

## **Dragons vs Elephants – Fighting at 14,000 Feet on the Himalayas**

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*“Frontiers are indeed the razor’s edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations.”*

Lord Curzon<sup>1</sup>

While explaining the Peloponnesian war, the Greek historian Thucydides states that when an established power confronts a rising power, the possibility of the conflict between the two becomes inevitable. The ‘Thucydides Trap’, in this sense is completely befitting to make sense of the India-China rivalry over Ladakh.<sup>2</sup> China, an established global power and India, a rising power among the comity of states, neighbour each other in the eastern Himalayan region. Driven with aspirations of global dominance, both China and India hold important strategic geographic locations, have vast natural resources, well-developed armed forces in terms of quality, are thriving economies, and above all, possess nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup> When states of this stature indulge in a conflict or dispute, the whole world pays notice. Chinese and Indian military troops engaged in a scuffle on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 2020 that left twenty Indian soldiers dead while causing an unspecified number of Chinese casualties. The recent face-off took place along the Galwan River on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at a height of over 14,000 feet which is refereed as the ‘Roof of the World’.<sup>4</sup> Chinese government was irked with the Indian construction of a road in the finger area of Pangong Tso Lake region besides another road connecting in Galwan Valley in addition to the defence facilities build-up in the area. The 15<sup>th</sup> June confrontation in the Galwan

Valley was fought with sticks and clubs rather than weapons, and there is no apparent explanation as to why tensions have risen to their highest level in decades, with the first fatalities occurring 45 years ago. Before jumping to the drivers, consequences and future scenarios, it is vital to look into the history of Sino-Indian territorial dispute in the region.

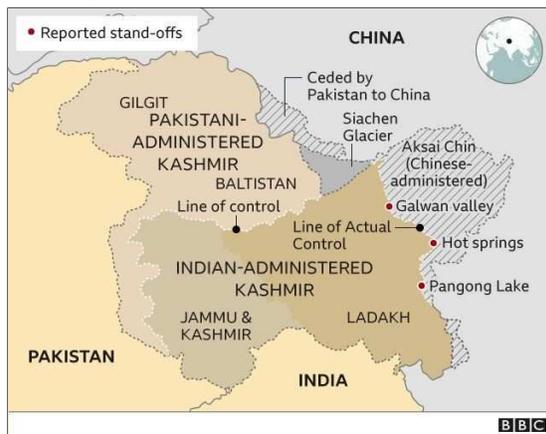
### **Historical Background**

The border between India and China stretches from the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in the East, Sikkim in the middle, and Aksai Plateau in the west. India administers Arunachal Pradesh, although China claims the territory, and China administers the Aksai region.<sup>5</sup> The beginning of the territorial dispute between China and India can be traced back to several factors, including the British imperial map-making technique, the absence of a viable Tibetan state, and a mix of difficult terrain. Following the independence in 1947, India made the McMahon Line, named after the chief negotiator Sir Henry McMahon, its official border with Tibet. Following China's annexation of Tibet in 1950, the two countries shared a boundary that had never been defined by treaty.<sup>6</sup> After a decade in 1960, both states went to a month-long war in which Chinese forces advanced deep into the Indian territory in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. A 2,000-mile-long Line of Actual

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Control that divides the two nations in the Himalayas was demarcated at the end of 1962.<sup>7</sup> Since the truce in the early 1960s, there have been several summits and talks on the territorial dispute. However, due to prevalent distrust between the two governments, the meetings have resulted in little or no success.



In the last decade, multiple skirmishes of varying intensities took place in Northern Ladakh in 2011, in eastern Ladakh in 2014, and in Doklam in 2017. However, no casualties were reported as a result of these skirmishes. The stalemate between the two governments to engage each other on the issue continued until recently when in 2019, Delhi published a political map showing Ladakh as a Union territory of India.

### Drivers of the Dispute

The conflict is not as simple as it looks and there have been several key drivers behind the territorial dispute. The wolf warrior diplomacy by China is the key driver in asserting its territorial claims overseas. The second most important driver are the US- China relations. The relationship between the United States and China is perhaps as strained as a relationship can be without engagement in an overtly heated conflict. The US-India relationship, on the other

hand, is improving with each passing day.<sup>8</sup> The US-backed India in the border dispute, and its Indo-Pacific policy is aimed at counter-balancing China, with India playing a vital role. In light of the Ladakh situation, Beijing's actions might be interpreted as an attempt to send a strong message to both Washington and New Delhi.<sup>9</sup> Following the revocation of Articles 370 and 35-A, India incorporated areas which were under the local jurisdiction of Xinjiang and Tibet into its newly created Union Territory of Ladakh. This action forced China into the Kashmir conflict, invigorated China and Pakistan to make counter-moves on the Kashmir issue, and significantly increased the perplexity in settling the border issue among China and India. As per Wang Shida, Deputy Director of a Chinese Ministry of State Security- associated think tank, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), India's unilateral move of repealing Article 370 and 35-A from the state of J&K "posed a challenge to the autonomy of Pakistan and China."<sup>10</sup>

Beijing also expressed dissatisfaction after New Delhi produced new maps in November 2019 reflecting changes in India's cartography, including the re-organisation of Ladakh as a Union Territory, following the repeal of Articles 370 and 35-A.<sup>11</sup>

### What Next?

In the context of the economic policies of India and China, both countries have been strong trading partners for decades. Bilateral trade between the two countries increased from US\$ 3 billion in 2000 to US\$ 92.68 billion in 2019. Moreover, in 2019, China was India's second-biggest commercial partner, but in the first half of FY 2020-2021, it overtook the United States as the country's top trading partner.<sup>12</sup> There has

also been an effort to reduce India's dependence on Chinese goods after the Galwan valley incident but the current trade situation indicates that nationalistic ideals of bringing China to its knees through a boycott of Chinese goods have failed as the Indian economy is apparently deeply intertwined with Chinese exports. In the absence of sufficient local industries and heavy dependence on imports Modi's appeal for 'Aatma Nirbhar Bharat', i.e. a 'a self-reliant India'<sup>13</sup> would be reduced to a mere meaningless catchphrase, as it presently is. This is why we witness a blossoming trade connection between India and China even after the Galwan Valley event and will continue to see a large dependency on China for the foreseeable future. India cannot bear to go on a full-scale war with such reliance, especially during and post-COVID period.

India and China, both hold a strategic position in the region, a dispute between these two will have significant strategic implications for the region, especially for Pakistan. CPEC,<sup>14</sup> a flagship project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) passes through the Gilgit Baltistan (GB), an area under Pakistan's administration that India claims to be its part of the territory. In case India gets its hands over the Karakoram Pass and adjacent areas, it will be able to conveniently influence the working of CPEC. Through the Oldie Air Base in Daulat Beg, the Indian Air Force will have precise surveillance over the CPEC critical choke points. Additionally, Chinese transits to the Indian Ocean through Gwadar Port begin at Khunjerab Pass, roughly 250 kilometres from Karakoram Pass, in Gilgit Baltistan.<sup>15</sup> The CPEC road infrastructure, as well as the other CPEC related developments, would be exposed to Indian influence over the

heightened regions of GB. The area ceded to India would have serious ramifications for both China and Pakistan.

In the words of Otto von Bismarck, "Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable — the art of the next best."<sup>16</sup> Predicting the future course for China and India in this seemingly unending conflict is not an easy task. However, considering the previous episodes of this conflict, it seems like the status quo will persist<sup>17</sup> though it will be highly tenuous as India will fight its best to retain the current shape of the LAC while at the same time, attempting to curb the dispute from escalating into a full-scale war. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, a large segment of India's economy is dependent on China. Moreover, the Indian military might not confront China for a long period as it also intends to keep China from deploying tactics such as Salami Slicing,<sup>18</sup> a strategy in which China gradually slices off territory while manipulating the facts on the ground in order to shift the balance of territorial arrangements in its favour. Beijing has successfully used the aforementioned method in the South China Sea maritime conflict. China, on the other hand, has no intention of making any concessions to India. The governing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership feels that such agreements are unnecessary since it seemingly believes that it can achieve its territorial claims without making any concessions. The Sino-Indian territorial conflict is a suitable case study in great power rivalry, buffer state risks, and imperial legacies. Although no country, be it China or India, is in a position to modify its stances. Hence, the chances of a full-fledged confrontation remain minimal owing to shared economic interests.

## Notes and References

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