

# Impact of India-China Tensions in the USCENTCOM AOR

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## **Key Points**

- Indian unilateralism in border disputes with China, Pakistan, and Nepal has not only drained economic, military, and diplomatic resources, but has also caused destabilization and harmed regional development.
- India recently increased regional tensions by asserting claims to territory currently recognized by the UN as belonging to, and occupied by, China, Pakistan, and Nepal.
- In response to India's assertions, Pakistan launched diplomatic and media protests, the Nepalese parliament declared its own territorial counterclaims, and China forcibly occupied Indian-claimed lands, in the process engaging in border skirmishes with Indian troops.
- Should India persist, the crises will likely aggravate tensions and cause more skirmishes.
- Since India appears unlikely to counter China's moves militarily, India may jeopardize its stature as a regional leader and perceived counterweight against China.
- Growing Indian multilateral defense cooperation will likely embolden India, intensify the regional arms race, increase instability in this already volatile region, and incentivize unconventional conflict.
- The current military standoff highlights the need for strategic restraint by regional giants, and sincere international community efforts to prevent escalation.

## **Introduction**

Complex territorial disputes, economic competition, and broader geostrategic competition between India and China cause tensions along the world's longest unsettled group of borders (Figure 1). The circa 3500 kilometer Indo-China border (Figure 2) is divided into Western, Middle, and Eastern Sectors. The Western Sector lies between Indian Occupied Kashmir and Xingjian, where India accuses China of illegal occupation. The Middle Sector (the least controversial of the three) Indian states of Himachal, Pradesh, and Uttarakhand share boundaries with China. The Eastern Sector is defined by the McMahon Line which separates the Chinese Tibet Region from Arunachal Pradesh, though China claims the whole area (Figure 2). Both countries have held twenty sessions over three decades to sort out their inconclusive border issues. On May 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> 2020, Indian and Chinese troops clashed in Hot Spring, Pangong Lake (Galwan Valley, Western Sector) while on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, troops clashed in the Eastern Sector's Naku La area (Figures 3 & 4). Such conflicts regularly take place during summers when melted snow offers greater mobility to patrolling troops from both sides. Each country's troops assert their

presence through aggressive posturing and sometimes verbal altercations. However, three distinct features indicate this current standoff is different: the scale of forces and reinforcements involved; the kinetic fight amongst troops; and the Chinese ingress into Galwan Valley, far beyond its own claimed line.<sup>1</sup>

### **What Sparked the Recent Conflict?**

While Indian infrastructure development in the disputed area infuriated China and apparently triggered the Western Sector conflict, the Eastern Sector escalation has another strategic dimension. India issued a new map showing Kalapani (Nepal) and Aksai Chin (China) as Indian Territory. Further, India developed an air strip at Daulat Bag Oldi (Western Sector) in 2008, which is capable of handling medium size cargo aircraft. Historically, military presence in the area remained limited. But recently now, forces have increased to permanent positioning including an infantry brigade group. To support the military in the area, India began developing an all-weather road which provided a *casus belli* for Chinese military action. (Figure 5). Nepal severely criticized<sup>2</sup> India's map through a parliamentary resolution and issued its own map,<sup>3</sup> the best Nepal could do. China, however, responded more aggressively.

In the Eastern Sector, China has severe reservations over India's hosting of the Dalai Lama-led Tibetan Government in exile. US Congressman Scott Perry's bill to recognize the "Tibet Autonomous Region as a separate, independent country"<sup>4</sup> presents a meaningful challenge to China, and has increased the military pressure in India's most vulnerable spot. Chinese positions in Doklam (Eastern Sector) have the potential to sever the Siliguri Corridor (Figure 2) which, if occupied, cuts the land route to seven Indian states battling decades of separatist movements and insurgencies.

Most likely, India applied pressure towards the Karakoram Pass to ease tension in the Eastern Sector (Figure 4). This area holds immense strategic importance to India, China, and Pakistan as it provides a land bridge for the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) flagship project, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Further, in stark violation of 12 UN Security Council resolutions,<sup>5,6</sup> India has altered Jammu's and Kashmir's disputed status, dividing it into the Kashmir Valley and Union Territories of Jammu and Ladakh. As China claims portions of Ladakh, and actively patrols areas along Pngong Lake, China views this unilateral alteration as India's attempt to completely control the disputed territory. China repeatedly reminded New Delhi that "challenging China's sovereign rights and interests by unilaterally revising domestic law and administrative division" is a serious concern for Beijing.<sup>7</sup> Similar

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<sup>1</sup> Ajay Shukla, After changing Galwan claim line thrice, PLA now claims entire valley, May 26 2020, <http://ajaishukla.blogspot.com/2020/05/after-changing-galwan-claim-line-thrice.html> (accessed on Jun 6 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Arun Budhathoki, India's Updated Political Map Sparks Controversy in Nepal, Nov 11 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/indias-updated-political-map-sparks-controversy-in-nepal/> (accessed on Jun 9 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Nepal Parliament approves new map as dispute with India escalates, Jun 13 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/nepal-parliament-approves-map-row-india-escalates-200613145121232.html> (accessed on Jun 13)

<sup>4</sup> US Representative Scott Perry introduces bill to recognize the "Tibet Autonomous Region as a separate, independent country", May 27 2020, <https://tibet.net/representative-scott-perry-introduces-bill-to-recognize-the-tibet-autonomous-region-as-a-separate-independent-country/> (accessed on May 29)

<sup>5</sup> UN resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir, <http://mofa.gov.pk/UN-resolutions-on-jammu-kashmir/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Nations\\_Security\\_Council\\_Resolution\\_47](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Security_Council_Resolution_47)

<sup>7</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on October 31, 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1712371.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1712371.shtml) (accessed on May 28 2020)

to the Indo-Nepal border row,<sup>8</sup> the current standoff over Indian aggression and unilateral changes to Jammu's and Kashmir's status will likely increase pressure on the Chinese Tibet Region.

As the world, particularly the West and US, largely overlooks recent Indian geo-strategic miscalculations, including discriminatory domestic laws, many in India believe their nation is destined to be a major regional power. Indian strategic alignment in the Far East and more aggressive policy towards the decades old border disputes hint at its aspirations to deter China's rise, and to capitalize on the Sino-US trade spat. Concurrently, Chinese assertiveness, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is likely a manifestation of the old Chinese saying, "kill the chicken to scare the monkey."<sup>9</sup> China faces numerous issues ranging from diplomatic pressure regarding COVID handling, to internal pressure over its economic downturn.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese moves appear perfectly timed to capitalize on the opportunity and address challenges. India, however, appears caught in a "Catch 22" situation as any kinetic reaction to Chinese activities may harm economic relations with China, and the resultant domestic political fallout will inhibit Indian's notion of being a counterweight to China.

### **What Next?**

Hindutva, described by some as being akin to Nazism,<sup>11,12,13</sup> is alleged to have caused proliferation of hardliners, religious extremists, and ultra-nationalists among the Indian population, particularly in the ruling elite.<sup>14</sup> India sees China as a major rival and threat to its regional and global ambitions and thus has rapidly modernized its armed forces. More Indians now perceive that "for reasons of national security as well as self-respect, India cannot continue to remain in a 'reactive mode' to Chinese provocations and it is time to respond in kind."<sup>15</sup> Indian intelligentsia propose responding in either of three domains: increase Indian strength, ally with others to restore power-balance, or as a last resort, jump on the hegemon's bandwagon.<sup>16</sup> While India focuses on the first two domains, it maintains a conciliatory, rather than confrontational, approach towards China. This approach is likely to remain due to India's ambitions of becoming a major power. This approach will raise serious questions about India's commitment to being a counterweight to China vice merely extracting diplomatic and military concessions from the West. Thus, capitalizing on opportunities arising from COVID-19 and US-China

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<sup>8</sup> Amish raj Mulmi, "What is the way forward in India Nepal border dispute", May 29 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/india-nepal-border-dispute-200528085916240.html> (accessed on May 30 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Archana Chaudary, India's China standoff shows risks of getting too close to Donald Trump, Jun 5, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indias-china-standoff-shows-risks-of-getting-too-close-to-donald-trump/articleshow/76208093.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on Jun 6, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Bloomberg News, China's Economy Slows Again, Adding Pressure for Policy Action, Sep 16, 2019, [China's Economy Slows Again, Adding Pressure for Policy Action - Bloomberg](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-16/china-s-economy-slows-again-adding-pressure-for-policy-action) (accessed on Jul 15, 2020)

<sup>11</sup> Germany's India envoy visits 'Nazi-inspired' Hindu group, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-india-envoy-visits-nazi-inspired-hindu-group/a-49682304> (accessed on Jul 13, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindutva#cite\\_note-121](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindutva#cite_note-121), Bruce Desmond Graham (2007). Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. Cambridge University Press. pp. 1-2, 11-12, 66

<sup>13</sup> Danial A, 6 Similarities Between Modi's BJP And Hitler's Nazi Party – Butchers Of Humanity! <https://www.parhlo.com/6-similarities-between-modi-hitler/>, (accessed on Jul 13, 2020)

<sup>14</sup> Dr Subramanian Swamy, BJP "Muslims are not equal citizens in India", Apr 1, 2020, [248 India Burning \(Clip\) | VICE on SHOWTIME - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=248IndiaBurningClip) (accessed on Jun 13, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> Arun Prakash, Delhi must build power-balancing alliance, or come to honourable accommodation with China, Jun 6, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/for-a-stable-peace-india-china-border-6444707/> (accessed on Jun 6, 2020)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

trade rivalry, without getting caught in the geopolitical competition,<sup>17</sup> seems to drive the current Indian policy.

On the other hand, China's expansionism and assertive positions toward Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea make the situation dangerous. An insightful US expert recently observed that this face-off is not routine and the "massive deployment of soldiers is a show of strength."<sup>18</sup> With a tactical move occupying 60 square kilometers, China seized the initiative and holds an advantageous position. However, reinforcement of forces highlights that China is preparing for a border skirmish or even a limited war.<sup>19</sup> As a whole, China seems to be getting ready for confrontation; the leadership has urged their population to prepare for hard times. Compared to other nations, Beijing's relatively small stimulus response to COVID-19 may be intended to save its economic policy ammunition for a bigger battle.<sup>20</sup> The current situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is stable as India has largely ceded to China's ingress, as the Chinese Army consolidates its gains with no intention of leaving.<sup>21</sup>

Lin Minwang, director of the Centre for South Asia Studies at Fudan University, said frictions were inevitable and it is impossible for India and China to resolve the border issue for now. The only practical option is to manage the conflicts.<sup>22</sup> Jeff M. Smith noted:

*"The good news is, the current crisis in Ladakh bears some resemblance to these prior standoffs, all of which were peacefully resolved. The bad news is, they also differ in some important and concerning ways, with mounting evidence to suggest the LAC is entering a new, more volatile chapter."*<sup>23</sup>

India appears unable to handle continued forceful occupation of Kashmir. Overstretched and running out of options, India is likely to delay the conflict potentially causing recurrence of such standoffs. Indo-China conflict is not near an end; rather it is the actualization of great power competition. India, while hesitant to actually confront China, has maintained the decade-old non-alignment policy and embraced the West to maximize the benefits. Regional competition is real, and despite de-escalation, China does not intend to retreat, but to test the waters and gauge international response.

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<sup>17</sup> Archana Chaudary, India's China standoff shows risks of getting too close to Donald Trump, Jun 5, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indias-china-standoff-shows-risks-of-getting-too-close-to-donald-trump/articleshow/76208093.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on Jun 6, 2020)

<sup>18</sup> Anbarasan Ethirajan and Vikas Pandey, "China-India border: Why tensions are rising between the neighbours", May 30 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52852509> (accessed on May 30, 2020)

<sup>19</sup> Lt Gen H S Pang (R), India's Fingers have come under Chinese boots. Denial won't help us, Jun 4, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/indias-fingers-have-come-under-chinese-boots-denial-wont-help-us/435145/?amp> (accessed on Jun 9, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> Zhang Lin, Is Beijing preparing to decouple from the US?, May 31, 2020 <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3086867/beijing-preparing-decouple-us> (accessed on Jun 2, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> Ajay Shukla, Ladakh Standoff: Chinese dig in, deploys artillery and tanks on LAC, Business Standard, Jun 13 2020 [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/ladakh-standoff-chinese-dig-in-deploy-artillery-and-tanks-on-lac-120061300049\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/ladakh-standoff-chinese-dig-in-deploy-artillery-and-tanks-on-lac-120061300049_1.html) (accessed on Jun 13, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Liu Zhen, The high roads to border conflict through India and China, June 14, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3088973/high-roads-border-conflict-through-india-and-china> (accessed on Jun 14, 2020)

<sup>23</sup> Jeff M Smith, The Simmering Boundary: A "new normal" at the India-China border? Jun 13, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/simmering-boundary-new-normal-india-china-border-part-1-67784/amp/> (accessed on Jun 13, 2020)

## **Strategic Implications**

To check China's Indo-Pacific rise, the US requires a South Asian ally as a counterweight. Indian ambitions to become a major power and US interest in the region have brought both countries closer. Thus, increased US military, economic, and diplomatic support to India advances US regional counter-China policy objectives. However, it is not yet clear whether this strategy is effective. The following factors prevent India from strongly countering China: economic interdependence with China<sup>24</sup> vis-à-vis deteriorating Indian economic conditions;<sup>25</sup> military asymmetry with China<sup>26</sup> and Pakistan; regional border conflicts; Russo-China relations vis-à-vis Indo-Russian relations; domestic political<sup>27, 28</sup> and humanitarian issues;<sup>29</sup> the deteriorating Kashmir situation; and the Indian legacy of non-alignment. Further, aggressive China's military posture forces India to either reciprocate Chinese action or look for other options to diffuse internal pressures. Some strategic Indo-China conflict implications are:

- a. India cannot achieve some of its global aspirations including its desire to become a major power without peaceful co-existence with China. Thus, the likelihood of India confronting China at the West's behest becomes remote.
- b. India will most likely leverage its position as a counterweight to achieve as many concessions as possible against its human rights violations and discriminatory domestic policies, which counteract US policy objectives. This has already manifested itself through growing defense cooperation, lukewarm western responses to Indian human rights violations in disputed Kashmir, and escalating Indian military activities along the line of control.
- c. It is evident that substantial economic and military disparity makes it almost impossible for India to counter China alone. Thus, numerous military and diplomatic agreements have been made to enable India for this purpose. On the other hand, such agreements have furthered the regional imbalance and created a false sense of superiority in Indian policymakers' thinking; thus adding instability to an already volatile security calculus.
- d. Domestic economic and political challenges exert pressure on Indian policymakers making it difficult for them to handle internal and external challenges without distractions - thus precluding any possibility for Indo-China military confrontation. Encirclement faced in Laddakh, growing instability in the disputed Kashmir valley, and domestic economic and political challenges force the Delhi administration to try to salvage its reputation. Asymmetry between India and Pakistan, western diplomatic support, and a false sense of superiority in a charged ultra-nationalist environment provides India an opportunity to address its challenges while exploiting the violable nature of the Line of Control.

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<sup>24</sup> Abhishek G Bhaya, China: Trade imbalance with India needs 'dynamic' solution, [China: Trade imbalance with India needs 'dynamic' solution - CGTN](#), Jan 17, 2020 (accessed on Sep 10, 2020)

<sup>25</sup> Roshan Kishore, India's economy was facing worst-ever deceleration before Covid-19 hit, [India's economy was facing worst-ever deceleration before Covid-19 hit - business news - Hindustan Times](#), Sep 01, 2020 (accessed on Sep 10, 2020)

<sup>26</sup> Nalin Mehta, To take on Chinese 'wolf warriors', India must fix military asymmetry, [To take on Chinese 'wolf warriors', India must fix military asymmetry \(indiatimes.com\)](#), Jun 28, 2020 (accessed on Sep 11, 2020)

<sup>27</sup> COVID-19 and Political Unrest In Northeast India, [COVID-19 and Political Unrest in Northeast India | ACLED \(acleddata.com\)](#), Oct 26, 2020 (accessed on Dec 14, 2020)

<sup>28</sup> India Farmers Intensify Protests as Deadlock Over New Laws Continue, [India Farmers Intensify Protests as Deadlock Over New Laws Continue | World News | US News](#), Dec 13, 2020 (accessed on Dec 14, 2020)

<sup>29</sup> Ravi Agrawal, Why India's Muslims Are in Grave Danger, [Why India's Muslims Are in Grave Danger \(foreignpolicy.com\)](#), March 2, 2020 (accessed on Sep 12, 2020)

- e. Growing asymmetry between India and Pakistan has initiated a renewed regional arms race which will further push economically stressed Pakistan towards China, potentially straining long-term US-Pakistan military and diplomatic relations. Reduced US-Pakistan engagement will also impact regional US support putting additional pressure on military-to-military cooperation.
- f. Based on India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) political philosophy, India is not likely to revert to pre-August 5 status. Therefore, normalization of relations between China and India is a distant possibility. Thus, the situation in Laddakh may increase domestic pressure on Delhi for a military reaction against China; however, such reaction is not likely. In such a scenario, the easiest escape for India would likely be escalation along the Line of Control.
- g. Economically stressed Pakistan has limited resources to address the growing conventional military asymmetry. Growing Indian military strength under the BJP government, and western diplomatic concessions provided to Delhi, may push the region to develop and employ sophisticated unconventional capabilities as a matter of necessity rather than choice. Therefore, asymmetric diplomatic and military support to India is likely to further destabilize the region.

### **Recommendations**

1. Address the concern of strategic imbalance in the region by ensuring:
  - a. Western technologies and diplomatic leverage provided to enable India to counter China are not used elsewhere; and
  - b. Enhance military-to-military engagement and security cooperation with Pakistan to manage the strategic imbalance and address concerns.
2. Maintain close communication with Indo-Pacific Command to improve situational awareness of the security situation along the Indo-China border, especially in Arunachal Pradesh.
3. Monitor the Indian domestic political situation, security environment, and media reporting to prevent any fallout along the Line of Control.
4. In the backdrop of increased diplomatic support to India, closely monitor indicators for potential false flag operations and surges in proxy actions in Pakistan.

## INDIA-CHINA BORDERLANDS



Figure 1

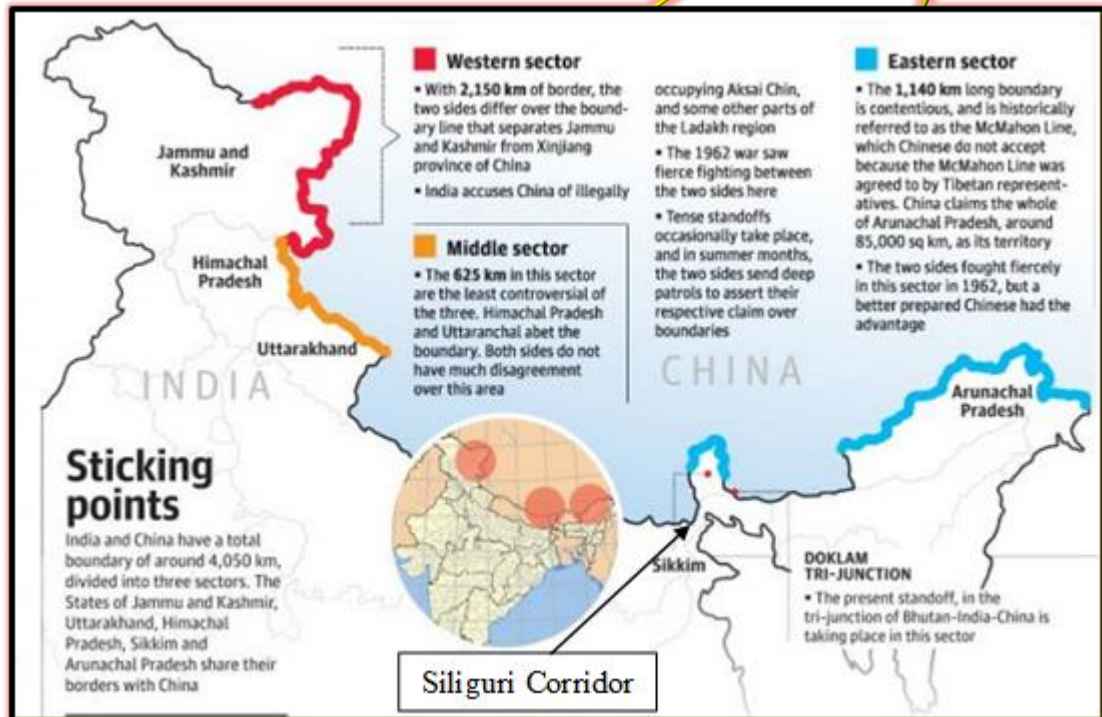


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4





Figure 5