



**Islamabad  
Policy Institute**  
*Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development*

# The Himalayan Face-off

FAISAL AHMED

5<sup>th</sup> Floor Ali Plaza, Jinnah Avenue,  
Blue Area, Islamabad.  
Email: [info@pipk.org](mailto:info@pipk.org)  
Tel No: 051-8444830  
P.O.Box 3393  
GPO Islamabad



# **The Himalayan Face-off**

**FAISAL AHMED**

**5 June 2020**

**Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan**

## The Himalayan Face-off

*By Faisal Ahmed\**

Tensions between India and China are back on the world's longest unsettled border. From the first week of May 2020, India and Chinese border troops have engaged in physical brawls along the disputed border, first near Pangong Lake in Ladakh and then days later in Sikkim, nearly 800 miles away.<sup>1</sup> The two sides were earlier involved in border confrontation in Doklam crisis of 2017.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Pangong Lake experienced a skirmish in 2013. India-China border disputes, in most instances, are resolved without resorting to the use of force. In the past, such incidents were resolved through 'banner drills', i.e., defender digs in and displays signs in other's side language that they are trespassing and calls on them to vacate. This practice has, however, not been held this time. As the current crisis enters the fifth week, both sides have reinforced their positions in the contested zones, and the Chinese side has reportedly crossed its previous claim line; constructed new posts, and dug-ins. This explainer would look into what exactly is the on-going border crisis? What broader challenges this episode signal for Asia's two largest countries? How it impacts the local situation in Ladakh and by extension Kashmir?

### **Complex Relationship:**

China-India relationship is a complex one. Territorial disputes, economy, and broader geostrategic competition govern the relationship. Competing claims on territory in Aksai China and Arunachal Pradesh continue to complicate talks for resolving the border issues. Even the 2000-mile-long Line of Actual Control (LAC) that separates the two countries is contested at various places, creating hotspots for a collision. Overall, China claims that India occupies around 34000 square miles of territory in Arunachal Pradesh. Meanwhile, India has laid claim to more than 14,000 square miles of territory in Aksai Chin, along the eastern side of Ladakh. Over twenty rounds of talks have taken place during the past three decades, yet all of them have remained inconclusive.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/05/16/the-chinese-and-indian-armies-settle-a-clash-by-fisticuffs>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/what-is-the-doklam-issue-all-about/article22536937.ece>

Meanwhile, on the economic side, bilateral trade has continued to expand over the years. In 2019, two-way trade crossed \$90 billion as China became India's second-largest trading partner.<sup>3</sup> In this, India runs a trade deficit of more than \$55 billion, gradually, making trade a contentious issue between two neighbors. India largely exports raw materials and imports manufactured goods from China. At the same time, New Delhi has attempted to restrict investment and expansion of Chinese technology companies in China, placing several business deals under review.<sup>4</sup> Yet, for stable relationship economic ties are critical.

These aspects have been complicated by growing competition between Beijing and New Delhi in South Asia and beyond. India remains suspicious of deepening Pakistan-China economic and security cooperation. In recent years, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) particularly, has been the focus of Indian opposition to Pak-China cooperation as the corridor traverses through what India claims to be the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan. Consequently, India has staunchly opposed China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Conversely, from Beijing's perspective, India's hosting of government in exile of Tibet and allowing Dalai Lama to be based in India, is a source of major mistrust. Similarly, India's expanding relationship with the U.S. has also raised eyebrows in Beijing. On the other hand, New Delhi remains distrustful of Beijing's growing political and economic ties with smaller states of South Asia, a region India considers its sphere of influence. This competition has manifested itself at the global stage. Indian repeatedly made efforts, like seeking a permanent seat on the UN Security Council; and acquiring legitimacy for its nuclear status through membership of Nuclear Suppliers Group, which has time and again been torpedoed by China, thus dashing Indian hopes to secure a status of great power.

### **On-going Border Standoff:**

On May 5, Chinese and Indian troops clashed at Pangong Lake in Ladakh. Media reporting suggests that skirmish happened when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers objected to Indian patrols in those areas. At first, the Indian military termed it 'temporary and short-duration face-offs'. These clashes often trigger due to different perceptions of the ground position of LAC dividing two sides. Days later, on May 9, in Naku La region near Tibet, troops clashed once again, throwing stones at each other, after Chinese soldiers apparently attempted to force Indian troops to move back from the territory they were patrolling.

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://ddnews.gov.in/business/india-china-bilateral-trade%C2%A0continue%C2%A0make-steady-growth>

<sup>4</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/28/india-china-fdi-restrictions-coronavirus/>

These recent skirmishes are taking place at three places: the confluence of the Galwan and Shyok rivers; the northern bank of Pangong Lake, and the Hot Springs areas.

The Indian press is reporting that PLA soldiers have crossed into the disputed territory, over to what was thought to be under Indian control, at several points, reportedly encroaching up to 3-4 km. Several reports claim that Chinese troops have destroyed Indian posts, bridges, and dug in their tents and trenches, with more reinforcements coming in, indicating they are here for a long haul. Some other reports, notably by Ajai Shukla, a retired Indian army officer and now a journalist, has claimed that at least three PLA brigades –comprising few thousand troops– are involved.<sup>5</sup> India may want to suggest this as a Chinese invasion, but in all probability majority of these troops are in the rear, on the Chinese side, as a supporting force to those on the frontlines.

While China's defence spending is far-ahead of India, the local balance of forces is quite even in Ladakh region, due to punishing terrain. Both sides have built-up airstrips, brought in more tanks, and increased the number of troops in recent years.<sup>6,7</sup> This makes a limited conventional engagement a non-viable option for both sides. Moreover, the expected military conflict will also be constrained by the weather. Harsh winter in the Himalayan highlands makes resupplying current forces prohibitive. Summer, hence, is considered ideal time by both sides to fortify existing posts and infrastructure and undertake new road construction work.

### **What's Different this time:**

Stand-offs on the disputed border are not new and hence, not unusual. Since boundary remains unsettled and unmarked at places along the LAC, skirmishes are common between patrolling troops. Three distinct features make an on-going standoff different from earlier ones: first, the scale of forces involved. In the past, stand-offs would remain localised without reinforcements being called in. This time, both sides have dispatched additional troops to support those on the frontlines. Second, these encounters have twice turned into fistfights between Chinese and Indian troops. This is new. In Doklam, there was physical brawl but not at the scale witnessed this time. Finally, the Chinese ingress across its claim-line in the Galwan Valley

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://ajaiashukla.blogspot.com/2020/05/a-new-and-worrying-chapter-ladakh.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1190083.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/eye-on-china-army-conducts-exercise-at-ladakh-iaf-re-opens-airstrip-in-arunachal-for-planes/articleshow/71188503.cms>

region i.e., the territory which China considers not to be disputed.<sup>8</sup> During the 1962 war, Chinese forces had overrun the Galwan river valley and later vacated it, thus, handing it back to India. This time, however, Chinese state media has boldly termed the ‘Galwan Valley region is Chinese territory’.<sup>9</sup>

### **Possible explanations for the current crisis:**

After years of relative peace on the China-India border region, unarmed military incidents are becoming a new normal. The current standoff is the most serious crisis to affect India – China bilateral relationship since the Doklam incident in the summer of 2017. After the Doklam crisis, leaders of the two countries President Xi Jinping of China and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India held two informal summits where they attempted to defuse tensions and reduce mutual mistrust. After Wuhan Summit in April 2018, both sides issued strategic guidance to their respective military commands for resolving border issues without increasing tensions. These high-level summits have, however, not made substantial progress in resolving lingering border disputes and other irritants in the China-India relationship. Failure to improve bilateral relations and address strategic mistrust has led to recurring crises. Yet, three explanations emerge for the current crisis.

### **Road Construction:**

China may have been irked by enhanced Indian military infrastructure and road construction on its side of the Ladakh region. On the Chinese side of LAC, PLA patrols are vehicle-based due to better roads, while Indian troops are mostly on foot. Therefore, New Delhi has focused on building new roads and improving existing infrastructure to send patrols to the furthestmost point allowing troops to crisscross harsh terrain with ease, and not allow Chinese troops ‘free run in the area’<sup>10</sup>. The standoff in 2017 commenced when Indian troops physically barred the Chinese road construction team in a disputed territory claimed by Bhutan, a close friend of India.

This time again the crisis has apparently been sparked by construction of a new road by the Indian side, aiming to reach an airstrip at India’s northernmost border post. India’s new road construction activity is taking place in the direct vicinity of disputed regions, making China more worried. The road which traverses along the Shyok river to the west of Chinese posts in Galwan Valley enables India to move forces quickly laterally across the contested boundary in Ladakh. Chinese state media have blamed the Indian side for the

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://ajaishukla.blogspot.com/2020/05/after-changing-galwan-claim-line-thrice.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188681.shtml>

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/nitingokhale/status/1262636082639888384?s=20>

skirmishes alleging New Delhi constructed ‘illegal defense facilities across the border into Chinese territory’ in the Galwan Valley region.<sup>11</sup> This will give Indian troops a better ability to patrol along the LAC, and also increase chances of future stand-offs, but it doesn’t explain the reasons behind the fistfights and Chinese ingress beyond its previously held position.

#### **Another border-standoff with local dynamics:**

A second explanation of the on-going stand-off is that it is just another face-off between local patrolling parties at the unmarked border, where local commanders are engaged in one-upmanship to gain local tactical advantage. Local PLA and Indian army commanders could be operating out of their operational considerations. In pursuing tactical advantages they are ignoring the potential broader political and strategic consequences of their actions. For instance, Indian officials, serving and retired, have described recent events as ‘usual’ border tensions and term fist-fights as ‘nothing new’.<sup>12</sup> They ascribe it to snow-melts in late spring, and the onset of summer, when two sides increase their patrolling along LAC, and face-offs usually take place. A former head of Indo-Tibetan Border Police – Indian paramilitary force patrolling the border with China– has described such Chinese intrusions as usual ‘summer activity’ that has been taking place for decades.<sup>13</sup> Also, while appearing to be unconvincing, the statement of Indian Army Chief that ‘it is just a matter of chance’<sup>14</sup> that two face-offs happened in matters of days while 800 miles apart, could allude to local dynamics and normal business. But it doesn’t explain why both sides sent reinforcements to the hotspot.

#### **Annexation of Occupied Kashmir and the on-going stand-off:**

In early August 2019, the Indian government made constitutional and legal changes to alter the status of the disputed state of Jammu & Kashmir by abrogating Article 370 and Article 35-A, which had been governing Kashmir’s relationship with Indian Union. In doing so, New Delhi, divided J&K into two territories to administer them directly as Union Territories. In this, India separated Buddhist-dominant Ladakh from the rest of Kashmir, giving more powers to the central government. On Ladakh, China has a competing claim, and at that time, China had strongly opposed the Indian announcement. Beijing had warned India not to make ‘any move that may further complicate the boundary question’.<sup>15</sup> Again when India put into effect these moves through administrative changes such as appointing new Lieutenant

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188681.shtml>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-pandemic-and-china-are-strengthening-us-india-relations-for-now-65840/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/undemarcated-boundaries-lead-india-china-border-clashes/1841950>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/law-and-order/coas-narvane-clears-air-over-recent-indo-china-standoff-attributes-it.html>

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/t1686549.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1686549.shtml)

Governor for Leh, Beijing reminded New Delhi that it was “challenging China's sovereign rights and interests by unilaterally revising domestic law and administrative division”.<sup>16</sup> New Delhi, however, ignored Chinese demarches. These developments took place in Autumn and Winter last year.

With the arrival of summer in 2020, Beijing responded on the ground by asserting its claims of sovereign rights in the border region of Ladakh. China has historically and consistently opposed unilateral changes to the status quo. Beijing prefers the maintenance of status-quo while border disputes are being negotiated. Negotiations take place with the understanding that no side is making unilateral changes on the ground. When one side attempts to unilaterally change the status quo, it induces a high degree of mistrust in the negotiations and consequently can trigger crises as being experienced at the moment. This plausibly explains the ingress by Chinese forces beyond their claimed line to indicate that Beijing doesn't accept the unilateral change in status-quo by New Delhi. These reinforcements show that Beijing is willing to dig-in heels, if necessary.

For China, the Ladakh region is important because of its pre-dominantly Buddhist region, and its boundaries are contested by India, Pakistan, and China. It is in Leh district of Ladakh where Dalai Lama is based with support from the Indian government. Leh is predominantly a Buddhist city. Kargil, second district of Ladakh, borders Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region and is predominantly a Muslim majority district. Thus, in any future settlement of the Kashmir dispute, the Ladakh region, as a whole, occupies a crucial place for both Pakistan and China.

### **Conclusion:**

Beijing and New Delhi have stated that they are determined to resolve on-going border tensions through diplomatic and military channels. For its part, China has declared that the situation on the border is ‘stable and controllable’. Meanwhile, India is also prioritising resolution through diplomatic means. On the ground, however, both sides are fortifying their positions. It appears for short term (6-8 weeks) stand-off will continue. And then both sides will quietly die-engage. Chinese and Indian military commanders are scheduled to meet on June 6 and it is expected that the two would work a way out of the current situation.

Pakistan has cautiously supported the easing of India – China border tensions. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Aisha Farooqui at the weekly media briefing on June 4, 2020 said: “We hope that the issue will be resolved in line with agreed understandings and established mechanisms to maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas”.

---

<sup>16</sup> [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)



Beijing through this face-off has made the point that it doesn't recognise India's unilateral actions in Ladakh. Should India persist in its actions and not revert to pre-August 5 status of Ladakh, then, it should also prepare for more such crises. This on-going crisis has critical implications for the Kashmir region as a whole. Pakistan, the third stakeholder, in Kashmir is cautiously following the unfolding stand-off. For Islamabad, a crucial takeaway is: Diplomatic means to register protests over changes in status-quo have limitations. It is through such use of force and ingress that unilateral moves to change status-quo are challenged.

*\*Faisal Ahmed is senior researcher at IPI.*