

Skirmishes along the Sino-Indian Border – Strategic Options for India

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Abstract

In the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, the clash in the Galwan Valley (June 15, 2020) between the Chinese and Indian troops, that killed twenty Indian soldiers, is undoubtedly a watershed moment in India-China relations. While both the Asian giants seek to avoid war, India and China have sharpened the political rhetoric; meanwhile, troops from both sides continue to be amassed along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The process of disengagement of troops and de-escalation of tensions have worked, albeit limitedly. Furthermore, the growing support of China to Taliban controlled Afghanistan (August 2021), will impact the course of Sino-India relations. The current stand-off between India and China marks the beginning of a new phase of relations where its repercussions will be felt in their immediate periphery and beyond. This article focuses on the strategic options for India. The transgression of China across the LAC will continue to cast its shadow over the relations between the two Asian giants. The earlier “spirit” and “connect” between the two nations stand broken and mending the same will test the institutions and leadership of both the countries.

Keywords: *Line of Actual Control, de-escalation, Galwan Valley, Quad, rapprochement*

1. Introduction

The skirmishes between the troops of India and China in Galwan Valley (June 15, 2020) along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has undoubtedly shaken the foundation of India-China relations. While the importance of the “Panchsheel” principles continued to be reiterated by India and China in the post-1962 era, the Galwan Valley clash (hereafter 15/6 clash) have now certainly thrown away all hopes of long-term goodwill between the two countries. Already mired by trust deficit, India-China relations have

continued to grow, albeit slowly since the 1962 war. The growing economic ties and high level of diplomatic visits between the two countries in the last decade have indeed hidden many of the apparent chokepoints in this relationship. However, the 15/6 clash has certainly derailed the same; whether the “disengagement” process will bear positive results, in the long run, is anyone’s guess. The latest round of violent skirmish in the high Himalayas has steered Sino-Indian relations into new territories where the costs of conflict can quickly spiral out of control. The paper has two crucial segments: this paper will first give a brief account of rapprochement as well as the skirmishes that have taken place along the Line of Actual Control. Secondly, it will reflect on the strategic choices for India while confronting China along the LAC. In the coming years, as India seeks to restrict and contain China’s belligerence in its vicinity and beyond, India’s diplomatic, as well as military prowess will be put to the test from different quarters.

2. The Line of Actual Control: Rapprochement and Skirmishes

In the absence of a well-demarcated border, the LAC continues to remain a contentious issue between the two neighbours. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (Government of India), India shares a 3488 km long border with China.¹ However, for the Chinese, the length of the LAC is only about 2000 km long (*The Indian Express*, 2020). This discrepancy attributes to the fact that China claims Aksai Chin (Hoffman, 1987: 38) as well as Arunachal Pradesh (whom it refers to as “South Tibet”²) (Rehman, 2019: 134) as part of its territory. From India’s perspective, the LAC encompasses three sectors: The eastern sector (Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh – 1140 km; known as the McMahon Line), the middle sector (Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh – 625km) and the western sector (Ladakh – 2152 km).³ China continues to dispute the legality of the McMahon line and refers to Arunachal Pradesh as Southern Tibet. Again, China continues to refuse India’s claim over the 1500 km long border in the western sector (Xinjiang and Tibet).

Among other legacies, the McMahon Line⁴ certainly left an indelible mark on India-China relations. Initially, Jawaharlal Nehru’s approach towards China was optimistic. However, as Wescott notes, despite “shared anti-colonial sentiments and pan-Asian ideas”, in the 1950s, the “undercurrent of suspicion between China and India” (Wescott, 2019: 160) was prevalent. The “ambiguities” (Maxwell, 1970: 56) of the boundary in the western sector (Ladakh⁵ and Aksai Chin) has certainly convoluted India-China relations. In 1954, when the maps of Government of India showed Aksai China as part of its territory, the “collision course” with China was inevitable (Maxwell, 1970: 57). Aksai Chin was once described by Nehru as an inhospitable region “without a vestige of grass.”⁶ China believes that it is part of the Hotan

County of Xinjiang province (Lau, 2017). During the 1950s, China started constructing a road through Aksai Chin in the north-eastern part of Ladakh (Chaudhury, 2020, June 11) which sought to connect Xinjiang with Tibet. From India's perspective, this 1455 km long road (NH219) also known as the "sky road" (Ying, 2014) passes through Indian Territory.

With the annexation of Tibet in 1951, the Sino-Indian rivalry had become "complex" with both positional and spatial issues in contention. The subsequent escape of Dalai Lama from Tibet to India in 1959 and the establishment of the Central Tibetan Administration or the Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamshala generated considerable friction between India and China. While "Zhou offered to recognise India's position in the eastern sector if India accepted China's sovereignty over the Aksai Chin area in the west" (Fravel, 2005: 68), India insisted on negotiating the dispute "sector by sector". This border impasse was bound to stretch India-China relations. In 1961, the "Forward Policy" initiation and the border war seemed more apparent than before as it created a "zone of conflict" in Aksai Chin (western sector) (Maxwell, 1999: 142) and by October-November 1962, Chinese troops had breached the eastern sector and "swept through the Brahmaputra valley" (Guha, 2011: 55). The war left a deep imprint on Indian foreign policy, and subsequent relations with China have since been guarded and competitive. The 1963 Sino-Pakistan Frontier Agreement delimited the Pakistan-China boundary "on the basis of the traditional customary boundary line including natural features and in a spirit of equality, mutual benefit and friendly cooperation" led to the relinquishment of the strategically important Shaksgam Valley by Pakistan to China (Joshi, 2017: 503).

For the current political establishment of India, the importance of Ladakh has been reiterated from time to time. According to the present Indian Army Chief General Manoj Naravane, it is in the Shaksgam Valley that there is a maximum threat of collusion between China and Pakistan (Gurung, 2020). As such, Ladakh continues to be a high priority strategic region for the Government of India.⁷ Over the years, diplomatic overtures by India and China had led to some degree of uneasy calm along the LAC but, as things stand, both countries have become firmer when addressing the contentious border dispute.

2.1. Rapprochement: Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC

Very few countries have had as many peace treaties and agreements to resolve and strengthen bilateral issues as have India and China. While there was a lull in relations after the 1962 border war, it gradually moved forward, especially after PM Rajiv Gandhi visited China in 1988 and subsequently opened the doors for "engagement" with China. The visit of PM Narsimha

Rao to China in 1993 did bring about a certain degree of “normalisation” in relations between the two countries (Mansingh, 1994: 285). The “Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas” (1993) emphasised that “No activities of either side shall overstep the LAC. In case personnel of one side cross the LAC, upon being cautioned by the other side, they shall immediately pull back to their side of the LAC.” The need for behavioural constraint by armies is elaborated in the agreement between the “Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas” (1996). It reaffirmed that “no activities of either side shall overstep the LAC”. Again, PM Vajpayee’s visit to China in 2003 was of great significance for India-China relations. The “Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China” (2003) clarified India’s stand on Tibet. It pointed out that:

The Indian side recognises that the Tibet Autonomous Region is part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China and reiterates that it does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India. The Chinese side expresses its appreciation for the Indian position. It reiterates that it is firmly opposed to any attempt and action aimed at splitting China and bringing about “independence of Tibet.”⁸

A certain degree of “quid-pro-quo” in *China’s World Affairs Yearbook 2003/2004*, “stopped showing Sikkim as a separate country” (Joseph, 2004); both the countries have strived to put their historical baggage behind and move forward. “The Protocol on Modalities for the Implementation of the Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along LAC” (2005) and the “Agreement on the Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs” (2012) further buttress the importance of tranquillity along the LAC. Importantly, Article VII of the “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation” (2013) states:

The two sides agree that if the border defence forces of the two sides come to a face-to-face situation in areas where there is no common understanding of the LAC, both sides shall exercise maximum self-restraint. To refrain from any provocative actions, not use force or threaten to use force against the other side, treat each other with courtesy and prevent the exchange of fire or armed conflict.

Likewise, Confidence Building Measures (CBMs), as well as several rounds of meetings of the Joint Working Group on the LAC, have contributed to dilution of tensions from time to time in a limited manner. Since assuming

the office of the Prime Minister in 2014, Narendra Modi and Jinping have met each other on several occasions, formally as well as “informally”. However, the “qualitative change” in relations is quite visible for all to see (Ganguly, 2017: 137).

After the Doklam⁹ (*India Today*, 2018) stand-off, the informal summit in Wuhan (2019) did help calm tensions, but it only meant that India would undoubtedly stand its ground, more firmly. Again, when the two leaders met in Chennai (2019), with emphasis on “business”, they wanted to ensure that they would not allow “differences to become disputes” (*The Hindu*, 2019). Much has changed since then. What it reflects is that there are “limits to cooperation” (Grieco, 1988). In a “hierarchical” (MacDonald and Lake, 2008) world order, India and China are not only striving to protect their national interests along the LAC but also in their immediate neighbourhoods and beyond. While there are several debates on China acting as a “revisionist power” (Johnstone, 2019; Kastner and Saunders, 2011), there is no doubt that the rapid rise of China has certainly made many countries feel rather uncomfortable. Again, while India is labelled as an “emerging power” (Pederson, 2016) or a “rising power” (Basur and Estrada, 2017), India’s immediate concern is to preserve its pre-eminent position in South Asia and to expand its role beyond its periphery. Given the weak foundations of India-China relations, achieving tranquillity and peace along the borders will depend on several factors which will test the tangibility of this relationship from time to time.

2.2. Skirmishes along the LAC

Post-1962 war with China, barring two critical incidents, the two nations has slowly worked towards reducing the trust deficit that had crept into this relationship. In 1967, the armies of India and China confronted each other in Nathula, leading to the deaths of 88 Indian soldiers. Again, in 1975, the last fatal incident due to firing was reported along the LAC in Tung La (Arunachal Pradesh) which resulted in the deaths of four Indian soldiers. However, through diplomatic parleys, both countries have ensured an uneasy calm along the LAC. It is unacknowledged that non-fatal skirmishes along the border have been a recurring feature along the LAC in the following years. Article VI – (1) of the “Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control” (1996) states – “Neither side shall open fire, cause bio-degradation, use hazardous chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosives within two kilometres from the LAC.”¹⁰ Both countries effectively followed this article in principle. A fragile peace was maintained, which ensured that fatalities along the LAC did not occur due to the use of firearms. In 2018, PM Modi in a meeting with

President Jinping declared, “not a single bullet has been fired along the LAC (*Hindustan Times*, 2018)”. The “not a single bullet” (NSB) factor has helped India-China relations tide over many a crisis – at a “tactical” and “diplomatic” level. At a tactical level, the NSB formula is essential because it ensured that confrontation was highly localised and temporary. It showed “firearms” were not used. Hence, the non-fatal nature of the skirmishes provides enough scope for de-escalation of tensions between the troops and dialogue between army commanders at the ground level. At a diplomatic level, it left the channel of communication open; summit level and a certain degree of bonhomie expressed between the tallest leaders before the public.

The 73-day long stand-off in the Doklam plateau in 2017 was resolved without the use of “firepower”. However, the Doklam episode was a clear indicator that India’s response to Chinese transgressions along the LAC would not go uncontested. While several protocols were established, deal with occasional transgressions along the LAC, there has not been an exchange of maps between the two sides that could have identified the areas of differencing perception (ADP). Press reports suggest that 23 such areas exist and the Galwan Valley was not one of them (Singh, 2020).¹¹ Fortuitously, over the years, incidents along the LAC have been on the increase (see Table 1).

Table 1 Incidents on the Line of Actual Control¹²

Year	West	East	Mid	Total
2019	497	138	28	663
2018	284	89	31	404
2017	337	119	17	473
2016	208	71	17	296
2015	342	77	9	428

Despite growing skirmishes, the two countries maintain a fragile peace. The fragile peace with zero fatalities along the LAC did reflect a certain degree of “maturity” in relations, neither India nor China could say with certainty that peace would prevail along the LAC. Additionally, the success of the NSB formula to the establishment of long-term stable relations between India and China is also dependent upon one additional important factor: commerce. Trade relations between the two countries have simply galloped ahead in the last few years. The U.S. has replaced China as India’s top trading partner: China was India’s top trading partner since 2013–14 till 2017–18 (*The Economic Times*, 2020, February 23). What is very clear is that China’s ambition of leading the global economy and shaping world politics

is not achievable by ignoring the “fifth largest”¹³ economy of the world. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RPEC) are two critical corridors of economic progress for China; India has opposed both of them and is unlikely to join them anytime soon.

The stress along the LAC had been visible for a few days before the tragedy in the Galwan Valley. In May 2020, scuffles between the Indian and the Chinese troops had taken place in Pangong Tso in which several Indian army personnel faced injuries. Reports of scuffles in Naku La in North Sikkim were received. In the early weeks of June, the military commanders did seek to address the growing tensions by indulging in “disengagement” talks. The skirmishes finally turned fatal. For the first time in five decades, twenty Indian soldiers died along the LAC in a confrontation with the Chinese. Ironically, the deaths did not come from bullets but were a result of rather primitive means of warfare which included the use of iron rods with nails embedded on them. The use of firearms during the faceoff was avoided, partly because of the 1999 and 2005 agreements; but by avoiding a bloodbath, it gave both parties enough scope to engage in a meaningful dialogue. However, it did result in fatalities and injuries on both sides; several Indian soldiers were taken hostage and subsequently released after intense negotiations. Since then, China on its part continues to be silent because it wants to prevent “confrontational sentiments from escalating” (*Business Standard*, 2020).

3. Strategic Choices for India

The seventieth year of diplomatic relations between India and China should have seen more gaiety, events on the ground indicate otherwise. Coupled with the border dispute, the onset of Covid-19 pandemic and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the “trust deficit” in Sino-India relations will only heighten in the coming years.

India’s claim over the Ladakh-Aksai Chin region has been disputed by the Chinese. Indeed, the “Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai” model that could have showcased “Asian solidarity” truly stands transformed now. There is political pressure on the Modi government to respond to the deaths of twenty Indian soldiers along the LAC in the Galwan Valley. In response to China’s incremental expansionism along the LAC, India will undoubtedly need to ensure that the strategic choices it undertakes are healthy enough to limit the positional progress of Chinese troops along the LAC and contain China in the long run. Necessarily, India will need a multipronged strategic approach in dealing with China. India will have to fight its cause on three different levels: ground zero, South Asia and “beyond”; winning them all will be a herculean task.

3.1. Level I: Ground Zero

Dealing with the events at ground zero involves two kinds of measures – short and long term. In the immediate short term, there is need for de-escalation of tensions. India has stressed upon the importance of dialogue and peace but, as Prime Minister Modi reiterated, “India’s commitment to peace shouldn’t be seen as its weakness (Sagar, 2020)”. China continues to be apprehensive about India’s construction of infrastructure along the LAC. Difference in perception over the LAC does exist, and skirmishes in the Pangong Tso lake, Galwan Valley, Gogra-Hot springs have put the Indian and Chinese forces on high alert.

The military officials on both sides want the contested areas to be “patrol free” regions and the border impasse to an end (Gupta, 2020). At the 17th Working Mechanism Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), officially, both sides agreed for the “early and complete disengagement of the troops along the LAC and de-escalation from India-China border areas in accordance with bilateral agreement and protocols and full restoration of peace and tranquillity was essential for smooth overall development of bilateral relations”.¹⁴ India has been rather resolute in standing its ground in these strategic regions. At a meeting (September 11, 2020) of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a “five point agreement”¹⁵ was reached between the two countries that would guide the two countries in resolving the border standoff. Through dialogue, the mutual disengagement process has moved forward in Gogra, Galwan Valley, Pangong Tso and Hot Springs. Videos released by the Indian army show that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has started the dismantling of tents, bunkers and pullback of troops as well as tanks around the Pangong Tso lake; Indian troops too have started withdrawing from the Kailash range (Peri, 2021). The 15/6 clash has ensured that the Indian troops cannot afford to let their guard down; preventing the Chinese troops from reoccupying the same will undoubtedly be a significant challenge. At the ground level, for India, the issue of de-escalation and disengagement is linked with the Chinese troops reverting to its April 2020 position along the LAC.

In the long term, India will definitely shore up its defences. Newspaper reports suggest that India not only called in for more reinforcements but also upped up the ante by acquiring new military aircraft and related peripherals from France (Pandit, 2020) and Russia (Hussain, 2020). The tensions in the subcontinent has certainly fuelled an arms race. The need for India’s defence preparedness went into overdrive; media reports suggest that India’s Defence Acquisition Council Arms approved several domestic development programs and also approved arms procurement projects (Raghuvanshi, 2020). In the long run, it was estimated that the Government of India would “spend USD

130 billion for fleet modernisation in the next 5–7 years across all armed forces (*The Economic Times*, 2019, September 10)". In September 2020, despite the call for "respecting the LAC" and the need for "maintenance of status quo" by both sides, bullets have been fired and tensions continue to simmer in the northern bank of Pangong Tso.¹⁶

3.2. Level II: South Asia

India is the heart of South Asia, seldom do inter-governmental policies work in the region without active guidance of this "big brother". China will test India's resolve to protect its national interests in South Asia. India's neighbourhood policy seeks to tighten "the bond between India and its neighbours, and better serving India's economic and social development strategy by promoting regional and sub-regional connectivity (Kaura and Rani, 2020: 2)". While India has been at the forefront of providing humanitarian aid to countries of South Asia, it still has not been able to generate enough goodwill which could cement ties with its neighbours. Bilateral relations between India and its neighbours now seem to be on shaky ground. While the corona pandemic might have slowed down the pace of specific projects, the Jinping administration has been rather relentless in pushing forward Xi's dream project. Current estimation of the BRI-branded projects in Bangladesh has a value of around US\$10 billion which include the construction of a massive 6.5-kilometre road/rail bridge over the massive Padma river and an industrial park in Chittagong (Brewster, 2019). The \$120 million Sinamale Bridge or the Chinese-Maldives Friendship Bridge is a significant sign of Chinese investment into the Maldives (Macan-Markar, 2019). Likewise, reports suggest that "the value of cumulative Chinese infrastructure investment in Sri Lanka amounts to \$12.1 billion between 2006 and July 2019 or equivalent to 14 per cent of Sri Lanka's 2018 GDP."¹⁷ Nepal has signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with China; being landlocked, many in Nepal believe with continuous investment from China, Nepal's dependence on India will reduce over the next few years. Pakistan has steadfastly supported the CPEC and has committed to complete the CPEC project "at all costs". The importance of CPEC for both the countries stems from the fact that it is "the shortest possible route to China to connect with Central Asia (Khan and Khan, 2019: 81)". Chinese investment has resulted in the construction of the Gwadar International Airport and the Sahiwal Coal Power Project. Initiatives under the CPEC expect to "improve trade and transport will link the main industrial cities with the ports of Karachi, Bin Qasim and Gwadar (Faisal, 2019: 12)". It is no coincidence that, with the increase of Chinese investment in countries neighbouring India (see Table 2), this ambitious "Neighbourhood First" policy has run into rough weather.

Table 2 Year-wise Comparison of China-India Trade with Countries of South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan) (US\$ billion)¹⁸

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
China's Trade with South Asia	9.19	11.42	14.52	16.58	16.57	23.25	30.01	33.57	41.04	60.41	54.71	52.81	55.84	59.99
India's Trade with South Asia	7.39	8.56	10.53	13.45	10.28	14.57	17.15	17.91	21.17	24.69	22.09	21.73	24.75	30.96

Among other things, one of the critical challenges for India will be its ability to compete with Chinese investment and involvement in South Asia. China has managed to establish “strategic partnership” with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The all-weather strategic partnership with Pakistan is already well-proven (Ashok, 2019). India’s image of a regional hegemon has undoubtedly not helped; countries of South Asia too have realised that they have more bargaining capacity than initially envisaged. China is well entrenched in infrastructure projects in South Asia. India has objected to the CPEC as it “directly impinges on the issue of sovereignty and territorial integrity of India” and “passes through parts of the Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh which are under illegal occupation of Pakistan.”¹⁹ For the Indian security establishment, the “latent” strategic component of the BRI is too conspicuous to be ignored. Furthermore, through the Covid-19 aid to countries and supply of PPE kits to countries of South Asia, China has ensured that it manages to portray itself as a responsible power which is keen to share its expertise in containing and tackling the spread of the coronavirus. The events in Afghanistan reveal that India has more problems in its neighbourhood than originally envisaged. The quick withdrawal of the US forces and the fleeing of Afghan President Ahsraf Ghani on 15th August 2021 have ominous implications for Indian foreign policy. While the Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan said that the Afghans have “broken the shackles of slavery”²⁰; the Chinese on their part have kept their embassy open and have sought to play a “constructive role in Afghanistan’s peace and reconstruction”.²¹

China’s “cheque-book” diplomacy has certainly emboldened countries of South Asia to exercise greater autonomy in foreign policy issues. Legacy, as well as “big brother” image of India, is only quite overbearing for its neighbours; India’s interference is not accept-worthy in the domestic affairs of countries in South Asia. In contrast, China always comes across as a new rich neighbour looking to invest and give aid whenever needed, and this has certainly helped its cause. The silence of India’s neighbours, especially Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka in condemning China’s predatorial moves along the LAC should ring alarm bells for Indian foreign policymakers. China is seeking to consolidate its position in mineral rich Afghanistan and strengthen the infrastructural projects under the BRI; this does not augur too well for the security establishment of India.

The skirmishes along the LAC will have significant implications for India, for Chinese establishment will hurt India where it matters most – its role in South Asia. China’s incremental steps to control the “right hand palm and its five fingers”²² has certainly alarmed India. China will seek to further tie India up in knots whereby stretching the ensuring military and economic resources. Importantly, China will seek to ensure that India’s

diplomatic prowess in the subcontinent gradually withers away. Therefore, the critical challenge for India will not only be the ability to maintain its military hold along the LAC but rather to address the growing presence of China in the Indian subcontinent. India will need to give fresh impetus to India's "neighbourhood first" policy and will have to play a proactive role in the creation of new institutions that can address the changing security environment of the region. As of now, it is quite apparent that China has outflanked India and moved ahead at this strategic level.

3.3. Level III: Beyond South Asia, Indo-Pacific and "Penumbra Territories"²³

Relations between the China and India have oscillated between "competition and cooperation" and have global dimensions.²⁴ The growing belligerence of China through the adoption of a "salami slicing approach" (Haddick, 2012) has not gone unnoticed. China continues to become more vocal and has adopted more aggressive postures in the East and the South China Sea. While it was always a marginal player, India has slowly made its presence felt in the region. The transformation of the Look East policy to the Act East Policy was a signal that India was seeking to strengthen relations not only with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries but also beyond it. As China continues to be more assertive in South Asia, India too can become an active player in the Asia Pacific region.

While China continues to encircle India through its "string of pearls" (Huang, 2018; Khurana, 2008) policy, India has moved strategically closer to the "Quad", albeit the "weakest link" (Grossman, 2018). India has sought to deepen its involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.²⁵ At the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore (June 1, 2018), PM Modi outlined India's vision for the Indo-Pacific Region, where he remarked that this concept was a "positive one" and it was a "natural region" and "home to a vast array of global opportunities and challenges." With Southeast Asia at the "centre", "it stands for a free, open, inclusive region."²⁶ Importantly, this is the region – especially the East and the South China Sea region – that China continues to flex its muscle. China has not only upped its ante in the South China Sea by not only building artificial islands in the disputed waters but also conducting naval exercises. Located in the Paracel archipelago, the Woody Island, though controlled by China, is a disputed island as Taiwan and Vietnam too have staked their claim over it. Again the ownership of the Spratly Islands has been a bone of contention between China and Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei; additionally, the Senkaku Islands dispute between Japan and China has undoubtedly heightened tensions in the East China Sea. In April 2020, the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing boats was

by China (Chaudhury, 2020, May 27). Under these circumstances, the role of India will be critical in bringing about peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region. Importantly, the success of the Act East Policy also depends on India's maritime strategy. An estimated \$200 billion worth of Indian trade passes through the South China Sea (Sen, 2020) and these waterways need to be secured. India's Maritime Security Strategy (2016) which envisages on "freedom to the use of seas", has identified specific "choke points", which include the Malacca and Singapore Straits.²⁷

Securing freedom of navigation is an arduous task which India needs to undertake in conjunction with the ASEAN members, US, Australia and Japan. India-US maritime cooperation has moved steadily forward. Post-Doklam crisis, India has sought to shore up its defence cooperation with the U.S. The "2+2 Dialogue" paves the way for the Indian military to procure critical and encrypted defence technologies from the United States (*The Economic Times*, 2018, September 7). The Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA) have further strengthened India-US defence ties. The Indian Navy in expectation will benefit particularly from the LEMOA (Thomas, 2019). As Khurana notes, while the military superiority of China is decisive, the Indian Navy could play an essential role in stretching "Chinese forces horizontally to the ocean waters (Khurana, 2017: 9)". The Malabar Naval Exercise (November 2020) sees the convergence of strategic interests between the U.S., Japan, Australia and India. As things stand, the withdrawal of the U.S. from another theatre of conflict (Afghanistan, August 2021) does not give too much confidence to its allies. Therefore, a working principle that gives 'teeth' to this collective dialogue process will undoubtedly be a significant boost for India. The Quad has identified a common adversary, but it is yet to manufacture a shared strategy which could successfully contain China. The distress along the LAC has undoubtedly ensured that India will have to reorient its foreign policy. As a multipronged approach, India will need to become an active player in the Indo-Pacific region and if needed, revisit "One China" policy in the future.

In international forums, China has never shied away from criticising India on a plethora of issues. In 2019, China raised the issue of Kashmir in a closed-door meeting at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). China has repeatedly blocked the declaration of Masood Azhar as a global terrorist, only relenting after pressure from the international community (Web Desk, 2019). While "four out of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council have bilaterally expressed official affirmations to support India's candidature to a permanent seat in an expanded U.N. Security Council",²⁸ China has been rather diplomatic in opposing India's candidature to the same.

India will have to play the “tik-for-tok” strategy diligently. As China’s “string of pearls policy” (Granados, 2018) becomes more polished than ever before, India will need to deepen its relationship with the democratic world. The Sino-Pak nexus has been proactive in questioning India’s position on Jammu and Kashmir and Leh/Ladakh in international forums and the United Nations in particular. On the other hand, India’s foreign policy has been somewhat restrained when it comes to addressing issues that provoke China. India has adopted a passive stand on issues of Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan. At a time when the U.S. and its allies are scrutinising China’s new security law for Hong Kong, India has maintained a diplomatic stand by seeking to keep “a close watch on recent developments”. Paul (2018) noted that the “umbrella hedging strategy”, which implies a “wait and watch approach”, has been generally favoured by India as it helps “keep all options open”, and it opens up a window for dialogue. Nevertheless, if further provoked, it leaves the door open for India to become more vocal against “One China” policy. In an environment where global powers have severely criticised Chinese authorities on a plethora of issues, India’s multi-aligned foreign policy will be more stressed. Ideally, India would not like to fall into a “Thucydides trap” (Allison, 2019), but with its limited military capabilities, it will have to make a choice sooner or later.

4. Conclusion

Despite several summit levels talks between PM Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping²⁹, the “protracted contest” (Garver, 2011) between India and China is visible for all to see. The “boundary question” is sensitive and complicated; the stand-off at Doklam plateau (Bhutan tri-junction) in 2017 should have been a warning sign to China that the impending future will be more than just competitive. The subsequent informal summits between Modi and Jinping provided an opportunity to bury the hatchet. Necessarily both the countries were looking at the broader picture where economic opportunities and trade could propel them to greater heights. The 15/6 clash in the Galwan Valley has undoubtedly laid to rest any further scope of camaraderie between the two Asian countries, at least for the next few years. The border stand-off could have significant implications on electoral politics in India. Therefore, no Indian government can afford to tone down its voice against China; the electoral costs will undoubtedly be high. The political relations between China and India have plummeted to new depths, and it will be tough for the political establishment to come out and support the Chinese government and companies.

The channels of communication at the highest levels have to be kept open, but “rules of engagement” has changed. India is keen to make sure that the “net progression” of Chinese troops along the LAC comes to a

grinding halt. The continuation of Commander level talks will be critical to the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the LAC. The positional withdrawal of troops by China will not imply giving up of territorial claims; China will continue to stake claim over such territories. As of now, despite the withdrawal of Chinese troops from the Galwan Valley, the trust deficit will simply continue unabated. At ground zero, India has got bruised, but it has shown enough resolve to withstand advancement of Chinese troops along the LAC. It is probably for the first time in the post-cold war era that China too has lost its soldiers in combat; any further inroad into Indian Territory will undoubtedly come at a considerable cost.

By adopting a more resolute position, Indian forces have indeed halted the march of the Chinese troops in the Himalayas. India has shown the global community that Chinese “expansionism” can be challenged; the question is whether India can play the long innings in containing China? Through a “defensive approach”, India seeks to deter China’s incursions along the LAC and contain its growing involvement in South Asia. The pullback of Chinese troops from the June 15 clash site reflects that the process of disengagement seems to have worked along the LAC, but monitoring the sanctity of the LAC will examine the resilience of the Indian forces and the diplomatic prowess of India.

India’s multipronged approach to dealing with the “dragon” does have its limitations. In the aftermath of the 15/6 clashes, the Government of India has launched an economic blitzkrieg; the banning of 59 mobile applications by the Government of India and debarring of companies of Chinese origin from participating in infrastructural projects in India. The call for “Atmanirbhar Bharat”³⁰ has gained momentum, but it continues to be at an infant stage. Additionally, there have been calls for a nationwide boycott of Chinese products.³¹ While economic relations have taken a beating, complete decoupling of economic relations is neither viable nor possible for both the countries. Silently, trade relations between the two countries have bounced back.³²

At ground zero, there is no certainty that China will continue to maintain the sanctity of the LAC. The operational costs of maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC will undoubtedly be high, and both countries will have to bear the cost. In the coming years, India’s pre-eminent position in South Asia looks challenging; China’s role as an “external balancer” in South Asia is not a subject of discount. India’s civilisational bonds and its diplomatic overtures may just be weak to prevent its neighbours from moving out of the “elephant’s” shadow. The growing investment, as well as inducements from China, has certainly created a dilemma for India’s South Asian neighbours; India certainly has significant security challenges ahead. However, again, India can make it “difficult for China to have complete sway over the region (Pant, 2007: 68)”. India is seeking to shed off its image of being a peripheral

player in the Indo-Pacific region; rather, it can play a critical role in making the Quad more robust in the long run. Furthermore, its silence should come as leverage on “One-China” policy, using it tactfully when the right opportunity comes. Till then India will continue to hold the “One China” card close to its chest.

China has realised that the costs of military engagement will prove to be expensive in the short run. The “tik-for-tok”³³ policy between India and China will further fuel tensions across South Asia and the South China Sea in particular. But, relations cannot be “business as usual”; India will invariably need to become militarily more “atma-nirbhar” or “self-reliant” in the coming years. Skirmishes along the LAC have ensured that any kind of “hugplomacy” between PM Modi and President Jinping, at least publicly, is unlikely to happen in the next few years. The advent of social media and overzealous news media in India will ensure that the ruling establishment will find it hard to justify any kind of bonhomie between leaders at the highest level. The Chinese envoy to India stressed that Modi-Jinping should explore a “manufacturing relationship”, (*The Quint*, 2020) but “manufacturing trust” is the need of the hour. While “birthday wishes” have come to a grinding halt,³⁴ bilateral diplomatic relations at the bureaucratic level will invariably continue. India might have committed a “Himalayan blunder” (Dalvi, 1968) in 1962; however, with the skirmishes turning fatal in 2020, the “great wall of mistrust” in Sino-Indian relations seems more unbreachable than ever before.

Notes

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1. India shares its borders with seven countries. “International Land Border”, <<https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/BMIntro-1011.pdf>>, accessed on 7.3.2020.
 2. “For instance, China’s dogged insistence on naming the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh ‘Southern Tibet’ is undergirded by the argument that any region that once fell under Lhasa’s writ should now be folded into a greater China” (Rehman, 2019).
 3. For details see “International Land Border”, <<https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/BMIntro-1011.pdf>>; “Not just in Ladakh, India, China moved troops in all three sectors last month,” *The Indian Express*, June 12, 2020, <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-army-ladakh-lac-6454863/>>.
 4. Henry McMahon was the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India in 1913.
 5. In 2019, The Government of India accorded Union Territory status to Jammu and Kashmir. Additionally, Ladakh became a Union Territory.
 6. “Speech in Rajya Sabha (1959, August 31), Prime Minister on Sino-Indian Relations: In Parliament (New Delhi: External Publicity Division of External

- Affairs, Government of India, 1962), p. 98,” in M. Shankar (2015), “Showing Character: Nehru, Reputation, and the Sino-Indian Dispute, 1957–1962”, *Asian Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2015.1042575>
7. “I wish to place on record that whenever I mention Jammu and Kashmir in the House, it means both Pak-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin... And the borders of Jammu and Kashmir, as decided by our Constitution and the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir, include both Pak-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin”, Amit Shah, Home Minister, Government of India, in a speech in the Parliament of India, 2019. See “PoK and Aksai Chin are also part of Jammu and Kashmir: Amit Shah”, *The Economic Times*, August 6, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pok-and-aksai-chin-are-also-part-of-jammu-and-kashmir-amit-shah/articleshow/70548871.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst>.
 8. “Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation Between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of China”, June 23, 2003, MEA, Government of India <<https://www.mea.gov.in/in-focusarticle.htm?7679/Declaration+on+Principles+for+Relations+and+Comprehensive+Cooperation+Between+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China>>.
 9. Doklam’s geographical position makes it a strategically important area as it is located between Tibet’s Chumbi valley to the North, Bhutan’s Ha valley to the East and India’s Sikkim state to the West.
 10. “Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, 1996” <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_961129_Agreement%20between%20China%20and%20India.pdf>.
 11. Sushant Singh (June 4, 2020), “De-escalation process underway: 2 LAC flash-points are not in list of identified areas still contested”, *The Indian Express*, retrieved from <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-ladakh-border-lac-galwan-6441494/>>.
 12. Sushant Singh (May 22, 2020), “Big surge in Chinese transgressions, most of them in Ladakh”, *The Indian Express*, retrieved from <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/aksai-chin-army-big-surge-in-chinese-transgressions-most-of-them-in-ladakh-6421674/>>.
 13. “Investopedia, The Top 20 Economies in the World,” <<https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/#:~:text=India%20Nominal%20GDP%3A%20%242.94%20trillion,the%20United%20Kingdom%20and%20France>>.
 14. “17th Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs, July 24, 2020”, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32846/17th_Meeting_of_the_Working_Mechanism_for_Consultation_amp_Coordination_on_IndiaChina_Border_Affairs>.
 15. “India, China agree on 5-point plan for resolving border standoff: Here’s what you need to know,” *Hindustan Times*, September 11, 2020, <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-china-agree-on-5-point-plan-for-resolving-border-standoff-here-s-what-you-need-to-know/story-ZoxC1MNSZcQxIRN467YE0K.html>>.

16. Rahul Singh, “Indian, Chinese soldiers fired burst of bullets in air near Finger 4 before Moscow talks”, *Hindustan Times*, September 16, 2020, <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indian-chinese-soldiers-fired-burst-of-bullets-in-air-near-finger-4-before-moscow-talks/story-ISRSmKSVpf17QdDUIE3JhO.html>>.
17. Ganeshan Wignaraja, Dinusha Panditaratne, Pabasara Kannangara and Divya-Hundlani, “Chinese Investment and the BRI in Sri Lanka”, *Chatham House*, March 24, 2020, <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/CHHJ8010-Sri-Lanka-RP-WEB-200324.pdf>>.
18. Riya Sinha, Niara Sareen, “India’s Limited Trade Connectivity with South Asia”, *Policy Brief*, Brookings India, May 2020, p. 8, <<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Trade-Policy-Brief.pdf>>.
19. “Question No. 606 BRI AND CPEC”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <<https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/32353/QUESTION+NO606+BRI+AND+CPEC>>.
20. “Afghans have broken ‘shackles of slavery’: Pakistan PM Imran Khan”, *Business Standard*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/afghans-have-broken-shackles-of-slavery-pakistan-pm-imran-khan-121081601134_1.html>.
21. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on August 16, 2021, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1899785.shtml>.
22. According to Dr Lobsang Sangay, Sikyong (President) of the Tibetan-government-in-exile, “To understand the Doklam face-off, you have to look at China’s supreme leader Mao Zedong’s ‘right hand palm and five fingers’ strategy. In the 1950s, Mao described Tibet as the right hand palm, while Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal and Arunachal Pradesh are five fingers.” For details, see *The Tibetan Journal*, November 3, 2017, <<http://www.tibetanjournal.com/mao-described-tibet-right-palm-ladakh-sikkim-bhutan-nepal-arunachal-five-fingers/>>.
23. It refers to territories that lie beyond the ‘mainland’ China.
24. “Sino-India Relations including Doklam, Border Situation and Cooperation in International Organizations”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 2018, <http://164.100.47.193/lsscommittee/External%20Affairs/16_External_Affairs_22.pdf>.
25. It is an informal strategic forum consisting of the U.S., Japan, Australia and India.
26. “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 1, 2018, <<https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>>.
27. “The Straits of Malacca and Singapore link the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean. Providing the shortest sea route from the Persian Gulf to East Asia/ West Pacific regions, it is a strategic choke point in the IOR. A dense shipping zone, more than 70,000 ships transit it each year. The narrowest point amongst the two straits is the 1.5 nm wide navigable stretch of the Phillip Channel in the Singapore Strait”. For further details, see “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy”, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf>.

28. “Q NO.1302 CHINA AGAINST UNSC REFORMS PROCESS”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <<https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/26163/Q+NO1302+CHINA+AGAINST+UNSC+REFORMS+PROCESS>>.
29. “Both have met at least 18 times since Modi came to power in 2014. These include one-on-one meetings in each other’s countries and on the sidelines of the multilateral summits. The PM has visited China five times as the PM, the most by any Indian PM in the last 70 years”, in “Modi-Xi meetings, several pacts: killings breach consensus, dent diplomacy”, *The Indian Express*, June 17, 2020. <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-standoff-diplomacy-lac-incident-mea-6462195/>>.
30. ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ means ‘self-reliant India’.
31. “Chinese investments in India,” Gateway House, Report No. 3, Map No. 10, February 2020, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Chinese-Investments_2020-Final.pdf>.
32. “India-China trade grows 62.7% in 1st half of year, crosses \$57 billion”, *India Today*, July 14, 2021, <<https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/india-china-trade-grows-62-7-in-1st-half-of-year-crosses-57-billion-1828018-2021-07-14>>.
33. ‘Tik-tok’ a popular app was banned by the Government of India following the clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020. The phrase ‘tik-for-tok’ in place of ‘tit-for-tat’, necessarily connotes retaliatory measures in different ways by India and China.
34. In 2020, for the first time since 2016, Prime Minister Narendra failed to greet Xi on his birthday. For details, see Anita Joshua, “Modi punishes Xi: No ‘Happy Birthday’ this year”, *The Telegraph*, June 17, 2020, <<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/narendra-modi-punishes-xi-jinping-no-happy-birthday-this-year/cid/1781445>>.

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