

Is China Turning the Table to Fuel the Conflict over Kashmir?

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Key Points

- Tensions culminated when a deadly brawl between China's and India's army broke out in Ladakh (Aksai Chin on Chinese side) and claimed several lives on both sides. Fortunately, the situation was de-escalated by the two nations' agreement to pull back their forces from the brink. However, there is still the possibility that another clash will escalate into a large-scale military conflict at any time as both sides have been very assertive over this contested region for decades.
- Neither China nor India will loosen its grip on this region. In particular, China is likely to be more assertive as this Himalayan region is critical to China's "One China policy" and "Belt and Road Initiative."
- China is expected to have the upper hand when it comes to territorial conflict in this region as China has superior economic capabilities and the endorsement from a strong ally, Pakistan.
- This low-intensity conflict is most likely to affect the so-called "Great Power Competition with China" as India has apparently a closer relationship with the US.

Introduction

The deadliest clash between Chinese and Indian armies in Galwan valley occurred on June 15th 2020. As a result, 20 Indian and 4 Chinese soldiers were killed and dozens wounded. This was the first time since 1975 that a confrontation between the two forces along the 3,488 kilometers long China-India Line of Actual Control (LAC) resulted in fatalities (Figure 1).¹ Conflicts between the two Asian giants over the disputed Kashmir region were little incidents besides a war in 1962 and since then there were many small skirmishes along the border. However, what we have to look at is that both China and India are fortifying this mountainous region and reinforcing their forces with heavy weapon systems. Both countries are getting increasingly assertive. Although China and India have agreed on the disengagement of forces, created a buffer zone, and resumed talks to ease tensions, there is always a high possibility of another clash or escalation at any time. The purpose of this paper is to take a look at the prolonged conflict's background, each stakeholders' stance over this region, why China and India have been confronting each other for decades over this almost uninhabitable region, and finally what the impact would be on the US and USCENTCOM area of responsibility, especially from the perspective of the Great Power Competition with China.

¹ Abhijnan Rej, "China confirms deaths in Galwan clash with India," *The Diplomat*, Feb 20, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/china-confirms-deaths-in-galwan-clash-with-india/> (accessed Mar 12, 2021)



Figure 1. Area Map

Background

The conflict is considered to have originated when India and Pakistan became independent countries. For decades, Kashmir, often referred to as “Paradise on earth,”² has been one of the most sensitive regions between China, India, and Pakistan. There were several incidences of war over the Kashmir region; including three wars between India and Pakistan and the Sino-Indian War in 1962. There are still conflicts of varying intensity today. It can be assumed that the cause of the conflict between the two giant Asian countries is not simply a territorial issue. The importance of this region to both China and India is rooted in a complicated historical background; however, this paper will focus on geopolitical aspects. This contested region is considered by both China and India as a highly critical area in terms of connectivity or linkage. China has determined Aksai Chin to be important for connectivity between Xinjiang and Tibet, both of which are sensitive Chinese autonomous territories. On the other hand, India has determined Ladakh to be a critical link to Central Asia. This highly disputed border area between China and India has mostly been controlled by China since the late 1950s. China consolidated its military grip after the Sino-Indian War of 1962, while India claims this region as part of its union territory of Ladakh. One of the main problems over this mountainous area between China and India is there are no specific landmarks, fences or artificial construction along the LAC with consensus. The root cause is an ill-defined 3,440 km (2100 mile) long border. Rivers, lakes, and snowcaps along the frontier cause the line to shift, bringing soldiers face to face at many locations, and potentially sparking confrontations.³ The military tensions have risen as both China and India attempt to fortify this area with constructions of roads, airfields, and military facilities.⁴ In addition, it is also worth

² Suresh Thawani, “Paradise on earth; Kashmir valley”, *The Economic Times*, Jun 11, 2009, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/travel/paradise-on-earth-kashmir-valley/articleshow/4642478.cms?from=mdr> (accessed Apr 7, 2021)

³ *BBC News*, “India-China dispute: The border row explained in 400 words,” Jan 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia53062484> (accessed Mar 24, 2021)

⁴ *Hindustan Times*, “India-China row: Five things you need to know today,” Sep 23, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/indianews/lac-row-five-things-you-need-to-know-today/story-29FinNp244RrXwaf81DYdL.html> (accessed Apr 7, 2021)

considering that India's aggressive movement toward Kashmir has provoked China. In 2019 India revoked its Constitution Article 370, which guaranteed the Muslim majority Jammu and Kashmiris' autonomy for decades. As a result, Kashmir and Ladakh are under New Delhi's direct control as federal union territories. China sees both the repeal of the article and the formation of the new state as a form of aggression.⁵ It is obvious, that Delhi's arbitrary actions have motivated Beijing to interfere assertively in order to maintain stronger political and military grip in Kashmir.

Each Side's Stance Over this Region

It is imperative to understand each nation's position over this long-disputed region and why both China and India maintain their firm stance at the strategic level because military confrontation is mirrored by each countries' political will. The position of this paper is threats to this area is closely related to China's "One China policy" in terms of political domain as well as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). An opposing perspective, the region is also critical to India when it comes to the economic linkage between Kashmir and Central Asia along with tensions with Pakistan, which has long been the number one strategic priority since India's inception.

China's Stance

China's domestic and foreign policy is centered around its One China Policy. This means literally there is only one People's Republic of China (PRC). This has been Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) fundamental policy as well as the fundamental bedrock of Chinese policy-making and diplomacy.⁶⁷ China considers the One China policy to be the core interest that it can never yield in any relationship with another country. This policy originally comes from relations with Taiwan; however, one may argue that it is not limited to relations with Taiwan as it affects not only various Chinese foreign policies regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Bhutan, but also domestic policy regarding 5 Chinese autonomous regions: Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang.⁸ China has a complex relationship with its minorities, many of whom chafe under Chinese rules. Riots and unrest have periodically flared up in far-flung regions of China, including Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and the western province of Xinjiang (home to the Turkic speaking Muslim Uyghurs).⁹ China, like other large countries, is multi-ethnic. The Chinese government officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups. The Han people form the large majority, making up approximately 94 percent of the population. The Han majority speak Chinese (known as Mandarin), but most of the minorities speak other languages, which fall into 15 main language families.¹⁰ The greatest concern of Chinese leadership, specifically the Chinese Communist Party is the threat of separatism ideas to China's territorial integrity especially in those areas that are composed of minority ethnicities such as Tibet and Xinjiang.¹¹ In particular, Aksai Chin is a vital piece of land for Beijing because it connects to Tibet and Xinjiang where many issues are on-going including allegations of human rights abuse. Therefore, Beijing is likely concerned that if China loses its strong grip in that region, separation activities by minorities will increase and spread to other regions. According to open source

⁵ Anik Joshi, "India has handed China a way to interfere in Kashmir," *Foreign Policy*, Jun 16, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/16/china-kashmir-himalayas-pakistan-conflict/> (accessed Apr 9, 2021)

⁶ *BBC News*, "What is the 'One China' policy?," Feb 10, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-38285354> (accessed Mar 24, 2021)

⁸ *ChinaToday.com*, "China's Autonomous regions," http://www.chinatoday.com/city/china_autonomous_regions.htm (accessed Apr 7, 2021)

⁹ Clarissa Sebag Montefiore, "How China distorts its minorities through propaganda," *BBC News*, Dec 15, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20131215-how-china-portrays-its-minorities> (accessed Mar 24, 2021)

¹⁰ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "A Visual sourcebook of Chinese civilization," <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/geo/people.htm> (accessed Mar 25, 2021)

¹¹ John Irgengioro, "China's National Identity and the root causes of China's Ethnic tensions," *Springer*, Sep 30, 2018, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12140-018-9297-2> (accessed Apr 7, 2021)

information, the Chinese government has detained more than 1 million Uyghurs in reeducation camps since 2017 and subjected those not detained to intense surveillance, religious restrictions, forced labor, and sterilizations. The total number of camps are estimated to be as high as 1,200 and construction spending on security-related facilities in Xinjian increased by 20 billion yuan (around \$2.96 billion) in 2017.¹² I believe that containing separatist dissent is one of main reasons why Beijing put its political and military efforts to control Aksai Chin, although the region is a desolate winter desert. Furthermore, I reckon why China is trying to expand its influence to Afghanistan and Tajikistan is also related to China's internal security concerns. I believe the Chinese Communist Party is afraid of the influx of separatists or extremists from these countries into Xinjiang and its Uyghurs community. China appears to do everything necessary to stop any Uyghurs separatism related activities or movements.

India's Stance

Foreign policy toward Pakistan, India's long-standing rival nation, has always been the number one priority when it comes to India's strategic plan. In particular, there has been continuous tension between India and Pakistan for decades over Kashmir ever since two nations became independent from the British Empire. Although there was a rare political gesture for conciliation between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Prime Minister Imran Khan on 23 March, 2021,¹² it is hard to expect a quick resolution to prolonged conflict over Kashmir between the two rival countries. In this regard, Ladakh is an essential region to India in terms of longstanding territorial conflict with Pakistan. Therefore, I'd like to focus on the economic and geopolitical aspects as to why Ladakh matters to India, because this region is the only link to Central Asia from India by land. In this regard, India administered Kashmir and Ladakh are critical regions in terms of connectivity between India and Central Asia. Regional integration helps countries not only overcome divisions that impede the flow of goods, service, capital, people and ideas, but also exert their influence.¹³ India has been developing regional integration through the Chabahar port project, on Iran's south-eastern coast along the Gulf of Oman, as a way to transport goods to not only Iran, but also Afghanistan and central Asian countries by avoiding rival Pakistan (Figure 2). India also plans to set up a railway stretching approximately 600 km railway from Chabahar port to Zahedan, the provincial capital of Sistan-Baluchestan in Iran close to Afghan the border.¹⁴

¹² Lindsay Maizland, "China's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Mar 1, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghursxinjiang?gclid=EAlalQobChMItddev1vnL7wlVgpmGChOPzwEGEAAYAiAAEgIUx_D_BwE (accessed Mar 25, 2021) ¹² Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, "Pakistan PM Khan desires peace with arch-rival India," *Reuters*, Mar 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-india-idUSKBN2BM29A> (accessed Apr 7, 2021)

¹³ *The World Bank*, "Regional Integration," <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/overview> (accessed Mar 26, 2021)

¹⁴ Manoj Kumar, Nidhi Verma, "India likely to start full operations at Iran's Chabahar port by May end," *Reuters*, Mar 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-iran-ports-int-idUSKBN2AX1DK> (accessed Mar 26, 2021)



Figure 2. The Strategic Push for the Chabahar Port

However, there are some uncertainties to operate due to several factors including the tension between the U.S. and Iran, closer relations between China and Iran, Afghanistan's unrestful security situation, and China's attempts to increase its influence on Afghanistan. Therefore, I think India needs a safer and more secure route to Central Asia directly from its territory. Ladakh is the only region to securely fulfill India's regional integrity initiative. India's growing trade needs have prompted India to develop this almost uninhabitable region through the construction of roads and an airfield. This infrastructural development may have ignited the conflict with China. China is the dominant power in this region due to its economy, military power, and alliances. The fear of losing the region to China led India to formulate a policy to reconnect with the region. This is the context of Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP), which India's former Minister of State for External Affairs, E. Ahmed, unveiled at the first meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue in June 2012 in Kyrgyzstan. The aim of the new policy was to expand India's relations with Central Asia beyond the traditional spheres of economics and energy. India has been seeking to integrate economics with geopolitics by focusing on strengthening strategic and security cooperation between India and Central Asia.¹⁵ This plan is likely becoming increasingly desperate to India amid intensifying tensions with China. India has to find alternatives to replace China's large market if conflict with China is inevitable since China has long been India's largest trade partner.

Who is Winning?

China has the upper hand in terms of greater military leverage in the region, but it would be controversial to declare one side is winning. These two Asian giant countries, ranked 3rd and 4th military power in the world, have been in military confrontation for decades along the LAC.¹⁶ It would be incorrect to judge only by military power; however, focusing on the economic perspective is the analytic basis for this paper, and simply stated, India can't afford the consequences of competition with China in terms of economic as well as militarily. China's 2021 defense budget is \$178.2 billion, the second largest country after the United States. India, on the other hand, ranks third with \$73.6 billion.¹⁷ China is spending 2.4 times more than India's Defense expenditure in 2021 to modernize its military capabilities. In addition to the defense budget, China has a significant lead over India in macroeconomic terms. As of 2021, China is the second largest economy in the world, while India takes seventh place respectively

¹⁵ Neha Dwivedi, "Can India connect with Central Asia?," *The Diplomat*, Nov 30, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/can-indiaconnect-with-central-asia/> (accessed Mar 26, 2021)

¹⁶ Global Firepower, web site, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php> (accessed Apr 2, 2021) ¹⁷ Ibid.

on a nominal basis.¹⁷ China's GDP is 5.9 times greater than India's. In terms of Purchase Power Parity, China's is 2.8 times that of India's.¹⁹ Of course, there may be errors in comparing only by simple economic indicators. However, if China and India continue to clash in extreme competition, these indicators can be seen as objective index that China's position is far more advantageous in terms of economic competition with India. In particular, China was the only country in the world to achieve positive economic growth when the novel Coronavirus pandemic depressed the global economy last year.¹⁸ China's economic dominance economic India has been significant during the COVID-19 pandemic. India's Coronavirus situation is getting worse and India has difficulties getting enough vaccines for its people. In contrast, China is manufacturing its own COVID-19 vaccines and provides vaccines to many countries. These Chinese-made vaccines are likely to be used to expand China's influence and secure a better position than India during the unprecedented pandemic. One of India's economic experts said,

“Recognizing that Beijing has an immense military advantage, New Delhi has chosen a path of levying economic punishments, such as the banning of Chinese-origin apps and restricting Chinese participation in government procurement. But India's limited economic leverage over China has rendered these measures relatively ineffective. As South Asia's worst performing economy in 2020, India is not in a position to bear the cost of a military conflict. A war with China would force India to discard its long-standing policy of strategic autonomy.”¹⁹

From a different perspective, China also has a more advantageous position than India. India's revocation of its Article 370 and integrating Kashmir as a federal territory allows China to strengthen its alliance with Pakistan at very little cost and accelerates its BRI via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as well. Perhaps more importantly, it also allows Beijing to adopt a protective cover for its mistreatment of Uighur minorities in Xinjiang, which has drawn criticism from the international community.²⁰

Outlook

It is difficult to predict what will happen in the future in terms of major powers conflict as there has always been much uncertainty and fluidity in international politics. The world is still undergoing the unprecedented novel Coronavirus pandemic, but some hopeful processes are underway such as the Afghanistan peace talks, the restart of the Iran nuclear deal, and the Middle East peace process. These factors will have an indirect impact on the China-India confrontations. However, it must be assumed, that China is likely to be more assertive in engaging in its territorial disputes and actively responding to India's movements in order to maintain the upper hand in the Kashmir region. There are two reasons for such a position. First, China's official national grand strategic objective: of the 'China Dream.' Chinese President Xi Jinping has emphasized that China will be a superpower nation by 2049, the centennial of the founding of the People's Republic of China, which means China intends to surpass the US in terms of its economic and military power. Xi Jinping is likely to utilize 'China Dream' to consolidate and unite

¹⁷ Statistics Times, web site, <https://statisticstimes.com/economy/gdp-indicators-2021.php> (accessed Apr 2, 2021) ¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jonathan Cheng, "China is the only major economy to report economic growth for 2020," *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan 18, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-only-major-economy-to-report-economic-growth-for-2020-11610936187> (accessed Apr 7, 2021)

¹⁹ Sushant Singh, "Why China is winning against India," *Foreign Policy*, Jan 1, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/01/india-chinahimalayas-ladakh-standoff/> (accessed Apr 2, 2021)

²⁰ International the News, "India has handed China a way to interfere in Kashmir," Jun 18, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/674341-india-has-handed-china-a-way-to-interfere-in-kashmir> (accessed Apr 9, 2021)

Chinese people, especially the military in order to maintain its power and regime.²¹ Second, inferiority, or defeat in the Kashmir region against India could have a negative impact on China's other disputes or potential disputed areas such as Taiwan, South and East China sea, and some border areas with Russia, and Vietnam. Border conflicts seem inevitable as China shares 22,116km of land border with 14 neighboring countries.²² The decline of Chinese influence in a high-profile region like Kashmir can have a domino-like effect in China's other disputed areas. That might be Chinese Communist Party's greatest concern. Lastly, Aksai Chin is a critical area to link Xinjian and Tibet, one of the China's vulnerable areas. Chinese officials are likely concerned that Uyghurs hold extremist and separatist ideas, and they view the camps as a way of eliminating threats to China's territorial integrity, government, and population.²⁵

China's activities to strengthen its control in the Kashmir region are likely to intensify, and tension between China and India is also likely to escalate as India will respond aggressively against China's activities. However, it will be extremely difficult for India to continue its hardline stance against China, especially in terms of economic strength. China has been India's largest trading partner. India must acquire alternative markets to replace China if they want to take the confrontation route instead of reconciliation. Therefore, India's dependence on the US is expected to increase in economic and security domains as the Kashmir territorial dispute between China and India intensifies.

Recommendations:

- Remain impartial to maintain cooperative relations in the military domain with both India and Pakistan. Showing any favoritism to India in order to contain China could lead to Pakistan establishing much closer ties in multiple domains with China.
- Closely monitor ongoing tensions between China and India that may affect the CENTCOM AOR. Instability may increase separatist activities, terrorism, and extremism. Transnational extremist or terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and their local affiliates may instigate escalation between these two nuclear powers.
- Encourage both sides to avoid any miscalculations and to exercise restraint. Any sort of skirmishes or conflict could escalate into large scale military confrontation.

²¹ Graham Allison, "What Xi Jinping wants," *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/> (accessed Apr 7, 2021)

²² Gavin, "The 14 countries bordering China: China's neighbors," *China Highlight*, Mar 18, 2021, <https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/countries-bordering-china.htm> (accessed Apr 4, 2021) ²⁵

Lindsay Maizland, "China's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," *Council on Foreign relations*, Mar 1, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang?gclid=EAIaIQobChMItddev1vnL7wIVgpmGChOPzwEGEAAYAiAAEgIUX_D_BwE (accessed Mar 25, 2021)