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## **China-India Galwan Conflict: The Perils of Nationalism**

*By KB Teo*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Since 1949, China-India ties have been difficult and rocky. In the 1950s, they shared a common non-aligned foreign policy. Relations turned sour with the October 1962 Sino-Indian war. Though ties improved with the summit meetings of their leaders in 2018 and 2019, their territorial disputes in the Himalayas remained unresolved.*

### **COMMENTARY**

ON 16 JUNE 2020, brutal fist fighting broke out between Chinese and Indian troops at the Galwan Valley, Ladakh, in the Himalayas. It is 4,300 metres above sea level, with snow-capped mountains. The area is next to Aksai Chin and near China's Xinjiang province.

New Delhi said 20 Indian soldiers, including a senior officer, were killed. Both sides have been actively boosting their military hardware there. There is no settled boundary where the flare-up occurred, only a tenuous Line of Actual Control (LAC) separating Chinese and Indian troops.

### **China's Motivations**

China has three main motivations behind the incident. First, Aksai Chin and Xinjiang are of strategic importance to Beijing. Aksai Chin provides China with land access to the south of the mountainous Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. China conducts nuclear and long-range missile tests at Lop Nur in Xinjiang, a region with vast oil and gas resources.

Second, Beijing is irked by India's military upgrading and renewed territorial claims to Aksai Chin. This region has been under Chinese administration since the 1950s and

the construction of a highway there was one of the triggers of the China-India war in 1962. Only a fragile peace prevailed, with occasional military skirmishes.

China and India share a long land border whose actual length is in dispute. On 18 June 2020, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah vowed to take back Aksai Chin (by force), again irking Beijing. Through its control of significant points in Aksai Chin, such as Patrolling Point 14, China is able to gain a strong military advantage in overlooking Indian military positions in the region.

At the same time, China and Pakistan have been relentlessly upgrading the strategic Karakoram Highway, something which India views with trepidation. Today, a stronger China has an assertive foreign policy, setting aside Deng Xiaoping's advice to "Hide your capabilities; Bide your time".

### **Indian Ocean as a Strategic Region**

Third, Beijing sees the Indian Ocean as a strategic region. The United States has been strongly cultivating India, as part of its anti-China strategy. China has a strong ally in Pakistan which Beijing strongly supported since the 1970s.

Over the past 30 years, Beijing has significantly expanded its engagements and presence in the Indian Ocean region. American and Indian strategists have raised fears about China's expansionism.

New Delhi sees Beijing's Indian Ocean plan as anti-India. China views Pakistan's Navy as a helpful partner in tying down Indian resources in the Arabian Sea, away from the Indian Ocean region. China has strengthened ties with Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Myanmar.

Beijing's "string of pearls" doctrine seeks a stable balance of power in the Indian Ocean region. This is one way that Beijing is reducing New Delhi's dominance in South Asia.

### **India's Motivations**

India too has three main motivations. First, New Delhi sees the Indian Ocean as its own backyard. India sees China's growing presence there as a major strategic challenge. But Beijing does not view the Indian Ocean as India's sole preserve. China is claiming sovereignty over the Galwan Valley where both countries have enhanced infrastructures, especially roads, bridges, and airstrips.

Second, India is, however, quite dependent on China for trade and investments. China is India's second largest trading partner. China's investments in India totalled US\$26 billion (2019), compared to lower level of foreign direct investments from other Asian countries like South Korea and Japan. Many Indian companies are dependent on China for critical supplies.

India has a huge trade deficit of \$56.8 billion (2019), its largest with any state in the world. There are 54 Indian companies operating in China. They are in manufacturing, healthcare, and financial services.

Third, India seeks to undermine China's close economic and military ties with Pakistan, New Delhi's arch rival in the region.

### **Consequences of India-China Tensions**

There are a number of consequences of this Sino-Indian rivalry. One, China and India are the world's two most populous states (1.4 billion, and 1.3 billion respectively). They are both the world's emerging technological powers, and changing the global balance of power.

Two, they are both nuclear-armed. A Sino-Indian war would have geopolitical reverberations worldwide. The summit diplomacy between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is over, for the foreseeable future.

Three, both China and India have very nationalistic political and military leaderships. President Xi is facing growing domestic challenges: his handling of COVID-19 is facing strong domestic criticisms; the Chinese economy is slowing down, raising unemployment and threatening key private sector activities. He has to be seen domestically as strong in foreign policy. This will boost his political legitimacy.

In military terms, China is stronger than India. China is the larger spender on defence, \$266 billion in 2019. India spends about \$70 billion. Another Sino-Indian war would be disastrous for both.

For the past ten years, Sino-Indian rivalry has steadily intensified, but remained largely stable. India and China have also been more engaged. Bilateral trade increased 67 times between 1998 and 2012. Thousands of Indian students have flocked to Chinese universities. Both sides have also held joint military exercises.

### **Perils of Extreme Nationalism**

Both China and India have a nationalistic foreign policy to advance their respective geopolitical interests. China's "string of pearls" doctrine has already built strong links with Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Myanmar. This should not be a surprise.

From Beijing's viewpoint, the Indian Ocean is critical because it links the oil-rich Middle East with an economically vibrant Asia. This will lessen Beijing's "Malacca Strait dilemma", where China's oil supply passes through and is seen by Beijing as a potential choke point.

Beijing is seeking to counter Washington's hostile encirclement policy. On the other hand, it is not in China's long-term interests to worsen ties with India. It will only push India closer to the US and other US partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and those in Europe.

The Galwan Valley episode showed the perils of extreme nationalism on both sides, but Chinese media have prudently called for a resumption of Sino-Indian dialogue to restore cordial and mutually beneficial ties.

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