



Assessing Contemporary Challenges in India – China Relations Through Border Disputes

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ABSTRACT

A complex and dynamic relationship has existed between India and China, Asia's two largest nations, for decades. Long-standing border problems have led to increased tensions among the two countries. This research paper addresses India-China border conflicts as current issues. It provides an overview of the history of the border conflicts, specifically focusing on flashpoints like the CPEC, the conflicts in the 2020 Galwan Valley, the 2017 Doklam stalemate, 1967 La & Cho La standoff and the 1962 Sino-Indian War, etc. By analyzing the geopolitical factors, economic interests, nationalist sentiments, and military posturing involved in these disputes, the paper assesses how the unresolved border issues are clouding India-China relations in the present day. It argues that the latest border clashes indicate a new era of strategic competition and confrontation emerging between the two rising powers. However, the paper also explores prospects for managing tensions and preventing escalation through diplomacy and confidence-building measures. While the larger disputes remain unresolved the latest 2024 India China Border Patrol agreement de-escalate tensions at some level by restoring the patrolling rights in Despang and Demchok region between mutual countries after deadly clash in recent years in Galwan, paving the way for improvement in political and business ties between Asian giants. It provides comprehensive examination of India-China relations' complicated



dynamics amid their increasingly assertive postures along disputed Himalayan border. The paper highlights the implications of these heightened tensions for regional stability and cooperation in Asia.

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Introduction

The boundary between China and India, which spans more than 3,500 km and is disputed by the two Asian superpowers for many years, is situated across the majestic Himalayan mountain range. Since the late 1980s, India and China's political and economic relations have improved, although the border dispute still occasionally emerges. The most recent border standoff in the Doklam area in 2017 brought the two nuclear-armed neighbours dangerously close to outright military confrontation. Indian and Chinese military brawled in Galwan Valley in June 2020, resulting in alleged deaths of around forty Chinese soldiers and twenty Indian soldiers. Despite the decades of diplomacy a legacy of colonial era boundary conflicts has remained unresolved. The future of the relationship is heavily dependent on the resolution of their unresolved border dispute, which poses increased threats as China and India compete for strategic influence and domination in Asia. Watershed momentums put in place to maintain stability a significant example is 2013 (BDCA) Border defence cooperation agreement established protocol for border confrontation, 1996 Confidence building measures agreement sets guidelines for military exercises at LAC , BRICS participation, various bilateral trade agreements, the 2020 (Moscow) Five point consensus commitments to dialogue and de-escalation and the most recent October 2024 India – China Border Patrol agreement.

The current research addresses complex historical and current dynamics of India-China border dispute.

It attempts to evaluate how the conflict affects the ratio of cooperation to competition in the current India-China relationship. Primary contention is that the border conflict is a sign of a deeper geopolitical rivalry between the two emerging Asian powers, which will shape the dynamics of the region in the decades to come. An examination of the conflict's motivators sheds light on Asia's developing strategic environment, which is marked by rising nationalism and heightened great power rivalry. Boundary dispute amongst China and India involves several issues, that this article explores to offer insight on current dynamics and potential future path of relations between two most populous countries in world. These issues could be crucial for maintaining stability in Asia and the broader international order.



Significance of Border Issues and Alternative Perspectives

The border areas and zones of conflict between India and China traverse a vast expanse, stretching from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh and the Northeast region of India. India claims the first territory, Aksai Chin, that is ruled by China. It is located at Tibet, Xinjiang, and Kashmir intersection. With its history of tensions that culminated in Sino-Indian War 1962, Ladakh, that is divided by Line of Actual Control (LAC), is a prominent hotspot. Disputes over the exact demarcation of the LAC have escalated into recent standoffs, notably exemplified by 2020 Galwan Valley clash, that resulted in suffering of both side's casualties. While Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have experienced sporadic incursions and tensions, they have generally remained relatively tranquil compared to other flashpoints. In Sikkim, past confrontations at the Nathu La and Cho La passes have been mitigated since the signing of a bilateral agreement in 2005, contributing to a semblance of stability in the region. However, Arunachal Pradesh, claimed entirely by China as South Tibet, remains a locus of frequent tensions as China disputes the McMahon Line recognized by India, leading to intermittent flare-ups. Henry McMahon drew it during the Simla Convention in 1914, designating it as the frontier between Tibet and British India. India utilized the line to assert its authority over Arunachal Pradesh after independence, despite the line's legitimacy being questioned. Moreover, Northeastern states sharing borders with China have witnessed occasional incursions and territorial disputes, underscoring the intricate web of challenges that characterize Sino-Indian relations in these border regions. Comprehending intricacies of these territorial conflicts is essential to understanding geopolitics of area and larger dynamics of Sino-Indian relations.

Both cycles of peace and conflict have occurred in China and India. While efforts have been made to promote bilateral cooperation during times of peace, hostility, and violence on both sides sabotage the peace process during times of war. In 1962, because of boundary disputes and disagreements, both countries went to war, with China prevailing. Although after the defeat, India refused to engage in negotiations with China to resolve these boundary issue.¹ Even though both nations decided to reestablish diplomatic ties after a protracted fourteen-year, they were unable to agree on how to resolve problem. The security of both nations and the entire South Asian region is threatened by the absence of a conflict-resolution process.² Although attempts have been made to resolve the border conflict more

¹ Zhang, Hongzhou, and Mingjiang Li. "Sino-Indian Border Disputes." *Analysis*, no. 181, 2013, pp. 1-9. ISPI, <http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/Harmonizing>.

² Moriera, Bruna B. "The Sino-Indian Border Dispute and Its Consequences for Asian Security." *Mundorama*, 25 Mar.



maturely, it appears that an acceptable solution remains far away.³ Rationale for arriving at previously indicated conclusion is that their disagreements can flare up at any time, even during times of peace. LAC, which causes a constant territorial dispute between the two nations, is not accepted by either. In essence, there isn't a well-demarcated or accepted border on LAC. Minor clashes, conflicts, and tensions in the border area are therefore routine.⁴ However, this time, the tension turned violent, and the two countries have been involved in a border standoff that seemed unlikely to be resolved amicably.

The Doklam border standoff was not your typical India-China standoff; it tested their diplomatic nerve and talents and had the potential to turn into a small-scale war. At its heart was diplomacy, and both parties were able to prevent the situation from getting worse. India had been proud that Indian Army successfully fought PLA (People's Liberation Army) for 73 days, something that most likely only a small number of Asian armies could accomplish. From constructing roads in Doklam tri-junction region; New Delhi prevented PLA, being regarded as a disputed territory, from stopping war from breaking. China's persistent attempts to deteriorate relations between India and its neighbors indicate that Beijing had been successful in its goal of adding some strategic complexity to an otherwise harmonious political partnership between India and Bhutan. Beijing additionally aimed to assess India's military capabilities and diplomatic disposition in the event of a territorial threat. Thus, the incident's resolution shed light on the nuanced nature of India-China ties and demonstrated how minor events can escalate in the absence of political will. In May 2020, violent clashes erupted between soldiers in Ladakh and Sikkim sectors. One major face-off occurred near Pangong Tso lake where troops engaged in stone pelting and fist fights. The escalation was significant as it marked a break from decades of established protocols between the two armies. In June 2020, Chinese and Indian troops brawled in the Galwan River valley, killing twenty Indian soldiers. More than forty Chinese soldiers are alleged to have died, although this

2016, <https://www.mundorama.net/?p=19035>.

³ Krishnan, Unni. "India Seals China Border Pact as Singh Hails Li Handshake." Bloomberg, 24 Oct. 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-10-23/india-seals-border-pact-with-china-as-singh-hails-li-handshake.html>.

⁴ Amy, Kazmin and Jyotsna Singh. "Indian and Chinese Troops Clash in Border Dispute." Financial Times, 16 Aug. 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/01744eb2-827811e7-A4ce-15b2513cb3ff>.



number has not been verified by Chinese authorities.⁵ The deadliest clash since 1967 happened in Galwan Valley of Ladakh. The violent hand-to-hand combat highlighted that border tensions remained extremely volatile despite ongoing diplomatic talks. Two months following the Galwan clash, either side provocatively moved soldiers near the southern Pangong Tso bank and Chushul Heights (Chaudhury, 2020). Disengagement talks had limited success in calming tensions.

Barely two months after the Galwan clash, troops from both sides were involved in provocative military movements at the southern bank of Pangong Tso and the Chushul Heights (Chaudhury, 2020). Conflict resolution was limited by disengagement negotiations. India-China relations are complex, involving cooperation, competition, and conflict. Border disputes and conflicts between India and China have historically contributed significantly to shaping their bilateral relations in the current scenario these tensions continue to impact various aspects of their relationship influencing Geo politics, economics, and security dynamics in the region. As two of the world's largest and most populous nations, India and China's competition affects the Asia Pacific area. India-China commerce and investment have also been affected by broader tensions. While both countries are important trading partners the lack of Trust resulting from the unresolved disputes has led to periodic disruption in their economic relations. Furthermore, India's growing concern about Chinese investment and infrastructure projects has been exacerbated by security considerations arising from the border conflict.

China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and Belt and Road Initiative influence. Initiative (BRI) has raised alarms in India, leading to a reevaluation of its strategic posture and alliances.

India has major geopolitical concerns about CPEC since it will run through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, it claims. There are worries that China may encircle India and utilize CPEC to strengthen its position in the area. India's regional connectivity initiatives with Iran and Central Asia are competing

with the CPEC. India expressed concern that China's growing influence in Pakistan and the neighboring area could weaken its regional dominance. Furthermore, there are worries that China may militarize Gwadar and other CPEC projects to challenge India by controlling the Indian Ocean. In conclusion, India views CPEC as a threat to its sovereignty and a means of allowing China to gain greater strategic sway over the area on all fronts—politically, economically, and militarily. India faces challenging issues

⁵ Gettleman, Jeffrey, Hari Kumar, and Sameer Yasir. "3 Indian Soldiers Killed in First Deadly Clash on Chinese Border in Decades." *The New York Times*, 16 June 2020. Archived from the original on 16 June 2020. Retrieved 16 June 2020. ISSN 0362-4331.



in managing the CPEC's effects on its foreign policy and national security. The border dispute serves as a focal point for India's effort to counterbalance China's rise and assert own regional leadership.

Moreover, the border conflict have a domestic political dimension in both countries. Nationalist sentiments often flare up during periods of heightened tensions, putting pressure on leaders to take tough stands on territorial integrity. This can complicate efforts to de-escalate and find diplomatic solutions to the disputes.

China's India policy could be assessed considering Xiaoyu Pu⁶ and Ketian Zhang's⁷ 2022 articles on the relationship of states . Xiaoyu Pu is accurate when he states that rivalry and conflict on a global level are driven by security and status-related concerns, that have additionally impacted relations within China and India. He is also correct that China is less receptive to India's worries due to power disparity. China is still driven by status rivalry. Despite China's higher regard for itself and lower status of India, China has long considered India's potential as a counterweight to its geographic location and democratic system, which favor Western alignment. China's measures suggest that they perceive the struggle for India's status as a Zero-sum game, even if that isn't their objective. However, Xiaoyu Pu argues that China might have thought these were very complicated matters that demanded greater consideration, and that China's lack of support for India's membership in organizations such as UN Security Council and Nuclear Suppliers Group is not a "complete block." Nonetheless, Beijing's recent attempts to even dissuade UN Security Council's 1267 Committee from designating terrorists are reminiscent of zero-sum games.⁸

Ketian Zhang claims that China's LAC military activities are rational cost-benefit analyses. I agree with her that China continually employs militarily coercive means to achieve its goals and that utilizing coercion against India has had few geopolitical repercussions. Particularly a major power shift may change this for India. That could have occurred when India's military and scientific prowess dramatically increased, its economy rose to new heights, and its diplomacy took on new dimensions. It may still be ten years away, but there are signs that this is starting to happen. Due to India, this decade is

⁶ Pu, Xiaoyu. "The Status Dilemma in World Politics: An Anatomy of the China-India Asymmetrical Rivalry." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2022, pp. 227-45. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poac015>.

⁷ Zhang, Ketian. "Explaining Chinese Military Coercion in Sino-Indian Border Disputes." *Journal of Contemporary China*, 16 June 2022, pp. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2090081>.



probably going to be difficult. This decade is probably going to be difficult for India because of power disparities and China's attempts to take advantage of its security and credibility issues using coercive and non-coercive means.

Conclusion

In bilateral relationships, border disputes within China and India remain both a distinguishing characteristic and an issue of conflict. This research paper has provided important insights into how these long-simmering tensions have increasingly taken on a more confrontational dimension in recent years. The analysis shows that while economic cooperation and diplomatic engagement have strengthened since the 1980s, the lack of resolution on border issues continues to inject volatility into the relationship. Several key conclusions emerge from examining the contemporary border clashes through multiple lenses. Firstly, the disputes have become intertwined with the growing strategic competition between the rising Asian powers as they joust for regional influence. The military posturing, Nationalist rhetoric, and risk of escalation during recent standoffs like Doklam and Galwan underscore this geopolitical angle. Secondly, infrastructure projects, patrols, and perceptions surrounding the Line of Actual Control remain triggers enflaming tensions. Mutual suspicion over intentions and activities in border zones often spirals into confrontation between border forces.

Restoring stability hinges on addressing misperceptions through military confidence-building.

Thirdly, as the analysis demonstrates, domestic politics and public opinion complicate prospects of compromise or conflict mitigation. Nationalist sentiments tying territory to sovereignty and national pride constrain diplomatic flexibility on both sides. This narrow political space could further shrink with transitions in Chinese and Indian leadership. Managing future incidents to prevent uncontrolled escalation is thus a challenging but urgent task if the disputes are not addressed through substantive talks. Overall, the border conflicts leave India-China relations prone to turbulence amidst their global aspirations.

⁸ Krishnan, Ananth. "China Defends Move to Block Listing of Lashkar Terrorist." *The Hindu*, 19 Sept. 2022, Sec. World, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-defends-move-to-block-listing-of-lashkar-terrorist/article65909715.ece>.



Though shared economic and developmental interests incentivize cooperation, the trust deficit stemming from territorial disputes persists as a major impediment. Constructive engagement in disputes guided by realism is essential for Asia's stability. The paper's central arguments regarding how the intractable border disputes reflect and reinforce the overall competitive dynamics in contemporary India-China relations. It reiterates the geopolitical drivers, security implications, and trust deficit generated by recurrent tensions despite growing interdependence, highlighting the likelihood of intensifying strategic rivalry until power equilibriums and mutually acceptable territorial compromises are achieved. Thereby, it offers a cohesive yet nuanced outlook on this defining great power relationship that is pivotal to Asian security.

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