



Are India and China at a point of no return?



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European Eye on Radicalization



A Deep and Fundamental Rift Emerges Between India and China

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The clashes on the India-China border in the Himalayan mountains, in June 2020, amidst the global turmoil caused by the coronavirus pandemic, left many puzzled. The timing and the circumstances at first appeared to be in no one's interest, and some even blamed over-zealous local commanders for the escalation. A more complex picture has since emerged, which points to this being the start of a new, more serious and more fundamental rift in Indo-Chinese relations, as the interests of the two Asian giants increasingly diverge, and the differences in their governance systems become more evident and acute.

Whilst China's strength and global ambitions are much talked about, the rise of India has been largely understated. With nearly 1.38 billion inhabitants, and with an economy that has grown to become the fifth largest in the world, India's rather limited global projection has often been attributed to its political and ethnic fragmentation. Not for the first time, a totalitarian system may have mistaken diversity for weakness. There are some reasons to believe that China may have underestimated Indian resolve, and may, by provoking the incidents on the Line of Actual Contact, as now appears to have been the case, have awakened India's readiness to be more assertive in its dealings.

The four contributors to this report delve into some of these issues, broadly all agreeing that whilst a full war is unlikely, the time of peace and tranquillity between the two nuclear-armed countries is over, and Indian-Chinese rivalry will be a predominant feature in the region in the future as the global focus shifts from the Middle East to Asia.

Amrita Bhinder argues that the differences between China and India “couldn't be starker” — China a Communist totalitarian state, India the largest democracy in the world — and this could be seen even in the way they handled the news of the clashes in June 2020. India acknowledged the death of twenty of its soldiers, whilst China has not acknowledged any losses. This, Bhinder argues, reflects the very nature of the Chinese state, which “harks back to its imperial tributary system” and currently has border disputes with eighteen neighbouring countries. India, on the other hand “does not have any expansionist desires”.

This is a theme picked up by **Aditi Bhaduri**, who argues that a sustained Chinese presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region “constitutes a security threat for India”. Bhaduri concludes on a chilling note, saying that “Indian analysts do not rule out a short war — basing their predictions on China's behaviour patterns. Indian media reported a growing consensus within the government that the country should be prepared for a ‘military response’, even though dialogue and talks are ongoing.

In his contribution, **Zahid Ahmed** argues that regardless of any local issues that may have triggered the June 2020 violence, it is the wider geopolitical developments that are the main drivers for the current tensions. Whilst Zahid Ahmed does not think that another war is very likely, the heightened mistrust between the two sides will result in ongoing conflict, since India sees China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and expansion into South Asia, as detrimental to its strategic interests and security.

Raimondo Neironi raises the spectre of what he calls the “nightmare scenario” that may “destabilise the whole region” as India and China eye each other in any increasingly volatile global context. Neironi lists reasons why China sees the border area where the incidents happened as essential, including in the realisation of BRI projects in Pakistan. He points out that on the other hand, this did not stop the Chinese Communist party mouthpiece, *Global Times*, from accusing India “of milking the US-China rivalry for political purposes”.

This last point may be accurate up to a point. India and the United States increasingly see each other as sharing common values and visions, and in China they see a common rival and a potential military foe. This US-India relationship is a work in progress. The US has been warming up to India and was delighted to welcome it into the new, and as yet undefined, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), together with Japan and Australia.

Those who claim that India will end up fighting the battles of the United States are however completely wrong. This is very much India’s battle; it is domestically driven, and the competition is not new. India’s influence, culture and presence from the Gulf to the South China Sea can be traced back centuries. As Robert D. Kaplan points out in his book *Asia’s Cauldron*, Indian influence in places as far flung as Vietnam has contributed to ensuring that Chinese domination of its near-abroad, although often overwhelming, has never been complete. Within India, in recent years, there has been an increase in “Hindu nationalism”, which has defined the policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A hardline stance towards China is a part of this and has now become widely popular. Crucially, given India’s parliamentary system, Modi’s stance now has cross-party support, with the opposition Congress Party criticising Modi for weakness in the handling on the June crisis.

The radicalization among Hindus is, however, a double-edged sword. While it unites large parts of India against China, it also sows divisions with India’s large non-Hindu minorities, Muslims and Sikhs most prominently. It also runs the risk of alienating other countries around China in South and South East Asia on which India will depend if it wants to make a stand against China.

Nationalism is not only an issue for India. Communist and totalitarian China is also experiencing a nationalist resurgence — the tentacles of which appeared this summer to have reached the highest echelons of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, manifesting itself in the so-called “wolf warrior” diplomacy, adopted by Chinese diplomats under instructions from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in response to the debate on the coronavirus pandemic and its origins.

A theme that runs through this report is that China is expansionist, India more concerned in protecting what it has. All the cards appeared up to now stacked up in favour of China, but it is quite possible that president Xi has overplayed his hand. Countries near and far, including the US and the EU, India and Australia, were keen to embrace China in the post-Deng Xiaoping era, and to make money from the new opportunities that it presented. Now, the penny has dropped. Everyone has suddenly become aware that China can be a threat. In India, they became aware that it is an existential threat. China-India relations will get worse before there is any possibility they will get better again.

Sino-Indian clashes in Galwan Valley highlight China's expansionist aims

Amrita Bhinder, a lawyer and columnist involved in Indian politics

As the world looks at two of Asia's biggest countries that also happen to be two of the oldest civilizations known to mankind, the difference between India and China couldn't be starker. As the world's largest democracy, India has transformed into a major global voice on issues of people's rights, freedom of speech and equality for all. On the other hand, the People's Republic of China (PRC) remains one of the last bastions of Communism and while it has grown into an economic superpower, its human rights record has come under much criticism.

A Checkered Past

Sino-India relations have a checkered past. The two fought a war in 1962 after which China consolidated its claim to a region called 'Aksai Chin' in the Indian state of Ladakh that it had been intruding upon since the 1950s. In 2017, the two countries were locked in a standoff at the Doklam border over a tri-junction area that is claimed by both China and India's ally, Bhutan. In early June 2020, talks between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army of China saw the two agree to a phased de-escalation of their troops in Galwan Valley, but an [unprovoked attack](#) by Chinese border troops on Indian soldiers on June 15 has become a watershed in India's relations with China.

Stark Differences

While India has honored the sacrifice made by twenty of its soldiers who were killed in fierce clashes with Chinese troops in Galwan Valley, China has not even acknowledged the loss of its soldiers. Unlike China, where conscription has made military service mandatory for all citizens, joining the Indian Army is purely voluntary and does not discriminate on any grounds. When seen in this light, the Chinese Communist Party's disregard of its fallen soldiers speaks volumes. In an unscheduled visit to the frontline, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Indian troops at Leh and hailed their bravery. He lauded them for underscoring India's resolve to be self-reliant and called the presence of women soldiers there "inspirational".

As [Modi reiterated](#) India's commitment to upholding the tenets of democracy, he did not need to explicitly name China when highlighting the difference between *vistaarvaad* (Expansionism) and *vikasvaad* (Developmental growth). Unlike China — which has used its economic power to fuel state-backed projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative that harks back to its imperial tributary system by driving massive investments in over seventy countries — India does not have any expansionist desires. It is pertinent to mention here that as of 2020, China has ongoing [border disputes](#) with eighteen countries that include Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, Nepal, The Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

On the other hand, India is cooperating with neighboring countries, working to uplift the entire region. As things currently stand, it is the duty of every nation to throw their weight behind those who believe in democracy in its truest form. When it comes to Indo-China military fights, most historians forget India's refusal to back down in Doklam and how it dealt China a strategic blow in 1967, achieving a tactical advantage.

Conclusion

Unlike states run by politburo diktat, where strings are pulled by a secret few, democracy works by resting power with the people, to exercise without fear. India believes in a nation of, “*We the people, for the people*”, and Prime Minister Modi has often said on global platforms that India has always been guided by values of integration and unity or ‘[Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam](#)’, which means the entire world is one family. A recent illustration of this sentiment of uniting humanity was visible in how, despite challenges, India was able to manufacture life-saving drugs such as [hydroxychloroquine](#) and [paracetamol](#), making them available to over ninety countries to help combat the coronavirus pandemic. The global pandemic originated in the Chinese province of Wuhan and there has been much international criticism of Beijing for its non-timely disclosure of the [coronavirus outbreak](#). Whether this was willful suppression or plain oversight, China has a lot to answer for.

The Causes of Tension Between India and China

Aditi Bhaduri, *journalist*

Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed on June 15, 2020, the first violent confrontation in 45 years up in the icy peaks of the Himalayas. These soldiers fought each other with clubs, rocks and batons, without firing a single shot. The Indian army reported that twenty of its soldiers were killed. While Beijing did not disclose the number of its dead soldiers, state media has acknowledged casualties. Indian and U.S. intelligence reports have cited at least forty casualties on the Chinese side. A number of prisoners have also been exchanged between the two countries.

Apart from the disputes along the 2,000-mile border, there are geopolitical competitive dynamics.

For India, the increasingly close China-Pakistan alliance and China’s inroads into South Asia — part of India’s neighbourhood — has been an irritant. In 1965, Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam Valley — part of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir — to China. China has used this territory to link its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to the Arabian Sea — part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). On the international stage, China has obstructed U.N. resolutions targeting Pakistan-based, anti-India terrorist groups. It has also blocked India’s entry into multilateral forums like the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group.

The growing Chinese footprint in South Asia — which begins with chequebook diplomacy, but has often ended in [a debt trap](#) for countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives (apart from Pakistan), as well as in Nepal and Bangladesh — ensures a sustained China presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region which constitutes a security threat for India.

Meanwhile, China has been suspicious of any U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean and it was already wary of Washington’s alliances with South Korea and Japan in the Indo-Pacific region. The strengthening business and defense ties between India and the U.S., with the U.S. designating India as a [major non-NATO ally](#), are read in this context in Beijing.

India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Australia, Japan, and the U.S. has further fueled Chinese suspicions of an India-U.S. alliance to contain China's rise.

Given that these trends have been building for a while, the timing of this confrontation is curious.

According to Probal Dasgupta — a former member of India's defense forces and the author of the newly-released book "Watershed 1967: India's Forgotten Victory over China" — China's actions are indicative of its growing weakness. He points to a proverb of Chinese war philosophy which says: "Act strong when you are weak and act weak when you are strong." Therefore, the escalation on the Line of Actual Contact (LAC) must be viewed in this context — a move by Chinese president Xi Jinping to project power and divert attention from his domestic failures, while also testing India to see how far it can go, given the military and economic asymmetry between the two countries.

Another view gaining currency is that China is striking at India as a way to strike at the U.S.

Both India and China believe they are exceptional countries and have their own definitive ideas about their respective, civilizational roles in world affairs. Both have young, aspiring populations who are confident and assertive. While China views the U.S. as the bigger adversary, it views India as a growing threat to its regional aspirations. Nationalist sentiments are on the rise in both countries and the stand-off has only magnified those sentiments.

Indian analysts do not rule out a short war — basing their predictions on China's behavior patterns. Indian media reported a growing consensus within the government that the country should be prepared for a "military response" even though dialogue and talks are ongoing.

What Drives The Conflict Between India And China?

Zahid Ahmed, *Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Australia*

In June 2020, the world was shocked by reports of clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers that led to twenty Indian casualties. It was the most serious clash between the two countries since 1967. While developments continue to unfold following the incident, it is important to examine the history between the two nuclear powers and identify new drivers of tension.

Post-colonial South Asia inherited territorial disputes of the two newly-formed states of India and Pakistan with their neighbors, which included Pakistan, Nepal and China and Pakistan's border demarcation dispute with Afghanistan. Since 1947, these disputes have not been resolved and often lead to bouts of violence between the stakeholders. India has fought three wars with Pakistan and one with China over border disputes.

Because of the nature of the British-led partition of the Indian subcontinent, India and Pakistan were divided along religious lines, thus creating the Muslim-majority country of Pakistan. Their conflict, therefore, has been also influenced by the ideological dimension. With its Pakistan-centric policy, India started its relations with China on a high note through the much-applauded slogan of the Nehru government '*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*' (Indians and Chinese are brothers).

China Emerges As The Chief Threat

However, the dynamics between the two countries swiftly changed following the war in 1962. It was then that India realized that China was a much bigger threat to its national security than Pakistan. This realization was manifested through India's quest to become a nuclear power, which it did in 1998. India has also heavily invested in its military capabilities. According to a report issued by the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, India was the second biggest arms importer, accounting for 9.2% of the world's total imported weapons between 2015-2019.

Since China's victory in the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the India-China conflict was largely dormant. However, there have been occasional border skirmishes since then. China has also been particularly irked by India's support to Tibet's leader, the Dalai Lama. India has, in fact, hosted the Tibetan government in exile since 1959. Nonetheless, the two sides met during 1993-96 and reached the Sino-Indian Peace and Tranquillity Accords. Under these agreements, Indian and Chinese soldiers deployed along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) were not allowed to be armed and were required to hold joint military exercises. So, it was disturbing to learn that Chinese soldiers used nail-studded rods to beat to death Indian soldiers in June.

Leading up to this bloody clash are some important events that demand our attention. In 2017, there was a confrontation involving troops from both sides in Doklam, but luckily there were no casualties. Earlier in 2020, India also revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and it has been argued that this move possibly motivated China to attack Ladakh.

Geopolitical Drivers

Geopolitical developments are the main drivers for conflict between China and India. Since the start of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and expansion in South Asia, differences have been growing between New Delhi and Beijing. India sees this expansion as an encroachment on its sphere of influence. India also views China's ports in the Indian Ocean as detrimental to its strategic interests and security.

However, economic competition between the two countries precedes the BRI. There were already visible signs of Sino-Indian competition for influence in smaller South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. To counter China's growing influence in the region, India has joined the US, Australia, and Japan in a strategic partnership — the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). As its economy grows, China has pursued what has been dubbed as 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy to exert its influence in the region and the BRI is part and parcel of this approach.

While another war is not very likely, a military clash is merely one form that a political competition takes and this competition will be continued by other means given the heightened mistrust between New Delhi and Beijing.

Kashmir Stand-Off Could Deteriorate Sino-Indian Relationship

Raimondo Neironi, *Research Fellow at TWAI — Torino World Affairs Institute (Asia Prospects Programme) and a teaching assistant at Catholic University of the Sacred Heart.*

At a time when Chinese troops killed roughly twenty Indian soldiers in a brawl along the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) — a sort of border which divides Kashmir's Ladakh region, an administrative district of the Jammu and Kashmir state of the Indian federal union, and Aksayqin, the Chinese-administered sector of the area claimed by India's government as part of Ladakh — China-India ties have hit a new and dramatic low. While the incident in Galwan Valley pales in comparison to what China is doing across the South China Sea, border skirmishes in the landlocked Himalaya region have garnered a great deal of global attention.

China's Interest In Aksayqin

For Beijing, the Aksayqin plateau represents an important gateway that links the western part of Tibet to the southwestern Xinjiang province, through an important national highway dating back to 1954. Secondly, it serves as a two-way passage to Gilgit-Baltistan, a Pakistani-occupied area that China was to invest in and build infrastructure within the framework of a 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor'. Thirdly, the Chinese government intends to take over Galwan Valley waters. Most notably, China extended its sovereignty over the Pangong Tso lake and the Shyok river. Seven of South Asia's transboundary and longest rivers originate in the Tibetan plateau and China wants to take advantage of this and build hydropower dams along the mainstreams of these rivers, in order to manage downstream floods and collect hydrological data.

Rising Indian Nationalist Sentiment

While recent clashes are not as serious as what happened in 1962 when China launched a massive attack across the contested Sino-Indian frontier, Chinese analysts have voiced concern over India's response to the attack that occurred in June. Eager to appear tough against China amid soaring nationalist sentiment across the country, India banned TikTok, WeChat and other apps developed by Chinese tech giants. In an [op-ed](#) published in the *Global Times*, political analyst Lou Chunhao accuses India of milking the US-China rivalry for political purposes.

Mutual Interest In De-escalation

Meanwhile, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, has managed to get New Delhi back to the negotiating table and continue diplomatic talks to solve the issue, embracing the 1954 Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence charter. In fact, during the seventeenth meeting of the 'Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs' held on July 24, both sides agreed to swift and complete disengagement of their troops along the LAC, thus de-escalating the situation in accordance with three bilateral agreements signed in

1993, 1996 and 2005. This demonstrates a willingness and interest of both parties to continue consultations over the issue.

Conclusion

The return of the status quo will help allay growing fears of a nightmare scenario in the region, that might entirely destroy the bilateral relationship between the two countries and destabilize the whole region. However, consultations are unlikely to produce any permanent solution for the unsettled border in Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh — the eastern section of the Sino-Indian border. The subject is so sensitive that neither side raised the issue during the last eighteen meetings between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

While Beijing believes the dispute can be managed, but not completely resolved, New Delhi is more optimistic about reaching strategic coexistence with its neighbor — even though China's continued aggressions are inducing doubts among Indian policymakers. Aspirations for peace in this region are bolstered by a subtle line of cooperation, but it remains difficult to predict any bilateral agreement on Kashmir can be reached in the future.

