

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

China-India Border Crisis: Can a New CBM Avert War?

By P S Suryanarayana

SYNOPSIS

China and India have relentlessly confronted each other since they clashed in the western sector of their disputed boundary on 15 June 2020. To avert war, a viable confidence-building option, not considered by either side, is mutual accommodation. In this formula, both sides can keep their recent military 'gains' until the boundary is amicably settled.

COMMENTARY

ON 21 OCTOBER 2020, India handed over to China a missing Chinese soldier who had strayed into the Indian side in Ladakh, the scene of current Sino-Indian hostility. In conventional wisdom, this episode can herald the easing of tensions. However, the present China-India military crisis is a unique test of their political will, if not the prelude to their potential power struggle in Asia.

For the first time in 45 years, soldiers died on both sides in a ferocious physical clash on 15 June 2020. Throughout the crisis which began in May, there has been no exchange of fire so far, despite mutual allegations of warning shots being fired. Through competitive military manoeuvres, though, both sides have gained vantage positions. Diplomatic and military-level efforts to end the crisis have, therefore, remained unsuccessful.

Patrolling at 'Friction Points'

The disputed Sino-Indian boundary – divided into western, central and eastern sectors – is identified by the un-demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC). But there has been no agreement on the exact alignment of LAC. In the bilateral negotiations, China has

not agreed to determine the LAC alignment because it might prejudice the boundary settlement itself.

Consequently, the patrolling troops of both sides often confront each other at the contested “friction points”, i.e., places deemed useful in the Himalayan mountainous border.

Patrolling Claim Lines (PCLs) are, therefore, the unmarked limits up to which the soldiers of each side undertake routine patrolling, mostly at “friction points”. PCLs differ from Sovereignty Claim Lines (SCLs), which indicate the extent of land actually controlled or politically claimed by each side for exercising sovereign administrative authority.

SCLs run deep into each other’s cartographic territory. The 90,000-sq-km Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector is a constituent State in India, with regular representation in the Indian Parliament. However, China claims sovereignty over this territory. Similarly, in the western sector, India claims sovereignty over Aksai Chin, which is being administered by China from the 1950s.

The current Sino-India military crisis is unfolding mainly at “friction points” along and across the *de facto* LAC between India’s Union Territory of Ladakh (UTL) and Aksai Chin. Beginning as differences over PCLs at these “friction points”, the crisis snowballed, as both countries gained vantage positions through military manoeuvres, especially in the Pangong Lake area.

Disengagement and De-Escalation

Chinese and Indian defence ministers, General Wei Fenghe and Rajnath Singh respectively, met in Moscow on 4 September 2020 but failed to resolve the crisis. They simply assessed each other’s moods and methods. Thereafter, the two foreign ministers, Wang Yi and Jaishankar, met, also in Moscow on 10 September.

They agreed on a procedure to bring about “quick” disengagement by the troops and de-escalation of tensions. The need for “new confidence-building measures (CBMs)” was also emphasised as a pathway “to maintain and enhance peace and tranquillity in the border areas”. No formula was spelt out by either China or India.

Senior military commanders in the UTL-Aksai Chin region have also met quite regularly. On 22 September, they agreed “to stop sending more troops to the frontline” in this theatre. If implemented by both sides in letter and spirit, this commitment can lead to de-escalation of tensions i.e., a lowering of the temperature.

Being a matter of logistical detail, there has been no official word on how disengagement by the troops will be ensured. In a possible scenario, each side can withdraw its soldiers to an agreed location *behind* the Patrolling Claim Line of the other side at each “friction point”.

Each side will, in effect, withdraw its soldiers within the confines of its own PCL at each “friction point”. Some military analysts, however, disfavour the creation of a buffer zone

through demilitarisation. They argue that the evident lack of necessary trust in Sino-Indian relations would be an impediment.

No-Escalation Formula

A new formula can be envisioned to address the lack of adequate trust. Because of this syndrome, Beijing and Delhi will be inclined to preserve what they gained through their competitive military manoeuvres in the western sector in 2020. So, a *no-escalation* agreement can be conceived as a possible new CBM.

In this scenario, each country will retain its newly-acquired vantage positions. An agreement of this kind – in effect, deterrence – will be a ‘victory’ for both militaries, however limited in scope. They need not feel that their manoeuvres will go waste through de-escalation.

But a no-escalation formula will be viable only if both neighbours honour their commitment to stop sending more troops to the UTL-Aksai Chin theatre. Above all, both parties must be convinced of each other’s political will and military prowess to retain their vantage positions.

Surely, like all CBMs, a no-escalation accord, too, will only be a palliative. There is, therefore, no alternative to a settlement of the boundary dispute itself as quickly as possible. Jaishankar believes that the boundary dispute and the broader Sino-Indian relations cannot be separated.

Wang Yi, however, argues that the dispute should be viewed in “a proper context vis-à-vis [overall] bilateral relations”. A no-escalation CBM may help manage this Sino-Indian divergence.

P S Suryanarayana is an Adjunct Senior Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is author of ‘Smart Diplomacy: Exploring China-India Synergy’.
