Intrusions and Violation of LAC in India–China Border

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The lack of a clearly defined borderline and a mutually accepted actual line of control is the major reason for continuous tension and clashes between India and China. The political leadership of both the countries should see the present crisis as an opportunity to find an everlasting resolution to the border question.

After a brief interlude of about three years since Doklam crisis in 2017, yet another round of tensions started in the India–China border at Ladakh in May this year. It is “normal” that tussles occur in usual intervals in different sectors of the 3,488 km long India–China border. Mostly, such situations are handled at local levels and rarely lead to human casualty. The current clashes started when around 250 Indian and Chinese soldiers stood face to face at the banks of Pangong Tso, near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at Eastern Ladakh. The tussle started on 5 May and has spread to adjacent areas of Naku La and Galwan Valley and turned to bloody clashes, which caused the death of many soldiers from both sides. This type of a clash between the forces leading to human casualty happened after more than 50 years (Goldman 2020).

The terrain where the current tensions have taken place is important for both the countries for its geostrategic and political reasons, though it is a wasteland situated at a very high altitude and not suitable for human inhabitation as it is covered by snow almost round the year. The current crisis gets special attention as it emerged in a time when almost all countries in the world are undergoing through the COVID-19 pandemic, and China is accused by the Western countries for its laxity that caused the global spread of the pandemic.

The border or territorial dispute between India and China has its roots in the colonial construction of states and their boundaries in the Himalayan region (Karackattu 2017; Noorani 2011). By the end of 19th and early 20th centuries, the region became a theatre of big power conflicts, popularly known as “The Great Game.” The three major global empires/powers at that time, the British India, Chinese Empire and the Russian Tsarist Empire, shared borders in the region and played in the great power game that was very crucial in setting the cartography

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of this area. They had made many agreements and drawn lines to demarcate the boundaries in the geographically important locations in the region during the 19th century (Mehra 2007). The decline of the Chinese Empire started when it got defeated by Japan in the last decade of 19th century. This led to the emergence of Tibet as a major regional player and it started enjoying great amount of autonomy from the central authority in China. It is in this context, in 1907, the Russian Empire and the British Empire had re-emphasised upon the Chinese suzerainty over Tibet (Eekelen 2016). According to this, any border demarcation in the region requires the ratification of the central authority in China or could be valid only after China becoming a party/signatory to it.

**History of Border Dispute**

The Simla agreement of 1914 is a major source of controversy that appears very often in the border dispute between India and China. The agreement ratified the much-debated 550-mile long “McMohan Line” passing through the Himalayas as the border line between British India and China/Tibet (Goldman 2020; Mehra 1974; Eekelen 2016). The final agreement was signed between the British Indian Empire and Tibet, but not ratified or endorsed by the central authority in China. It is also important to note that the Chinese central authority was very weak due to the outbreak of civil war in 1911. The Peoples’ Republic of China that succeeded the Chinese Empire in 1949 questioned the sanctity of Simla agreement since the very beginning. To China, Macartney–MacDonald Line of 1899 was the legitimate border, as it was also a party in it (Eekelen 2016; Noorani 2011).

The geopolitical scenario of the region had changed completely by the mid-20th century. The British Indian Empire was replaced by the Republic of India and the Chinese Empire was replaced by the People’s Republic of China. None of these states have raised any serious territorial claims in the early years and, therefore, the status of border in the region remained “unde-marcated” (Smith 2014). By the mid-1950s, a serious discussion started from the Indian side on making a proper demarcation of border line in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The issue became much more complex as Aksai Chin—a territory claimed by India as its integral part, but situated in PoK (Pakistan occupied Kashmir)—had already gone under Chinese possession with the support of Pakistan. In the 1,200 km long highway constructed by China between Xinjiang and Tibet, about 179 km is passing through Aksai Chin. India came to know about the construction of this highway very late and Nehru made a public statement claiming Aksai Chin part of India. He accused China of construction of roads in the region by violating the territorial integrity of India (Bajpai et al 2020). All these developments have resulted in mounting tensions between two countries by the late 1950s. The Chinese military intervention in Tibet in 1959 followed by the exile and political refuge of Dalai Lama and his followers in India further deteriorated the bilateral relations (Guruswamy and Daulet 2009). The tensions started escalating in the border areas with the invasion of Tibet by China. China accused India for protecting Dalai Lama and his supporters who were involved in anti-China activities.

The tensions and clashes soon moved to a full-fledged border war in 1962. India had faced clear setback in the war, as Chinese forces advanced into the Indian territory and captured about 43,000 sq km land (Dalvi 1968; Dutta 2017). Later, the Chinese withdrew from the areas that they occupied and an agreement was signed. The major aspect of the agreement was the establishment of an LAC between the two countries. This LAC has nothing to do with either the border demarcated by Macartney–MacDonald Line of 1899 (the base of Chinese claims) or the Shimla agreement of 1914 (base of Indian claims). Eventually, this LAC has got the status of a “de facto border line” between India and China. The root cause of escalation of current tensions in the border is connected to the disputes on the status of this LAC, not the McMahon Line of 1914 or Macartney–MacDonald Line of 1899 (Sharma 1965; Noorani 2011).

The 1962 events created a big gap between China and India. Diplomatic relations between these two states were nominal for about a quarter of the century (Maxwell 2011). The Chinese military actions in Tibet, the presence of Dalai Lama and his followers in India, and the merger of Himalayan Kingdom Sikkim with Indian Union in 1975 further intensified tensions between the two, even though none of them turned into a major conflict-war. The 1967 crossfire between the forces of India and China at Nathu La and Cho La—two passes in Sikkim–China border—were the only major clash during this period, which resulted in the death of a few hundred soldiers on the Indian side and almost double on the Chinese side (Dasgupta 2019).

The efforts for reconciliation began by the late 1980s when Rajiv Gandhi, then the Prime Minister of India, visited China in December 1988. Both the countries had taken some fresh steps to strengthen bilateral cooperation, particularly in trade and commercial activities. Joint Working Groups (JWGs) were constituted and bilateral talks started to open new avenues for cooperation (Bajpai and Mattoo 2000; Panda 2020). This has further expanded and strengthened through diplomatic negotiations and high-level political visits/meetings. As a goodwill gesture, both the countries decided to maintain status quo in the borders and stopped large-scale infrastructure development projects in the border areas mainly due to the security concerns from the other. By then, both countries became more realistic on the border/territorial issue.

In the 1990s, the changed global situation and the big power aspirations forced India and China to reconcile and expand the chances of cooperation. Eventually, two agreements were signed by India and China—in 1993 and 1996—that gave legal status to the LAC of 1962 (Bajpai and Mattoo 2000). The Chinese de facto acceptance of Sikkim’s merger with India and the agreement signed by India and China for cross-border trade through Nathu La pass in Sikkim were the clear indications of the changing priorities. Both the countries have explored the chances of cooperation in trade and commerce. The agreement signed in 2015 to start trade and commercial activities through the Lipulekh pass of Uttarakhand is another major development in this regard (Panda 2020). On the other side, the intrusions and minor clashes in the border regions, the
All its constructions in the Western Ladakh demand of China—that India should stop capability in the region and the power of the long-time mutual suspicion of states on the constructions for infrastructure development in the border areas. The current crisis in the Eastern Ladakh is also related to the constructions in the border areas. Chinese forces have put up tents in the areas where Indian forces used to do routine patrolling for a long time. This has intensified tensions that has led to use of force and ended up in violent clashes. China even intruded into those places on which they have not made any claims in the past. It is observed that the military upper hand that India got in the Eastern Ladakh region through large-scale development of military infrastructure is the reason for Chinese provocations. It is a fact that, in the recent years, India has strengthened its military capabilities substantially on the LAC in Eastern Ladakh. It has constructed a bridge across Shyok River in October 2019, which facilitates the Military Tanks movement much closer to the LAC. Besides, the construction of a 3.5 km long airstrip at Anantnag and the revocation of military airfield at Daulat Beg Oldi should have provoked China to violate status quo (Gamble and Davis 2020). It is a fact that all these developments have substantially increased India's military capability in the region and the power equations moved in favour of India, at least in the Eastern Ladakh region. The demand of China—that India should stop all its constructions in the Western Ladakh sector—can be connected to this.

The discussions at various levels are still on to reduce the tensions and resolve the issue. In the high level military talks, it is decided to step back the forces of both the countries from the LAC at Galwan Valley—2 km by Chinese forces and 1 km by Indian forces. It is also decided to avoid further clashes and maintain a status quo. In the discussions, India demanded to restore the status quo in the LAC as it was in April 2020. Further, India demands complete withdrawal of Chinese forces from the areas where Indian military carry out routine patrolling and also from the northern part of Pangong Tso, a territory for which China had never made any claims before (Trot 2020; Price 2020). On the other side, China wanted India to stop all constructions, including the construction of roads, in the border areas in general and Western Ladakh in particular. The discussions helped in easing tensions, even though a concrete solution is yet to be arrived. The negotiations at the diplomatic and political levels are still on between the two countries.

The current developments in the India—China border region at Ladakh can be linked to certain other crucial political developments. First, the abolition of Article 370 from the Constitution of India that gave special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Second, the bifurcation of the state into two different union territories—Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. These moves had attracted harsh criticism from China, whereas India took a clear position that it is an internal matter of India. Indian claims of Aksai Chin, a territory originally part of Ladakh, which later became part of POK and currently under the possession of China, is another major concern for China. Third, the Chinese believe that India's efforts to build close relations with anti-China axis of Western powers like Australia, and United States (US) and also with Japan are a move to push its economic and political interests in the region. Interestingly, it is the first time that India is openly discussing this issue with the UK and Russia and seeking their support to counter Chinese military at LAC in Ladakh. Fourth, China suspects that India may try to grab the economic opportunities that it might lose in the ongoing tussle with the Western countries on the COVID-19 pandemic issue. Many Western countries are accusing China for its irresponsible handling of coronavirus cases as a reason for worldwide spread of the pandemic. In this context, any serious break-up between China and the West may lead to a huge outflow of foreign capital investment from China.

In Conclusion
The lack of a clearly defined border line and a mutually accepted LAC is the major reason for continuous tension and clashes between India and China. Therefore, the only perpetual solution of the crisis is an amicable settlement of the borders. The countries are working to resolve this dispute for more than three decades now, without any significant progress. The current developments show that there are differences between China and India even on the status of LAC. It is a fact that both India and China are the two fast-growing economies in the world, having the potential to emerge as leading powers in the world. The resolution of border conflicts would certainly strengthen their global aspirations. A close cooperation will remain as a distant dream, until the border/territorial dispute is resolved. While realising this, the political leadership of both the countries should see the present crisis as an opportunity to find an interminable resolution to the border question. The discussions and negotiations are to be channelized towards this direction by the leadership of both the countries.

References
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India China Border News Updates: Twenty Indian Army personnel were killed in a face-off in Ladakh's Galwan Valley on the night of June 15-16, the Army. Four more Indian soldiers who were in critical condition, are now stable. Amid the Indo-China border standoff, the Ram Mandir trust has put on hold its plan to begin the construction of the temple in Ayodhya. Expressing concern over the killing of Indian soldiers, the trust which has been charged with the construction of the temple after the historic Supreme Court verdict last year, said a new date will be decided soon. Meanwhile, China has no Beginning on 5 May 2020, Chinese and Indian troops engaged in aggressive melee, face-offs and skirmishes at locations along the Sino-Indian border, including near the disputed Pangong Lake in Ladakh and the Tibet Autonomous Region, and near the border between Sikkim and the Tibet Autonomous Region. Additional clashes also took place at locations in eastern Ladakh along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A deadly clash between Chinese and Indian troops on the disputed border means rhetoric alone is no longer an option, says author Mukul Kesavan. India’s control over its border with China is contingent on China’s geopolitical priorities, not India’s own military capacity. This has been true for more than half a century. In 1962, 15 years into India’s life as an independent nation, a dispute over Aksai Chin, the north-eastern “ear” of Kashmir, led to a short war with Mao Zedong’s China and a humiliating defeat for India. China’s military edge along this huge disputed frontier has kept successive Indian governments on tenterhooks ever since. LAC standoff | Status quo on India-China border in eastern Ladakh after Jaishankar-Wang meet. After the 1962 war, the India-China border was loosely controlled by both sides, with a fairly sparse deployment of troops. A significant change in border management occurred after the Chinese occupation of a post in the Sumdorong Chu Valley in 1986. The massive response by the Indian Army sparked realisation on both sides that the boundary issue needed to be brought to the fore, and pending a settlement, some mechanism must be evolved to keep peace along the LAC. The first manifestation of this came in the Depsang intrusion in 2013, and the attempted intrusion at Chumar in 2014.