China brawl", BBC, 18 June 2020.

¹³² The two foreign ministers met on 10 September 2020 on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Moscow. They agreed that the "current situation in the border areas is not in the interest of either side", adding that the troops "should continue their dialogue, quickly disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions". "Joint press statement – Meeting of external affairs minister and the foreign minister of China", Indian External Affairs Ministry, 10 September 2020.

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, Chinese scholars, June 2022.

¹³⁴ "Ladakh: China reveals soldier deaths in India border clash", BBC, 19 February 2021.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, New Delhi, November 2021-February 2023; and Chandigarh, June-September 2022.

¹³⁶ "No one has entered Indian territory or captured any military post, PM tells leaders of all parties", *The Indian Express*, 20 June 2020; "Phone call between External Affairs minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar and Foreign Minister of China, H.E. Mr. Wang Yi", op. cit.; "Modi's 'no intrusion by China' claim contradicts India's stand, raises multiple questions", *The Wire*, 20 June 2020.

¹³⁷ Abhishek Bhalla, "Defence Ministry removes report of Chinese intrusion from website, looks at prolonged standoff at Pangong Tso", *India Today*, 6 August 2020.

C. *Interpreting the Clashes*

China's actions in May 2020 hinged in part on the perceived need to defend its territory, including control of tactically important high ground. New Delhi's construction of a bridge in the Galwan Valley conjured the possibility, in Beijing's view, of India occupying mountaintops that would deny China the ability to observe Indian military movements along the recently built highway across the border. This strategic road supplies India's northernmost military base, Daulat Beg Oldi, on the Siachen glacier, where its troops face those of Pakistan.¹³⁸ In the standoffs of 2013 and 2014, India's assertive actions in Chumar had caused China similar alarm. Chinese experts have argued that the Modi government's focus on the western sector of the border was an attempt to expand the tactical advantages India enjoys in the eastern and middle sections – where it holds most of the commanding heights.¹³⁹

Trying to keep a favourable military balance of power along the border, however, cannot fully explain the coordination, scale and timing of the Chinese advances.¹⁴⁰ Beijing's decision to move its positions forward along the LAC was likely also motivated by larger, strategic considerations, including a belief that a show of force was necessary to curb what it saw as the adventurist mindset – rather than just the short-term ploys – of New Delhi policymakers. China's bet was likely that calibrated escalation that sharply departed from the norm was – paradoxically – needed to restore stability. Defined in Chinese terms, stability is achieved if Beijing can persuade New Delhi to lower significantly the frequency of its challenges to China's territorial claims, if not end them. As one Chinese analyst put it, New Delhi was “not listening” to Beijing's warnings, making it necessary for China to “use strength to forge balance”.¹⁴¹

Beijing's decision to escalate may have also arisen from a pervasive Chinese narrative that India has historically used China's moments of weakness to advance its claims. For instance, many Chinese scholars concur that India took advantage of China's absorption in domestic and external challenges in the 1950s to occupy more border territory.¹⁴² In the events of 2020, rising U.S.-China competition and domestic troubles arising from the emergence of COVID-19 likely compounded Chinese paranoia; Beijing's anxieties about foreign meddling were particularly high that year.¹⁴³ The decision to advance also likely underestimated the risks of a show of military strength, wrongly assuming that escalation would not spiral into combat causing deaths on the two sides.

¹³⁸ Ruser, *op. cit.*; Hu, Wang and Liu, *op. cit.*

¹³⁹ Hu, Wang and Liu, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁰ New Delhi's attempts to offset Chinese advantages began long before 2020. One Chinese source dates the beginning of Indian encroachment back to 1993. Crisis Group interview, Chinese scholar, December 2022.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Chinese expert, December 2022.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Chinese experts, June–July 2022. For instance, Hu, Wang and Liu assert that between 1950 and 1958 India took advantage of the fact that China was busy resisting U.S. aggression in Korea and responding to a Taiwan Strait crisis to claim close to 100,000 sq km of land south of the McMahon Line. Hu, Wang and Liu, *op. cit.*

¹⁴³ In October 2020, for example, Beijing misread a series of actions by Washington as suggesting the U.S. was preparing for a limited strike on Chinese outposts in the South China Sea. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°324, *Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management*, 20 May 2022.

V. Managing the Fallout

Though both sides downplayed the 2020 clashes, seeking to avoid a larger confrontation, distrust between New Delhi and Beijing spiked afterward. While diplomatic channels have remained open, and economic ties are still robust, contacts between political leaders have been sporadic and far from warm.¹⁴⁴ Xi and Modi did not meet at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Uzbekistan in 2022, spoke only briefly on the margins of the G20 in November 2022 and conferred on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in August 2023.¹⁴⁵ That these meetings occurred at all was positive. Still, neither side signalled that its position had changed, and both were cautious about the optics.¹⁴⁶ Xi notably skipped the September 2023 G20 gathering hosted by India, a sign that Beijing is sceptical the relationship can improve.¹⁴⁷

A. Washington, New Delhi and a Strained Relationship?

China's aggressive posture regarding the LAC has helped push Washington and New Delhi together, while the Galwan clash convinced India to shed some of its foreign policy inhibitions.¹⁴⁸ Under the Biden administration, U.S. efforts to build a coalition of like-minded countries with shared concerns about China (and Russia) have picked up pace, and New Delhi has actively participated. India appears to be more comfortable engaging with the Quad: Modi has attended five leader-level summits between March 2021 and June 2023. In 2020, India also invited Australia to take part, along with Japan and the U.S., in its annual Malabar naval exercise for the first time since 2007 – in effect making the drill a Quad enterprise.¹⁴⁹ Increasingly, New Delhi seems to be making its strategic and foreign policy choices with an eye to its strained ties with Beijing.¹⁵⁰

New Delhi's cooperation with Washington and support for a free and open Indo-Pacific in turn fuels Beijing's suspicions of India's intentions, not least regarding the border. Any sign that Washington could play a larger role in the border dispute sounds alarms in Beijing. A Chinese analyst interpreted U.S. and Indian joint military drills in the Himalayas in August 2022, shortly after U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's

¹⁴⁴ In May 2022, former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited New Delhi; a year later, Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu visited as well. Foreign Minister Qin Gang met with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at the March G20 summit in New Delhi.

¹⁴⁵ "Eight months after Bali, govt confirms: Modi and Xi spoke on need to stabilize relations", *The Indian Express*, 28 July 2023.

¹⁴⁶ The Chinese statement said New Delhi requested the exchange; India said it requested an informal discussion and not the bilateral meeting that Beijing wanted. Ananth Krishnan and Suhasini Haidar, "Xi tells Modi that China, India should consider 'overall interests' of ties and 'properly handle' border issue", *The Hindu*, 25 August 2023.

¹⁴⁷ See Ananth Krishnan, "China sends 'deliberate signals' to India, West as Xi Jinping skips G-20", *The Hindu*, 5 September 2023; and Y.P. Rajesh, Krishn Kaushik and Martin Quin Pollard, "Xi skipping G20 summit seen as new setback to India-China ties", Reuters, 5 September 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Tanvi Madan, "China has lost India", *Foreign Affairs*, 4 October 2022.

¹⁴⁹ Sanjeev Miglani and Kirsty Needham, "Australia will join naval drills involving India, U.S., Japan", Reuters, 19 October 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Tanvi Madan, "India is not sitting on the geopolitical fence", *War on the Rocks*, 27 October 2021.

visit to Taiwan, as a way of reminding China of the dangers of a two-front war.¹⁵¹ Later that year, the U.S. and India convened annual military exercises 100km from the border; China said the exercises violated the spirit of existing agreements.¹⁵²

Even so, Chinese analysts appear to remain assured of the limits of U.S.-India cooperation, arguing that India is unwilling to give up its strategic autonomy and still needs China.¹⁵³ “The U.S. has a lot of resources to win over India, but we also have a lot of resources to curb India and the U.S. from growing strategically closer”, wrote one analyst.¹⁵⁴ India remains economically and geographically tied to China. In spite of New Delhi’s decision to block Chinese apps, target Chinese companies with tax raids and other investment hurdles, and generally reduce its economic dependence on Beijing, two-way trade continued to boom between 2020 and 2022, reaching \$135.98 billion.¹⁵⁵ In 2022, China was India’s largest trading partner, edging out the U.S., which exchanged \$119.5 billion in goods with India. The U.S. has retaken a slim lead over China in 2023 to date.¹⁵⁶ Due to its exports, India enjoys a trade surplus with the U.S., unlike the deficit it has with China, which has been indifferent to New Delhi’s concerns regarding the skewed relationship.

Yet Chinese confidence in the resilience of its ties with India cannot conceal the grave harm to the relationship done by the latest twists in the border dispute. Since the Galwan clash, India has insisted that links with China cannot return to normal without first reverting to the status quo ante along the LAC, with China pulling back its troops and military facilities to their pre-April 2020 positions.¹⁵⁷ New Delhi’s stance, making clear that the dispute and the health of the overall bilateral relationship are linked, marks a return to India’s pre-1988 approach, and underlines Modi’s interest in burnishing his credentials as a nationalist strongman standing up to China. Beijing, in contrast, has been dismissive of New Delhi’s concerns, calling on India not to let the dispute spoil bilateral ties and insisting border conditions are “stable”.¹⁵⁸ China rejects India’s demand that the situation on the ground go back to what it was before April 2020, arguing that India’s version of the status quo was forged through “illegal” incursions and patrols.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵¹ Lin Minwang, “India is becoming threatening on the border again, manipulating both China and Nepal at the same time?”, Bottom Line Thinking (WeChat post), 15 August 2022 [Chinese].

¹⁵² Anjana Pasricha, “India dismisses Chinese objections to India-U.S. military drills near border”, Voice of America, 1 December 2022.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Chinese expert, December 2022.

¹⁵⁴ “High-level interview: How can China avoid being passive in the trilateral China-U.S.-India relationship?”, *NetEase*, 4 March 2022 [Chinese].

¹⁵⁵ Ananth Krishnan, “India’s H1 trade with China declines amid slowdown”, *The Hindu*, 13 July 2023; Ananth Krishnan, “India’s imports from China reach record high in 2022, trade deficit surges beyond \$100 billion”, *The Hindu*, 13 January 2023.

¹⁵⁶ “US emerges as India’s biggest trading partner in FY23 at \$128.55 billion; China at second position”, *The Hindu*, 16 April 2023.

¹⁵⁷ “India-China situation ‘still not normal’, says government”, NDTV, 7 October 2022.

¹⁵⁸ “China says India border stable, contrasting with Indian view”, AP, 28 April 2023.

¹⁵⁹ Weibo post by Hu Shisheng, 29 April 2023.

B. *Disengagement From Contested Areas*

On the ground, the two governments have sought to manage tensions by disengaging from areas where tensions flared in 2020. Following talks between the People's Liberation Army South Xinjiang Military District and the Indian Army's 14th Corps, the two militaries have pulled troops, equipment and weapons systems back from the border and torn down structures at Patrol Point 14, or PP14, in the Galwan Valley on the northern shore of Pangong Lake, PP17A near Gogra post and PP15 in Hot Springs.¹⁶⁰ In each location, agreed buffer zones now physically separate the two militaries. In the Galwan Valley's case, the two sides withdrew 1.5km each from the site of fighting, creating a new buffer zone where neither sends patrols.¹⁶¹ About 30 soldiers on each side are stationed outside the zone, with another 50 troops 1km farther out. It is unclear how far back permanent facilities of both militaries are located.

Negotiations over disengagement around Pangong Lake appeared to accelerate after a further skirmish, which took place after the Indian military occupied the Kailash Range on the lake's southern bank on 29 August 2020, securing a commanding height over the Chushul Valley for the first time since the 1962 war. Both armies blamed each other for firing the first shot in the first shootout since 1975.¹⁶² In exchange for India withdrawing from Kailash, the Chinese military pulled back from the Pangong Lake and returned to its pre-April 2020 positions.¹⁶³ Both sides also agreed to not patrol within the buffer zone.

Although the physical separation of the two militaries has greatly reduced the risk of clashes in the four locations where buffer zones were created, tensions could surface again. Both sides have bolstered their military presence and equipment beyond the buffer zones and along the rest of the border. The disengagement process is also incomplete from India's perspective: after twenty rounds of corps commander-level talks between the sides, two sites – Depsang and Demchok – remain actively contested.¹⁶⁴ More generally, Indian critics of disengagement have argued that some of the new buffer zones are carved more out of Indian territory than Chinese and that New Delhi has given away patrolling rights that it previously had.¹⁶⁵ Community

¹⁶⁰ PP is short for Patrolling Points, markers on the ground up to which troops patrol along the LAC. See Sushant Singh, "Patrolling Points: What do these markers on the LAC signify?", *The Indian Express*, 13 July 2020.

¹⁶¹ Dinakar Peri and Vijaita Singh, "After Chinese pullback, Indian troops also move 1.5 km away from Galwan Valley clash site", *The Hindu*, 7 July 2020.

¹⁶² Shreya Dhoundial, "India's move to occupy Kailash Range became turning point in disengagement talks: Lt Gen YK Joshi", *News 18*, 17 February 2021; and Shiv Aroor, "First shots were fired south of Pangong Lake in August 29-30 clash between Indian and Chinese troops", *India Today*, 16 September 2020.

¹⁶³ Snehash Alex Philip, "China completes pullback from Pangong Tso, 10th Corps Commander talks tomorrow", *The Print*, 19 February 2021.

¹⁶⁴ India counts them among the friction points in the 2020 clashes, but China considers them to be legacy issues predating that fighting, which therefore are not part of the disengagement negotiations. Dinakar Peri, "Explained: What are the friction points on the LAC?", *The Hindu*, 4 June 2023. Indian analysts believe that Depsang, due to its strategic value, will prove to be the site of the most intractable frictions between the two sides.

¹⁶⁵ One media report alleges that disengagement in the Galwan Valley started from a point 1km north west of PP14 on India's side of the LAC, in effect shifting the border north west by a kilometre

leaders in Ladakh have also said the buffer zones encompass grazing lands, affecting local livelihoods.¹⁶⁶

C. Military Deployments

China has kept between 50,000 and 60,000 troops close to the western section of the border since the 2020 clashes, and constructed facilities that allow for up to 120,000 soldiers to stay within 100km of the LAC.¹⁶⁷ New infrastructure has also cut down the time for reinforcements and equipment to reach the border.¹⁶⁸ A Chinese analyst estimated the army could dispatch up to 120,000 troops to the border within a week.¹⁶⁹ Beijing has also deployed heavy weaponry to the border, including rocket launchers and air defence missile systems to Xinjiang, and S-400 anti-aircraft systems to bases in Xinjiang and Tibet.¹⁷⁰ Military exercises take place regularly, apparently not just for training purposes, but also as means of deterring the Indian side.¹⁷¹

Beijing has also continued to build settlements along the border. Satellite images show that construction of more than 200 structures in six disputed locations along the China-Bhutan border began in 2020, speeding up in 2021.¹⁷² According to Indian media, in 2020 China built a village consisting of 100 homes inside disputed territory between Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh, an area that was already under Chinese control but had previously only had a military post.¹⁷³

to China's advantage. A retired military commentator adds that the buffer zone that was negotiated in Hot Springs at PP15 falls entirely on what was previously India's side of the LAC. Ajai Shukla, "Withdrawal from Galwan Valley puts Indian troops further from LAC", *Business Standard*, 9 July 2020; H. S. Panag, "No war no peace in PP15 but China wants more in Depsang Plains, Charding-Ninglung Nala", *The Print*, 15 September 2022.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Konchak Stanzin, councillor of Chushul, Leh, 25 November 2021; New Delhi, 22 September 2022. For more, see Praveen Donthi, "A Winter Night on the India-China Himalayan Frontier", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 April 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Chinese expert, December 2022. See also Minnie Chan, "Chinese military upgrades near disputed Himalayan border viewed as provocative in India", *South China Morning Post*, 16 July 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Tibet opened its first higher-speed railway in 2021, connecting Lhasa to Nyingchi (which hosts troops and a dual-use airport just 15km from Arunachal Pradesh), facilitating quicker civilian and military movement across eastern Tibet. In mid-2022, China announced construction of the G695 highway, which will likely run parallel to and pass close to friction points along the LAC. Liu Xuanzun, "Lhasa-Nyingchi railway hosts its first military transport mission", *Global Times*, 4 August 2021; Laura Zhou, "China-India border: Beijing's new highway plans near disputed territory expected to spark concern in Delhi", *South China Morning Post*, 20 July 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Chan, op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ Liu Xuanzun, "PLA Xinjiang Military Command gets new anti-aircraft missile, rocket artillery", *Global Times*, 26 May 2021; Shishir Gupta, "Chinese S-400 systems across LAC, forces India to rethink air defence", *Hindustan Times*, 23 June 2021.

¹⁷¹ "China conducts military exercise with attack choppers over Pangong Lake", *The Economic Times*, 20 July 2022; Liu Zhen, "China's military holds high-altitude drills near border with India", *South China Morning Post*, 9 November 2021; Minnie Chan, "China-India border: PLA troops, jets, artillery 'send warning shot with Tibet drill'", *South China Morning Post*, 8 September 2021.

¹⁷² Devjyot Ghosal, Anand Katakam and Aditi Bhandari, "China steps up construction along disputed Bhutan border", Reuters, 12 January 2022.

¹⁷³ Vishnu Som, "Exclusive: China has built village in Arunachal, show satellite images", NDTV, 18 January 2021.

China's comparatively sanguine view of the border dispute reflects its strong military standing. According to one Chinese analyst, military and infrastructure improvements will serve to underpin stability by curbing Indian encroachments and deterring the intensity of U.S.-India cooperation to "contain China".¹⁷⁴

The Indian army, for its part, has redeployed a large portion of its forces from its western border with Pakistan to its northern border with China, where it has stationed an additional 50,000 troops – not counting reserves – and moved heavy weapon systems to forward areas.¹⁷⁵ It has also permanently based additional troops in Leh, Ladakh's capital, on top of the three divisions traditionally based there.¹⁷⁶ Given the difficult terrain, it has trained more crews to operate surveillance drones instead of relying solely on patrols, and is in the process of purchasing MQ-98 Predator drones from the U.S. for surveillance both along the LAC and in the Indian Ocean.¹⁷⁷

New Delhi has also continued to build infrastructure. In a bid to mirror China's creation of model villages, the Indian government has funded various border infrastructure projects, such as the Vibrant Villages Program, and inaugurated roads in Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁷⁸

D. Sources of Risk

Although both sides wish to avoid a full-blown conflict, strains on the LAC are evident.¹⁷⁹ Construction projects and troop deployments on both sides are the result of rising tensions and the cause of additional mistrust. The chances of violence erupting along parts of the western LAC are now lower, thanks to the buffer zones. But conflict could reignite in areas seen as tactically important where the two militaries remain in proximity – for instance in Depsang, at the northernmost end of the LAC adjacent to Aksai Chin. Viewed from Beijing, Depsang's flat expanse could allow Indian tanks access to Aksai Chin; for New Delhi, the area is a passageway to the Indian-held Siachen glacier, known as the world's highest battlefield, which Pakistan also claims. Indian military planners fear a scenario in which China could attempt to block India's road access to Siachen, giving Pakistan an opportunity to assume positions on the contested body of ice.¹⁸⁰ Since the 2013 standoff, China and India have regularly obstructed each other's patrols in the area.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ Hu Shisheng, "Under the U.S. and West's enticements, how will India cater?", *World Knowledge*, no. 1824, 1 July 2022 [Chinese].

¹⁷⁵ See Joshi, op. cit.

¹⁷⁶ Snehesh Alex Philip, "Army beefs up Leh-based 14 Corps to counter belligerent China as winter approaches", *The Print*, 12 November 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Rajesh Roy, "India moves closer to approving purchase of armed drones from the US", *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2023.

¹⁷⁸ See Neeraj Chauhan, "India builds infra near LAC to counter China's model villages", *Hindustan Times*, 14 April 2023. Utpal Parashar, "India capable of giving befitting reply to aggression: Rajnath Singh", *Hindustan Times*, 17 June 2021.

¹⁷⁹ In January, the Indian army chief described the situation on the LAC as "stable and under control but unpredictable at the same time". "Situation along northern border stable but unpredictable: Army chief Manoj Pande", *The Hindu*, 12 January 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Sushant Singh, "What Rajnath left out: PLA blocks access to 900 sq km of Indian territory in Depsang", *The Wire*, 17 September 2020.

¹⁸¹ In 2013, China built a road and set up positions near a bottleneck in the area that both sides must pass through to reach their respective patrolling limits, leading to the standoff. China has since

Parts of the eastern section of the border are also cause for concern. On 9 December 2022, the two armies clashed on the Yangtse plateau in Arunachal Pradesh's Tawang district, wounding six Indian soldiers. The two sides differ over what triggered the fighting because the Chinese and Indian versions of the LAC do not coincide in the area.¹⁸² Beijing accused Indian troops of having obstructed a routine Chinese patrol on its side, while New Delhi says Chinese troops encroached upon Indian territory and tried to "change the status quo".¹⁸³ According to New Delhi, the Yangtse ridgeline, held by India, is tactically important as its heights provide views both of Indian movements in and out of the area and of China's activities in disputed areas with Bhutan. Having secured the ridgeline with six outposts, India holds a better tactical position. But infrastructure improvements on the Chinese side since 2021 have given its military easier access to the plateau.¹⁸⁴

Aside from tensions along particular segments of the border, the erosion of confidence in guidelines for managing infractions make clashes likelier and perhaps deadlier as well. The sides are increasingly testing these boundaries, to the extent that some wonder if the 1996 prohibition on opening fire at the border still holds. In June 2020, the Indian army announced it had altered its rules of engagement to allow field commanders to decide how best to respond to acts of aggression, suggesting that Indian soldiers would no longer be bound by firearm restrictions.¹⁸⁵ As noted earlier, in September 2020, the two sides accused each other of firing warning shots in a faceoff.¹⁸⁶

The ambiguities of existing agreements may be making them obsolete amid the chronic mutual suspicion. Although the sides agreed in 1996 to limit the forces and

prevented Indian access to Patrolling Points 10, 11, 11A, 12 and 13, on the eastern side of the bottleneck. India has prevented China from reaching a place called Burtse to the west of the bottleneck. The frequency of Chinese obstruction reportedly rose after the incidents in 2017 and 2020. Snehes Alex Philip, "India-China tensions at Depsang, a disengagement sticking point, began much before May", *The Print*, 8 August 2020. Snehes Alex Philip, "After Gogra, the next doable disengagement plan between India & China involves Hot Springs", *The Print*, 11 August 2021.

¹⁸² Chinese media claims the Dongzhang (also called Chumi Gyatse) waterfall and the Duoguoer grazing grounds in the area sit on the Chinese side of the LAC and accuse New Delhi of denying Chinese access to the two since 2001 and 2003, respectively. "A detailed introduction to the Dongzhang area on the border of the Line of Actual Control in the eastern section of China and India", *NetEase*, 3 January 2023 [Chinese].

¹⁸³ "PLA spokesperson makes remarks on Chinese border troops' routine patrol in Dongzhang area", Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China, 13 December 2022. "From confirming no deaths to saying India gave it back to China: 5 things Rajnath Singh said on Tawang clash", *India Today*, 13 December 2022.

¹⁸⁴ India is also building an all-weather tunnel that will facilitate military access. Nathan Ruser and Baani Grewal, "Zooming into the Tawang Border Skirmishes", Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 20 December 2022. "Sela Pass tunnel in Arunachal's Tawang to provide all-weather connectivity to China border", *Hindustan Times*, 18 December 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Snehes Alex Philip, "India changes rules of engagement at LAC after Galwan Valley clash", *The Print*, 20 June 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "China and India accuse each other of opening fire as border tensions rise", *The Guardian*, 8 September 2020. Indian officials also allege Chinese aircraft flew within 10km of the LAC in June 2022, which, if confirmed, would violate both the 1996 and 2005 bilateral agreements.

weaponry deployed along the LAC, they failed to nail down specific ceilings.¹⁸⁷ The 1996 agreement stipulates that troop and arms reductions would take place “within mutually agreed geographical zones” along the LAC, and that “ceilings shall be determined in conformity with the requirement of the principle of mutual and equal security”.¹⁸⁸

Military reinforcement and infrastructure building on both sides of the border, while not technically in violation of these accords, break with their spirit and deepen mistrust. A loss of confidence by both governments in the security guarantees offered by existing agreements has fuelled the belief that military power is a more dependable option. Without a clearer definition of what “mutual and equal security” looks like, and a new understanding of the military balance of power that both sides can live with, India and China will continue to jostle for advantage and the risk of miscalculation will remain high.

¹⁸⁷ The 1996 agreement says arms include “combat tanks, infantry combat vehicles, guns (including howitzers) with 75mm or bigger calibre, mortars with 120mm or bigger calibre, surface-to-surface missiles, surface-to-air missiles and any other weapon system mutually agreed upon”.

¹⁸⁸ It also mentions that military exercises involving more than one division (circa 15,000 troops) should not take place in “close proximity” to the LAC, without supplying further details.

VI. Recommendations

A definitive resolution of the China-India border dispute remains elusive. The most feasible solution to date was China's proposal, aired until the early 1980s, of a territorial swap. But in the current climate such a compromise appears far-fetched. Bilateral tensions and domestic politics tie the hands of decision-makers – neither side can afford to look weak on matters of sovereignty and territory.

A. *Crisis Management and Conflict Prevention*

Without a realistic political solution in sight, China and India should make crisis management and de-escalation along the border their priorities. At the heart of the dispute is lack of agreement over where the LAC lies. Without consensus, soldiers from the two countries will continue to encounter each other in areas of overlapping claims, maybe sparking fresh clashes. Ideally, the clarification process that came to a halt in 2002 could restart. The two governments could begin demarcating the line in the middle sector – where disagreements are fewest and maps have been exchanged in 2000 – as a confidence-building measure.¹⁸⁹ While that would be a welcome start, defining the entirety of the LAC could come at a high political cost, given that it might appear that any such bargain is in fact an agreement on the boundary itself. Despite the challenges, it would be ideal for the sides to take mutual small steps toward the goal of delineating the LAC.

Even without deciding on the LAC, the two governments should consider other measures to reduce the risk of conflict. Discussions at the special representative level – between China's foreign minister and India's national security adviser – have been paused since 2019 and should resume.¹⁹⁰ The two sides should consider making the existing buffer zones permanent and creating additional ones in areas where stand-offs between the two armies regularly occur. Given Indian views that the most recently created buffer zones are tantamount to territorial losses, New Delhi would need to be willing to defend to a domestic audience the physical separation of the two militaries as the most effective way of reducing the risk of conflict, including by making clear that both sides are giving up patrolling rights.¹⁹¹ The two sides should seek reciprocity in terms of the size of patrolling areas and rights each side is giving up in establishing more buffer zones.

¹⁸⁹ Though there are differences in the middle sector, they are not substantial or daunting and the exchange of maps was reportedly helpful. See Krishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

¹⁹⁰ The two sides set up the special representatives' track in 2003 as one of three tiers of negotiations on boundary issues. This mechanism was meant to empower the representatives with better access to top political decision-makers.

¹⁹¹ With Indian national elections due early in 2024, the Modi government will not want to concede anything that might damage its prospects. Though China has preferred creating buffer zones to calm the border dispute ever since the 1960s, India has only reluctantly come to accept this measure since the 2020 clashes. Both sides should see buffer zones as essential for maintaining peace on the border. Dealing with anti-China sentiment in India is also critical for a durable solution.

Despite waning confidence in existing bilateral agreements, New Delhi and Beijing should continue to abide by them, particularly the ban on using firearms.¹⁹² Joint public statements reaffirming the sides' commitment to the agreements can help offset lost confidence. If discussions have not already taken place, the two sides should also review recent violations and discuss additional ways to prevent more from occurring through the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs.

Because the top brass on both sides makes many vital decisions, the two sides should consider establishing a high-level communication channel that could serve to clarify misunderstandings, supplementing the existing hotlines at the front-line commander level.¹⁹³ The two sides could, for instance, set up a channel between the Indian army's director general of military operations and the head of the China's Western Theatre Command; if protocol continues to prevent progress – as it has in the past – the two sides should identify alternative end points.¹⁹⁴ As a first step, the sides should establish means of rapid communication between the foreign ministries, a measure that they have already agreed to in principle.¹⁹⁵ Such a communication channel, however, will likely be valuable only for preventing misunderstandings, not for managing crises. In its dealings with the U.S., China has a history of not communicating in a timely manner during crises despite the existence of hotlines.¹⁹⁶

For those areas along the border where there is no buffer zone and troops are likely to run into each other, the two governments should consider alternative measures. The 2005 agreement asked soldiers on both sides to withdraw during faceoffs. Further accords could be reached at the highest military and political levels to set limits on the number of troops patrolling in disputed areas. A new ban on the use of deadly weapons that are not firearms – such as nail-studded clubs and tasers – should be considered. The two sides could draw up a list of disputed areas along the LAC where standoffs are more frequent and regulate patrolling in these areas – or even establish no-patrol zones. With both sides relying more on drones, Beijing and New Delhi could also agree on parameters for their use in intelligence gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance.

B. *Containing Mutual Fears over Reinforcements*

More broadly, the two sides should seek to prevent the upgrading of infrastructure and military outposts from becoming a source of instability. Reinforcement of military positions will likely remain the norm, meaning that efforts should turn to find-

¹⁹² The outrage in India at the deaths in Galwan led to criticism of restrictions on use of firearms at the border. Reportedly feeling the pressure, the government allowed the military to do away with these restrictions. It is important to educate the public about the importance of reinstating the ban. See “No restrictions on using firearms’: India gives soldiers freedom along LAC in extraordinary times”, *Hindustan Times*, 20 June 2020.

¹⁹³ There are six hotlines between the ground commanders along the LAC – two each in eastern Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

¹⁹⁴ Sujan Dutta, “India-China military hotline talks run into protocol congestion within a week”, *The Print*, 12 July 2018.

¹⁹⁵ In February 2021, the two foreign ministers agreed to establish a hotline. See Elizabeth Roche, “India, China foreign ministers to set up hotline”, *Mint*, 26 February 2021.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group Report, *Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management*, op. cit.

ing a mutually acceptable equilibrium. The parties could attempt to reach an understanding over levels of forces, arms and facilities – and their proximity to the border – that are in accord with the “principle of mutual and equal security”. Striking such an agreement will be exceedingly challenging for both governments, not least because of the potential political cost of being perceived as ceding too much ground. Furthermore, as long as at least one of the parties believes it can shift the balance of power in its favour, there will be little incentive to freeze current capabilities. Still, the two sides should as a minimum engage in more regular dialogue to share concerns over each other’s military deployments and infrastructure development, and thereby lower the risks of misunderstanding.

C. *Handling a Competitive Relationship*

As the two sides continue to compete on various fronts, the potential for distrust to spill over into the border dispute is likely to remain. A return to the era in which the border issue was shelved to let the bilateral relationship get stronger seems improbable in the short term. Instead, New Delhi and Beijing should seek ways to improve management of their troubled relationship and its effects on their perceptions of threats from the other side. As a start, Beijing should immediately appoint an ambassador to India, a post that has been left vacant since October 2022.¹⁹⁷

In addition, there is an immediate need to restart high-level encounters: informal interactions between the two countries’ heads of state, which used to happen regularly, have barely taken place since the Galwan clash. Meetings on the sidelines of multilateral summits should continue, but more sustained high-level engagement is crucial. New Delhi will likely be concerned about giving the impression that relations have returned to normal. But it can make clear to its domestic audience that leader-to-leader discussions are intended to air Indian concerns and press for national interests rather than accommodate Chinese demands, not unlike interactions between senior U.S. and Chinese officials.

New Delhi and Beijing should also be more sensitive to the ways in which their relations with third parties – the U.S. for India, and Pakistan for China – can spur overreaction from the other side. India could become more cognisant of how accepting U.S. security support for its border operations, or security and economic cooperation in general, may incline Beijing to believe that New Delhi’s assertiveness at the border is part of a design aimed at helping the West contain China or take advantage of Western containment to strengthen itself.¹⁹⁸ For its part, China should be conscious that its strategic and defence cooperation with Pakistan only confirms India’s suspicions that Beijing’s aim is to keep Indian regional power in check.¹⁹⁹ Regular, senior-level dialogue can help manage perceptions and deepen each side’s understanding of the types of cooperation that raise red flags for the other.

¹⁹⁷ Rezaul H. Laskar, “No Chinese ambassador in India for nearly a year, longest gap since 1976”, *Hindustan Times*, 18 September 2023.

¹⁹⁸ See C. Raja Mohan, “Why China is paranoid about the Quad”, *Foreign Policy*, 17 May 2022.

¹⁹⁹ India is especially sensitive to China’s obstruction of the inclusion of Pakistan-based militants in the UN Security Council’s 1267 global list of militants for sanction. For more, see Suhasini Haider, “Held up by the Chinese”, *The Hindu*, 19 October 2022; Vijay Gokhale, *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India* (Gurugram, 2021), pp. 113-130.

Ideally, the two governments would also identify areas where there is a strong shared interest in cooperation. Allowing the other side's journalists to return should be an easy route to building confidence; the visa of the last Chinese journalist in India was not extended, forcing him to leave toward the end of June, and China had already asked the last Indian journalist in China to depart.²⁰⁰

In the past, burgeoning economic ties helped steady the relationship. China remains India's largest trading partner, but the large trade deficit has spurred Indian concerns – of the \$135.98 billion total trade in 2022, India's imports stood at \$118.5 billion. Beijing, meanwhile, is increasingly wary of how efforts by the U.S. and its allies to reduce their economic dependence on China align with India's own desire to limit imports from China and boost its domestic manufacturing. As confidence-building measures, China could make more effort to engage with India on its trade deficit concerns, while India could roll back some of its stringent actions against Chinese apps and companies.²⁰¹

The two countries previously found common cause in defending the interests of non-Western, developing countries. This joint mission, however, has also been undermined, as Beijing questions whether New Delhi's foreign policy orientation remains non-aligned. As China pushes to expand its global influence through the multilateral forums in which it wields relative control – including in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS – it should make more of an effort to support India playing a bigger role in these bodies as a good-will gesture.

²⁰⁰ See “China orders last Indian journalist in country to leave”, Bloomberg, 12 June 2023; and “Last Chinese reporter ‘expelled’ after India denies visa extension”, *The Hindu*, 27 June 2023.

²⁰¹ Ananth Krishnan, “Chinese investments returning to India with greater opacity”, *The Hindu*, 5 July 2023.

VII. Conclusion

The border dispute between China and India is a legacy of colonial rule in South Asia that has become a major strand in the emerging major-power rivalry of the 21st century. As nationalist governments have arisen in India and China over the past decade, each has set great store by sovereign assertiveness and global status. The contested border between the two countries has in turn become a theatre for displays of state power and military prowess.

But shows of national strength have also generated growing fears as to the other side's intentions, and heightened sensitivity to perceptions that territory or military superiority is under threat. The deadly combat in eastern Ladakh in 2020 encapsulated these risks, causing grave damage to the bilateral relationship; Sino-Indian ties are now in their deepest trough since the 1962 war. From a combination of competition and cooperation, India and China appear to have returned to a mode of "armed coexistence", in which each state counts on rival global alliances.²⁰² Amid mutual distrust, as well as military reinforcements and infrastructure building on both sides, the border remains prone to sudden flare-ups of violence, with consequences that could reach far beyond the region.

Keeping the peace at the border hinges on revitalising the rules of engagement that for decades managed to stop standoffs from escalating into clashes. More and stronger buffer zones, clearer rules on use of firearms and other weapons, and communications channels between the two countries' top brass can all play a vital role. A comprehensive agreement to demarcate the border would be ideal, but domestic politics in both countries make this task prohibitively difficult. In the absence of such a deal, political leaders in both countries should seek to complement military protocols with far more fluid high-level engagement. The dispute in the Himalayas is now about strategic competition between the two biggest Asian powers as much as the border's territorial value itself. Preventing further fighting depends on ensuring that competition can be handled amicably on the high ground.

New Delhi/Taipei/Washington/Brussels, 14 November 2023

²⁰² The phrase was coined by President Mao Zedong in 1962. See Stephen P. Westcott, *Armed Coexistence: The Dynamics of the Intractable Sino-Indian Border Dispute* (Singapore, 2023).

Appendix A: Map of the Line of Actual Control Dividing China and India



Appendix B: Map of the Eastern Sector of the Line of Actual Control



Appendix C: Map of the Western Sector of the Line of Actual Control



Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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