China, India and the Galwan Valley Clashes: What Can India Do?

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Key Points

- The escalation of tensions between India and China, which have led to the deaths of 20 soldiers, is likely to dent the bilateral relationship significantly.

- Statements from both sides indicate that tensions are not likely to die down easily, with both sticking to their stated positions.

- Strengthening strategic ties with the US cannot cover up for the fact that India needs to make up a lot of ground in the strategic and economic spheres to reduce its inequalities in relation to China.

- India needs to strengthen its economic ties with its neighbours in South Asia and countries elsewhere that seek to reduce their dependence on China.

- India’s simplistic media narrative, which whips up ultra-nationalist sentiment, does not serve any useful purpose.

Summary

Tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC, the common disputed border between China and India) in the Ladakh region (twenty Indian military personnel died in violent clashes with Chinese troops in Ladakh’s Galwan area, along the LAC) skyrocketed on 15 June. The incident came days after the army chief General M.M. Naravane stated that both sides were moving towards de-escalation.

The last deaths of Indian soldiers at the LAC were in 1975, while a violent clash at the Nathu La border area occurred in 1967. The recent border standoff, which has lasted for 40 days, is...
one of the longest recorded. In 2017, the Doklam standoff, which lasted for two months, began when China began to construct a road through Doklam Plateau, and Bhutan protested. India stepped in because that road could have provided China the ability to gather intelligence about Indian troops positioned around the area.

### Clash in the Galwan Valley

On June 16, India’s army said 20 of its soldiers had been killed in clashes with Chinese troops at a disputed border site, in a major escalation of a weeks-long standoff between the countries.

**Analysis**

**Official Reactions**

Reacting to the event, the Indian Government stated that China had ‘departed’ from the consensus to respect the LAC in the Galwan Valley. China, on the other hand, stated that
India had violated the consensus by illegally crossing the border twice and carrying out provocative attacks on Chinese soldiers, resulting in ‘serious physical clashes’.

China, too, is reported to have suffered casualties; both India and China have confirmed that and the state-owned Chinese media has warned India to exercise restraint. In a tweet, the editor of the Global Times stated:

> Based on what I know, Chinese side also suffered casualties in the Galwan Valley physical clash. I want to tell the Indian side, don’t be arrogant and misread China’s restraint as being weak. China doesn’t want to have a clash with India, but we don’t fear it.

On 17 June, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that India wanted peace, but that it was prepared for war. Senior Chinese officials also called for restraint.

**Why the Recent Events Came As a Surprise**

What has surprised observers of India-China relations are not just the clashes between their troops after they had supposedly disengaged, but the fact that it has happened barely a year after the leaders of both countries held a high-profile meeting at Mahabalipuram in October 2019. Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have met on eighteen occasions since Modi came to power in 2014. At Mahabalipuram and at a Summit held at Wuhan, China, in 2018, both sides agreed to maintain peace at the borders; it was believed that a Doklam-like situation would not arise again. Since 1993, six agreements have been signed with similar objectives.

It would be pertinent to analyse the reactions not just of the public, but also strategic commentators in India with regard to the current events in order to determine if those are predictable.

**Boycott of Chinese Goods**

On social media, there have been numerous calls to boycott Chinese goods, but such a campaign had been started to stop purchase of Chinese products after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such calls have been made in the past as well, but a dramatic decision is unlikely, although India has taken some steps to place restrictions on foreign direct investment from China. That step was taken before the current clashes, however. Interestingly, a rail project connecting Delhi and Meerut (in Uttar Pradesh state), was awarded to a Chinese company, Shanghai Tunnel Engineering Company (STEC) in the midst of the tensions between both countries. Some commercial associations have backed a ban on Chinese goods, as have some ministers in the Modi Government. Some public surveys have also backed a ban on Chinese goods, while calmer voices have called for a more reasoned approach.

Former Indian PM, H.D. Deve Gowda, criticised suggestions for boycotting Chinese goods, saying, ‘Its implications are deep. We should be guided by pragmatism.’ Several commentators have also argued that India’s dependence on China should be reduced
sector-wise, but calls for a blanket ban are economically senseless and demonstrate India’s lack of self-confidence.

As of now, the Indian Government has taken two steps. It has directed the state-owned telecom companies, BSNL and MTNL, to avoid using Chinese equipment to upgrade their 4G networks. Second, India may make it compulsory for e-commerce organisations to state clearly whether the products that they sell are manufactured in India or not.

Another point being flagged on both electronic and social media is that this is not the India of 1962, a reference to the Sino-Indian war of that year during which Chinese forces overran Indian troops, who fought under very tough conditions; it left a scar on the collective Indian psyche that has endured.

A section of strategic analysts argue that China’s aggressive behaviour towards India is a result not merely of India’s building of a road along the strategically important Galwan Valley (although that could be the immediate cause), but a number of other geopolitical and economic factors, including India’s changing approach vis-à-vis Taiwan, and its increasing proximity towards the United States.

**Global Factors**

At the global level, China has drawn criticism from numerous countries other than the US, including those that have close economic ties to Beijing, due to its role in spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. India, on the other hand, is strengthening ties not just with the US, but with countries like Australia (in a virtual meeting between the PMs of both countries, there was emphasis on a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”), and Vietnam. India is likely to play a larger role not just in the Indo-Pacific region, but globally, too. It has also been argued that India’s decision to back an enquiry into the origins of the virus and its vehement backing for a probe into the origins of the virus has not gone down well with China. India, as the World Health Organisation Chair, is also likely to make Taiwan a member of that organisation, a position that it lost when China used its influence to isolate the country internationally. Recently, furthermore, US President Donald Trump spoke about the need to reform the G7 grouping and called for Australia, India, South Korea and Russia to be included in it. China did not take kindly to that call even as India welcomed it.

Another crucial factor is the dynamic within South Asia. Beijing is taking advantage of India’s recent tensions not just with Pakistan, but also Nepal, to pressure New Delhi. India’s tensions with Nepal were heightened after Kathmandu included territories that it disputed with New Delhi in its official maps. On 12 June 2020, Nepalese border guards opened fire on a group of Indians, killing one person and injuring two others.

Finally, domestic pressures which Xi Jinping has faced in recent months could have exacerbated the situation. Some of those pressures include the country’s economic slowdown and the international criticism that it faces due to its mishandling of the pandemic, which have resulted in the Chinese president trying to change the narrative.
While much effort has been spent trying to determine the reasons for China’s actions, some analysts note that, with China, it is best not to make assumptions and avoid reaching simplistic explanations.

Future Moves

What are the possible steps which India can do to counter China’s aggressive moves in the long run? Some analysts suggest that strengthening strategic ties with the US is essential but needs to be calibrated; New Delhi needs to carefully determine the tangible benefits of those ties. Second, in future, India should not try to make sense of China’s moves and believe that summits like those at Wuhan and Mahabalipuram will pave the way for a better understanding. New Delhi needs to avoid lurching between extremes.

India also needs to be less predictable, and to focus on its strategic and economic goals without making a fuss. Its partnerships need to be targeted and there needs to be an increasing focus on reviving its economy. It is pertinent to note that the media and even sections of the strategic community are excessively reactive, and, while there are some very high-quality researchers working on China, some of whom predicted events such as Galwan Valley, more time and energy needs to be invested in understanding the domestic politics of China and understanding Chinese strategic thinking.

It remains to be seen whether the tensions between Beijing and New Delhi will reduce over the next few days, but India certainly has its task cut out if it wants to emerge stronger. There needs to be a greater focus on alliances, and not just with the US. It is also important that India tries to bring ties with some of its neighbours in South Asia back on track. There can be no one way of dealing with China; a multi-layered approach is needed to deal with Beijing.

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