

INDIA-CHINA: BETWEEN PRE-1962 AND NOW

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Indian Army jawans keep vigil at India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh. | Photo Credit: Ritu Raj Konwar

The [clash between Indian troops and the Chinese PLA at Galwan in 2020](#) and the [recent altercation between troops at Yangtse](#) in Arunachal Pradesh have served to highlight the lingering boundary dispute as well as the complex Line of Actual Control (LAC).

It is tempting to examine the parallels in India-China relations in the 1960s and the current situation along the LAC. Both situations concern the boundary question, although the focus in the 1950s was on the fundamental question of the "territorial dispute" involving the whole of Aksai Chin claimed by India and the whole of NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) claimed by China. Today, however, with the Chinese firmly in occupation of Aksai Chin and India firm in guarding its territorial integrity in Arunachal Pradesh, the immediate issue has moved on to transgressions along the LAC.

The differences in the western sector (Ladakh) are no longer confined to Trig Heights in the Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) area and Demchok in the south as was the case in earlier decades. The Depsang Bulge, Galwan, Pangong Lake and Hot Springs are areas where China is seeking to press expedient claims. Since the Galwan incident, the two sides have disengaged at multiple friction points even as military and diplomatic talks continue to find a way out of the impasse at Depsang and Demchok.

In the middle (central sector), the Barahoti pasture north of Chamoli in Uttarakhand has been at the centre of the dispute for the past seven decades.

In the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh), the international boundary and the LAC are defined by the 1914 McMahon Line, based on the watershed principle. Yet, China seeks to make inroads in the Tawang sector as well as other areas such as the Upper Subansiri region, and further, near the tri-junction with Myanmar.

Traditionally, China has enjoyed advantage in terms of terrain and logistics on the high plateau of Tibet. China has always projected a spurious interpretation of the LAC and shied away from clarifying its position through an exchange of large-scale maps following the one-off exchange of maps two decades ago concerning the middle sector.

Unlike in the past, India is rapidly building its border infrastructure. China has had a headstart in

building its own, yet has the temerity to object to improved logistics on the Indian side, solely to keep intact the asymmetry. There are other similarities and differences compared to the past. Both periods involve contention over frontier tracts which underwent redefinition as the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China came into their own in quick succession in the late 1940s and sought to interpret their geographies and national identities through clear-cut boundary lines. The difference today is that the focus is primarily on the LAC as against the larger boundary dispute even though neither side has given up its extensive territorial claims.

In the 1950s, China had yet to reveal its true bias in favour of Pakistan, including on Kashmir. As ties deteriorated, China's support for Pakistan on Kashmir became self-apparent in the vocal call for self-determination in the 1960s. Today, China openly works in tandem with Pakistan against India's interests to internationalise the issue at the UN.

China's internal vulnerabilities have always cast a shadow on bilateral relations with India. Whether under Mao Zedong or Xi Jinping, Tibet has remained a source of insecurity for China. In the late 1950s, Mao Zedong adopted an aggressive stance towards India as a means of consolidating his leadership in the face of internal challenges and avoiding censure of disastrous political and economic policies. Today, Mr. Xi is facing mounting scrutiny for the dreadful Zero-COVID policy, and growing authoritarianism. The tendency to create external diversions is a common thread.

There are important lessons to be imbibed from the past. In 1962, India was forced to approach the U.S. and other Western countries for military assistance to meet the Chinese challenge. But it was meagre and came too late. In the current phase, India has rapidly inducted new weapon systems albeit with heavy emphasis on *aatmanirbharta* (self-reliance) in defence manufacturing.

The LAC between India and China, not being the result of bilateral negotiations, is frequently open to challenge by either side. There are areas along the LAC that have been patrolled by both sides in the past. The Chinese ingress in Sumdorong Chu valley in the Tawang sector in 1986-87 resulted in close confrontation that lasted eight years. It was only in 1995 that the two sides pulled back, with India relocating its Jaya and Negi posts on the south side of the Hathungla-Lungrola ridgeline. Nobody insinuated then that India was creating a buffer zone on its own territory, so why take that line now in regard to the disengagement already achieved in Ladakh? China encroached on Longju in Upper Subansiri way back in August 1959, yet the government of the day did nothing about it thereafter.

The biggest difference between the situation in the 1960s and now is the political will of the Modi government and the determination of the Indian army to block Chinese patrols, and not just in Yangtse.

Overall, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's endeavour to engage China has been in keeping with India's broader world vision of good-neighbourly and peaceful ties, inclusive growth and development. China's vision is contrarian. It seeks to build a China-centric hierarchy with scant regard for notions of equality and multipolarity.

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