# RECENT INDIA-CHINA BORDER TENSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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The recent China-India tensions in Ladakh form the latest episode in a long-standing border dispute predicated on divergent interpretations by India and China of boundary demarcation that date back to early 1950s. These conflicting interpretations have their origins in the suspect, and largely arbitrary manner, in which the British demarcated the Himalayan boundaries of their empire in India with China.

The first focal point of Sino-Indian dispute is the region of Aksai Chin, administered by China as part of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region but claimed by India to be a part of the Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

The second focal point is the so-called 1914 McMahon Line, which according to India, demarcates the Sino-Indian border in eastern Himalayas. The territory in dispute here is largely the state of Arunachal Pradesh of the Indian Union. Given its suspect legality and the surreptitious process that gave rise to it, China has never recognized the Line as a legitimate boundary between the two countries, and has, therefore, continued to claim Arunachal Pradesh as Chinese territory.

The dispute gave rise to a war in 1962 and armed clashes in 1967 but thereafter the dispute was managed more or less peacefully. The provisional line of demarcation has been observed ever since as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The situation on the ground was granted legal recognition as the result of the 1993 and 1996 Sino-Indian agreements that committed the two countries to the maintenance of peace along the LAC as well as peaceful resolution of the dispute.

However, peaceful management has not precluded occasional flare-up of tensions like the ones witnessed in 2013 Daulat Beg Oldi (Ladakh) standoff, the 2017 Doklam stand-off, and the latest series of skirmishes in eastern Ladakh. Recent tensions in eastern Ladakh, like the ones before it, have followed a typical pattern of one side constructing roads or other defense-related infrastructure in a disputed area that leads to the obstruction of the works by the other side, followed by unarmed confrontations, and ultimately culminating in negotiations and peaceful end of tensions. Why these tensions occur from time to time is something that must be pondered. In fact, it is not difficult to assign them a cause.

Since the very beginning of the dispute between India and China, global powers have tried to contain and frustrate China utilizing India, amongst other things, as the tool of this containment and frustration. Although, the momentum and focus of China’s march to position of a global power has not been arrested or even distracted by such attempts, yet India remains a geopolitical pivot of choice for China’s great-power rivals to needle China from time to time. Despite China’s repeated admonitions to India to not allow its relationship with China to be held hostage to its own detriment by such geopolitical manipulation, India’s great-power pretensions, aggravated by its own strategic vulnerabilities, have turned it into a perfect geostrategic putty in the skillful hands of other great powers.

In the days of the Cold War, it was the now-defunct Soviet Union that exploited India’s insecurities and great-power pretensions in its rift with China. Now, it is the United States that is adroitly using the attractive prospect, to India, of a strategic partnership to embolden it into confronting China during the penultimate stage of its marathon process of becoming what it calls the “champion nation” of the world, that is, a nation unrivalled in economic strength, military power, political leadership, and cultural influence. Called offshore balancing, the US strategy consists in preventing the rise of China as the leading country of the world by pitting its regional competitor or competitors against it.

Anything that strengthens China is, therefore, a risk for its competitors, and, by the same token, anything that undermines it is an asset. For people and nations alike, friends are a guarantee of security in good and bad times alike. China’s relations with its friends naturally assume a foreboding aspect for its rivals. For this reason, these relations generate no end of anxiety for India.

China-Pakistan relations are a case in point. The overall potential and the ongoing diversification of this relationship is a nightmare for India as well as a cause of deep concern for any country that considers China its strategic competitor. The recent round of Sino-Indian tensions, starting with the Chinese discovery of Indian attempts to build roads in the disputed territory in eastern Ladakh, may, therefore, have arisen in part out of India’s psychotic fears regarding the successful development of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The fact that CPEC is coming into being next door causes consternation in New Delhi. This dread spells trouble for Pakistan.

It will not be a bootless inquisition to regard Indian provocations in eastern Ladakh as consistent with its expansionist policy that led it in August 2019 to the abrogation of the special status of the Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

The fact that domestic development and economic growth have remained far from satisfactory curtail Pakistan’s options in dealing decisively with the Indian misconduct. In the absence of decisional autonomy provided by abundant financial resources, dealing decisively with India is a tall order. The alternative is to stand tall which Pakistan does unfailingly. This situation calls for exceptionally innovative strategic thinking on the part of Pakistan for dealing successfully with its rivals. A holistic approach to security, as the Chinese have been able to formulate, will be particularly helpful in this regard. Pakistan should also consider the implications of the future settlement of the border dispute between India and China, even if the likelihood of such an eventuality is slender right now and may remain so for some time to come owing to the trust deficit between them but it is not out of the question since both China and India have expressed commitment to the peaceful resolution of their border dispute.

There might also be another reason for the recent flare-up. As part of the efforts of China’s competitors to show it as the bête noire of the international system, provoking tensions in Ladakh may have been part of the plan to discredit China as a destabilizing force particularly at a time when the US and other western countries are trying to hold it responsible for the initial spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Recent tensions in Ladakh may well have been a sub-plot aimed at reinforcing perceptions about China being a power that wants to subvert the international rules-based order by not playing ball. However, China, rather than trying to disrupt the international order, is in fact fast attaining to the position of preeminence therein, with major investments in the viability and the preservation of the global order. On the contrary, China’s competitors are suffering from the fear of being upstaged and seem to be frantically multiplying points of contention in their attempts to balance China.

However, the magnitude of China’s peaceful development has so far continued to neutralize such provocations. The fact that India and China have agreed to resolve the recent breakout of tensions peacefully means that China has prevailed once again. But it does not mean that since China has prevailed, things are also hunky-dory for Pakistan. They are far from normal. Occasional tensions with China may be India’s strategy of massing forces piecemeal all the way to where it can catch Pakistan unawares.

For Pakistan, such tensions never augur well to begin with, because there is always a possibility that in the wake of non-realization of objectives on the LAC, India may seek to save face through some irresponsible step against Pakistan that may have serious consequences for national security and regional stability. It is not unimaginable that India, suffering from chronic inferiority complex with respect to China, will not someday vent its pent-up frustration at Pakistan which it perceives to be a weaker, because smaller, country.

India’s propensity to forget that the battle is not always to the strong makes it a particularly serious risk. After all, the so-called post-1971 myth of Indian conventional invincibility vis-à-vis Pakistan may only be the figment of strategic imagination. Nevertheless, embarrassment anywhere in the region may force it to pick trouble with Pakistan simply because of the latter’s consistent resistance to India’s dangerously burlesque aspirations for regional harmony. But a bully never forgives you for calling his bluff and keeps coming at you till he is floored.

Second, India’s actions, no matter how non-threatening they may seem at first blush, always tend to have anti-Pakistan and anti-Chinese dimensions. Pakistan, therefore, needs to be forever on the guard, maintain a firm and robust defense posture, willing to utilize fluid situations to its benefit proactively. It has admirably done the former but so far has desisted from doing the latter. In any case, Pakistan should act toward India’s actions along LAC as we would respond to a break-in the house down the same street where we live. We always become more alert and beef up the security of our own house.

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