



## ACB ISSUE BRIEF

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### **Galwan Incident: Larger Implications for Sino-India Relations**

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India has long-standing border disputes with the northern neighbour China. The rivalry between two nuclear-armed countries which are both regional powers is also seen as a global flashpoint.

The recent attack with stones and clubs by the Chinese Army at the border in the Galwan Valley in the Ladakh region of India has once again highlighted the tensions. The latest set of incidents occurred on the 15 June 2020. A similar attack had occurred earlier on 5 May 2020 first near Pangong lake in Ladakh in north India, and again five days later in Sikkim in north eastern India<sup>1</sup>.

There are varying versions of the events from a purely land warfare perspective. However, these events while significant in themselves are symptomatic of much deeper issues between the two countries. China and India are often seen as rivals in South Asia and in the larger Indo-Pacific. Given India's position as an emerging middle power which is a member of the G20 and a candidate state for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council this competition is also spilling over on to the world stage.

#### **Land Border Dispute**

Colonial-era agreements and legacies create differences about the exact land border that was never well-defined. There are conflicting definitions of where the LAC lies<sup>2</sup>. There are twenty points of divergence across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). More than twenty rounds of negotiations have failed to yield any result<sup>3</sup>. The Chinese define the LAC as on Nov. 7, 1959 and the Indians define it as on Sept. 8, 1962. The supposed occupation of area along the two LAC was the cause of the 1962 war. Both countries maintain they have been operating within their side of the LAC per these contending definitions<sup>4</sup>. Given the ambiguity and possibility of faceoffs there has been a mutually agreed protocol since 1993 to solve such situations at the operational level. However, the PLA often honours these more in the breach than in the observance<sup>5</sup>.

The ostensible proximate cause of the last two months of strife is China's objecting to the Indian construction of border roads close to the LAC. The two-hundred and fifty-five kilometre Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road, aims at narrowing the existing infrastructure gap with China along the LAC and provides India with all-weather access to its airfield near the Karakoram Pass<sup>6</sup>. While these constructions have been going for the past two years, only recently has it entered terrain claimed by the Chinese. On the other hand, the Indian Army found a Chinese patrol in an area claimed by India<sup>7</sup>.

One issue that China faces is the proximity of the Indian road construction to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor<sup>8</sup>. Another event that concerns China is the bifurcation of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir and making Ladakh a Union Territory. China perceives this as a precursor to recapture of Aksai Chin, which they have held since 1962<sup>9</sup>.

However, as is want in these situations there is no clarity on the actual position of the two armies. Even if the actual position of the two armies in purely geographic terms is established, the mutual claims of border violations remains a matter of perception. China believes that there can be a political and not a technical settlement<sup>10</sup>. This incident cannot be said to be merely local and reflects a larger game plan of China.

## China's Issues

There are a variety of military and diplomatic issues facing China that need addressing in order to understand the motivations for this attack.

**Territory Capture:** China has a long history of capturing territory in disputed zones. It has been seen both in land and maritime boundaries. This particularly applies to unoccupied and claimed/disputed territory, which is normally patrolled but not occupied. This is a tactic it has practised with India, Bhutan and in the South China Sea area for several decades<sup>11</sup>. Maj Gen Rajiv Narayanan points out that coercive diplomacy may work with weaker countries but not with India<sup>12</sup>.

**Counter-Containment:** China has long adopted a position of counter-containment to target countries that are seen to be encircling it in an alliance<sup>13</sup>. In the instant case India is seen as aligning with the USA and Japan. Thus, China believes that by keeping pressure on India on the border there would be a bargaining chip to force India to stay neutral vis-à-vis the USA. In the absence of strategic friendship with India, China seeks tactical gains<sup>14</sup>. China sees India as the main challenger to its leadership of a unipolar Asia. A successful democratic state is seen as a threat to the autocratic system in China<sup>15</sup>. Conversely, India perceives China as encircling India by the *Maritime Silk Route* and *Belt and Road Initiative*. A further issue is the closeness of China to Pakistan<sup>16</sup>.

**Covid-19 Pandemic:** The Covid-19 pandemic and the concealing of its contagion has created hostility against China. There has also been a reaction to the propagation of escalatory responses through Wolf Warriors<sup>17</sup>. This there is aggressive posturing in maritime and land domains. Whereas China is explicably eager for geo-political space the expansionist strategy is backfiring<sup>18</sup>.

## India's Response and Challenges

India faces several issues in responding to and tackling the situation. Further, there are internal issues that may need addressing before India builds the capacity to respond effectively.

**Military Response:** This incident has caused a deep sense of outrage in the Indian strategic community. Cmdre R.S. Vasani has described China as a barbaric nation<sup>19</sup>. There is a view that India needs to give a strong response. A similar view is expressed by Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia<sup>20</sup>. This endorses the view expressed in the document titled **Non-Alignment 2.0**<sup>21</sup>. One view is that the Modi government for the past several years has been practising *appeasement* of China, akin to the policy of Chamberlain towards Hitler in the 1930s<sup>22</sup>.

India has in the past launched retaliatory attacks on Pakistan in response to border violations especially using non-state actors. The air strikes in Balakot, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on 26 February 2019 are often cited as example of a strong response<sup>23</sup>. Constructivists like Dr Ian Hall attribute the strong response of India to the Hindutva ideology of the ruling BJP<sup>24</sup>. However, he also concedes that China is being belligerent and India needs to respond strongly<sup>25</sup>.

The Realist view is that the balance of power being in India's favour it is able to take action against Pakistan. However, as can be seen no such drastic action has been taken against China. The worst case scenario of this standoff is seen as a potential nuclear war<sup>26</sup>.

**Diplomatic Negotiations:** There are suggestions for a status quo on the border. Further, given that neither side wants war, a negotiated settlement is considered the best outcome<sup>27</sup>. Negotiations by three-star level military commanders has not yielded results. There are suggestions of diplomatic negotiations. Little can really be expected from these dialogues. It can be said that the days of *tactical detente* are over<sup>28</sup>. One suggestion is for mediation by Russia in this impasse with China<sup>29</sup>. This has however been politely declined by that country<sup>30</sup>.

**Economic Aspect:** There is a strong sentiment in India for economic boycott of China<sup>31</sup>. Using economic boycott as a political tool is deep-rooted in the Indian political psyche, and was symbolic of the freedom struggle.

## India's Alliances

In the context of long-standing issues with a hostile nuclear armed neighbour, it becomes imperative to explore alliances.

**Strategic Autonomy:** A major recommendation of the document **Non-Alignment 2.0** is for India to maintain a position of Strategic Autonomy<sup>32</sup>. In the light of these recent events, one of authors of this document Lt Gen Prakash Menon, believes that China is seeking to disturb India's position of Strategic Autonomy in global affairs. Thus, India may be forced to seek alliances with like-minded countries<sup>33</sup>. This is perhaps akin to the 1971 treaty with the USSR<sup>34</sup>. This was concluded after the wars with China in 1962, and with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. The tensions with Pakistan and hostile neighbourhood drove India to seek Soviet support<sup>35</sup>. The 1962 War with China is seen as a watershed that moved Indian foreign policy from Idealism to Realism<sup>36</sup>.

The more China is seen as belligerent, India and other compatible countries will be forced to come together<sup>37</sup>. Even Constructivist scholars acknowledge the need for India to seek such alliances<sup>38</sup>. India currently effectively undertakes military diplomacy at the maritime domain<sup>39</sup>.

*China must mentally accept that India will never be in any camp but, depending on the context and issues at stake, it will sit in the same tent with nations having common interests. This should be India's gameplay.* (Lt Gen Dr Prakash Menon)<sup>40</sup>.

**Quad:** India has long been part of the Quad dialogue, along with USA, Japan, and Australia<sup>41</sup>. Chinese scholars view the entire concept of Indo-Pacific, especially the Quad, as being directed against China<sup>42</sup>. Given India's strategic autonomy it is not keen to part of the Quad<sup>43</sup>. It is another issue whether any of the member states will be keen to formalise the Quad especially at a military level. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has brought together several countries beyond the original Quad. These include Brazil, South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam. These too are potential partners of an expanded Quad Plus<sup>44</sup>.

In the immediate situation Quad member states have issued statements condemning China's actions. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned China as a rogue state and cited the recent attack on the world's largest democracy as an instance of this tendency<sup>45</sup>. Australian Maritime scholar Dr David Brewster has written that given the deterioration of Australia-China relationship, the connect with India becomes more important<sup>46</sup>. In this context, the historic Commonwealth connection becomes important<sup>47</sup>.

## Governance Challenges

In order to be effective vis-à-vis China, there are governance challenges that need addressing.

**Doctrinal Position:** India has not drafted a White Paper on Defence Strategy<sup>48</sup>. Military doctrines provide the best source of strategic thinking. India has undertaken the formulation of Military Doctrines since the first nuclear tests in 1998. In 2004, the Cold Start Doctrine of the Indian Army was released<sup>49</sup>. This was followed by a second doctrine in 2018<sup>50</sup>. The Indian Navy released the first doctrine in 2009. In 2007, Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy was released<sup>51</sup>. The first Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces was released in 2006. The Indian Air Force released a doctrine in 2012<sup>52</sup>. The second Joint Doctrine of the Armed Forces was released in 2017<sup>53</sup>. A second version of the Indian Maritime Doctrine was released in 2016<sup>54</sup>. In the same year a Maritime Strategy Paper was also released<sup>55</sup>. These provide the conceptual provide a for India's defence policy and strategy. All Doctrines too take an essentially Realist position.

The **Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces** states the need for deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and punitive destruction<sup>56</sup>. In the context of the current crisis in Ladakh, the Land Warfare Doctrine too is Realist in approach talking of deterrence and asymmetric warfare<sup>57</sup>.

**Governance Structures:** Effective negotiations eludes India due to poor integration both at the interservice level and in the civil-military domain. This is a long-standing issue in India<sup>58</sup>. There are multiple agencies involved in border security including the Indian Army, ITBP and other agencies. The Ministries of Defence, Home and External Affairs are all involved in policy making. Besides, there are the China Study Group, and Intelligence Agencies playing a role in China policy<sup>59</sup>. Given the recent creation of the Chief of Defence Staff position, it is not clear where this official features in the scheme of things. Also, there is the National Security Advisory Board. The Joint Doctrine has clear guidelines on resolving these issues. It is another matter of these are actually implemented by the political class and military.

## Conclusion

This incident in Galwan highlights a number of underlying issues facing India in terms of handling China. China is unable to act as a politically reliable and military responsible country. Another issue is the underlying unwillingness of the Chinese leadership to settle the issue conclusively. Chinese actions that are intended to pressurise India to not enter alliances are having the opposite effect. Moreover, they are unwilling to make peace with India.

India is effectively hovering between *appeasement* and *détente*. This situation can be treated as a *New Cold War* or *Cold War 2*. Some of the political, diplomatic and military positions taken by India during the Cold War may need to be replicated attuned to the current global scenario. Military Diplomacy akin to that in maritime sphere may be needed.

India also encounters internal challenges in tackling the challenge of China. There is for one high grandiloquence around the need for a strong military response. In this regard India faces internal issues that need to be addressed.

## Way Forward

In the given scenario the following recommendations are given as a way forward:

**Political Will:** The border issue with China has clearly crossed military issues at a purely operational level. It is now in the domain of political leadership to address it at their level. Ideally there could some kind of agreement on land border status quo.

**Quasi-Alliances:** As noted India is effectively being forced to seek allies. This may be either with several bilateral partners or else with a bloc especially the Quad. These may be military or even diplomatic and strategic but would ideally aim at counterbalancing of China. India has long experience of Non-Alignment under the Soviet umbrella and could adopt a similar policy of forming quasi-alliances. India would be in the same tent without joining any camp.

**Economic Response:** Clearly an immediate economic boycott of China does not seem feasible. However, disengagement from China should be a long-term objective. In order for this to be effective, capacity building in India, particularly developing domestic manufacturing capacity may be needed.

**Civil-Military Relations:** While the matter needs to be settled at a political level, there is need to involve the armed forces in any negotiations. Given India's poor track record of civil-military relations this will be an internal challenge that needs to be tackled. This will also involve coordination among various agencies. While rhetoric of military response or negotiation is all very well this needs to be guided by expert input.

**Indian Military Capacity:** Notwithstanding supportive comments it is not certain that any country may necessarily militarily support India. Hence, India would need to keep its own defences in order. Given the complexity of the issue there is a need to address it at a joint services level. Besides the Army, Air Force and Navy this would need to involve paramilitary bodies. Rhetoric of a strong response apart, there is a need to enhance military and diplomatic planning and implementation. Declared doctrines of the Army, Navy and Air Force and Joint Doctrine specify the principles that will guide the process.

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