


Winter 11-17-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Roman Muzalevsky, "Sino-Indian Border Disputes in an Era of Strategic Expansions," *Parameters* 51, no. 4 (2021): 37-48, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss4/5>

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## Sino-Indian Border Disputes in an Era of Strategic Expansions

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**ABSTRACT:** The June 2020 clash between the People's Republic of China and India in the disputed Ladakh border area resulted from the strategic expansions of both powers. Like two bubbles expanding in a contained space, these expansions were bound to collide and cause friction. This article explains how the expansions precipitated the incident and might exacerbate border disputes in the future. In pondering implications, it recommends Washington pursue a Eurasia-focused policy embracing the disputed region.

**O**n June 15, 2020, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Indian troops engaged in a fight using fists and clubs close to Patrol Point 14 in the Galwan Valley in the disputed border area of Ladakh in the Himalayas. At least 20 Indian and 45 Chinese soldiers died in the clashes. According to Indian reports, PRC forces crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that separates India-administered Jammu and Kashmir from PRC-administered Aksai Chin.<sup>1</sup> Beijing and Delhi claim these territories in parts or entirety and blamed each other for the incident, the first deadly clash since 1975.<sup>2</sup> The skirmish did not involve the use of firearms, which the powers banned in previous years. Despite an agreement to disengage, and a previous record of withdrawal after similar clashes, the situation has not returned to the status quo ante.<sup>3</sup>

Analysis of the strategic expansions of both powers reveals the larger dynamics which arguably made the June 15 incident inevitable. A strategic expansion involves policies and measures aimed at extending a state's political, economic, and military influence or control within and outside its borders. Such policies and activities are interconnected and mutually reinforcing but are harder to implement in a region riddled with border disputes. The PRC and India are both pursuing

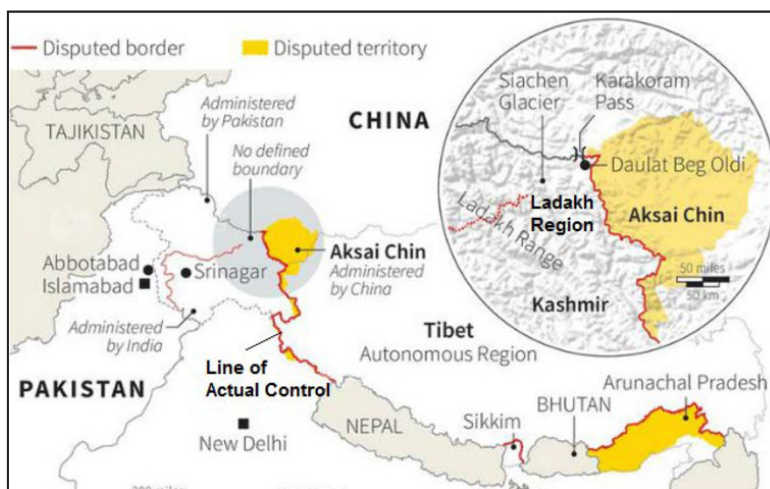
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1. "A Border Dispute between India and China Is Getting More Serious," *Economist*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/05/28/a-border-dispute-between-india-and-china-is-getting-more-serious>.

2. Alyssa Ayres, "The China-India Border Dispute: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, June 18, 2020, [https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-india-border-dispute-what-know?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI4IOj6K7c6gIVkgjICR1AJwmLEAAYASAAEgL-dfD\\_BwE](https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-india-border-dispute-what-know?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI4IOj6K7c6gIVkgjICR1AJwmLEAAYASAAEgL-dfD_BwE).

3. Special Correspondent, "LAC Standoff: India, China Hold Fourth Round of Consultations," *Hindu*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lac-standoff-indian-and-chinese-commanders-hold-talks-on-further-disengagement-in-eastern-ladakh/article32076879.ece>; Nick Reynolds and Sidharth Kaushal, "A Military Analysis of the Sino-Indian Border Clashes," RUSI, June 2, 2020, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/military-analysis-sino-indian-border-clashes>; and Rajesh Roy, "India-China Border Standoff Turns Violent, with 20 Indian Soldiers Dead," *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/india-china-border-dispute-turns-deadly-11592305962>.

strategic expansion policies focused on the disputed Ladakh region and deploying capabilities to shape their geopolitical environments and facilitate their ongoing rise as great powers. The incident and the dispute thus represent the focal points at which the powers' strategic expansions interact. In this case, it does not matter whether the incident was a provocation or an accident, as the conflict's geopolitical premise rooted in the strategic expansions connotes a degree of inevitability.



**Figure 1. Map of disputed borders and territory in the Himalayas (Map courtesy of REUTERS Graphics)<sup>4</sup>**

The notion of strategic expansion is especially illuminating in the context of the border dispute because India and China share the perception that each is a victim of exploitation by foreign powers; each also desires to remedy this legacy. As two of the world's oldest civilizations, both countries seek to regain a status befitting their size, population, and heritage; thus, each places considerable value on "territory, past wrongs and restitution."<sup>5</sup> The "century of national humiliation" in China and the colonization and partition of India reinforce this commitment, with both powers seeking to reconstitute the areas they once controlled and do so within perceived borders so as to right the supposed wrongs caused by outside actors.<sup>6</sup> The related efforts foster an environment conducive to border conflicts, as conceptions of "inherent

4. Alyssa Ayres, "China's Mixed Messages to India," *Asia Unbound* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, September 17, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-mixed-messages-india>. Adapted by the authors.

5. Mohan Malik, *China and India: Great Power Rivals* (Boulder, CO: First Forum Press, 2011), 28.

6. John Garver, "The Unresolved Sino-Indian Border Dispute: An Interpretation," *China Report* 47, no. 2, (2011): 103, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000944551104700204>; Shreya Das, *The Sino-Indian Border Dispute: What Role for the European Union?* (briefing paper, European Institute for Asian Studies, 2014), [https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/EIAS\\_Briefing\\_Paper\\_2014-2\\_Das.pdf](https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/EIAS_Briefing_Paper_2014-2_Das.pdf); and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Wronged by Empire: Post-Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 110.

historical and contemporary greatness” are difficult to reconcile in the case of the contested borders.<sup>7</sup>

The latest border incident has implications for global security, Sino-Indian-Pakistani ties, and the United States, which has been retreating from its global security role over the past few years while increasingly directing its capabilities toward containing the PRC. Having never developed a robust Eurasia-focused policy featuring the Ladakh region, the United States’ ability to formulate a response to the incident has been limited. The strategic expansions of the PRC and India into the disputed Ladakh region (on a micro level encompassing political, economic, and military expansions) also have a bearing on America’s role as a guarantor of global security, which has hinged on its efforts to connect excluded regions to the international system.<sup>8</sup> To shape the strategic expansions of the PRC and India, the United States must develop a policy with a focus on Central and South Asia strategies. Only then can it maintain its role as a global security guarantor in a world order increasingly influenced by the rise of Asian great powers.

### Political Expansion

For India and the PRC, political expansion into the disputed border region of Ladakh refers to an elevated focus on policy making regarding the region at both national and local levels; promotion of the nations’ capacities to control local administrations in the territories under their de facto control by appointing and removing local officials and managing or setting local and trans-regional policy agendas; and actions by the governments to redefine or adjust the political and administrative status of the controlled territories in the disputed region.

In the case of the PRC, political expansion refers to the extension of political influence from the center of the country to its periphery in service of the “Chinese dream.”<sup>9</sup> Beijing defines the dream as achieving a “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by restoring its preeminence and

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7. David M. Malone and Rohan Mukherjee, “India and China: Conflict and Cooperation,” *Survival* 52, no. 1 (February–March 2010): 137, [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396331003612513?journalCode=tsur208&Garver, “Unresolved Sino-Indian Border”; Tsering Topgyal, “Charting the Tibet Issue in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute,” \*China Report\* 47, no. 2 \(2011\): 116, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000944551104700205>; and Brahma Chellaney, “Coming Water Wars: Beware the Future,” \*International Economy\* \(Fall 2009\): 38, \[https://www.international-economy.com/TIE\\\_F09\\\_Chellaney.pdf\]\(https://www.international-economy.com/TIE\_F09\_Chellaney.pdf\).](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396331003612513?journalCode=tsur208&Garver,%20%22Unresolved%20Sino-Indian%20Border%22%3B%20Tsering%20Topgyal,%20%22Charting%20the%20Tibet%20Issue%20in%20the%20Sino-Indian%20Border%20Dispute%22%3B%20China%20Report%2047%2C%20no.%202%20(2011)%20116%2C%20https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000944551104700205;and%20Brahma%20Chellaney,%20%22Coming%20Water%20Wars%20Beware%20the%20Future%22%3B%20International%20Economy%20(Fall%202009)%2038%2C%20https://www.international-economy.com/TIE_F09_Chellaney.pdf)

8. See Roman Muzalevsky, *China’s Rise and Reconfiguration of Central Asia’s Geopolitics: A Case for U.S. “Pivot” to Eurasia* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2015), <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2351.pdf>.

9. Patricia Kim, “Understanding China’s Military Expansion,” Pacific Council on International Policy, September 19, 2019, <https://www.pacificcouncil.org/newsroom/understanding-china%E2%80%99s-military-expansion>.

making it a “fully-developed great power by 2049.”<sup>10</sup> Political expansion supports this “dream” by advancing and consolidating institutions of political and administrative control in peripheral, culturally different, and autonomous areas exhibiting separatist tendencies. The PRC exerts control over the political, cultural, and economic development agendas in these areas, making them adhere to the party’s core values, beliefs, policies, and strategic vision. Xinjiang and Tibet, bordering Ladakh and Aksai Chin, are examples which elucidate Beijing’s sensitivities (and India’s for that matter) when viewed through the prism of the incident and its strategic expansion.

On the one hand, China’s political expansion is an organic process. Beijing now has the capability to extend its political control to areas beyond the “Han core,” something it had struggled with after incorporating Tibet and Xinjiang in 1949.<sup>11</sup> Various threats and challenges also limited maneuverability in advancing national sovereignty claims during the Cold War.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, aspects of the expansion are a directed process. This process has developed because Beijing is pursuing a balanced and secure national economic development by shrinking the gap between the prosperous eastern and poor western regions while building a secure base to project power on its western flank. This dual imperative is critical for the security of the PRC, which perceives advancing separatist forces along its entire frontier from inner Mongolia in the north and Taiwan and Hong Kong in the southeast to Tibet and Xingjian in the northwest. This task is projected to grow in importance as economic growth slows and the elite look for new sources of economic growth, legitimacy, and power.

The perceived US efforts to foment separatism and contain Chinese expansion in the Indo-Asia-Pacific make the western flank even more important to Beijing’s grand strategy. These efforts also make the PRC less restrained regarding its territorial and sovereignty claims. Chinese actions in the disputed region include aims to change India’s strategic calculus regarding Delhi’s unfulfilled role of a counterbalance, push for a reinterpretation of the LAC, and deter India’s regional expansion while securing its own. India’s territorial constitutional changes in August 2019

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10. Kim, “Understanding China’s Military Expansion.”

11. M. Taylor Fravel, “Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China’s Use of Force in Territorial Disputes,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/2008): 83, [www.jstor.org/stable/30130518](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30130518).

12. Aldo D. Abitol, “Causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian War: A Systems Level Approach,” *Josef Korbel Journal of Advanced International Studies* (Summer 2009): 82, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=advancedintlstudies>; and Zhihua Shen and Julia Lovell, “Undesired Outcomes: China’s Approach to Border Disputes during the Early Cold War,” *Cold War History* 15, no. 1 (2015): 89–111, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14682745.2014.932350>.

and military expansion in the disputed areas have only reinforced Beijing's negative perception of India's territorial claims over Ladakh, Aksai Chin, and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>13</sup> The country's political expansion has aggravated India's insecurity, prompting a race for political control in the region, which exacerbated the dispute and culminated in the incident.

Similarly, India's concerns about its sovereignty and China's territorial claims drive its political expansion. At the heart of India's concerns are power asymmetry vis-à-vis the PRC on the Tibet issue, the border disputes, and nuclear capabilities. Delhi considers Tibet a contested buffer state with geopolitical benefits.<sup>14</sup> The region contains 40 percent of the PRC's mineral resources and the world's third-largest freshwater repository.<sup>15</sup> It also provides nations controlling it with major advantages to project power toward the border with India or the rest of the China.<sup>16</sup> Border tensions are exacerbated by the construction of dams on the rivers originating in Tibet as well as the regional expansions of both powers.<sup>17</sup> Beijing's resistance to Delhi's interpretation of the McMahon Line as India's northeastern border with Tibet further aggravates the border disputes.<sup>18</sup>

Like the PRC in Xinjiang and Tibet, India is extending its political influence in the Muslim-dominated Jammu and Kashmir regions by resorting to nationalism, which has become a more potent force under the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party since it gained control of the administration in 2014.<sup>19</sup> In 2019, India's Hindu nationalist government stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its status as an Indian state, breaking it into two territories directly governed by New Delhi.<sup>20</sup> It also divided its eastern Ladakh region into a separate union territory. India's minister of internal affairs then reaffirmed India's claim to Aksai Chin by stating "we are ready to give

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13. Chaowu Dai, "China's Strategy for Sino-Indian Boundary Disputes, 1950–1962," *Asian Perspective* 43, no. 3 (2019): 435–57, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2282990224/fulltextPDF/2C0ED2E7291C4EE6PQ/1?accountid=41510>.

14. Chellaney, "Coming Water Wars," 38; and Malone and Mukherjee, "India and China," 137–58.

15. Hongzhou Zhang, "Sino-Indian Water Disputes: The Coming Water Wars?," *WIREs Water* 3 (March/April 2016): 155–66, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/wat2.1123>.

16. Topgyal, "Charting the Tibet Issue," 119.

17. Ayres, "China's Mixed Messages"; Manuel Vermeer, "War over Water? Tibet, the Sino-Indian Power Play and Potential Consequences for Asia," *ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security*, no. 432 (July 2016), [https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/432\\_Vermeer.pdf](https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/432_Vermeer.pdf); Das, *Sino-Indian Border Dispute*, 9; and Sudha Ramachandran, "India's Worrying Border Infrastructure Deficit," *Diplomat*, June 19, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/indias-worrying-border-infrastructure-deficit/>.

18. Abitol, "1962 Sino-Indian War."

19. Dai, "China's Strategy."

20. Zeba Siddiqui and Fayaz Bukhari, "India, China Clash over Kashmir as It Loses Special Status and Is Divided," *Reuters*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir/india-PRC-clash-over-kashmir-as-it-loses-special-status-and-is-divided-idUSKBN1XA0M9>.

our lives for [Aksai Chin].”<sup>21</sup> Beijing almost certainly factored this statement in any decision to initiate or respond to the actions along the LAC.

Since the regional balance of forces favors China and Pakistan, India views the extension of its political influence in the north as necessary to secure its northern flank while also challenging the PRC’s assertive engagement in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. To that end, India has sought to enhance its engagement with Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal. Its perceived need to catch up has in turn elevated Beijing’s security concerns, making incidents such as the June 15 clash more likely. Sino-Indian and Pakistani-Indian border disputes are dangerous because their unstable interdependence, marked by trilateral perceptions and unequal capabilities, lends itself to a possible armed confrontation involving not two but three nuclear armed states.

### Economic Expansion

The economic expansion of both powers refers to the promotion of economic and development policies in and beyond the disputed border region of Ladakh. Unlike political expansion, which focuses on domestic development within a perceived geopolitical space, economic expansion has a pronounced transregional component supporting the countries’ internal and external expansion. Importantly, the expansion in both cases is meant to shore up state legitimacy, communist or nationalist rule, and the countries’ nationalist economic agendas.<sup>22</sup> These agendas eventually collide in domestic and regional environments, accentuating the border disputes amid the spike in regional economic infrastructure development. The expansions thus serve as sources of tension that spill into border conflicts. Defining how these expansions interact is key to ensuring a smoother reconfiguration of the Western-led global economic order to one potentially dominated by Asian powers in the coming decades.<sup>23</sup>

To fuel its global economic expansion, the PRC uses the Belt and Road Initiative, which entails more than \$1 trillion in infrastructure investments in more than 60 countries (including the regions disputed with India).<sup>24</sup> The initiative’s maritime and land components are linked by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which facilitates Beijing’s Western Development Strategy.

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21. Press Trust of India, “PoK, Aksai Chin Part of J&K; Will Give Life for It: Amit Shah in Lok Sabha,” *Business Standard*, December 5, 2019, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/pok-aksai-chin-part-of-jk-will-give-life-for-it-shah-in-ls-119080600532\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/pok-aksai-chin-part-of-jk-will-give-life-for-it-shah-in-ls-119080600532_1.html).

22. Malone and Mukherjee, “India and China.”

23. Roman Muzalevsky, *Strategic Landscape, 2050: Preparing the U.S. Military for New Era Dynamics* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2017), <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3362.pdf>.

24. Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, “China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative,” Council on Foreign Relations, January 28, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

India increasingly views the PRC's economic expansion in the border region as incompatible with its own, not least due to a growing trade imbalance. India has not joined the Belt and Road Initiative, which has also raised concerns about Beijing's agenda in Myanmar, Nepal, and even Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> India has been apprehensive about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor because it passes west of the Daulat Beg Oldie military base via the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which is disputed by Delhi and Islamabad, and because it legitimizes Pakistan and China's political and economic expansions. Prior to the border incident, Delhi directed domestic companies "to avoid using Chinese equipment to upgrade the 4G networks."<sup>26</sup> Following the border clash, and amid growing economic tensions in the bilateral relationship, it banned the use of Chinese applications and is considering further restrictions on the use of Chinese telecommunications equipment.<sup>27</sup> The economic tensions against the backdrop of the political expansions in the contested areas serve to increase misperceptions and prospects of border incidents.<sup>28</sup> Augmented by the powers' economic expansions in each other's recognized and disputed areas, the economic tensions contributed to the border clash—which, in turn, brought the tensions to a new level.

As Beijing advances economic policies in the southwest and northwest, Delhi leverages its Connect Central Asia policy to redefine the northern periphery and match these economic advances. Several major factors, however, constrain the policy. India has outlined a plan for developing and integrating the union territories with the rest of India, but the disputed region features mountainous terrain and high altitudes, making economic activities difficult to organize and sustain. India also has no border with Afghanistan and would have to rely on Pakistan to unleash the full potential of its regional and transregional economic policies. Finally, India's economy is \$10 trillion smaller than China's economy and could fall further behind absent major reforms.<sup>29</sup> Still, Delhi continues to press forward with economic expansion in the region while strengthening economic, political, and military ties with countries in the Indo-Asia-Pacific, especially Australia, Japan, Vietnam, and the United States.

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25. Kim, "Understanding China's Military Expansion."

26. Tridivish Singh Maini, *China, India and the Galwan Valley Clashes: What Can India Do?* (strategic analysis paper, Future Directions International, 2020), <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/china-india-and-the-galwan-valley-clashes-what-can-india-do/>.

27. Rajesh Roy and Shan Li, "India Bans TikTok, Dozens of Other Chinese Apps after Border Clash," *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/india-blocks-dozens-of-chinese-apps-including-tiktok-following-border-clash-11593447321>; and Ayres, "China's Mixed Messages."

28. Ashley J. Tellis, "Hustling in the Himalayas: The Sino-Indian Border Confrontation," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 4, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/04/hustling-in-himalayas-sino-indian-border-confrontation-pub-81979>.

29. Walter Russell Mead, "India Is a Natural U.S. Ally in the New Cold War," *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/india-is-a-natural-u-s-ally-in-the-new-cold-war-11590600011>.



## Military Expansion

For both countries, military expansion refers to a greater focus on military planning regarding the disputed border area of Ladakh and competing territorial claims, the development of military infrastructure, and the deployment of enhanced military capabilities in the region. These expansions stem from the comprehensive military buildups both powers have been pursuing over the past decade.

China's military expansion is meant to help the country become a world-class military by 2050, enabling it to protect its expanding economic interests, including those in Central and South Asia.<sup>30</sup> Beijing views Ladakh as an inalienable historical territory it must defend to protect its economic expansion while preventing India's expansion north and perceived US encroachment in the east. As a result, the PRC is reevaluating its "Active Defense" approach, seeking to preempt threats of attacks—not just attacks—along its perimeter to deter opponents.<sup>31</sup> Its military planners are also paying more attention to the southwest region and to India.<sup>32</sup>

In recent years, Beijing has significantly upgraded military infrastructure in the disputed region.<sup>33</sup> It has built 58,000 kilometers of railway and road systems, five air bases, and supply hubs across Tibet to improve rapid reaction and counterterrorism capabilities.<sup>34</sup> The network links to several major highways crisscrossing the country—Central Highway, Eastern Highway, Yunnan-Tibet Highway, and Western Highway—and is further connected to the PRC-Pakistan Karakoram Highway and the disputed Aksai Chin region. Aksai Chin is controlled by China and separated from Indian-administered areas of the disputed Ladakh by the LAC. Many of the network's roads run close to or beyond the LAC—areas India considers its territory. To improve military deployments, the Chinese have also extended rail lines close to the Indian border.<sup>35</sup>

During the border conflict with India on June 15, the PRC likely occupied multiple new geographic positions to ensure greater protection of the China National Highway 219 (G219) linking Xinjiang and Tibet and the China National Highway 314 (G314) connecting China to

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30. Kim, "Understanding China's Military Expansion."

31. See M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

32. Antara Ghosal Singh, "What Is China Saying about the China-India Border Stand-Off?," *Diplomat*, June 2, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/what-is-china-saying-about-the-china-india-border-stand-off/>.

33. Shivangi Borah, "Behind Doklam Lies an Uneven Infrastructure Race between China and India," *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy*, no. 14 (Fall 2017), <https://www.csis.org/npfp/behind-doklam-lies-an-uneven-infrastructure-race-between-china-and-india>; and Ayres, "China's Mixed Messages."

34. Das, *Sino-Indian Border Dispute*.

35. Das, *Sino-Indian Border Dispute*.

Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> It may have also done so to prevent India from building its own infrastructure and using “the 255 km Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie road.”<sup>37</sup> Completed in 2019, this road allows for rapid military deployment to the LAC.<sup>38</sup> India’s construction of offshoot roads may have aggravated Beijing’s concerns, triggering the alleged incursions.<sup>39</sup> The PRC then used the territorial gains as “a form of coercive issue linkage,” pressuring India on the “disputed territories to secure concessions” on border-related or non-border-related issues in other geographic areas.<sup>40</sup> China could thus be looking to pressure India to stay away from Nepal and roadbuilding in the eastern sector to prevent Delhi from expanding its influence there.<sup>41</sup> The disengagement, which has involved only select positions abandoned by the Chinese since the clash of June 15, lends credence to this argument.

While India’s regional military expansion has proceeded more slowly than China’s, many projects have been coming online over the past two years, unnerving Beijing.<sup>42</sup> India has completed the construction of most of the 73 roads under the “India-China Border Roads initiative.”<sup>43</sup> The Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie Road now enables Delhi to move military assets close to the contested areas along the LAC—a key change considering the People’s Liberation Army’s own rapid deployment capacity.<sup>44</sup> India’s military was long focused on “insurgency in Kashmir and the Naxalite uprising,” leaving it vulnerable to perceived military threats from China. The PRC’s recent military expansion in Xinjiang, Tibet, and the south has prompted Delhi to increase “manpower for the [country’s] Indo-Tibetan Border Police,” to strengthen the capabilities of its “Eastern Air Command,” and “expand [its] air bases” in the region.<sup>45</sup>

In upgrading its military potential, India has increased the capabilities of its “airmobile 17 Mountain Strike Corps.”<sup>46</sup> Once it completes its military modernization, India could deploy more forces near its border with

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36. Das, *Sino-Indian Border Dispute*.

37. Marcelo Duhalde, Dennis Wong, and Kaliz Lee, “India-China Border Clash Explained,” *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2020, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/world/article/3091480/China-India-border-dispute/index.html>.

38. Duhalde, Wong, and Lee, “India-China Border Clash.”

39. “Border Dispute between India and China”; and Derek Grossman, “Chinese Border Aggression against India Likely Unrelated to Pandemic,” *Diplomat* (blog), RAND, July 6, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/chinese-border-aggression-against-india-likely-unrelated.html>.

40. Reynolds and Kaushal, “Military Analysis.”

41. Singh, “China-India Border Stand-Off?”

42. Reynolds and Kaushal, “Military Analysis.”

43. Borah, “Behind Doklam,” 40.

44. Reynolds and Kaushal, “Military Analysis.”

45. Das, *Sino-Indian Border Dispute*.

46. Reynolds and Kaushal, “Military Analysis.”

the PRC, whose troops are mostly positioned deeper inland.<sup>47</sup> The PRC may have initially sought to alter the status quo in the Galwan Valley by gaining whatever military advantages it could (in complex terrain) in the areas it now controls.<sup>48</sup> After all, India's military expansion into Ladakh could enable it to sustain forward deployment closer to the PRC's borders, thereby eroding some of the PRC's advantages.<sup>49</sup> Pointedly, Colonel Zhang Shuili, a spokesperson for the Chinese military's Western Theater Command, said the PRC had always maintained sovereignty over the Galwan Valley, despite retreating from the area after a war with India in 1962.<sup>50</sup>

India's regional military expansion and attempts to match the PRC in military infrastructure building are predicated on a need to protect itself in a two-front war. The result is an unstable "arms race" dynamic prone to miscalculations of intent and capabilities in the conditions of a security dilemma.<sup>51</sup> India's relatively more acute threat perceptions, as well as a sense of injury and resentment against the PRC, exacerbate this dilemma.<sup>52</sup> With both powers now possessing the capacity to wage large-scale war in the disputed area, this dynamic is even more menacing in terms of its risks and implications.

## Implications

For decades, the western frontiers of the PRC and the northern frontiers of India were out of reach for both countries, but now ongoing expansions are threatening the status quo. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the disputed Ladakh, where both nations are expected to act more assertively as their strategic expansions leave them less room to maneuver. Absent a mutually agreed-upon modus operandi, the powers risk raising the bar of acceptable levels of violence—a dangerous prospect considering their status as nuclear-armed states. The region's terrain will influence decisions to initiate, sustain, freeze, or end a confrontation. A conventional or nuclear confrontation is not inconceivable and awareness of the risks might facilitate

47. Frank O'Donnell, *Stabilizing Sino-Indian Security Relations: Managing the Strategic Rivalry after Doklam* (paper, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/06/21/stabilizing-sino-indian-security-relations-managing-strategic-rivalry-after-doklam-pub-76622>.

48. Reynolds and Kaushal, "Military Analysis"; and Tellis, "Hustling in the Himalayas."

49. Reynolds and Kaushal, "Military Analysis."

50. Niharika Mandhana, Rajesh Roy, and Chun Han Wong, "The Deadly India-China Clash: Spiked Clubs and Fists at 14,000 Feet," *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/spiked-clubs-and-fists-at-14-000-feet-the-deadly-india-china-clash-11592418242>; and "Border Dispute between India and China."

51. Jonathan Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 141; and Abitol, "1962 Sino-Indian War," 76.

52. Tien-sze Fang, *Asymmetrical Threat Perceptions in India-China Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198095958.001.0001/acprof-9780198095958>; Neville Maxwell, "Why the Sino-Indian Border Dispute Is Still Unresolved after 50 Years: A Recapitulation," *China Report* 47, no. 2 (2011): 71–82, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/000944551104700202>; and Malik, *China and India*, 45.

a more effective mechanism to manage the border tensions. Both parties should signal clear intentions and avoid misperception traps that could invite further provocations and land grabbing. These actions are critical because both countries operate in dissimilar political environments and differ in their abilities to control national sentiment during conflict.

The border incident and conflict will prompt the PRC and India to adjust regional military balances and relations with neighboring countries, foreign powers, and institutions in response to each other's regional advances. Both will likely increase defense spending in the Ladakh region and adjoining areas, partially as an extension of growing military spending trends. Both will also boost engagement with neighbors along the shared perimeter to secure political, economic, and military advantages. Finally, both will reexamine their roles in multilateral institutions and adjust their relationships with regional and global powers to balance each other's strategic expansions.

The United States may try to use the border conflict to draw India into a strategic alliance explicitly opposing the PRC. India is unlikely to embrace the idea, instead positioning itself as an independent and self-sufficient power, drawing on its growing capabilities and historical legacy as a nonaligned movement leader during the Cold War. At that time, Delhi faced a choice of aligning with either the United States or the Soviet Union but chose to chart its own path and, just like Beijing, has treated the dispute on a bilateral basis. India appears wary of causing misperceptions in the PRC's calculus regarding a strategic partnership with Washington and is likely to opt for a soft balancing.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, India's foreign policy approach, rooted in strategic autonomy, is becoming "more nuanced, more flexible and adaptable" as it comes increasingly under strain "because of the rise of a realist strand of thinking" driven by the rise of the PRC.<sup>54</sup> This strain presents an opening for the United States to pursue a strategic relationship with India and provides a counterbalance to China's advances in the Indo-Asia-Pacific and beyond. Ultimately, the United States should develop a robust policy on Ladakh involving a series of economic, political, and military initiatives in Central and South Asia. This approach will help Washington influence the strategic expansions of both powers while serving as a credible global security guarantor and integrator in the increasingly changing world order.

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53. Amy Kazmin and Don Weinland, "Trump's Embrace of Modi Stokes India-China Stand-off in Himalayas," *Financial Times*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/dd253671-ee10-4e51-b9c0-c3fa9c2134e4>.

54. Deepa Ollapally, "India: The Ambivalent Power in Asia," *International Studies* 48, no. 3-4 (2013): 201, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0020881713485009>.

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