



Strategic stalemate: Indo-China border dispute & future of Bilateral relations post-Galwan

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Abstract

The Indo-China border dispute maintains its status as one of Asia's longest-standing and most complicated issues because of historical uncertainties and mistrust between both sides. The June 2020 Galwan Valley clash became a major landmark in India-China relations because it was India and China's deadliest incident since they postured opposite each other for 40 years. This research investigates the strategic dimensions of the Galwan incident followed by the developing military and diplomatic dispute along the Line of Actual Control. The study looks at how history shaped this dispute and how security aspects and rising military activity transformed the Himalayan border. This research examines the decision-making processes of India and China while exploring the stalled disengagement efforts and how their changing geopolitical dynamics affect them through increased QUAD cooperation from India and increasing regional influence from China. The increase in distrust between the nations continues to outpace their shared economic interests, which reduces genuine chances for reconciliation. This paper evaluates the current situation using a multidisciplinary approach to present it as a "strategic stalemate" which maintains dangerous escalation risks, yet both countries prioritise diplomatic stability to avoid actual conflict. The research proposal recommends specific confidence-building initiatives which would enable long-term stability through effective tension management.

Keywords: Galwan Valley clash, Line of Actual Control (LAC), Geopolitical dynamics, Confidence-building initiatives

Introduction

This Indo-China border dispute represents a prolonged geopolitical conflict between Asia's most populous nations, which possess nuclear weapons capabilities as neighbouring states. The territorial dispute originated from conflicting perspectives about historical borders that developed during the period of colonisation. The main points of disagreement between India and China exist throughout the 3,488-kilometre Line of Actual Control spanning three geographic sections: Ladakh/Aksai Chin in the West, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand in the middle, and Arunachal Pradesh in the East. Throughout history, the 1962 Sino-Indian War put an end to Chinese military dominance, leading to an atmosphere of recurring suspicions that drove strategic planning between both nations. (Liu, 2021) ^[1]. Despite numerous bilateral pacts, including peace and tranquillity and confidence-building agreements signed in 1993 and 1996, the LAC has experienced continuous tensions. The contested region between countries has no shared border definition, which causes continuing military standoffs between border forces through confrontational border incidents. The countries use dialogue through diplomacy and military channels to sustain minimal stability yet pursue infrastructure development at their border, which creates additional military positions leading to potential conflict points. The June 2020 Galwan Valley confrontation between Indian and Chinese military forces shifted Indo-China diplomatic processes while establishing new conditions for their military dispute management. For the first time since 1975, India lost soldiers in battle during direct People's Liberation Army (PLA) confrontations against the Indian Army, reaching a minimum number of 20 Indian deaths combined with unknown casualties of Chinese personnel. (Singh, 2020) ^[2]. The conflict erupted during a period of diplomacy when both sides attempted to lower tensions because the involved border region seemed

relatively calm. Utilising stone tools, iron rods and wooden clubs revealed a contradictory reality because advanced geopolitical combat tactics witnessed the use of basic weapons and created extra uncertainty during the situation. After this incident, each nation sent their armies to deploy more personnel construct sophisticated defence structures and intensify their political relationships. Public feelings alongside foreign policy frameworks and diplomatic relations developed an escalating pattern due to this incident. The diplomatic relations between both nations deteriorated further when India launched a ban against multiple Chinese mobile applications while China simultaneously became more aggressive in border policies and denied responsibility for the conflict. This paper examines the current strategic deadlock following Galwan as it studies the probable evolution of Indo-China relations among the complexities of modern global dynamics. (Pandey, 2020) ^[3] This paper provides a detailed evaluation of the roots of the historical dispute and military and diplomatic strategies in use today alongside geopolitical ramifications affecting Asia and global regions. Both strategic examination and policy analysis guide this study because it seeks to discover methods to reduce tensions while preventing future conflicts to establish stable regional conditions.

Historical Underpinnings and Strategic Stakes in the Indo-China Border Dispute

The Indo-China border dispute exists as a sophisticated problem with multiple factors stemming from unclear historical events and colonial territory mapping alongside different nationalist interpretations. Strategic calculations of India and China are heavily influenced by the events of the 1962 Sino-Indian War together with the subsequent border agreement negotiations. The ongoing border dispute focuses on three main areas: Aksai Chin within the western sector,

Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector, and regions located in the middle sector, which includes Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The ongoing conflict between India and China is primarily caused by both sides having different perceptions about the LAC and failing to create an agreed boundary due to lacking official documentation. A total of seven decades passed between 1947 and 1962 before open warfare materialised in this enduring geopolitical rivalry between China and India. (Sandhu, 1972)^[4]

Overview of the 1962 War

The brief Sino-Indian War of 1962 introduced irreversible changes to relations between the nations of India and China. The western dispute centred on Aksai Chin belonging to Jammu and Kashmir, according to India, before China completed Route 219 to connect Xinjiang and Tibet in the 1950s. China disputed the McMahon Line drawn between British India and Tibet in 1914 by labelling it a colonial act, thus asserting ownership of most of Arunachal Pradesh, which it named South Tibet. Under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, India started the policy of "forward deployment", which involved establishing military outposts across disputed zones to assert sovereignty but did not have enough resources or strategic planning backing. China saw this action as hostile and used the chance of mounting combined military attacks in October 1962 against India on its western and eastern territories. Chinese army forces rapidly defeated the Indian armed forces and seized control of regions in Arunachal Pradesh as well as Ladakh. In November 1962 China unilaterally declared a ceasefire before withdrawing from the eastern sector, yet Aksai Chin remained under their control. (Sandhu, 1972)^[4]. This moment left permanent damage to the Indian defence strategy together with public awareness of national security. The Indian people discarded Asian solidarity ideals which followed the presidential dreams of Nehru. This caused the Indian military to reinforce its northern borders and develop local defence industry capabilities. The conflict enabled China to establish its territorial authority in important regions while flawlessly displaying its capacity to resort to military power. After this conflict started a prolonged diplomatic deadlock between these two nations which persisted until the late 1980s.

Border Agreements (1993, 1996, 2005, and others)

After a lengthy diplomatic abstention and the end of war activities, both nations implemented expanded engagement through diplomatic meetings together with confidence-building initiatives. The border maintained its peaceful demeanour beginning in the late 1980s up until today, despite an unsuccessful attempt to solve the issue permanently. Bilateral agreements were signed to establish procedures which controlled tensions between the countries and instituted dialogue frameworks as well as conflict management protocols. The 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control successfully recognised the operational boundary which functioned as the LAC even though the document did not establish its legal status. The agreement demanded both sides maintain their current positions while abstaining from military aggression alongside refusing any military escalation. The 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the LAC advanced by specifying policies for troop withdrawals and

operational policies and systems for dealing with pending operational issues. (Agreement..., 1996). The LAC firearm limitation rolled out in the treaty caused armed forces to utilise close combat tools instead of firearms during the 2020 Galwan conflict. Through the 2005 Protocol on Modalities for Implementation of Confidence Building Measures, border personnel received formal procedures to enhance communication through flag meetings and hotlines. The document stressed peaceful resolution methods while developing procedures to stay clear of military concentrations near the LAC. The 2005 Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question established a comprehensive political document with a solid foundation. The agreement required addressing both strategic needs and local community welfare as well as mutual concerns when settling border disputes. These agreements failed to succeed primarily because states interpreted the Line of Actual Control differently and did not trust each other politically. Post-Galwan has caused serious strain in those mechanisms since China became more assertive and India strengthened its ties with Western powers.

Strategic Importance of Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh

These two regions hold vital strategic and geographical worth which exceeds basic questions of territorial nationalism. The strategic position linking military supply routes supports the governance interests and geopolitical schemes of both China and India in these regions. Aksai Chin, a high-altitude desert region of around 37,000 square kilometres, lies at the tri-junction of India, China, and Pakistan. The strategic value of Aksai Chin is crucial for China because the G219 highway functions as a vital linkage between Tibet and Xinjiang regions. China uses this area to protect its western frontier while advancing military forces throughout its western theatre command. Aksai Chin's loss would create internal disruptions within China that would lower China's capability to regulate ethnic disturbances in Tibet and Xinjiang. Aksai Chin belongs to the former Jammu and Kashmir princely state; thus, it remains constitutionally attached to Ladakh territory. The territorial control of India in this area provides substantial surveillance capabilities for monitoring Chinese departments within the Karakoram Highway region. Aksai Chin stands close to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which creates strategic complications among China, India, and Pakistan since Chinese investment through CPEC has amplified regional security challenges. Arunachal Pradesh, on the other hand, holds immense strategic and political importance for India. Arunachal Pradesh occupies 83,000 square kilometres of Indian territory, which extends the northeastern defensive buffer and controls vital passes including Bum La and Se La that connect through the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, known as the "Chicken's Neck". Mainland India links to its northeastern states through this essential narrow path; thus, security maintenance remains a priority. Arunachal Pradesh belongs to China because of its historical connections with Tibet. (Cannon, 2024)^[6]. The monitor identifies Tawang, along with its prominent Tibetan Buddhist monastery, as an important religious and cultural heritage of Tibet located within South Tibetan territory. The region stands essential

for China because it helps to undermine India's position as a protector of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan government-in-exile. Increased Chinese authority in this region would create instability in India's control of its northeastern states and enhance rebel organisations operating within the area. (Jacob, 2020) ^[7] The defence of Arunachal Pradesh by India aims to safeguard the integrity of the nation and guard the northeastern border while preserving Buddhist cultural heritage from the Indian subcontinent. India's defence organisation has placed Arunachal front and centre in its strategic agenda, as evidenced by its investment in the Sela Tunnel together with military airstrip network development.

The Galwan Valley Clash (2020): A Flashpoint in the Himalayan Highs

Sequence of Events

A June 2020 violent battle at the Galwan Valley represented the most severe incident between Indian and Chinese forces since the 1962 war. The western sector of LAC borders Galwan Valley, which lies at the junction point of the Shyok and Galwan waters in eastern Ladakh. Indian intelligence reports showed Chinese troops constructing new facilities and erecting camps in areas that India considered to be their side of the Line of Actual Control starting in early May 2020. The two military leaders of both sides met on June 6, 2020, to initiate a disengagement method. A violent stand-off happened during Indian military patrols that checked disengagement progress in Galwan on June 15 at night. Colonel Santosh Babu, along with the troops from the 16 Bihar Regiment, encountered Chinese forces after they allegedly built up new positions in the valley during a supposed withdrawal process. The violence escalated into vicious sword-like battles since all parties had signed a firearm ban. However, they fought using iron rods and clubs with barbed wires and stone weapons. Several hours of combat occurred within the dangerous high-altitude region exceeding 14,000 feet. Intense hand-to-hand combat occurred chaotically because it produced major damage to both sides fighting in the valley. (Reuters, 2024)

Casualties and Military Implications

The Indian government officially verified the passing of twenty soldiers together with Colonel Babu. The violence claimed numerous casualties while most of the survivors became trapped in freezing conditions when they fell into the Galwan River. Since the Kargil War of 1999, the casualty numbers from the border conflict became the highest total that India suffered. India bestowed gallantry medals upon soldiers who fought in the battleground posthumously and presented their highest distinction, the Maha Vir Chakra, to Colonel Babu. When China took no position regarding casualties, it triggered worldwide guesses about the extent of Chinese military losses. The official Chinese confirmation about the deaths of four soldiers emerged eight months after the incident through a February 2021 announcement, although Indian sources suggested the Chinese fatalities exceeded 35–45 casualties. Chinese silence regarding the military losses received wide interpretation across the world as a move to maintain domestic control and prevent angry public reactions. (ThePrint, 2025) The Galwan military confrontation triggered India to implement substantial alterations in its defensive deployments along the Line of Actual Control. A rapid increase of military forces took place along the eastern

Ladakh sector. (Teo, 2020) ^[10] The military forces of India established a 50,000-strong troop increase alongside fast-tracked development of border facilities such as operational roads and bridges and military airfields. The Indian Air Force launched increased flights from its neighbouring air bases and relocated advanced weapon systems closer to the border region. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) on the Chinese side enhanced their positions by adding more troops as well as air defence systems and heavy machinery. The Chinese military erected long-term buildings inside disputed areas. This clash destroyed previous trust-building initiatives and diplomatic procedures, which now lead both nations toward an ongoing confrontation. (The China Story, 2020)

Domestic Responses in India and China

The Galwan clash caused India to experience unprecedented national sadness and anger. Across India, various vigils took place as the media presented the deceased soldiers as heroes who defended national sovereignty. The Indian government granted complete freedom to its military forces for action along the Line of Actual Control with all implications. The Indian government implemented a ban on more than 200 Chinese smartphone applications, including TikTok, along with WeChat and PUBG, because of national security risks. (The Economic Times, 2021) The bans served as indicative signs of India's wider efforts to break economic and digital connections with China. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took an unexpected trip to Leh in July 2020 primarily to uplift military morale and demonstrate countrywide determination. The key China-related part of his message, "the age of expansionism is over", served as a clear signal of warning to Beijing. The incident stimulated demands for clear policy announcements about China relations and military strategies, yet the government balanced nationalistic messages with a cautious foreign policy approach. At the beginning of the clash, China kept its state-controlled media outlets from reporting about it. (Times of India, 2021) Chinese officials recognised their casualties later on but presented the incident as evidence of PLA soldiers taking heroic measures for restraint. Chinese citizens showed both sorrow and fury, yet the state directed public opinion to depict India as an attacking force that provoked China. Chinese authorities celebrated PLA families who lost soldiers by giving them posthumous honours while releasing documentaries which glorified their service and sacrifices. The media coverage introduced specific boundaries to control levels of nationalist emotions that could escalate into unmanageable public frustration. (Telegraph India, 2021) ^[17] The Galwan conflict transformed into a unifying national force in India, whereas China used it as part of its official patriotic education programme. The handling of the same incident demonstrates the fundamental difference between the political systems as well as media control measures which exist in these two nations.

Impact on Public Opinion and Nationalism

The Galwan clash catalyzed a sharp surge in nationalist sentiment in both countries, though in distinctly different ways. The occurrence in India intensified Chinese distrust among the general population and triggered discussions about protecting national independence along with securing the homeland. People actively boycotted Chinese products

while economic independence rose to prominence throughout public discussions. Border infrastructure received increased funding alongside demands for defence modernisation as a result of this incident. Indian people exhibited an extreme decline in their attitudes toward China according to public sentiment surveys. (Firstpost, 2021) ^[14] A Pew Research study conducted in 2021 demonstrated that Chinese public opinion lost favour with more than 70% of Indian people, indicating a substantial rise from preceding surveys. The Galwan Valley turned into a manifestation of Indian perseverance following the model of the Kargil conflict from the 1990s. The Chinese government strategically utilised the incident to enhance cultural narratives regarding both national territory defence and military force strength. (CPPR, 2020) The state media of China adopted a continuous message that the country would never surrender any territory while demonstrating strong military force against any offensive actions. The Chinese military deaths became a part of China's enduring story about national strength, which linked back to the century of national shame and the Communist Party's pledge for national progress. China's public opinion displayed both eagerness and caution toward confronting nuclear-equipped India since many netizens doubted the advantages of such an encounter. Such repression demonstrates how the government shows great attention to dissenting domestic opinions regarding foreign policy decisions. The clash at Galwan introduced an enduring psychological barrier between the people of India and China which will last indefinitely. The restoration of diplomatic trust through diplomatic efforts encounters another obstacle due to public doubt about the situation. Short-term political advantages from nationalism threaten to make the task of reaching compromises much harder. (JTMS, 2022) Political costs would arise from any perceived concession accomplished by both leaderships.

Frozen Frontlines: The Strategic Stalemate in Indo-China Relations Post-Galwan

Since the Galwan Valley clash occurred, the Indo-China border has experienced an extended and tense standoff together with increasing military force and swift development projects as well as stalled diplomatic negotiations. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) now shows a permanent military presence from both nations, which resulted in creating this new standard of high-altitude militarisation. (LKY School of Public Policy, 2022) The Galwan incident led India to intensify troop numbers, introduce enhanced monitoring technology and reinforce infrastructure across Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The Indian government accelerated fast-track development of vital strategic projects which include the Darbuk–Shyok–DBO road and the Sela Tunnel along with forward airbases. The Western Theatre Command of China has carried out the construction of several new military garrisons together with dual-use airfields and all-weather roads for achieving logistical supremacy. (Press Xpress, 2024a) Multiple talks aimed at disengagement continue without reaching any conclusion. The Corps Commander-level meetings at Moldo-Chushul since 2020 brought partial disengagement results to the Pangong Tso and Gogra sectors, but the Depsang Plains and Demchok locations continue to have unresolved conflicts. (Jash, 2022) ^[23] LAC interpretation differences between India and China prevent an expected

restoration of pre-2020 positions during the next few years. Frequent diplomatic meetings within the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) and special representatives' meetings have maintained dialogue and stopped tensions from worsening. The platforms developed minimal progress in solving underlying issues due to India's close alliance with the U.S. through QUAD and the resulting strategic uncertainties between competing powers. China maintains an aggressive foreign policy while India stays firm about its territorial sovereignty, which makes both countries less flexible during talks. This territorial standoff exists as well as strategic and psychological elements that result from evolving global partnerships together with growing historical disputes. Both armies have accepted the position through continued standoff, which weakens established confidence-building mechanisms and creates a permanent defensive presence. Public declarations of peace and stability fail to conceal the active role the Indo-China border plays in Asian geopolitical affairs because deterrence now dominates diplomatic approaches.

Geopolitical Implications: The Expanding Strategic Chessboard

Bilateral tensions between India and China worsened after Galwan, and this strategic realignment affected the regional mechanics throughout the Indo-Pacific area. Strategic reform by India demonstrates itself through its increasing partnership with democratic allies under Quad security cooperation, which brings together the United States, Japan, and Australia. The QUAD increases its focus on maritime defence along with tech partnerships and logistics network security in ways that project unified resistance against Chinese aggressive manoeuvres. (Saran, 2024) ^[26] The Indian military's involvement in Malabar exercises, along with its IPEF membership and defence treaty upgrades with America through COMCASA and BECA, represents Indian strategic growth in the region. Defence cooperation, together with intelligence sharing between the United States and India as part of their strategic partnership, has displayed exponential growth, while their joint interest spans from cybersecurity to critical infrastructure protection. India strengthens its bilateral ties with both ASEAN nations and Europe through enhanced relations with France as well as the EU to offset growing Chinese geographical expansion. (Jaffery, 2025) ^[22] China has intensified its strategic alliances with Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which reduces Indian sovereignty claims in Gilgit-Baltistan. CPEC represents a dual purpose which combines economic development alongside China's continuing geopolitical authority in South Asia. (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2025) ^[19] China has expanded its military operations and economic cooperation with Eurasian and African nations through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to enhance its strategic power. The maritime sphere sees China maintaining leadership through its modern military expansion alongside aggressive activities in the South China Sea that affect international maritime rights and naval freedom. (Through infrastructure developments in South Asian bases like Djibouti, Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka), China seems to be implementing a strategic plan for Indian containment through a "string of pearls". Such moves in the environment of rising Indo-China tensions make the region less stable for regional

harmony. (Ali, n.d.) The Indo-Pacific security framework exhibits three dominant features of flexible alliances combined with deterrence strategies and infrastructure race competition, which represent a transition beyond traditional power balance dynamics toward adaptive strategic stability.

Future of Bilateral Relations: Between Strategic Caution and Selective Cooperation

At this stage of mistrust, India and China maintain a careful diplomatic relationship through which they practise deterrence alongside limited cooperative action. Despite their deteriorating military relationship, India and China maintain economic ties by achieving new trade records between nations. Chinese entities maintain their position as leading trading partners for India, while Indian industries heavily depend on Chinese technologies alongside electronic products and pharmaceutical raw materials known as APIs (active pharmaceutical ingredients). The economic ties between these nations result in a contradictory situation because strategic tensions have increased, yet separating systems seems unfeasible. The BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), together with the G20, serve as neutral platforms where India and China can pursue cooperation on environmental stability and financial assistance alongside counterterrorism measures and disease response programs. Through these international forums, both nations can build constructive relationships while remaining distant from direct problems in their bilateral relationship. Soft power activities coupled with norm-setting capabilities drive these institutions as channels in this era of increasing world multipolarity. (Ganiger, 2024) ^[20] The multi-state engagements between these two countries possess limited effectiveness concerning the advancement of substantive trust reduction for major territorial and strategic disagreements. The upcoming phase will most probably exist through wise practical methods. The ongoing deep mutual distrust between China and India persists because of persistent border confrontations while China maintains unclear strategic objectives which have strengthened Indian public hostility toward their neighbour. (Landrin, 2024) ^[24] New instances of border confrontations remain probable across Tawang together with Depsang as well as the middle sector because both sides contain differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control. Both nations should renew their border management systems to stop conflicts from getting worse. The implementation of confidence-building measures (CBMs) needs to focus on joint patrolling standards and the re-establishment of closed communication channels and border employee encounters together with creating jointly accepted buffer areas in sensitive zones. The sides should create bilateral diplomatic channels through Track II diplomacy along with direct backchannels to enable non-hostile discussions about mutual misunderstandings. The initiatives to boost military exercise transparency along with the development of infrastructure away from sensitive areas work together as stabilizing measures. In the current situation, the restoration of full diplomatic relations seems unlikely, but strategic deterrence methods should function together with diplomatic efforts to stop unintended military actions while sustaining Asian regional peace. The lasting political stability between Indo-China nations will stem from present-day political commitment, which should coincide with strategic planning and effective strategic cooperation

measures between opposing short-term competitive interests.

Conclusion

The Indo-China boundary conflict, rooted in historical resentment and conflicting territorial disputes and national objectives, shapes the fundamental geopolitical division between Asian nations. This research examined the path of this conflict since the 1962 war and the decades of bilateral talks and stability interruptions which led to the vital June 2020 Galwan Valley skirmish. The confrontation exposed both the delicate status of the problems and demonstrated the weakness of the ongoing confidence-building efforts between India and China. Strategic paralysis began after the Galwan incident while both countries implemented amplified military expansion along with amplified infrastructure construction and stricter diplomatic positions. India's growing strategic partnership with the United States and QUAD and Indo-Pacific democracies developed another component in the bilateral relations at the same time China expanded its regional influence through joint projects with Pakistan. This development produces effects that affect both India and China, together with the entire structure of Indo-Pacific security. Both countries maintain opportunities for cooperation through multilateral organisations, including BRICS and SCO, together with specific collaboration areas involving trade and climate initiatives and global governance. A deep trust gap persists between India and China that needs constant political commitment to bridge through transparent communication and tangible efforts to maintain the Line of Actual Control peace. India-China relations will alternate between short-term strategic separation and long-term strategic competition as far as border conflicts persist without conclusive resolution systems. The present situation demands deliberate diplomatic efforts that combine concern management with competition control and conflict escalation prevention. The opportunity for mutual coexistence remains possible, but an ongoing strategic conflict controls the political dynamics between the countries. A strategic movement which combines realistic measures with controlled limitations alongside new diplomatic efforts provides the potential to transition this strategic political impasse into lasting peace.

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