

BORDER DISPUTES WITH CHINA, NEPAL AMID COVID ADD TO INDIA'S WORRIES

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India seems to be facing border problems with two of its neighbours—China and Nepal—while grappling with rising cases of covid-19 at home and a cyclone along its east coast.

India's border challenges are not new. The India-China border problem dates back to the 1962 war. The lack of a clearly demarcated boundary between the two countries continues despite countless rounds of talks. The current tensions have erupted in an area in Ladakh in Kashmir with Indian and Chinese armies bringing in reinforcements into Demchok, Daulat Beg Oldie and around Galwan river as well as Pangong Tso lake in Ladakh, said two people, requesting anonymity. There is also some tension in northern Sikkim.

The current India-China tensions "are a reminder that Chinese aggression is not always rhetorical", said assistant secretary of state for south Asian affairs of the US state department, at an event in Washington on Wednesday.

The India-Nepal boundary issue, too, is decades old. Both countries claim territory that lies at the tri-junction of India, Nepal and China. India and Nepal had both shown Kalapani and Lipulekh in their political maps, but Kathmandu this week brought out a new map that shows a new area, which is Limpiyadhura, within its boundaries.

The trigger for the recent rise in tensions was Kathmandu's objection to India inaugurating a road connecting the Lipulekh pass with Dharchula in Uttarakhand. India said the road lies within Pithoragarh district and will give Indian pilgrims easier access to Kailash Mansarovar. But Nepal's premier KP Sharma Oli said Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura belong to Nepal and vowed to "reclaim" them through political and diplomatic efforts, PTI reported.

On both issues, India has issued measured reactions.

Last week, India's foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said New Delhi "remains committed to the objective of maintaining peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas". Indian army chief Manoj Mukund Naravane said Indian troops have always upheld peace and tranquillity along the frontier.

In a separate statement, the army said incidents along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) happen because of differing perceptions of where the frontier lies.

Indian and Chinese troops had clashed in eastern Ladakh near Pangong Lake on 5 May and in north Sikkim on 8 May. Soldiers on both sides were injured in the incidents, which marked the first major flare-up along the LAC since the 73-day standoff at Doklam in 2017. As it stands, China claims 90,000 sqkm of Indian territory and occupies another 38,000 sqkm in Jammu and Kashmir. Besides, under the boundary agreement of March 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 sqkm of Indian territory in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to China. Former Indian ambassador to China Gautam Bambawale said: "Improvement in transportation and communications have led to the two armies patrolling these border areas better, more frequently. Hence, the possibility of patrols coming face-to-face is greater. This is the dynamics we are seeing. But, there are detailed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to de-escalate such situations and both sides should stick to these."

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