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# India-China Border Tensions and U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

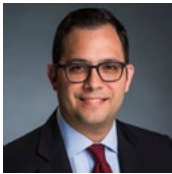
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## Executive Summary

India-China border intrusions and clashes have become more frequent and threaten to lead to all-out conflict between the two Asian giants. In recent years, China has upped the ante in its border disputes with India through infrastructure development, military deployments, capability enhancements, and periodic efforts to encroach into territory controlled by India. The first deadly border clash between the two countries in 45 years occurred on June 15, 2020, in the Galwan River Valley, where 20 Indian troops and at least four Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops were killed. More recently, on December 9, 2022, Chinese and Indian forces clashed along the disputed border in the mountains near Tawang in the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh after an estimated 300 Chinese PLA soldiers tried to cross the border.

While the Chinese and Indian militaries have since pulled back forces from the most contentious standoff sites where the 2020 buildup occurred and established temporary buffer zones, both sides retain high numbers of troops forward deployed along the disputed frontier, and there are several flashpoints that could erupt into another border crisis at any time. The most recent clash that took place near Tawang is a reminder that, even though recent attention has been focused on the Ladakh region, there are multiple trigger points along the 2,100-mile-long Line of Actual Control (LAC) that bear monitoring.<sup>1</sup> With both China and India enhancing infrastructure and introducing new and advanced weapons systems on their sides of the disputed border, combined with forward deployments and heightened lack of trust, the chances for continued standoffs that could erupt into local or even full-blown conflict remain high.

The increased prospect of India-China border hostility has implications for the United States and its Indo-Pacific strategy. Washington has a strategic interest in what happens between India and China—two nuclear-armed nations whose populations together will soon total 3 billion. As the United States considers the role that India will play in the Indo-Pacific and how to maximize U.S.-India cooperation to meet security challenges in the region, U.S. policymakers must closely monitor and be prepared to respond quickly to future India-China border crises.

Until recently, U.S. officials handling South Asia policy have focused the bulk of their conflict management resources and planning on preparing for a potential India-Pakistan conflict. However, they are shifting their attention to the growing potential for an India-China

military crisis and will benefit from additional resources as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy to address the China challenge more broadly.

For its part, India does not seek direct U.S. involvement in the India-China border dispute or any crisis that may arise there, but it is likely confident that it can count on the United States for some forms of support if requested. The United States responded to the 2020 border crisis by extending full diplomatic and material support for India. The United States provided information and intelligence and expedited delivery of equipment, including two MQ-9B surveillance drones and specialized gear for extreme cold weather conditions. The Biden administration in its October 2022 National Defense Strategy notes that it will support its allies and partners when they face “acute forms of gray zone coercion from the PRC’s campaigns to establish control over the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and disputed land borders such as with India,”<sup>2</sup> signaling that support for New Delhi in a potential fresh border crisis with Beijing would be forthcoming.

Indian officials believe China is trying to contain India by forcing it to divert more resources into defending simultaneously both its western border with Pakistan and eastern flank with China and by weakening its willingness and ability to challenge Chinese ambitions to dominate the region. Developments along the LAC in 2020 brought clarity to India’s strategic approach toward China, meaning India’s views of the China challenge are starting to converge with those of the United States.

Given the dangerous implications of another India-China border crisis, the United States must start implementing policies now both to prevent another border flare-up between New Delhi and Beijing and to

be prepared in the event another crisis erupts. To help deter and respond to further Chinese aggression along the border with India, the United States should:

- Elevate Indian territorial disputes with China on par with Beijing’s assertiveness against other U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and ensure this is reflected in all national security-related documents and speeches.
- Offer India the sophisticated military technology it requires to defend its borders and initiate coproduction and codevelopment of military equipment.
- Assist India in strengthening its maritime and naval capacity.
- Conduct joint intelligence reviews with India to align assessments of Chinese plans and intentions along the LAC and enhance coordination with Indian officials on contingency planning in the event of a future India-China conflict.
- Establish or support an official or unofficial organization charged with collating unclassified commercial satellite imagery on the position of PLA troops along the LAC and disseminate these images routinely for public consumption.
- Criticize Beijing’s efforts at land-grabbing in multilateral forums, including the U.N., Shangri-La Dialogue, G20, and East Asia Summit.
- Message Pakistan—and enlist help from Pakistan’s other important partners to convey similar points—about the need to stay neutral in the event of a potential future India-China border flare-up.
- Be prepared to extend full support to India, in the event of another border crisis or conflict.

## Introduction

India-China border friction has become a defining characteristic of the Indo-Pacific security environment in recent years. Border intrusions and clashes are becoming more frequent and threaten to lead to all-out conflict between the two Asian giants. The first deadly border clash between the two countries in 45 years occurred on June 15, 2020, in the Galwan River Valley in Ladakh, where 20 Indian troops and at least four Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces were killed. The clash followed a major Chinese military buildup in the spring of 2020, in which Beijing massed thousands of troops, tanks, and artillery guns at several points along the two countries' disputed border and set up new forward positions beyond the LAC in areas previously patrolled by India. More recently, on December 9, 2022, Chinese and Indian forces clashed along the disputed border in the mountains near Tawang in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh after an estimated 300 Chinese PLA soldiers tried to cross the border.

The increased prospect for India-China border hostility has implications for the United States and its Indo-Pacific strategy. Washington extended important assistance to India in 2020 following the Galwan border clash—including timely intelligence sharing as well as delivery of critical defense equipment and supplies on an expedited basis—and almost certainly would offer similar aid in the future. The United States' assistance paved the way for stronger U.S.-India bilateral relations. China's border aggression also marked an inflection point in India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy, leading New Delhi to become more receptive to cooperation both bilaterally and multilaterally among the Quad countries (the United States, Japan, India, and Australia).

India-China border conflict dynamics also are setting the course of India's maritime strategy. Increased Chinese hostility on the shared land border is motivating India to ensure it does not become vulnerable to expanding Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).<sup>3</sup> India is strengthening its naval and maritime capabilities and seeking greater cooperation with naval powers—like the United States, Japan, Australia, and France—that share its objective to check expanding Chinese naval power in the IOR. Some analysts, however, worry about resource constraints forcing India to choose between whether it will focus more on building capabilities for its army or its navy and speculate that New Delhi will defer expanding its maritime capabilities and shift attention toward the heightened threat along its land border.<sup>4</sup>

As the United States considers the role that India will play in the Indo-Pacific and how to maximize U.S.-India cooperation to meet security challenges in the region, U.S. policymakers must closely monitor and be prepared to respond quickly to future India-China border crises. Until recently, U.S. officials handling South Asia policy have focused the bulk of their conflict management resources and planning on preparing for a potential India-Pakistan conflict. However, they are beginning to shift attention to the growing potential for an India-China military crisis along the border, evidenced by the mention of the dispute in the National Defense Strategy (NDS) released in October 2022.<sup>5</sup>

India is preparing to deal with an increasingly aggressive China and will seek to avoid being reliant on any other power—namely the United States—when it comes to protecting its territorial sovereignty. Yet it is undeniable that U.S. policy on this issue matters, and if handled effectively, can help deter future Chinese incremental land grabs—or “salami slicing”—of India's borders.

## The increased prospect for India-China border hostility has implications for the United States and its Indo-Pacific strategy.

This paper provides a history of India-China border crises and standoffs since their 1962 war, providing strategic, political, and economic context to the status of the border situation and giving close attention to the current state of play in the wake of the 2020 clashes. It addresses the likely reasons behind the intensification of border tensions in recent years and examines the military balance on each side of the border, assessing India's and China's military strengths and weaknesses and explaining how India's other neighboring rival, Pakistan, factors into their strategic calculations. This paper looks at prospects for reducing border tensions in the near term and explores how the United States should respond in the event of another India-China border crisis. Finally, it assesses the implications of ongoing border friction between India and China for Washington's broader Indo-Pacific strategy and provides policy recommendations for dealing with these tensions and any potential future border conflict.

INDIA-CHINA DISPUTED BORDERS<sup>6</sup>

The India-China disputed border is referred to as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and consists of the western sector (union territory of Ladakh in India; Xinjiang and Tibet Autonomous Region of China); middle sector (the states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand in India; Tibet Autonomous Region in China); and the eastern sector (the state of Arunachal Pradesh in India; Tibet Autonomous Region in China). India accuses China of illegally occupying the Aksai Chin along its northern border in Ladakh, while China lays claim to India's state of Arunachal Pradesh. The most contentious areas of the disputed border are in the western and eastern sectors, where the two countries fought a war in 1962. (Joshua Fitt and LtCol Joseph Grimm/CNAS; Design: Melody Cook/CNAS)



### Synopsis of India-China Border Dispute

India and China went to war in 1962 after China launched simultaneous attacks against Indian positions in the eastern and western sectors of their disputed borders on October 20. Within a week, China gained control of land in both sectors that previously had been administered by India.<sup>7</sup> After New Delhi sought military aid from Washington, China declared a unilateral ceasefire on November 21. China then annexed the land it captured in the western sector, the Aksai Chin, while retreating from the area it had taken in the eastern sector—Tawang, located in what is now the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>8</sup> Beijing and New Delhi then agreed to a de facto boundary that emerged around a loosely agreed Line of Actual Control (LAC).<sup>9</sup> To this day, the LAC remains un-demarcated, with each country differing in its perception of precisely where it lies.

A contributing factor to the outbreak of the 1962 war and ongoing border disputes between India and China is India's role as home to around 100,000 exiled Tibetans. Following China's crackdown on the 1959 uprising in Tibet, the 14th Dalai Lama, along with tens of thousands of other Tibetans, fled China for India. A series of India-China border skirmishes followed. Tawang—the region that China invaded and briefly captured during the 1962 war—is the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama and holds special historical and cultural significance for Tibetan Buddhists.

The 1962 war only lasted a few weeks, but Beijing's significant defeat of New Delhi has had a lasting impact on the countries' relations and Indian perceptions of the strategic threat China poses. Since the 2020 border crisis, both sides have deployed more troops and capabilities, constructed more infrastructure, and continued to face each other down at multiple points along the border, setting the stage for future clashes.<sup>10</sup>

## Decades of Border Peace Break Down

**B**efore the 2020 border clash that killed Indian and Chinese troops, it is widely believed that the last loss of life in a clash over the disputed border was in 1975 in Arunachal Pradesh, which was not yet an Indian state and was claimed by China.<sup>11</sup> In this incident, India said Chinese troops ambushed an Indian patrol, killing four soldiers. New Delhi said the Chinese forces had crossed into Indian territory, while Beijing held that it acted in self-defense. The next major border crisis between India and China, known as the Sumdorong Chu standoff, took place from November 1986 to May 1987, when the two countries massed troops on each side of the border near Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. The border standoff coincided with India granting statehood to Arunachal Pradesh, which the Chinese viewed as a

provocation. Following the defusing of that crisis, both sides recognized the need to put confidence building measures in place to avoid future conflict.

For the next 25 years until 2013, the China-India border remained relatively peaceful as the two sides engaged in sporadic talks to reduce border tensions. During this period the two sides signed a series of accords that began with the “Agreement for the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC,” which was inked on September 7, 1993, and mandated notification of military exercises and provided a “framework for border security . . . until final determination is made regarding border demarcation.”<sup>12</sup> As a next step, China and India inked the 1996 “Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field.” This deal sought to rectify the 1993 agreement's ambiguous text governing military posture and place restrictions on military buildups by both parties.<sup>13</sup> The agreement's specifications guiding troop posture and armament restrictions was designed to prevent a full-scale war.<sup>14</sup>

### For 25 years until 2013, the China-India border remained relatively peaceful as the two sides engaged in sporadic talks to reduce border tensions.

The establishment of “special representatives”—national security advisor for India and vice foreign minister for China—in 2003 to upgrade and regularize border discussions led to the signing of two additional agreements in 2005, one that created protocols in the event of a face-off in disputed territory, and another that clarified the goals of boundary resolution and committed the two sides to not allowing the border question to impede the development of bilateral ties. Finally, the 2013 “Border Defense Cooperation Agreement” laid out several mechanisms for reducing misunderstanding and miscommunication between the two sides and prohibited each side from tailing the patrols of the other. It further provided steps for resolving disputes “in areas where there is no common understanding of the LAC.”<sup>15</sup> Both sides' objective with these series of border agreements was to preserve the status quo along the disputed border until a diplomatic settlement could be reached. For over two decades, from the late 1980s until the mid-2010s, India and China managed the boundary dispute and improved ties in other areas, including in trade and investment.



Even as military tensions along the border subsided, Beijing's rhetoric regarding their disputed frontiers, particularly over Arunachal Pradesh, began to heat up around 2006. This was likely due to several factors, including China's concerns over growing unrest in Tibet—which Beijing had invaded in 1950 and annexed in 1951— and India's strengthening ties to the United States, including the negotiation of a historic U.S.-India civil nuclear deal. In November 2006, China's ambassador to India referred to Arunachal Pradesh as part of China, and several Chinese commentators began to call Arunachal Pradesh "South Tibet."<sup>16</sup> In another sign that China was openly questioning Indian sovereignty over the state, in 2009 China opposed an Asian Development Bank loan, part of which was for a watershed project in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>17</sup> Chinese protests against Indian official visits to the Tawang district of the state was further evidence that the Chinese were toughening their position on the territorial dispute.<sup>18</sup> The Chinese likely were signaling India that its growing ties to the United States would come with a cost, including China stoking border friction and reviving its claims on what India considered its territory. Beijing's statements on Arunachal Pradesh also may have been a warning to India not to take advantage of Tibetan protests inside China.

As China hardened its position toward the border dispute, Indian academic circles questioned the ever-deepening U.S.-India relationship. An influential Indian think tank released a report in 2012 titled "Non-Alignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the 21st Century," which argued that India should "develop a diversified network of relations with several major powers to compel China to exercise restraint in its dealings with India, while simultaneously avoiding relationships that go beyond conveying a certain threat threshold in Chinese perceptions."<sup>19</sup> In line with this thinking, after the 2007 multilateral Malabar naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal stoked Chinese concerns that India was becoming part of a U.S.-led effort to contain China, New Delhi curtailed these types of multilateral naval exercises.

India-China border tensions resumed once again in 2013, perhaps in part due to Chinese President Xi Jinping's ascension to power in October 2012. In April 2013, Chinese troops camped for three weeks several miles inside Indian territory on the Dapsang Plains in the Ladakh region.<sup>20</sup> Following a series of diplomatic and military meetings between Indian and Chinese officials, both sides eventually removed their tents and pulled back their forces. Shortly thereafter,

however, several hundred PLA soldiers set up camp in Chumar in Ladakh and called on New Delhi to remove structures they claimed were bunkers. In the end the Indians dismantled the structures, and the PLA removed its tents in Chumar. The incidents marked the first time in two decades that the Chinese had conducted such border incursions, raising Indian concern about the potential threat of future conflict with China over their disputed borders.

The next border standoff occurred 18 months later in September 2014 during President Xi's visit to India for meetings with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had been elected to power in May of that year. On the same day the two leaders met in New Delhi, around 1,000 PLA soldiers intruded on Indian territory in Ladakh, carrying heavy equipment, ostensibly for constructing a road. India responded by dispatching 1,500 of its troops to the area. The standoff lasted for 20 days until the Chinese troops withdrew. It was unclear why the Chinese made the incursion while Xi was in India. There was Indian speculation that the PLA leadership had deliberately sought to undermine Xi's visit, but it also is possible the Chinese wanted to test Indian officials to see if they would overlook the border infringement in the interest of preserving positive optics around the visit.<sup>21</sup>

Yet another lengthy border standoff occurred in the summer of 2017 in the Bhutan-China-India tri-border area in Doklam. The standoff began in June 2017 after Beijing tried to construct a road in territory administered by Bhutan and overlooking the Siliguri Corridor, a thin piece of strategic territory linking India's seven northeastern states to the rest of the country. India feared the road project would have given Beijing a commanding military position in the area and quickly dispatched troops and bulldozers to stop the Chinese road construction.<sup>22</sup> A standoff between Chinese and Indian forces lasted until late August 2017, when both sides agreed to retreat to their status quo positions.

The breakdown in border peace between India and China over the past several years can be attributed to a multitude of factors, many of which have been mentioned already. The predominant cause, however, may be China's confidence in its own growing military and economic strength. Indian experts on China tend to view the 2008 global financial crisis as an inflection point that bolstered Chinese power and contributed to Beijing's increased assertiveness regarding its regional territorial and maritime claims.<sup>23</sup>

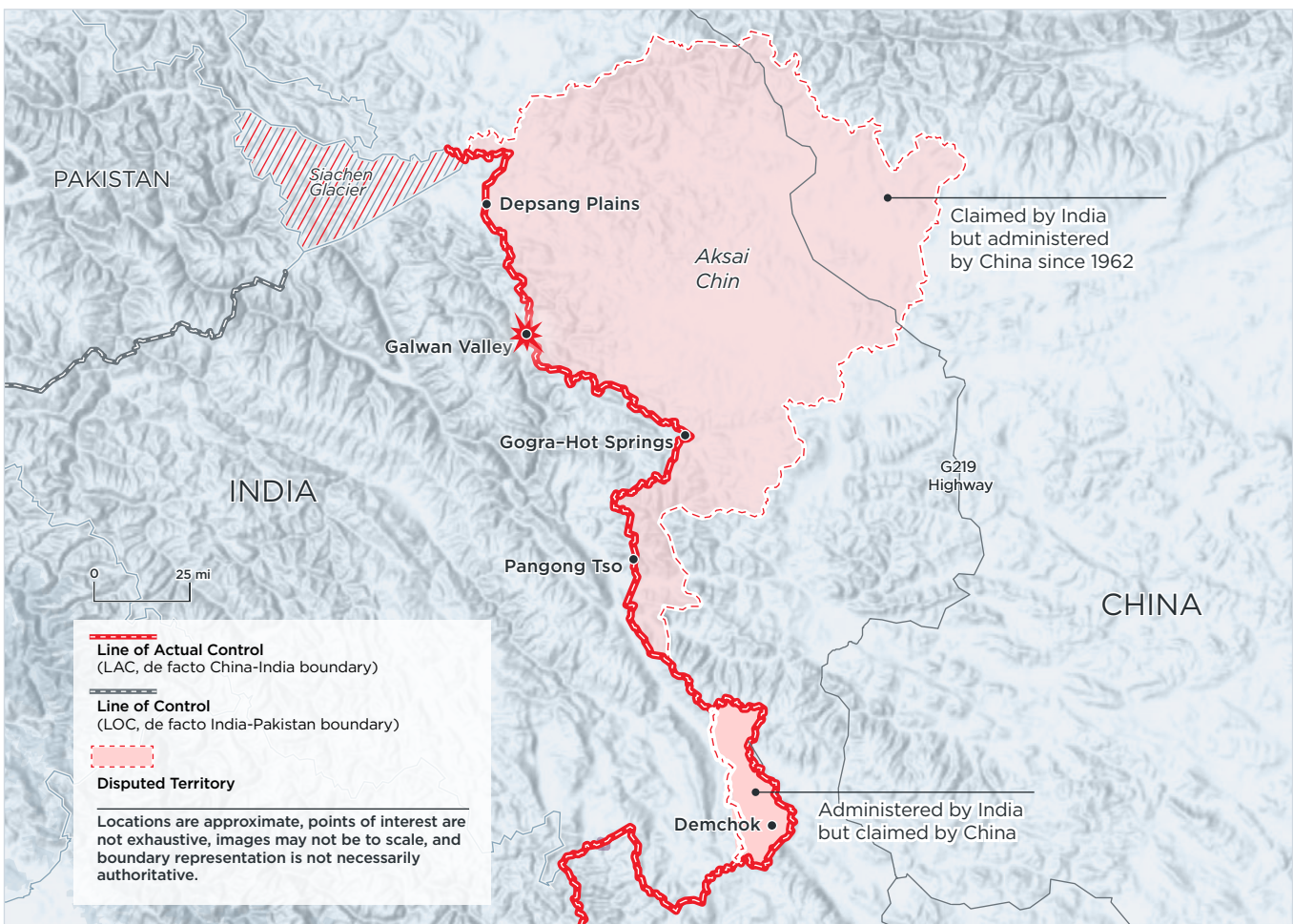
## Galwan Crisis Marks Watershed for India-China Relations

Even as periodic border friction was occurring between India and China, Prime Minister Modi focused on building trade and investment ties with China while publicly proposing to demarcate the border to resolve the border dispute. During Modi's visit to China in May 2015, for example, the two countries signed 24 agreements and nearly \$22 billion in business deals.<sup>24</sup> But Modi stopped short of joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global investment and infrastructure development plan. Prime Minister Modi and President Xi held informal summits in Wuhan, China, in April 2018 and again in Mallapuram, India, in October 2019, but no concrete agreements or initiatives were taken at

either meeting. India's interest in engaging in dual-track relations with China—building stronger economic and diplomatic ties while downplaying military tensions at the border—diminished with the 2020 Galwan border crisis.

In the spring of 2020, when most of the world was distracted by the coronavirus pandemic, China deployed 30,000 soldiers at five different points along the LAC, including on territory India had controlled, essentially blocking India's ability to patrol what it considered its territory.<sup>25</sup> In early May near Pangong Lake in the border's western sector, there was a physical altercation between Chinese and Indian troops that resulted in injuries on both sides, but no deaths. The clashes erupted when Chinese troops tried to prevent the Indian Army from conducting its traditional patrolling in the area.<sup>26</sup>

### LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL FLASHPOINTS IN THE WESTERN SECTOR<sup>27</sup>



In 2020, Indian and People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers faced off at numerous points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Ladakh region including at Depsang Plains, Demchok, Galwan Valley, Gogra-Hot Springs, and Pangong Tso. The first deadly border clash between China and India in 45 years occurred on June 15, 2020, in the Galwan Valley, where 20 Indian troops and at least four PLA troops were killed. Forces eventually disengaged at Galwan, Pangong Tso, and Gogra-Hot Springs, but standoffs remain at Depsang Plains and Demchok. (Joshua Fitt and LtCol Joseph Grimm/CNAS; Design: Melody Cook/CNAS)

By early June 2020, Indian and Chinese military leaders at the corps commander level agreed to pull back forces over a two-week period, beginning in the Galwan Valley.<sup>28</sup> However, on June 15, Indian forces observed that the Chinese side had failed to vacate an area from which they had earlier agreed. A hand-to-hand brawl broke out between the forces, with Chinese troops reportedly using stones, clubs, and sticks.<sup>29</sup> Twenty Indian troops and at least four PLA soldiers were killed, many from falling into a freezing river in the valley. It marked the first loss of life along the disputed border since 1975.

While a series of corps commander-level talks throughout the summer of 2020 facilitated disengagement in the Galwan area, China refused to back away from its newly held positions at Pangong Lake. In response to the Chinese intransigence, on August 29, 2020, Indian Army special units occupied the heights of the Kailash Range, south of Pangong Lake, where they overlooked the Chinese positions. The move demonstrated that India was prepared to take forward-leaning action on the border to defend its territorial claims and gained New Delhi a useful bargaining chip in its disengagement talks with China. On September 7, the PLA fired shots in the air to try to convince the Indian military to pull back from its newly held positions but to no avail. Soon both sides had deployed tanks facing the other at several points along the contested boundary.<sup>30</sup>

It was not until February 2021, after 10 rounds of corps commander-level talks, that China and India finally agreed to disengage forces at Pangong Lake. China's Defense Ministry announced that Chinese and Indian troops on the southern and northern shores of Pangong Lake began "synchronized and organized disengagement."<sup>31</sup> Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, on the other hand, emphasized that "there are still some outstanding issues left in the deployment and patrolling on the LAC" and that "we will focus on them in talks in the future."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, troop levels on both sides of the border remain at their highest level in decades.<sup>33</sup> Gen. M. M. Naravane, India's former chief of army staff, said he was concerned about China's large-scale buildup along the border and the fact that India had increased its own presence in response. China's troop presence at the border opposite Ladakh is around 60,000, up from about 15,000 in 2020, and India has sent a similar number of troops and advanced artillery to its side of the border in Ladakh.<sup>34</sup>

It took another 18 months for Beijing and New Delhi to make further progress in their border talks. At the 16th round of corps commander-level talks

in September 2022, they agreed to disengage from Gogra-Hot Springs, known as Patrol Point 15. The process involved five components, including "stopping of 'forward deployments'; return of troops of both sides to their respective areas; dismantling of 'all temporary structures and other allied infrastructure'; restoring 'landforms in the area' to pre-standoff positions by both sides; stopping of forward deployment in a 'phased, coordinated and verified manner', and ensuring structures are 'dismantled and mutually verified.'"<sup>35</sup>

Although the disengagement at Gogra-Hot Springs generally is deemed a success (and has been verified by commercial imagery), there is some Indian criticism that the Modi government allowed PLA forces to remain well within India.<sup>36</sup> A recently leaked Ladakh police report states that India has lost 26 of the 65 Patrolling Points in eastern Ladakh.<sup>37</sup> Indian herders also have complained that they no longer can graze their sheep in areas they could previously. However, Indian officials note that it is incorrect to say India has been disadvantaged by the disengagements and establishment of buffer zones at Gogra-Hot Springs. They argue that the buffer zones are small (one to two kilometers) and temporary and that India has not lost any territory.<sup>38</sup> Other Indian experts have noted that the establishment of buffer zones provides India breathing space and buys New Delhi time to fortify positions in the area.

India has been clear that the disengagement process is incomplete and that there remain two outstanding friction points along the LAC, where Chinese forces remain in forward positions that prevent India from patrolling areas it had previously, including in the Depsang Plain in the northern part of the LAC and Charding Ninglung Nullah in Demchok farther to the south. China retains ammunition depots, tanks, and artillery systems on its side of the border at the Depsang Plains area. Some have noted, however, that Chinese forward activities and patrolling interference at Depsang and Demchok pre-date the 2020 crisis.<sup>39</sup>

In an interview from November 2022, General Manoj Pande, the Indian Army chief, provided an overall assessment of the LAC: "If I have to describe in a single sentence, I would say the situation is stable but unpredictable," suggesting that anything can happen in spite of 16 rounds of border talks and demarcations. Pande continued: "As far as the PLA force level is concerned, there has been no significant reduction. While there were . . . brigades which had come for the purposes of collective training, with the onset of winters there are indications of them going back. But on the LAC itself, there is no reduction of strength."<sup>40</sup>

While China wants to move ahead with developing the broader bilateral relationship with India, setting aside the border crisis, New Delhi is tying normalization of overall relations to China's willingness to return to pre-May 2020 force positions along the LAC. Indian officials believe China is seeking to force India to accept a "new normal" along their disputed frontier that would prevent India from patrolling areas it had previously, meaning New Delhi essentially would be ceding control of territory it claims. India instead holds that there are three steps necessary for India-China bilateral relations to return to normal. The first step is disengagement of forces along the LAC, which remains incomplete, with the PLA continuing to hold positions it took in 2020 at Demchok and Depsang. These PLA forces continue to block India's traditional patrolling routes, and India insists Chinese forces must return to their original pre-May 2020 positions. The second step involves de-escalation near the border, which would include a broader phasing down of forces across the western sector to pre-2020 positions. During the de-escalation phase, it is likely India would agree to resume special representatives talks between India's national security advisor and China's vice foreign minister. The special representatives talks are aimed at resolving territorial disputes, rather than merely managing them, but they have been suspended since 2020. The third step would include the restoration of peace and tranquility along the border, but even then, it is unlikely the two sides can return to business as normal.<sup>41</sup>

Three years after the Chinese military buildup, and despite disengagement in some areas, Beijing has achieved a form of territorial expansion by enhancing its military capacity within the Aksai Chin, the region north of Ladakh that China annexed following the 1962 Sino-Indian War.<sup>42</sup> Small Chinese outposts along the border in 2020 were joined by temporary tent camps and eventually evolved into permanent bases with cold-weather shelters. In the Depsang Plains, before 2020, China maintained primarily an observational presence, whereas this area now contains infantry shelters and ammunition storage facilities, in addition to tanks and artillery systems. Even in areas where disengagement of forces has occurred, such as the Galwan Valley and Hot Springs, China has established large military bases attached to modern roads for easy resupply close to the border. China's expansion of air power facilities and logistics nodes is not only evident along the Aksai Chin border but across the Tibetan Plateau. China effectively has bolstered its power

projection along its disputed border with India, while India is now on the defensive to reassert its territorial claims and prevent further erosion of its position in the Ladakh region, even as it faces territorial threats from China in the eastern sector of their disputed borders in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

## China Makes Moves in Arunachal Pradesh

With international attention focused on border tensions in India's Ladakh region, China made a move against Indian positions in another part of the disputed border 2,000 miles southeast in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. On December 9, 2022, Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed in the mountains of the Tawang region after 300 PLA soldiers attempted to cross the disputed border.<sup>43</sup> The Indian Defense Minister claimed Chinese troops had crossed the LAC to seek to "unilaterally change the status quo."<sup>44</sup>

Tawang holds historical, cultural, and strategic importance and represents a major source of friction between India and China. Sandwiched between Tibet and Bhutan, with a population that adheres to Tibetan Buddhism, Tawang was the region through which the 14th Dalai Lama fled to India from China in 1959 after the PLA crushed a Tibetan uprising. China accused India of colluding with the United States and United Kingdom to facilitate the Dalai Lama's escape into India. Indeed, thousands of Tibetans have fled to India, making the country the host of the largest Tibetan diaspora in the world, numbering more than 100,000. China briefly controlled Tawang after it invaded India in 1962 and the district was the location of a deadly border clash between India and China in 1975.<sup>45</sup> China is intent on exerting control over the selection of the next Dalai Lama to ensure "Sinicization" of Tibetan Buddhism, which is another reason Tawang—the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama—is critical to China's overall effort to consolidate its grip on Tibet.<sup>46</sup>

The de facto border between India and China in this area is represented by the McMahon Line, which was agreed to by the Tibetan and colonial British authorities in India in 1914. India accepts the McMahon Line as the legal demarcation while China rejects it, holding that Tibet was not a sovereign state and therefore had no authority to negotiate the border. Following the annexation of Tibet by China in 1950, India took full control of Tawang and removed the local Tibetan administration.



## LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL FLASHPOINTS IN THE EASTERN SECTOR<sup>47</sup>



On December 9, 2022, Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed in the mountains of the Tawang region after 300 People's Liberation Army soldiers attempted to cross the disputed border. As the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, Tawang holds historical, cultural, and strategic importance and represents a major source of friction between India and China.<sup>48</sup> Another lengthy border standoff occurred in Doklam in the summer of 2017. The border face-off started after China attempted to build a road in the area that would have provided Beijing a commanding military position overlooking the Siliguri Corridor, a piece of territory connecting mainland India to its northeastern states. (Joshua Fitt and LtCol Joseph Grimm/CNAS; Design: Melody Cook/CNAS)

### Key Events in India-China Border Dispute from April 2020 to December 2022

#### April 2020

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) turns military exercises into an operational deployment of around 30,000 soldiers along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).<sup>49</sup>

#### Early May 2020

PLA soldiers cross multiple spots along the LAC—Gogra-Hot Springs, Galwan Valley, and Pangong Tso.<sup>50</sup>

#### May 5, 2020

After a violent confrontation between PLA and Indian patrols near Pangong Tso,<sup>51</sup> India counterdeploys two divisions by month's end to mirror PLA deployment.<sup>52</sup>

#### May 9, 2020

In a confrontation in Naku La area, Sikkim, four Indian and seven PLA soldiers were injured during the melee involving 150 soldiers.<sup>53</sup>

#### June 6, 2020

The first corps commander-level talks are held to discuss de-escalation plans along the LAC.<sup>54</sup>

#### June 15, 2020

Troops clash in the Galwan River Valley, leaving 20 Indian and at least 4 PLA soldiers dead.<sup>55</sup>

#### June 30, 2020

In a third round of talks, corps commanders agree to disengage troops at Patrolling Points 14, 15, and 17, running from the Galwan

Valley to the Gogra-Hot Springs area. The PLA pulls back hundreds of meters from territories claimed by India.<sup>56</sup>

#### August 29–30, 2020

Indian soldiers take control of heights along the Kailash Range on the southern bank of Pangong Tso. The Indian Army and PLA face off for the first time on the southern bank of Pangong Tso.<sup>57</sup>

#### February 21, 2021

India and China reach a disengagement agreement on Pangong Tso. Neither side will patrol the contested areas until a settlement is reached through future talks.<sup>58</sup>

#### July 13, 2021

PLA troops enter Demchok and protest a celebration of the Dalai Lama's birthday.<sup>59</sup>

#### July 26, 2021

Chinese "civilians" enter Indian area at Charding Nullah in the Demchok sector, set up tents, and refuse to leave.<sup>60</sup>

#### September 12, 2022

Indian and Chinese soldiers withdraw from the Gogra-Hot Springs area. An impasse remains in Demchok and Depsang.<sup>61</sup>

#### December 9, 2022

Troops clash in the Tawang Sector in India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh after 300 PLA soldiers attempt to cross the LAC. Soldiers from both sides sustain minor injuries in the face-off.<sup>62</sup>

#### December 20, 2022

In the 17th round of corps commander talks, the parties fail to reach an agreement to end the impasse at Demchok and Depsang.<sup>63</sup>

The December 2022 incident near Tawang is a reminder that China can cause problems for India at multiple points along the disputed border and that India must remain vigilant for Chinese probing and incursions across an expansive area of difficult and underdeveloped terrain. China's action near Tawang happened one week after the completion of the U.S.-India joint military exercises near the LAC in the Indian state of Uttarakhand and may be a signal to New Delhi that any joint U.S.-India action to counter Beijing will come at a price. Beijing also may be trying to dissuade India from following through on its construction of a major highway—the “Arunachal Pradesh Highway”—close to the India-Tibet-China-Myanmar border that will run as close as 12 miles to the India-China border in some areas. It also is possible that China was testing Indian defenses or trying to divert India's attention away from other areas of the border.

## The China-India Military Balance

**S**ince the deadly Galwan River Valley clash in June 2020, both China and India have deployed additional troops and military equipment to the LAC and have upgraded the infrastructure needed to deter aggression, bolster defenses, and improve the probability of conducting successful military operations against their opponent. Although the two nations have agreed to disengage to the new buffer zones at several key patrol points along the LAC, military buildup continues along the full length of the disputed border and across all sectors, as well as in unnegotiated regions such as Depsang Plains and Demchok in eastern Ladakh.

### Chinese Military Activities along the LAC

China continues to gain advantages in the military balance with India. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Beijing's defense budget reached an estimated \$207.3 billion compared to India's \$65.1 billion in 2021.<sup>64</sup> The PLA's significantly larger budget gives it more resources to build a larger and more technologically advanced force. In addition, China also appears to be making progress on the ambitious military reforms President Xi set into motion starting in late 2015, which ultimately aim to help turn the PLA into a modernized force by 2035 and a “world-class military” by mid-century, if not sooner.<sup>65</sup> The PLA's capabilities are advancing rapidly nearly across the board, from more numerous and capable platforms to cutting-edge technologies derived from Beijing's military-civil fusion plan and increasingly “informatized” and “intelligentized” forces, along with the C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers,

intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), space, electronic warfare, and logistics capabilities to enable them.<sup>66</sup>

One major change to China's military posture toward India was a result of Xi's PLA reform campaign, which included the establishment of the Western Theater Command (WTC) as one of five joint regional commands that replaced China's old system of dividing the country into military regions.<sup>67</sup> The WTC is responsible for defending China's border with India. Moreover, the PLA is working to improve its training and exercises to enhance readiness and build a cadre of capable combat leaders. To that end, WTC troops have participated in several exercises, including a massive set with Russian forces in August 2021.<sup>68</sup> Significantly, according to an Indian Ministry of Defense-funded think tank analysis in November 2022, the WTC is focused on becoming increasingly competent at conducting joint military operations at higher elevations and geographically complex regions.<sup>69</sup>

In recent years, Beijing also has increased its troop presence along the disputed border to challenge Indian movements. Nowadays, China maintains an estimated 60,000 troops along the LAC opposite the Ladakh region, even during harsh winter conditions.<sup>70</sup> Forces along the border also are bolstering integrated air and missile defense capabilities, including reported deployments of S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems (which India also purchased from Russia) at bases in Xinjiang and Tibet.<sup>71</sup> China also reportedly deployed H-6K long-range strategic bombers to the region in late 2021.<sup>72</sup> In the summer of 2022, Beijing reportedly had deployed long-range artillery and rocket systems, with a multiple-launch rocket system test at an altitude of over 17,000 feet in Xinjiang that potentially could target critical Indian bases across the border.<sup>73</sup>

China's ample military and economic resources enable the PLA to keep building infrastructure to support military operations on the border with India at a brisk pace. According to a comprehensive study in March 2022 of Chinese military logistics in the WTC, “China is currently undertaking a major expansion of its infrastructure that is enhancing its ability to project military power along its western frontier.”<sup>74</sup> The study further states:

Within its western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, China is constructing and upgrading dozens of airports and heliports—a large majority of which are military or dual-use facilities. China is supplementing its airpower

expansion with new roads, rail, and other infrastructure that are upgrading the PLA's logistics capabilities and enabling more rapid movement of troops, weaponry, and equipment.<sup>75</sup>

The report argues that these trends have intensified since the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan River Valley clash in 2020. In recent years, the Chinese also have widened airstrips and located radars along the border to improve PLA power projection capabilities across the border into India and enhance theater awareness.<sup>76</sup>

Beijing's new roads go through particularly sensitive regions, serving as military enablers for future joint operations. For example, as part of a large national infrastructure program, China is constructing the G695 highway, connecting Xinjiang and Tibet through the China-controlled Aksai Chin region, which would enhance its ability to deploy PLA troops to the LAC, especially along the disputed India-Tibet border. Once completed, G695 would become only the second major highway constructed in Aksai Chin since 1955.<sup>77</sup> In a November 2022 interview, General Pande stated that Chinese infrastructure development at the LAC was "going unabated." He further noted that "the G695 road or highway, running parallel to the LAC, which will give them the ability to not only move forces forward but also switch forces from one sector to another."<sup>78</sup> Separately, Beijing is building a bridge—its second—across disputed areas of Pangong Lake, with the intention of enhancing PLA deployments to the region.<sup>79</sup>

Finally, Beijing recently constructed several large structures along the LAC to house troops during winter. According to one Indian estimate, China's expanded facilities over the past two years may have boosted its troop accommodation capacity from 20,000 to 120,000 troops—all within 60 miles of the border.<sup>80</sup> Structures in the disputed Dopsang Plains appear to be "permanent, all-weather encampments" and no longer temporary.<sup>81</sup>

### Indian Military Activities along the LAC

India spends less than one-third of what China spends on its military each year, and around 70 percent of that limited budget is dedicated to fixed costs such as pensions, salaries, and force sustainment.<sup>84</sup> The scarcity of resources, environmental concerns, and interagency differences have often left long-standing plans to construct and modernize critical border infrastructure—like roads and tunnels—delayed or incomplete. The resource gap also extends to civilian infrastructure, which plays an important role in advancing or undermining the territorial claims of each side. While China has built and

### China's New Land Border Law

China's land border law, which was adopted in October 2021 and put into effect in January 2022, demonstrates China's increased resolve to protect its borders and settle any border disputes on its terms.<sup>82</sup> It emphasizes development of towns along the border and highlights the role of civilians in supporting PLA and People's Armed Police forces in defending the border, requiring local governments to provide resources to residents for information collection and organized action to defend the border.

The new border law simultaneously commits the state to developing border towns to improve local public services, infrastructure, and cross-border trade and tourism. While China likely had multiple motivations for implementing the border law—it shares a 13,500-mile-plus land border with 14 countries—its border dispute with India was certainly a major factor. Indian officials have noted that China's land border law, which will use civilian settlements to aid the legitimacy of its territorial claims, should be seen in the same light as Chinese construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea to strengthen its maritime claims.<sup>83</sup>

modernized remote villages near the Sino-Indian border (and now within the disputed territory between Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh), India has lagged in developing its border villages, leading residents to depart the regions in search of better living standards.<sup>85</sup> Recently, however, India has been trying to reverse this trend through its new "Vibrant Villages" campaign to build model villages on its side of the disputed border.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, much of India's force increases along the LAC since the 2020 clash have come from redeployments and force rebalancing. For example, in June 2021, India shifted approximately 50,000 troops to the LAC in Ladakh—20,000 of which were pulled from India's disputed western border with Pakistan.<sup>87</sup> The Indian Army has even deployed naval special forces and other units in the east previously deployed for counter-insurgency to Ladakh and repurposed other divisions and corps for operating along the LAC.<sup>88</sup> India also has boosted its defensive capabilities along the LAC by deploying drones for surveillance operations in eastern Ladakh and conducting airborne drills in the area.<sup>89</sup>

To meet the costs of sustaining the military presence along the border (as well as modernizing the Navy and Air Force and encouraging indigenous defense manufacturing), Prime Minister Modi's 2023–24 defense budget of \$72.6 billion marked an increase of about 13 percent above initial estimates of defense outlays for 2022–23 (the Indian financial year runs from April 1 through March 31).<sup>90</sup> The 2023–24 defense budget allocates \$22.6





Joint exercises such as Yudh Abhyas (which means “Training for War”) take place in high-altitude terrain and provide realistic training to improve the warfighting skills of U.S. and Indian Forces. In December 2022, the U.S. and Indian militaries completed the 18th edition of Yudh Abhyas, which was held in the mountains of India’s Uttarakhand state, just 60 miles from the LAC. (Benjamin Wilson/U.S. Army)



Joint exercises provide an opportunity for Indian and U.S. military forces to enhance infantry combat skills, including weapons tactics, in rugged, high-altitude environments, serving as a strategic deterrent to Chinese aggression along the LAC. (Benjamin Wilson/U.S. Army)

billion for new weapons purchases—including drones, munitions, missiles, satellites, air defense systems, combat helicopters, and fighter jets—and \$13.84 billion toward promoting Indian self-reliance and reducing the country’s dependence on defense imports.<sup>91</sup> To facilitate logistics for the Indian troops stationed along the LAC, the defense budget sets aside \$605 million for construction of border roads—a 43 percent increase over last’s years allocation for this purpose. Strong Indian economic growth—projected at a rate of 7 percent in 2022–23—helped India maintain a growing defense budget for 2023–24, but India will continue to lag behind China’s defense outlays for many years to come.<sup>92</sup>

The Modi government has sought to mitigate these limitations by reforming and modernizing the Indian military to increase jointness between different branches. Key to these efforts is the development of four theater commands that would enable different branches to combine resources and address threats along the borders with Pakistan and China.<sup>93</sup> Still, India needs to speed up modernization of its forces and employ the most sophisticated defense technologies as soon as possible if it hopes to successfully deter Chinese border aggression. This depends on the Indian government allocating more funding toward equipment acquisition and sustainment. While increasing India’s indigenous defense manufacturing capabilities is a worthy long-term goal, the

government can ill afford to ignore its immediate defense requirements, many of which can be filled only by foreign purchases.

India also has begun to accelerate infrastructure development along the border to improve its position. As of November 2022, New Delhi reportedly had narrowed the “infrastructure differential” with Beijing at the LAC to include “roads, tunnels, bridges, troop habitats, permanent defenses, helipads, and airfields.”<sup>94</sup> One particularly significant infrastructure project for New Delhi is the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi (DSDBO) road. DSDBO is approximately 160 miles and at one point comes within 20 miles of India’s Daulat Beg Oldi air force base.<sup>95</sup> Chinese analysts cite the construction of DSDBO as a reason for their country’s 2020 military actions along the LAC, claiming that it was India’s completion of this road that changed the status quo.<sup>96</sup>

Strengthening defense ties with the United States also is enhancing India’s force readiness and enabling India to procure more advanced capabilities to improve the military balance along the border. These include systems like Chinook helicopters for rapid troop transport and armed Predator drones for expanded intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.<sup>97</sup> The annual U.S.-India military exercise, Yudh Abhyas, which takes place in high-altitude terrain, also helps India retain its advantage over China in high-altitude



combat. In early December 2022, the U.S. and Indian militaries completed the 18th edition of Yudh Abhyas, which was held in the mountains of India's Uttarakhand state, just 60 miles from the LAC. China said the exercise violated the spirit of agreements made between China and India in 1993 and 1996 and that it "didn't serve the mutual trust between China and India."<sup>98</sup> An Indian External Affairs Ministry official countered the Chinese claim, saying the exercise had nothing to do with the India-China agreements, while also calling on the Chinese side to reflect on its own breaches of the 1993 and 1996 diplomatic accords.<sup>99</sup>

## The Pakistan Angle

**A**s border tensions between China and India simmer, Pakistan could play a significant role in whether these two nuclear-armed Asian giants get along in the future. India is wary of deepening China-Pakistan strategic partnership and the role Pakistan could play in any escalation of tensions between New Delhi and Beijing. Pakistan has been New Delhi's arch-nemesis since the creation of both countries in 1947, due to their long-standing dispute over the status of Jammu and Kashmir.

For China, Pakistan assists in geostrategic containment of India in South Asia. The India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir consumes Indian resources and compels India to maintain a large troop presence on its western border along the Line of Control (LOC) that divides Kashmir, thus making it difficult for India to protect its eastern border with China. Indian strategists admit the specter of potentially having to fight a two-front war against Pakistan and China at the same time would be an impossible task. Although Islamabad may exercise caution in any potential border conflict between China and India—as it has done in the past—Pakistan's strategy and activities nonetheless must be considered in any comprehensive assessment of China-India border disputes.

China's "all-weather" partnership or "iron brotherhood" with Pakistan has served the two nations well for decades. In 1951, Pakistan became the first Muslim country to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC), and since the 1960s, bilateral ties have flourished with few discernible challenges. Beijing's strategic approach to Islamabad is multifaceted, and although Beijing's greatest motivation for keeping Islamabad close relates to its desire to keep India off balance, another significant aspect of China's relations with Pakistan involves cooperation on counterterrorism. Beijing seeks to eliminate any potential spillover of Islamic extremism

from neighboring Pakistan or Afghanistan into China's restive northwestern region of Xinjiang. Beijing fears that external influence and support could convince the Uyghur people, who are predominantly Muslim and reside there, to destabilize the province and ultimately secede from the rest of China.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, Beijing has leaned on Islamabad to promote its international objectives; most notably, during the Cold War, Pakistan facilitated secret negotiations between the United States and China that culminated in President Richard M. Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972 to meet with Chairman Mao Zedong, which began the process of normalizing U.S.-China bilateral ties.<sup>101</sup>

China and Pakistan tout that their longstanding partnership is "higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans." Beijing leverages this partnership as a strategic counterweight to distract New Delhi. For example, New Delhi is concerned that China is assisting Pakistan on the development of both conventional and nuclear weapons. New Delhi further worries about the potential establishment of PLA naval facilities at Gwadar, and China already has good access to the port at Karachi. New Delhi believes these ports could eventually become linked with others throughout the Indian Ocean, in effect giving China, as many have discussed, a "string of pearls" to encircle and choke off India from the rest of the world.<sup>102</sup> New Delhi is also worried about the geostrategic implications of Beijing's BRI, at India's doorstep. Indeed, BRI's flagship project is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a collection of infrastructure projects traversing disputed territory between India and Pakistan.

**Pakistan's behavior in past China-India border conflicts is instructive because it suggests that Islamabad might exercise caution before taking the bold move to open a second front against New Delhi.**

Following the Galwan Valley clash between China and India in June 2020, there was some speculation among senior Indian military officials that Pakistan might try to exploit the opportunity to attack Indian forces along the LOC. Most notably, in January 2021, Indian Army Chief General M. M. Naravane said that "There is increased cooperation between Pakistan and China, both in military and non-military fields. A two-front situation

is something we must be ready to deal with.”<sup>103</sup> Indeed, New Delhi since at least 2006 has been concerned about the potential for a “two-front war” along both its western and northern borders.<sup>104</sup> However, Pakistan thus far has kept its powder dry, and when China and India went to war in 1962, Pakistan chose to avoid opening a second front due to pressure from Washington.<sup>105</sup>

Pakistan’s behavior in past China-India border conflicts is instructive because it suggests that Islamabad might exercise caution before taking the bold move to open a second front against New Delhi. Despite the long-standing China-Pakistan partnership, Islamabad has reiterated its position that it does not wish to become overly dependent on Chinese assistance and would like to improve its relationship with the United States.<sup>106</sup> There also are fears in Pakistan that its participation in CPEC constitutes a “debt trap.”<sup>107</sup>

Meanwhile, in October 2022, over a year after U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan, the now former Pakistani chief of army staff, Qamar Javed Bajwa, visited the Pentagon to seek to reset security ties, which have been badly damaged by Pakistan’s support for the Taliban during the United States’ 20-year effort to stabilize Afghanistan.<sup>108</sup> In another sign that the United States and Pakistan may be seeking to improve ties, Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari visited Washington in December 2022. Moreover, as the U.S.-India partnership continues to strengthen because of mutual concerns over China, and as the United States implements the Indo-Pacific strategy it unveiled in February 2022, Pakistan wants to be viewed as one of the countries with which Washington can cooperate in the Indo-Pacific region. These factors may help to dampen prospects for Pakistani military intervention during a future China-India border flare-up.

However, there are ways Pakistan could assist China—short of opening a second front—in the event of a future India-China border crisis. One possibility is that Islamabad decides to conduct large-scale or out-of-cycle military exercises near the LOC or naval maneuvers, suggesting it could enter the fray quickly. Another scenario might involve Pakistani military and intelligence units encouraging or supporting terrorist groups to conduct attacks against Indian targets across the LOC or in major Indian cities. Alternatively, Islamabad could shift its nuclear posture in a way that New Delhi would notice. None of these actions would constitute opening a second front, but they nonetheless could force India to consider shifting resources and attention away from the LAC to the LOC, potentially to China’s military advantage.

## Challenges to Reducing Border Tension

**W**hile the Chinese and Indian militaries have since pulled back forces from some of the most contentious standoff sites where the 2020 buildup occurred and established temporary buffer zones, both sides retain high numbers of troops along the disputed frontier, and there are several flashpoints that could erupt into another border crisis at any time. The most recent clash that took place near Tawang in the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh is a reminder that, even though recent attention has been focused on the Ladakh region, there are multiple trigger points along the 2,100-mile-long LAC that bear monitoring. With both China and India enhancing infrastructure, changing their rules of engagement since 2020, and introducing new and advanced weapons systems on their sides of the disputed border, the chances for continued standoffs that could erupt into full-blown conflict remain high.

Similarly, prospects for negotiating a political settlement of their disputed borders remains low. For its part, China since 2002 has been uninterested in clarifying the LAC through an exchange of maps, as India has suggested. China is resisting the map exchange process likely because territorial ambiguity favors exaggerated claims and supports maintaining military advantages.<sup>109</sup> According to China expert Yun Sun, Beijing is unmotivated to resolve the border dispute through technical discussions and instead prefers to use the unresolved border issue to undermine Indian global power and influence.<sup>110</sup> During a brief period in the late 1970s under Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, China made fresh overtures toward India and proposed a “package deal” to resolve their border disputes in which China would give up its claim to Arunachal Pradesh in exchange for India ceding its claim on the Aksai Chin.<sup>111</sup> This was during a time of high tension between the former Soviet Union and China, and the offer was rescinded by the late 1980s. More recently, Beijing has signaled its unwillingness to give up its claim to Tawang district within Arunachal Pradesh, further demonstrating the “package deal” is no longer an option for Beijing.

Several border agreements signed between India and China from 1993 to 2013 are becoming increasingly irrelevant, or at least out of date, as both sides fail to respect them and violate established protocols. The series of border agreements laid out confidence building measures (CBMs) designed to prevent and mitigate violent confrontation and create standard guiding principles as both parties pursued a peaceful solution to the boundary

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question. But the Chinese actions in 2020 have led to a breakdown in these agreements, and a complete sense of distrust has taken root on both sides. For instance, the Chinese have used the tactic of shooting guns into the air as warning shots on at least two occasions in the past two years. Prior to 2020, firearms had not been used at the India-China border since 1975. And despite the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement's provision that both sides would reduce military deployments along the border, China and India now are moving in the opposite direction and reinforcing their military positions and force levels.<sup>112</sup>

Experts also agree that both sides now regularly violate the terms of the 1996 agreement, and that events from 2015 to the Ladakh standoff in 2020 have led to a complete breakdown of this accord.<sup>113</sup> For instance, despite the 1996 agreement's call for the reduction and elimination of heavy weapon systems near the LAC, China in recent years has introduced long-range artillery and rocket systems, air defense systems, and other advanced weaponry near its side of the LAC. India has attempted to match Chinese armaments and expand its own military capability by deploying rocket launchers and cruise missile systems near the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>114</sup> India and China also have violated provisions of the 1996 agreement on holding to a 15,000-soldier ceiling for troop deployments and limiting military exercises along the LAC.<sup>115</sup> In recent years, both have expanded their troop numbers to about 50,000 in Ladakh. China has undergone significant troop reconfiguration since the Ladakh crisis to strengthen its posture along the LAC. For example, the PLA combined its 2021 rotations, composed of the 8th and 11th divisions, with its 2022 rotations, composed of the 4th and 6th divisions.<sup>116</sup>

Indian military officials have further accused China of violating airspace provisions of the 1996 agreement. Analysts highlight that until the Ladakh standoff in 2020, the PLA refuted accusations of airspace violations by claiming that PLA aircraft were unarmed. However, since June 2022, Chinese fighter jets frequently have

disregarded the 10-kilometer no-fly zone along the LAC, triggering the activation of Indian Air Force air defense measures, such as the scrambling of Mirage-2000 and MiG fighter jets.<sup>117</sup> In the weeks before and after the December 2022 standoff at Tawang, Chinese reconnaissance aircrafts have flown in no-fly territory in eastern Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>118</sup>

Neither side is following the protocols laid out in the 2005 border agreements, and Indian government officials believe that Chinese diplomatic and military gray-zone tactics at the border over the past several years have rendered these agreements useless.<sup>119</sup> Likewise, the 2013 "Border Defense Cooperation Agreement" between India and China has failed to achieve its objective of reducing misunderstandings and minimizing misperceptions between the two parties through enhanced communication and cooperation.<sup>120</sup> China has refused to use the hotline established by both militaries, and both parties have violated the agreement's restriction on tailing the other side's troops, once again underscoring the difficulties in keeping bilateral tensions at the disputed border under wraps.

## Responding to a Potential Future India-China Border Conflict

**T**he United States responded to the 2020 border crisis by extending full diplomatic and material support for India. The United States provided information and intelligence and expedited delivery of equipment, including two MQ-9B surveillance drones and winter gear. U.S.-India relations deepened as a result of the U.S. response, and senior Indian officials have noted privately that U.S. support for India during the crisis had a profoundly positive impact on India's ability to defend its borders.<sup>121</sup> Still, China tries to convince the Indian public through sophisticated misinformation and disinformation campaigns that the United States is not a reliable partner for India and is the cause of problems between China and India.<sup>122</sup>

India is not seeking direct U.S. involvement in the India-China border dispute but is likely confident—barring any major contingencies that Washington would have to tend to elsewhere—that it can count on the United States for support, if necessary. Indian officials probably believe they would be able to reach out and obtain substantial support from the United States in the event of another potential border crisis.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, the

Biden administration in its National Defense Strategy released in October 2022 states that, “The Department [Pentagon] will also support Ally and partner efforts, in accordance with U.S. policy and international law, to address acute forms of gray zone coercion from the PRC’s campaigns to establish control over the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and disputed land borders such as with India,” signaling that such support for New Delhi would be forthcoming.<sup>124</sup>

From an Indian perspective, however, it is worth considering precisely what type of support Washington might provide in a future land border crisis or war. Based on the Galwan Valley experience, New Delhi would expect intelligence support and winter gear from the United States, but it also might request things like joint exercises, emergency senior-level military and defense consultations, and inclusion in Quad statements of the need to defend Indian border claims—all to enhance its deterrence vis-à-vis Beijing. New Delhi, however, clearly wants to convey to its people that India alone can handle military operations competently and successfully, even in a wartime scenario. Additionally, India probably believes that joint statements with the United States that frame

### **Indian officials probably believe they would be able to reach out and obtain substantial support from the United States in the event of another potential border crisis.**

the border crisis through the lens of intensifying U.S.-China competition would be provocative and unhelpful. As their country becomes an increasingly confident emerging power, Indian officials would prefer to avoid the perception of being dependent on Washington to manage the border dispute with China. Thus, there are built-in limitations to what New Delhi might ask for from Washington. It is worth highlighting, however, that this was the same American assessment before the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Following the end of that conflict, an Indian narrative developed that Washington had not supported India enough, even though John F. Kennedy’s administration had pledged significant military aid to India that New Delhi ended up not accepting. This suggests U.S. policymakers are in a tough spot to do something, but not too much, to assist New Delhi in the future.

On the other side of the LAC, Washington is likely to have little influence over Chinese decision-making. Like

India, Beijing fundamentally believes that LAC tension is a bilateral issue between India and China. Beyond that, the state of U.S.-China relations is at such a low point due to deep and wide-ranging disagreements over Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, human rights, trade, and many other issues that Beijing would see no reason to trust Washington as an unbiased mediator between China and India. Rather, Beijing is more likely to point the finger at the United States for meddling in, or even being the cause of, China-India border tensions. As noted above, one of the probable contributing factors of Beijing’s decision to initiate clashes in Galwan Valley was that it assessed the U.S.-India partnership had been strengthening in large part to counter China. This suggests that the best way for Washington to influence Chinese behavior is to bolster deterrence efforts alongside India.

### **Implications for U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy**

**T**he chances of India-China conflict are increasing as each country pursues its growing interests in the region and becomes more sensitive to the other’s activities along the LAC.<sup>125</sup> Washington has a strategic interest in what happens between India and China—two nuclear-armed nations whose populations together will soon total 3 billion. U.S. policymakers must be prepared for a potential new India-China border crisis and consider how the United States should position itself diplomatically and militarily in the region to try to prevent another border flare-up from occurring but also to be prepared to react to any potential outbreak of hostilities. The United States has spent a great deal of time and resources wargaming potential India-Pakistan conflict scenarios but has not paid sufficient attention to similar wargaming related to an India-China conflict.

Although the National Defense Strategy briefly states the Pentagon’s intent to support India in border disputes against China, the Biden administration’s National Security Strategy strikingly does not mention this point. China-India border tensions are not at the top of U.S. officials’ minds in the same way that China’s behavior in the Taiwan Strait or South or East China Sea consumes U.S. policymakers. However, if the Galwan Valley and, more recently, Tawang incidents are any indicator, the prospects for China-India armed conflict are high enough that Washington should engage in deeper consideration of the potential implications such a conflict might have on its goals in the Indo-Pacific region. This is particularly the case given that both nations are nuclear-armed.



One implication of intensifying border friction between New Delhi and Beijing is a further hardening of New Delhi's position on China and a corresponding deepening of its partnership with the United States. Indian officials believe China is trying to contain India by forcing it to divert more resources into defending simultaneously both its western border with Pakistan and eastern flank with China and by weakening its willingness to challenge Chinese regional hegemony. Developments along the LAC in 2020 have brought clarity to India's strategic approach toward China, meaning India's views of the China challenge are starting to converge with those of the United States, even if their strategies for dealing with the challenge differ in several respects. For example, India remains reluctant to focus Quad cooperation on defense-related activities, whereas the United States is eager to enhance defense planning and coordination among the four nations. Additionally, India remains largely reluctant to speak out against Chinese aggression toward Taiwan or human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

A hardening Indian position on China could facilitate Washington's "integrated deterrence" strategy. According to the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy:

Integrated deterrence will be the cornerstone of our approach. We will more tightly integrate our efforts across warfighting domains and the spectrum of conflict to ensure that the United States, alongside our allies and partners, can dissuade or defeat aggression in any form or domain. We will drive initiatives that reinforce deterrence and counter coercion, such as opposing efforts to alter territorial boundaries or undermine the rights of sovereign nations at sea.<sup>126</sup>

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration argued that deterrence did not fail. Rather, the plan all along was to engage in cost imposition, i.e., punishing Moscow in other areas of U.S.-Russia relations, such as through sanctions, and not exclusively through supporting the Ukrainian resistance.<sup>127</sup> However, in the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration seems to be prioritizing deterrence by *denial*—most clearly highlighted by continued security support to Taiwan—as key to preventing China from resorting to military operations in the future. This suggests that the United States might want to open or deepen discussions with New Delhi on the most effective ways to deter Beijing by *denial*, keeping in mind the inherent limitations described above.

The other potential way to deter China from further encroaching on Indian territory is through deterrence by *detection*. Ensuring India has sophisticated ISR capabilities is the best way to deter China by detection along the disputed border. Commercially available ISR also could provide a means to deter China. For instance, if Chinese troop movements and/or military-related construction along the border are revealed to the public, this could help prevent China from moving forward with aggressive military plans to avoid international blame and opprobrium.

From a broader perspective, renewed Chinese assertiveness along the LAC is likely to further convince other Chinese neighbors that are cautious about security cooperation with Washington that closer security ties with the United States would be beneficial to their national security. These countries most notably include, but are not limited to, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which all seek to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing Beijing by appearing to align with the United States over China in the context of great-power competition. However, if Washington extends support to India that helps it to deter Chinese aggression, other nations may begin to calculate that strengthening security ties with the United States is a more effective way to protect their territorial sovereignty than placating China.

Renewed China-India tensions or armed conflict at the border also would result in newfound challenges for the United States. Of course, any military escalation between nuclear-armed nations is alarming. Though



(L-R) Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, U.S. President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meet at the Quad Fellowship Founding Celebration ahead of the fourth Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo on May 24, 2022. After the Galwan Crisis, and the subsequent deterioration in India-China relations, India has taken a more active role in the Quad. (Yuichi Yamazaki/Getty Images)

the possibility of nuclear exchange in any India-China conflict may be low, the risk of another regional nuclear-armed power—Pakistan—getting embroiled in the fight is a complicating factor that also must be considered. Short of nuclear war, sustained crisis or war along the LAC could force the United States to redirect military and other resources to the region.

Lastly, given the need to try to prevent a border crisis from flaring in the first place, there is a need to better understand Chinese motives for its actions along its disputed borders with India.<sup>128</sup> There was speculation on why China had taken such aggressive action along the LAC in the spring of 2020, with very few definitive answers coming to light. One widely held view is that China had a strategic goal of seeking to pressure India to back away from its growing security ties with the United States and reconsider its growing involvement with Quad activities. China views the Quad as part of a containment strategy of China. On the other hand, some observers blamed a more tactical reason: reaction to India's completion of a road leading to a remote airfield on the border of the Aksai Chin. Others have pointed to India's scrapping of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomous status in August 2019 as another possible reason for new Chinese aggression along the LAC in the Ladakh region. Beijing expressed its opposition to the Indian move on Kashmir, calling it "illegal and invalid."<sup>129</sup> Perhaps in the wake of India's effort to consolidate its hold over Jammu and Kashmir, China wanted to demonstrate it was likewise consolidating its control over the Aksai Chin.

## U.S. Policy Recommendations

**G**iven the dangerous implications of another India-China border crisis, the United States must implement policies now to seek both to prevent another border flare-up between New Delhi and Beijing and to be prepared in the event another crisis erupts. To help deter and respond to further Chinese border aggression against India, the United States should:

*Elevate Indian territorial disputes with China on par with Beijing's assertiveness against other U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and ensure this is reflected in all national security-related documents and speeches.*

To date, only the Biden administration's National Defense Strategy mentions the issue briefly, without any real elaboration on U.S. policy. The National Security Strategy does not mention it at all. In the future, every authoritative U.S. statement should mention the

India-China border dispute, while making clear that Washington supports maintaining the territorial status quo between New Delhi and Beijing. (The U.S. government does not recognize China's claims on Arunachal Pradesh and considers the Aksai Chin as disputed territory, which translates to supporting the territorial status quo). This is more than mere rhetoric. Indian media outlets follow Washington's mentions of India closely, and they notice when India is absent on key topics. By raising U.S. support for maintaining the territorial status quo between India and China on a routine basis, Washington will reach the Indian government and its people and engender greater trust that the United States will support India in the future.

*Offer India the sophisticated military technology it requires to defend its borders and initiate coproduction and codevelopment of military equipment.*

While total U.S. military sales have increased to over \$20 billion in the last 15 years, India has not made a major military purchase from the United States since the \$3.5 billion helicopter deal signed during then-President Donald Trump's visit to India in February 2020. To help bolster U.S.-India defense trade and improve Indian capabilities over the longer term, Washington should offer the most sophisticated technology as part of the defense deals it proposes. Washington also must incentivize U.S. private companies to codevelop and coproduce high-tech military equipment in India.

*Assist India in strengthening its maritime and naval capacity.*

Helping India improve its maritime and naval capabilities will enable India to remain a dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) at a time when China is making new inroads into the IOR. New Delhi shares Washington's concerns about the increased presence of Chinese maritime vessels—including submarines and sophisticated research-and-reconnaissance vessels, like the one that docked in a Sri Lankan port in August 2022. Since the late 2000s, Beijing has conducted expeditionary operations to the Gulf of Aden. These operations began as a multinational anti-piracy effort, but after the threat receded, China's operations did not, culminating in the announcement in 2017 that Beijing would open its first official overseas base in the East African nation of Djibouti. The PRC maintains port access in places like Gwadar, in rival Pakistan, as well as Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka),

prompting fears in New Delhi that China's "string of pearls" strategy is designed to encircle and choke off India, if necessary.

*Conduct joint intelligence reviews with India to align assessments of Chinese plans and intentions along the LAC and enhance coordination with Indian officials on contingency planning in the event of a future India-China conflict.*

Washington and New Delhi should conduct regular joint intelligence reviews to compare notes on China's activities, plans, and intentions along the LAC. In addition, they should hold joint wargaming exercises to develop mutual understanding of the threat of a future India-China conflict and identify Indian capabilities gaps that can be filled before conflict breaks out. Finally, they should develop contingency plans for a potential future India-China conflict to identify appropriate roles and responsibilities for the United States that will assist Washington in responding quickly and effectively to any such crisis.

*Establish or support an official or unofficial organization charged with collating unclassified commercial satellite imagery on the position of PLA troops along the LAC and disseminate these images routinely for public consumption.*

This capability would provide clarity on what is transpiring in a remote part of the world. The National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA), for instance, has a program in place known as Tearline, which encourages nongovernmental groups to conduct their own analyses of national security issues, with NGA providing the raw satellite data.<sup>130</sup> NGA then posts these products to the Tearline website. Another potential model is the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), which focuses on maritime sovereignty disputes, particularly in the South and East China Seas. Notably, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute recently began publishing commercial imagery on Chinese and Indian military postures along the LAC.<sup>131</sup> Washington could create or support a similar organization for China-India land border disputes that analyzes unclassified commercial imagery for public release. AMTI has become an indispensable resource, especially for U.S. policymakers who want foreign governments or the public to know what China is doing in these disputed regions without sharing classified imagery.<sup>132</sup> A potential downside, however, is that New

Delhi might not want its public to know the full extent of PLA activities in disputed areas as this might become fodder to protest government incompetence or inaction.

*Criticize Beijing's efforts at land-grabbing in multilateral forums, including the U.N., Shangri-La Dialogue, G20, and East Asia Summit.*

For instance, Washington could single out China's land border law from 2021 as a contravention of international law and norms of behavior, just like Washington has done in support of maritime counterclaimants to Beijing's excessive sovereignty claims based on historical territorial rights in the South and East China Seas. India may prefer such an approach because it would not necessarily have to single out Chinese assertiveness across the LAC. Washington also could highlight Beijing's encouragement of PRC citizens to settle across its border in Bhutan and Nepal, noting such actions are part of its land-grabbing agenda.<sup>133</sup>

*Message Pakistan—and enlist help from Pakistan's other important partners to convey similar points—about the need to stay neutral in the event of a potential future India-China border flare-up.*

Although India may prefer the United States terminate its partnership with Pakistan, doing so is not in the interests of either Washington or New Delhi. Unlike in the case of China regarding the LAC, the United States has a degree of influence with Pakistan and could leverage it to ensure Islamabad stays on the sidelines in any future potential military conflict or crisis between India and China. Preventing a third nuclear-armed nation from entering the fray would be critical to controlling the situation from escalating toward a nuclear scenario. U.S.-Pakistan partnership helps challenge Beijing's outsize influence over Islamabad—an outcome that ultimately benefits India.

*Be prepared to extend full support to India, in the event of another border crisis or conflict.*

Some analysts have argued that the United States could embolden India inadvertently by providing it unquestioning support. On the contrary, India is aware that it is vulnerable to China along the LAC and has no interest in provoking China. However, India will not sacrifice its territorial integrity and it is in the U.S. interest to support India in that goal. In the event of another border crisis, Washington should be prepared to support India with

intelligence and information sharing that will help India bolster its defenses and expedite the provision of military items that will enhance Indian ISR and missile and air defense capabilities. Washington also should be prepared to provide operational planning support to India, as requested.

## **Conclusion**

India faces an increasingly aggressive China on its border, and, as a result, the United States must be prepared to deal with future India-China border conflicts and crises. In recent years, China has upped the ante through infrastructure development, military deployments, and periodic efforts to encroach into territory claimed by India. To its credit, New Delhi has handled the situation with calm and patience, focusing on finding diplomatic solutions to the periodic flare-ups. But the situation remains tense and far from resolved, suggesting that India must constantly reconsider and fine-tune its approach to achieve continued success. Meanwhile, Beijing's initial motivation for launching the Galwan Valley attacks remains unclear, as does its long-term strategy for the region. Thus, India must remain vigilant.

For its part, the United States should support New Delhi diplomatically and militarily, yet not trumpet this assistance. Washington should find creative ways to bolster India's position without seeking to mediate the conflict. Given the implications for its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, Washington cannot afford to stay completely on the sidelines of this conflict nor neglect it until conflict breaks out.



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