# GEO-POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHINA-INDIA STANDOFF AT LADAKH

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‘Study the past if you would define the future’, guided the wise Confucius centuries ago. The current situation of China-India standoff in Ladakh thus compels the policymakers and political analysts to delve deep into key dynamics of the issue that has strategic implications.

In a military standoff with China in Ladakh region’s Galwan Valley, India has lost its face and between twenty to forty military men. The crisis in Ladakh gave India a moment of pause, shading the prospects of propping it up as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region and a counterweight to China.

The crisis also shored up the extra-regional risks associated to a full-fledged war between the two. Even so, crises offer opportunities that must not be wasted. The 24 percent of world’s population inhabiting South Asia which is endowed with abundant natural and human resources should not be held hostage to the Indian reticence to peacefully resolve the territorial disputes with its neighbours. The region can prosper and become a model for growth if irredentist claims are settled and expansionist designs are eschewed.

Galwan Valley is located on the Chinese side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western section of the China-India frontier, which has been under Chinese patrolling for years. China contends that despite their representations and protests, India was building roads, bridges and other infrastructure in the Valley since April this year.

The Chinese were compelled to respond once the Indian troops crossed the LAC on May 6 and obstructed the Chinese patrols. After several parleys, India agreed to withdraw its troops and demolish the facilities that were constructed.

In the June 6 bilateral meeting both sides agreed to de-escalate the crisis and India agreed to withdraw personnel from Galwan Valley and dismantle its facilities, as requested by the Chinese side.

However, nine days later, Indian troops again crossed the LAC and attacked the Chinese troops that went to clarify the situation. Consequently, fierce fight ensued in which India lost at least 20 men and scores were injured.

Indian stance on the crisis swivelled like a pendulum between blaming China for crossing to Ladakh to completely denying that Indian-claimed territory was violated. Indian experts and veteran soldiers argued that Chinese military had crossed the frontiers at five points along LAC and one across the international border some 2,000 kilometres to the East.

As claimed, the Chinese army entered Ladakh on April 19 in Galwan, Depsang, Chushul, Pangong Tso, Chumar and Demchok. By May 9, roughly a five kilometres long strip was taken over up to Shyok River and Northern fringes of Pangong Lake. This exposed Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi main supply route to Ladakh.

After the tide receded, the Indian government allowed ‘complete freedom of action’ to the troops deployed along the LAC for using firearms, mainly due to domestic pressures and to appease the military and gain public approval.

The decision to use firearms, once again a unilateral one, is being seen as a violation of the 1996 and 2005 China-India bilateral agreements and may turn the faceoff into a larger conflict.

**China and India’s conflicting regional goals**

Seemingly, India inherited colonial legacy to gain territories and amass wealth and the country still seeks Lebensraum – the so-called ‘breathing space’ – for Hinduism beyond its burgeoning landmass. Such revisionism is a recipe for disaster, especially once two of its six geographically contiguous neighbours are nuclear powers and key regional players.

Besides addressing the hegemonic intentions of its southern neighbour, experts believe that Beijing is either creating a territorial buffer to Xinjiang-Tibet Highway against India and / or is seeking to dominate the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi main supply route.

**History of the Galwan Valley skirmishes**

China and India have a non-demarcated border and the disputed territory is the primary source for seven decades of tenuous relationship. From Indian vantage point it is a 3,488 kilometres contested front, whereas Chinese see it as 2,000 kilometres stretch of inhospitable but strategic space at stake.

The Ladakh sector is a 700 kilometres long frontier that stretches between Karakoram Ranges and Himachal Pradesh. In November 1962, China and India fought.

Before Ladakh, China-India last clashed in September 1967. There was a month-long standoff in Sumdorong Chu in 1986-87. In November 2010, India objected to China’s issuing of separate visas to travellers from Indian-Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJ&K). New Delhi dropped all references to ‘One China’ policy as a response.

In April 2013, there was a major Sino-Indian military faceoff on the Depsang plateau. There was a skirmish in Chumar in September 2014. In May 2017, India boycotted China’s Belt and Road Summit in Beijing and strongly criticised the initiative. Between June and August 2017, Indian and Chinese militaries were in a tense standoff on Doklam Plateau bordering Bhutan.

**History of peace overtures between China and India**

In April 1976, China and India restored full diplomatic ties and in September 1993, both signed an agreement to manage tensions along their border. In November 1996, further confidence-building measures were signed on managing border disputes.

Indian Prime Minister’s visit to Beijing in June 2003 led to further warming of ties. After a gap of forty-four years, China and India reopened Nathu La Pass in July 2006.

Beijing and New Delhi cooperated closely during global climate talks in December 2009 in Copenhagen. In April 2018, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi met at Wuhan and agreed to reduce tensions.

There have been Sino-Indian agreements in place to avert conflict over territories. These include the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement, 1996 confidence building measures in similar vein, 2005 agreement on rules of engagement between border patrol, 2012 agreement on consultations and cooperation and the Border Cooperation Agreement in 2013. These agreements are not carved into stone and there reportedly are no common maps of LAC.

**Significance of the Ladakh conflict for the region**

Regardless of what triggered the current Ladakh conflict, the actions and ensuing responses have strategic implications for the region and the international efforts for peace and stability. The Indian unilateral decision to change the status of IOJ&K and Ladakh on August 5, 2019 affected both Pakistani and Chinese security.

Inter alia measures to tighten the grip over Kashmir during Covid-19’s lockdowns, India followed up on that momentous decision of August 5 and began encroachments in Ladakh, ostensibly tripping the Chinese threshold and consequently inviting a swift and measured response.

In the recent crisis, besides putting things right, Beijing has tested the limits of how far it can go against India and its partners who plan contain China or foray into its geographical buffers.

In this crisis, China has actually achieved a precise surgical strike, unlike the phantom claims that India made in 2016 against Pakistan. Thereafter, China has allowed India a diplomatic face-saving without ceding an inch of territory.

**Internationalising the conflict for arms build-up**

There is also a possibility that India could have deliberately created this crisis to curry more favours from the United States and the West to build its military muscle and gain greater access to high-end military technologies complaining that the country is still under-equipped to play a pivotal role in containing China.

Likewise, as recent reports show, India has approached even Russia to equip its military to deal with China. In providing military assistance and technology transfers to India, Russia does not seek to contain China. Rather Moscow is exploiting the economic opportunity in New Delhi as against competing with Beijing, which is a strategic partner for foreseeable future.

The global response to Sino-Indian impasse is also worth examining. Against the backdrop of ­­President Trump’s immediate offer to ‘help’ the two parties resolve their tensions and the earlier offer to ‘mediate and arbitrate’, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticised the Chinese army for ‘escalating’ the border issue. He expressed serious concern in his virtual address on Europe and China Challenge on June 19, during the 2020 Copenhagen Democracy Summit.

However, Russia has largely maintained neutrality in the conflict and welcomed all steps at de-escalating the crisis at LAC. Konstantin Kosachev, the Chair of Russia’s Federation Council on Foreign Affairs commented, ‘We understand the sovereignty of India, we understand the sovereignty of China. I really believe Russia should not interfere in these kinds of disputes…. Our mission is to be an honest broker to contribute to a dialogue and to prevent and avoid any solutions connected with the use of military force’.

**Building India as a counter-weight to in the Indian Ocean**

The dispute also illustrates the stakes of competition in the Asia Pacific region and India is likely to increase its involvement in the Quad and Quad-plus alliances. The Quad comprises the U.S., Australia, Japan and India to pushback against China’s rise in Asia Pacific.

The Quad-plus is its nascent offshoot that envisages including states like South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand in the alliance. India is likely to strengthen strategic relationships coupled with the one with the U.S. A Western view holds that through this conflict, China has delivered India to the U.S. However, some Indian pragmatic experts consider that India has deep commercial interests even with China and the shift will not be as dramatic as expected in the West.

The crisis in Galwan Valley has driven a wedge in veteran Indian military leadership, the government and the opposition parties. Majority is stupefied by the government and military’s inaction and consider it a defeat. An expert echoed this sentiment on Twitter, ‘In one stroke, China seems to have done a Kargil and Balakot to India’.

In a clear contrast to this popular view in India, Prime Minister Modi played it down by asserting, ‘No one entered our territory, not an inch of land was lost’. Bewildered opposition exclaimed, ‘Is Modi saying that China crossed into China? If nothing happened, why then the de-escalation mission?’ Premier Modi’s inaction is in stark contrast to his masculine policy that won him a second term in office last year.

The pushback received in Galwan Valley shows that India’s political sloganeering to fight a two-front war against China and Pakistan is to clear the military operations litmus test.

**Effect of the tensions on bilateral trade**

Politics among two states by far affects their socio-cultural and economic propensities. Thus, having burgeoning people-to-people relations and trade worth USD 84.4 billion, the Indian and Chinese interests overlap in these domains.

This necessitates rational choices particularly by the lower riparian state that also faces mammoth problems involving domestic development and human rights.

The Indian spheres remain full of all sorts of commentaries, criticism and information on the current standoff while the Chinese side stays put and more observant of the global avenues of cooperation, technology and innovative solutions for the pandemic stricken domestic socio-economic landscape.

Long Xingchun, a senior research fellow of the Academy of Regional and Global Governance in Beijing Foreign Studies University, observes the Indian campaign to boycott Chinese products and plans of increasing trade barriers as ‘undoubtedly suicide paths for India’s economic development’, also because the ‘two countries are not in the same heavyweight class’.

India, in his view, has ‘sabotaged’ the economic cooperation with China, which ‘must be built on the foundation of a benign relationship’. It seems that India ‘needs to devise rational economic strategies based on the comprehensive assessment of its own capacity to avoid following a self-destructive path’, Xingchun believes.

It will, therefore, be an uphill task for the Indian government to keep wrangling with its top trading partner and for its military to address asymmetries in capabilities. The Indian response to the impasse also raises a bigger question – is the West placing bets on the right horse to contain rising China and its Eurasian partners? A closer look at investments in New Delhi since 2005 shows that the returns are yet to come.

All in all, the present dispositions of cooperation and coexistence in a globalized world are too lucrative to be ceded to unilaterally structured power struggles of a single state – these have already affected South Asia to be among the least developed and diplomatically organized regions across the globe.

It is therefore pertinent for such actors to tread responsibly, fulfil the obligation of safeguarding peace, security and stability in the region and shun differences for a greater benefit of our peoples and future generations.