

The Great Divide: Border Disputes and Geopolitical Tensions Between India and China

Laxmi Narayan M D¹, Reovwin John², Jeevan Yohan Varghese³

^{1,2,3}Author, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore

Abstract:

This research project delves into the intricate relationship between India and China, marked by a complex interplay of cooperation and conflict that positions it as one of the most critical bilateral dynamics in contemporary international affairs. The study comprehensively explores the historical backdrop, geopolitical influences, and evolving economic interests that have engendered a spectrum of challenges and opportunities in this relationship. It scrutinizes pivotal points of contention, encompassing territorial disputes, trade imbalances, and regional sway, all the while acknowledging instances of collaboration like diplomatic dialogues and cultural exchanges. Through an exhaustive analysis of primary and secondary sources, the project aims to provide a nuanced comprehension of the myriad issues shaping India-China ties. Additionally, it evaluates the potential implications of these challenges on regional stability and global geopolitics. By illuminating the intricate tapestry of factors characterizing this bilateral relationship, our research contributes to a deeper grasp of the broader Asian geopolitical landscape, offering invaluable insights for policymakers and scholars alike.

Keyword: India, China, Border Dispute, Geopolitical Implications

1. Historical Background

The ongoing border dispute between India and China is deeply rooted in a poorly defined, 3,440-kilometer (2,100-mile) boundary. This disputed line is subject to shifts caused by natural features such as rivers, lakes, and snowcaps, often leading to face-to-face confrontations between soldiers from both nations. Adding to the complexity, both India and China have been competing to develop infrastructure along this contentious border, known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A significant trigger for the deadly clash in 2020 was India's construction of a new road to a high-altitude air base in the region. Despite several rounds of military-level talks, tensions have continued to simmer. In December 2022, troops clashed near the Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh state, resulting in minor injuries. Efforts to de-escalate had been underway since a major clash in June 2020, which marked the first fatal confrontation between the two sides since 1975.

The historical context of this dispute includes a war fought between the two nations in 1962, resulting in a humiliating defeat for India. However, the ongoing tensions hold the potential for dangerous escalation, particularly given the nuclear capabilities of both nations. Moreover, the economic ramifications of strained relations are significant, as China stands as one of India's largest trading partners. This military standoff has also been mirrored by growing political tension, putting a strain on the relationship between Indian Prime

Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping. This standoff at the Line of Actual Control is not a recent development; it has been ongoing for some time. The most severe escalation in over 45 years occurred in 2020 when at least 20 Indian soldiers and an unconfirmed number of Chinese soldiers were killed. The implications of this conflict extend beyond the two nations, with significant geopolitical consequences for the broader South Asian region. The escalation of tensions can be traced back to April of the previous year when both China and India were aggressively building military infrastructure in the disputed area to assert their dominance. This may have acted as a tipping point that led to the confrontation. Additionally, India's decision to unilaterally annul the special status of Kashmir in August further complicated matters. This move, which revoked Article 370 and brought the Ladakh region under central rule, added a new layer of complexity to the dispute.

China's friendly ties with India's regional rival, Pakistan, have also played a role. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), initiated in 2015, is a multi-billion-dollar project within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It aims to create a network of highways, railways, and pipelines connecting China's Xinjiang region to the Arabian Sea at Gwadar, passing through the Pakistani-administered region of Kashmir. India's claim over "Pakistan occupied Kashmir" and its opposition to the CPEC project have been viewed as direct threats by China and Pakistan. The border dispute took a deadly turn in 2020, with both sides suffering casualties. Thousands of Chinese and Indian troops found themselves in a standoff in the Ladakh region high in the Himalayas in early May. While an agreement to de-escalate was reached on June 6, the mutual withdrawal of troops from the Galwan Valley went awry on June 15, resulting in casualties on both sides. Though China's government and media did not provide casualty figures for Chinese troops, unconfirmed Indian media reports indicated more than forty Chinese soldiers lost their lives. The contested 2,200-mile border, or Line of Actual Control, has been a long-standing subject of competing claims and tensions, including a brief war in 1962. This border remains undermarketed, and China and India have differing interpretations of its location, leading to frequent border "transgressions" ("Council on Foreign Relations"). While these transgressions often do not escalate tensions, serious standoffs like the current one has been less common, although this marks the fourth since 2013 ("Council on Foreign Relations").

2. Territorial Disputes

The India-China border dispute has been a longstanding source of tension, primarily stemming from a poorly defined, 3,440km (2,100-mile) border. The de facto border, known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has seen clashes since December 2022, with both sides escalating their military presence. The deadliest incident in recent history was the June 2020 clash in Galwan Valley, resulting in casualties on both sides, marking the most dangerous Sino-Indian border conflict since 1967. Currently, India and China are engaged in a frenzied competition to enhance their infrastructure along the border. This build-up suggests a strategic decision by both countries to strengthen their logistical capabilities for potential conflicts during peacetime. This situation is further complicated by assertive foreign policies and other factors, including Sino-Pakistan relations and tensions regarding the Dalai Lama's succession. The risk of escalation between these nuclear-armed powers remains substantial. The LAC can be divided into three sections: western (Ladakh and Tibet/Xinjiang), middle (Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, and Tibet), and eastern (Arunachal Pradesh or "South Tibet" and Tibet). In the western section, particularly in Tibet, satellite images indicate a growing Chinese presence.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been constructing a network of military installations since 2017, complete with dual-use infrastructure like housing, roads, public facilities, and internet connectivity. This forms part of the CCP's broader plan to build "well-off villages" in Tibetan border towns.

The escalation of tensions along the Sino-Indian border is a significant concern, surpassing the number of escalations in the past decade compared to the five decades following the 1962 border war. Agreements signed in 1993, 1996, and 2005 that had previously maintained stability have been shattered. Several factors have contributed to these tensions, including unresolved border disputes, the rise of nationalist leaders in both countries, and international politics, which have intertwined and reinforced each other. Historically, territorial disputes have often led to more wars than other factors like political, ideological, or economic differences. China and India inherited the world's longest unmarked border, and the strategic importance of this dispute, combined with decades of animosity, militarization, and nationalism, have compounded the border issues. In the late 2010s, Xi Jinping assumed power in China, while Narendra Modi took office in India in 2014, both with strong political bases. This empowered them to pursue ambitious national agendas aimed at achieving great power status. This included accelerating military modernization, increasing defense infrastructure, and making physical and legal changes to the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

While there has been some progress in disengagement along the India-China boundary, achieving full de-escalation remains a challenge. On September 13, 2022, India and China confirmed their respective disengagements from another friction point in eastern Ladakh, marking the fourth such disengagement in the area. This was a positive step toward ending the 28-month standoff ongoing since the military clashes of May 2020, which included the violent Galwan Valley clash. Finding a lasting solution to the border dispute is increasingly difficult, and armed coexistence has become the new reality in the India-China border regions. While recent disengagement agreements are steps forward, broader de-escalation efforts are still needed.

3. Geopolitical Implications

The India-China territorial dispute holds significant geopolitical ramifications. The Galwan border conflict, surpassing the 1967 Doklam standoff in intensity, marked the first Indian fatality in 45 years along the border, further deteriorating their relationship. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) dividing India and China lacks demarcation, leading to frequent border disputes. The conflict erupted concurrently in the Galwan sector (previously undisputed), Demchok, Pangong Lake, and Nathu-La in Sikkim. The instigator of the conflict remains unclear, but it resulted in casualties on both sides. In January 2021, satellite imagery revealed China's construction of a new village about 2 km within the Indian side of the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh, a region China refuses to recognize as part of India. Several speculations surround the increase in Chinese aggression on the border, including India's abrogation of Article 370 altering Ladakh's status, improved US-India relations, and warming ties between India and Taiwan. China, as the militarily stronger power, aims to assert its dominance. Furthermore, China tends to exhibit "risk-taking behavior" at the border during domestic issues to divert attention, such as criticisms of its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While China seeks to separate boundary disputes from economic ties, India insists on a return to the pre-conflict status quo before normalizing relations. India retaliated by banning fifty-nine popular Chinese apps like PUBG, TikTok, and Shein. Additionally, India strives to reduce its dependence on China through the "atmanirbharta" (self-reliance) initiative. Indian officials have also called for discouraging Chinese

investments to demonstrate India's economic influence, even if it lacks military strength. The standoff prompted India to foster stronger relationships with countries like Australia, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, France, and the United Kingdom. In response, China has bolstered its ties with India's rival, Pakistan. India's rising geopolitical prominence carries regional and global implications. The nation's growing relevance is evident in its strengthening partnership with the United States, with both countries viewing themselves as pillars of a free and open Indo-Pacific. This elevated strategic importance is reflected in various new defense partnerships, many initiated by the US, with Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III characterizing them as closer than ever. Regionally, India's influence is expanding, particularly in its relationship with Japan, with increased joint military exercises and deepening security cooperation. Nonetheless, India's heightened geopolitical leverage could potentially escalate tensions in Asia rather than promote stability, a concern for the international community. The pursuit of "free and open Indo-Pacific" goals, championed by those seeking India's support, may face unintended consequences.

4. Military Standoff and Clashes

The ongoing military standoff between India and China has now entered its fourth year, with no signs of a resolution in sight. Despite numerous discussions between high-ranking ministers and military commanders from both sides, the dispute, which has brought their relations to their lowest point in over six decades, remains unresolved. In a concerning incident in December of the previous year, troops from both nations were involved in a scuffle in the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Notably, this region is thousands of kilometers away from Ladakh in the western Himalayan region, where the deadly clashes in 2020 initially triggered the current standoff. Recent developments have added complexity to the situation, with China renaming 11 places in Arunachal Pradesh in Chinese, referring to the region as South Tibet. This marks the third instance in the past six years where China has assigned new names to geographical features in the area. India has rejected this move, while China's foreign ministry spokesperson defended it, claiming that naming places within the territory falls under China's sovereignty.

India, in response to China's increasing presence along the border, has been actively developing both military and civilian infrastructure in its border regions. A noteworthy project involves the construction of a high-altitude tunnel through the mountains in Arunachal Pradesh, facilitating troop movements to the border areas. Additionally, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah announced a \$570 million program aimed at the development of nearly 3,000 border villages in the northeast, during a visit to Arunachal Pradesh. On December 9, 2022, a significant clash occurred along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the contested boundary stretching approximately 2,100 miles between northern India and China. Fortunately, firearms were not used, and there were no reported fatalities. However, both Indian and Chinese forces sustained injuries. This skirmish was the most severe since the summer of 2020 when deadly clashes in the Galwan Valley resulted in the most significant border escalation in over four decades. Following the 2020 clashes, India and China engaged in 17 rounds of military talks but have been unable to reach an agreement for disengagement across crucial areas of the disputed border. After the recent incident, Chinese and Indian military commanders convened once again to mitigate the risk of further escalation.

Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh asserted that the incident began when Chinese troops crossed the LAC in the Tawang sector, aiming to unilaterally alter the status quo. Chinese sources contested this

characterization but claimed that the border situation was "under control". The LAC, slightly longer than the U.S.-Mexico border, traverses extremely remote and mountainous terrain. Tawang lies in the LAC's "eastern sector," bordering the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, while the major clashes of 2020 occurred nearly 1,000 miles to the northwest in the Galwan Valley. China benefits from the relatively flat Tibetan plateau on its side of the LAC and has constructed a modern transit network to expedite troop movements across various border sectors. Defending the LAC poses formidable and extensive military challenges for India.

5. Border Dispute Challenges and Bilateral Relations

India and China, despite engaging in numerous diplomatic initiatives to resolve their longstanding border disputes, have faced persistent challenges. India's attempts to find political and legal solutions have encountered limited success, marked by an inadequate understanding and enforcement of international law. China's stance on the matter, coupled with its interpretation of treaty laws, has contributed to the lack of significant progress. Despite a series of bilateral agreements and protocols aimed at addressing the border dispute, such as those concerning peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and military confidence-building measures, the conflict remains unresolved. The inherent difficulties in addressing territorial disputes through diplomatic means and the questionable effectiveness of treaties in dealing with complex realities continue to cast a shadow on the prospect of a swift resolution.

The impact of the border disputes extends beyond the territorial realm, influencing various aspects of the bilateral relationship between India and China. Despite witnessing significant economic growth and becoming each other's major trading partners, incidents like the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 have strained trade relations. The call for boycotting Chinese goods in India following the incident underscored the tensions. However, trade and investment remain integral components of their relationship. Additionally, both nations, with a rich history of cultural and economic ties, have established cultural exchange programs to promote people-to-people interactions and enhance mutual understanding. While the border disputes have had a profound impact on the broader bilateral relationship, ongoing dialogues at various levels reflect a commitment to addressing political, economic, cultural, and regional issues.

6. Mediation Dynamics in India-China Border Disputes

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established with the primary objective of ensuring security, stability, and fostering trade, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation throughout the expansive Eurasian region. Grounded in the principles of a just polycentric world order and adherence to international law, the organization emphasizes mutual respect and expressly disavows forming alliances or directing actions against sovereign entities. While facilitating close contacts between India and China within its framework, the SCO's role in mediating the protracted border dispute between these two member countries has proven to be limited. Despite actively pursuing dialogue, exchanges, and cooperation, the organization primarily focuses on broader objectives such as maintaining peace, establishing partnerships, protecting national sovereignty, and advocating for the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The India-China border disputes have garnered attention from various third-party nations and international organizations seeking to play a mediating role. Notably, the involvement of external actors has encountered caution from China, which emphasizes the necessity of resolving the issue through bilateral negotiations and

expresses reservations about third-party intervention. This sentiment is underscored by Beijing's Chargé d'affaires ad interim in New Delhi, who highlights that third-party involvement may not be conducive to resolving the intricate border dispute. Despite the prospects of external mediation offering potential benefits, such as providing a neutral platform for dialogue and offering alternative perspectives, the challenges posed by the sensitivity and complexity of the disputes, coupled with historical preferences for bilateral negotiations, make achieving a mutually acceptable resolution a formidable task.

The dynamics of third-party involvement in mediating the India-China border disputes present a multifaceted issue with divergent perspectives. While external mediation holds the potential to offer diplomatic solutions and alternative perspectives, its efficacy hinges on the willingness of both parties to engage in dialogue and the specific approach taken by the mediators. The challenges inherent in navigating territorial claims, historical contexts, and geopolitical considerations further underscore the intricate nature of external mediation in this longstanding conflict.

7. Infrastructure Developments in Border Region

Infrastructure development along the India-China border region has played a significant role in shaping disputes and tensions between the two countries. Three years after the violent clash in Galwan, both India and China have been actively engaged in infrastructure development efforts, which has implications for their ongoing border disputes and relations.

China's Infrastructure Efforts

1. **Pangong Tso Bridge:** China is constructing a bridge across Pangong Tso, connecting the north and south banks of the lake.
2. **Road Connectivity:** Large-scale construction, including road connectivity to Shandong village, has been observed on the Chinese side.
3. **Tunnel Construction:** A 22 km-long tunnel is being built along the G-0177 expressway, linking to the vital G-216 highway in Tibet.

India's Infrastructure Projects:

1. **Pangong Tso Road:** India is building a black-topped road on the north bank of Pangong Tso, towards Finger 4.
2. **Border Roads Organization (BRO) Projects:** BRO is nearing completion of key infrastructure projects, including the Sela, Nechipu, and Sela-Chhabrela tunnels, improving all-weather connectivity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
3. **Alternate Axis Road:** Construction work on an alternate axis to the critical Darbuk-Skyok-Daulat Beg Oldie Road is advancing through the Saser La.
4. **India-China Border Roads (ICBR):** India initiated the ICBR initiative, which includes three phases aimed at improving mobility for Indian forces and enhancing border area connectivity.
5. **Vibrant Villages Programme:** A Centrally sponsored scheme has been introduced to develop villages on the border with China, enhancing infrastructure and quality of life in identified border villages.

Implications of Infrastructure Development Projects:

Positive Aspects:

1. **Defence Capability:** Enhanced border infrastructure strengthens India's defence capabilities, making it easier to patrol and secure the border.
2. **Economic Benefits:** Improved connectivity benefits local communities, boosts regional development, and generates economic opportunities.
3. **Strategic Position:** The improved infrastructure allows India to maintain a stronger strategic position in the region, potentially deterring aggressive moves from China.

Negative Aspects:

1. **Tensions and Disputes:** Infrastructure developments may contribute to ongoing border disputes and heighten tensions between India and China.
2. **Mutual Concerns:** Both India and China express concerns about each other's improved connectivity and defence capabilities in the border region.
3. **Perception and Negotiations:** The perception of assertiveness by either country could influence bilateral negotiations and overall relations.

Pangong Tso Lake and Border Dispute:

- Pangong Tso is a high-altitude saline water lake with unique characteristics, including changing colours.
- The lake has "fingers," which are mountain spurs that protrude into the water.
- India and China have differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) around Pangong Tso.
- India claims control up to Finger 4, while China claims territory up to Finger 2.
- The north bank, where the fingers are located, has been a hotspot for clashes and tensions between the two countries.

Infrastructure development along the India-China border region is a double-edged sword. While it enhances defense capabilities and regional development, it also raises concerns and contributes to ongoing disputes and tensions between the two countries, particularly in areas like Pangong Tso where territorial claims differ. These infrastructure projects have implications for the broader India-China relationship and the security dynamics in the region.

8. Conflict Resolution Strategies

Resolving the India-China border disputes, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), is a complex and sensitive issue. Several strategies and solutions can be considered to address this long-standing problem:

1. **Bilateral Talks and Diplomacy:**

Continued diplomatic negotiations between India and China are crucial. These talks should be sustained at various levels, including at the highest political levels, to facilitate dialogue and trust-building.

2. **Boundary Demarcation:**

Both countries should engage in serious discussions to demarcate the boundary. Clarifying and mapping the border could help reduce future tensions. The "3-Step Process" proposed by the Special Representatives of India and China is one approach to resolve the boundary issue.

1. Confidence-Building Measures:

Implement confidence-building measures to reduce tensions along the border. This can include regular military-to-military dialogues, hotlines between military commanders, and measures to prevent accidental confrontations.

2. Border Management Protocols:

Develop and strictly adhere to border management protocols that detail how troops should behave during face-offs and define no-patrol zones. Effective protocols can reduce the risk of clashes.

3. International Mediation:

Explore the possibility of international mediation, with the consent of both India and China. A neutral third party could assist in facilitating talks and finding common ground.

4. Economic Cooperation:

Enhance economic ties and cooperation on regional development projects. Mutual economic interests can incentivize both nations to maintain peaceful relations.

5. People-to-People Exchange:

Promote people-to-people exchange programs, cultural exchanges, and educational initiatives. These can foster greater understanding and goodwill between the citizens of both countries.

6. Incorporate Environmental Cooperation:

Collaborate on environmental conservation and address common concerns like climate change, which can create a shared interest and build diplomatic bridges.

7. Track Two Diplomacy:

Engage in "Track Two" diplomacy, involving non-governmental actors, think tanks, and experts to provide alternative perspectives and ideas for resolving the border disputes.

Resolving the India-China border disputes will require time, patience, and a commitment from both sides to find a peaceful and equitable solution. While the strategies mentioned above offer potential paths towards resolution, the ultimate success will depend on the willingness of both nations to engage in open and constructive dialogue.

Conclusion

The ongoing border dispute between India and China, rooted in a poorly defined Line of Actual Control (LAC), reflects a complex geopolitical scenario with historical, territorial, and strategic dimensions. The 2020 deadly clash in the Galwan Valley marked a significant escalation, leading to heightened tensions and military standoffs. Both nations are actively developing infrastructure along the border, contributing to a strategic competition. The implications extend beyond territorial disputes, impacting economic ties, regional geopolitics, and global relationships. Efforts for de-escalation and resolution through bilateral talks face challenges, and the involvement of external actors has been limited. The development of military capabilities and infrastructure in the border region adds a layer of complexity, presenting both opportunities and risks. Resolving this longstanding issue requires sustained diplomatic efforts, confidence-building measures, and a commitment to finding common ground, considering the broader implications for regional and global stability.

References

1. Amrita Jash India–China Boundary Dispute: Progress on Disengagement, but De-escalation Remains Far-fetched IAI Commentary, Issue 22I48, 2022
2. China-India Border Escalations: A Triangular Explanation. The diplomat. July 05, 2023 <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/china-india-border-escalations-a-triangular-explanation/>
3. ALEKSANDRA GADZALA TIRZIU - Tensions escalate: India and China’s militarization of the border. August 08, 2023 <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-india-border-2/>.
4. Md Sajjad Hosain - Journal of South Asian Studies - J. S. Asian Stud. 08 (03) 2020. 113-119 EScience Press.
5. Sandeep Kumar - India’s geopolitical rise in context: Regional implications. - Atlantic Council Blog <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/indias-geopolitical-rise-in-context-regional-implications/>.
6. Amrasha Singh - The China-India Dispute and its Geopolitical Implications. - The Yale Review of International Studies, January 2021 <http://yris.yira.org/comments/4677>.
7. VISHNU GOPINATH - The History of India-China Stand-Offs at the Border: Everything You Need to Know – The Quint (published on 14 Dec 2022 <https://www.thequint.com/explainers/india-china-troops-clash-tawang-border-dispute-galwan-arunachal-pradesh>).
8. Sameer P. Lalwani, Ph.D.; Daniel Markey, Ph.D.; Vikram J. Singh - Another Clash on the India-China Border Underscores Risks of Militarization – United States Institute of Peace Journal December 20, 2022 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/another-clash-india-china-border-underscores-risks-militarization>.
9. Anjana Pasricha - India China Military Standoff Enters Fourth Year Without Sign of Thaw. - VOA News (published on May 16, 2023) <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-china-military-standoff-enters-fourth-year-without-sign-of-thaw/7095154.html>.
10. Dinakar Peri - India, China ramps up infra on north bank of Pangong Tso lake - The Hindu (published on July 02, 2023) <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/both-china-india-ramp-up-infrastructure-on-north-bank-of-pangong-tso/article67034490.ece>
11. China Power Project, March 23, 2022 - “How is China Expanding its Infrastructure to Project Power Along its Western Borders?” <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-tibet-xinjiang-border-india-military-airport-heliport/>.
12. John Swartz - Tracking India’s Infrastructure Development Near the LAC, Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper, Issue No. 417, October 2023 <https://www.orfonline.org/research/tracking-indias-infrastructure-development-near-the-lac/>
13. Amitai Etzioni - China and India: A Lesson in Conflict Resolution - The Diplomat (published on September 01, 2017) <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/china-and-india-a-lesson-in-conflict-resolution/>
14. Kanti Bajpai - Is there a way out of the troubled India-China relationship? Frontline, The Hindu (published on February 09, 2023) <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/is-there-a-way-out-of-the-troubled-india-china-relationship/article66471168.ece>