



APRIL 2024

Three Years of Border Stalemate - No Resolution in Sight

Author: Vedica Karnik

Edited by: D Sakshi

About the Author

Vedica Karnik is an undergraduate student at the Jindal School of International Affairs and is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Security Studies, JSIA.

About the Centre for Security Studies

The Centre for Security Studies (CSS) was established in 2020 as the Jindal School of International Affairs' first student-run research centre under the aegis of Prof Dr Pankaj K Jha. Researchers at CSS – through in-depth analysis briefs and events, reports, policy briefs and print publications – explore both regional and thematic topics in the broader field of international security studies. The concept of international security has been expanded to reflect not merely the study of state security, but also include topics like ethnic, sectarian and religious conflict; civil wars and state failure; cyber and space warfare; resource-related security issues; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; defence economics and the role of ethics or morality in the formulation of security policies. The complexity of these matters is what the Centre for Security Studies attempts to unfold. Please refer to www.cssjsia.com for further details, and follow the Centre's social media platforms for critical news and research updates:



www.linkedin.com/company/jindal-centre-for-security-studies/



www.instagram.com/css_jsia/



https://twitter.com/Css_Jsia

Get in touch with us through email: css@jgu.edu.in

Important disclaimer

All views expressed in this publication belong to the author and do not reflect the opinions or positions of the Centre for Security Studies. While researchers and editors at CSS strive towards innovation, CSS as an organisation does not take any responsibility for any instance of plagiarism committed by the authors. The onus to ensure plagiarism-free work lies with the authors themselves.

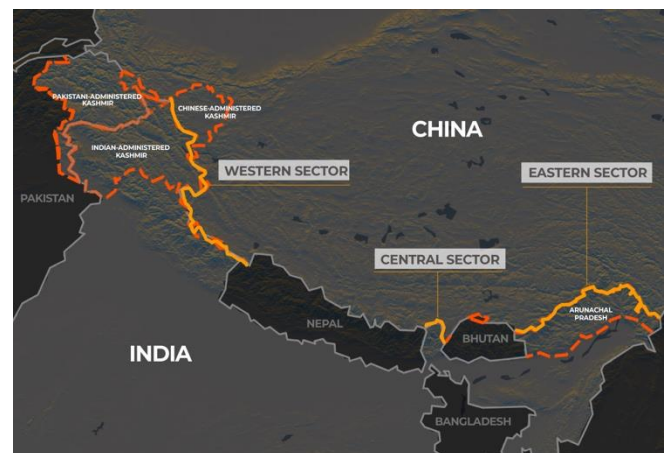
IB2403004

Introduction

The longstanding border dispute between India and China has persisted for decades with both nations claiming territories along their shared boundary. This conflict has its roots in historical disagreements and conflicting territorial claims leading to occasional military confrontations and diplomatic tensions. Despite efforts to reach a resolution the recent analysis of the past three years suggests that no immediate solution is in sight.

India and China have historical relations that date back over 2,000 years, fostering both cultural and economic ties since ancient times. Currently, both countries are major global economies and the most populous nations. Their official diplomatic relationship was established in 1950¹ and has lasted 72 years, marked by various territorial disputes.

The shared border between India and China approximately measures 3,488 km, making it the second-longest land border after Bangladesh. This border is typically divided into three sectors: Eastern, Western, and Middle. Five Indian states—Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh have borders with China, adding to the complex regional dynamics.



In the Western Sector, India has a 2152 km border with China, lies between Jammu and Kashmir and Xinjiang. A focal point in this region is the disputed territory at Aksai Chin.

¹ Ministry of External Affairs. "India-China Bilateral Relations - Ministry of External Affairs." *India- China Relations*, Jan. 2014, www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/ind-china-new.pdf

The origins of the Aksai Chin dispute can be traced back to the Colonial Empire's failure to establish a clear border between India and China².

Historically, the British proposed two border lines, namely the Johnson Line (1865) and the McDonald Line (1893). India upholds the Johnson's Line, designating Aksai Chin under Jammu and Kashmir, thus asserting Indian control over the region. Conversely, China subscribes to the McDonald Line, which positions Aksai Chin within its territory. Presently, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) currently acts as the boundary between Indian territories in Jammu & Kashmir and the disputed Aksai Chin, aligning with China's claims³.

China claims Aksai Chin due to its strategic significance, serving as a crucial corridor connecting Tibet and Xinjiang. The region hosts infrastructure vital to China's security and connectivity objectives. China's historical narrative and territorial ambitions drive its claim, emphasizing traditional sovereignty and national interests. The Chinese regime's expansionist agenda also plays a role, reflecting broader geopolitical dynamics such as its pursuit of regional dominance. The dispute underscores the complexities of managing territorial conflicts amid volatile geopolitics.⁴

The Middle Sector, comprises of 625 km long border , notably characterized by relatively fewer contentions between India and China. This sector adjoins Ladakh and Nepal, with the borders of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh touching the Chinese-occupied region of Tibet.

A 1140-kilometer boundary with China delineates the Eastern Sector, from eastern Bhutan to the Talu Pass, marking the Trijunction of Tibet, India, and Myanmar. This demarcation is known as the McMahan

² Sharma, Rishabh. "Bothering Border: Tracing Origin of Lines Dividing India, China." *India Today*, India Today, 1 Sept. 2023, www.indiatoday.in/history-of-it/story/india-china-border-dispute-map-mcmahon-line-lac-arunachal-pradesh-aksai-chin-2429667-2023-09-01

³ Van Eekelen, Willem. "Indian foreign policy and the border dispute with China." *Nijhoff Classics in International Law, Volume: 5*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004304314>

⁴ Yadav, D. (2023, September 11). *Through historical maps: Why China's claims over Aksai Chin hold no ground*. India Today. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/historical-maps-china-claims-hold-no-ground-over-aksai-chin-india-2434161-2023-09-11>

Line, a term contested by China as illegal. The Shimla accord of 1914 was negotiated as an attempt to settle the territorial dispute between Tibet and India. The deal included representatives from Tibet and China, although China did not formally endorse the accord.⁵

Background

The Sino-Indian border disputes are complex historical conflicts, characterized by the absence of an officially recognized delineation due to the inability of both nations to reach a consensus on border delimitation. The genesis of the discord dates back to the British colonial era, where India, under British rule, sought to extend the traditional border into Chinese territory. The 1913-1914 tripartite conference, featuring a Tibetan delegate, a representative from the Chinese central government, and Sir Henry McMahon of the British Indian government, resulted in a secret bilateral agreement known as the McMahon Line. However, this accord faced rejection from the Chinese central government, Tibetan authorities, and even the British-run Indian government initially.⁶

Notwithstanding these preliminary obstacles, the McMahon Line found its way onto the Survey of India maps in 1937 and was officially published as the Shimla Accord in 1938. Post-World War II, the British intensified efforts to expand control along the claimed McMahon Line. Upon India's independence in 1947, the McMahon Line became the de facto northeastern border.

Concerned about China's military presence in the area after Tibet's annexation in 1951, India increased its military and administrative influence in the eastern sector. . The annexation of Tawang, a significant center of Tibetan Buddhist culture and a holy site, further intensified tensions. India interpreted China's silence as an implicit acceptance of the McMahon Line.⁷

⁵ BHONSALE, MIHIR. "Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media." *Orfonline.Org*, www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-sino-indian-border-issues-an-analysis-of-incidents-reported-in-the-indian-media

⁶ CHERIAN, JOHN. "Border Disputes between India and China: A Colonial Legacy." *Frontline*, 30 July 2020, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/colonial-legacy/article32196398.ece>

⁷ Kalha, R. S. "The McMahon Line: A Hundred Years On." *The McMahon Line: A Hundred Years on* | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, www.idsa.in/idsacomments/TheMcMahonLine_rskalha_030714

The decision to follow the McMahon Line from India's perspective is logical and essential for several reasons. Firstly, it represents the result of historical agreements between British India and Tibet, which China implicitly recognized through its subsequent actions and agreements. India sees adherence to this line as upholding the sanctity of historical agreements and respecting established international borders⁸.

Secondly, following the McMahon Line is crucial for maintaining stability and security along the border region. Clear and recognized borders help prevent misunderstandings, incursions, and potential conflicts between the two countries⁹. By adhering to established borders, both India and China can focus on peaceful coexistence and constructive engagement rather than territorial disputes and military confrontations.

Moreover, from a strategic standpoint, following the McMahon Line allows India to secure its northeastern territories and maintain a favorable position vis-à-vis China. It provides India with strategic depth and control over key areas that are crucial for its security and regional influence.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the border issue between India and China is complex and multifaceted, with disputes in various sectors along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Resolving these disputes requires diplomatic efforts, mutual trust, and compromise from both sides. While India sees the McMahon Line as a logical basis for delineating its border with China in the eastern sector, finding a comprehensive solution to the border issue will likely require dialogue, negotiation, and a willingness to address each other's concerns.

Following the Tawang incident, the border between China and India saw a period of relative tranquility. However, both nations actively pursued the construction of infrastructure and conducted regular patrols

⁸ Tomar, V. (n.d.). US recognises McMahon Line: Impact on India China Border issue. <http://cescube.com/vp-us-recognises-mcmahon-line-impact-on-india-china-border-issue>

⁹ *US senate resolution for underlining backing India on McMahon Line: What is the mcmahon line?*. The Indian Express. (2023, March 16). <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/mcmahon-line-us-senate-8499398/>

in the area. The 1954 agreement on trade and intercourse across Tibetan borders marked the emergence of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence."¹⁰

However, differing interpretations of the agreement heightened tensions, culminating in the first Sino-Indian military clash in August 1959. Nehru's Panchsheel Principles, also known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, were intended to guide international relations and promote peaceful cooperation among nations. However, the Chinese counterparts, particularly during the early years after the principles were established, arguably misused, or misinterpreted them to advance their own interests, particularly in relation to the border dispute with India.

One of the key principles of Panchsheel is mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Despite this premise, China engaged in aggressive actions along the India-Border, such as the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Despite the supposed commitment to peaceful coexistence, China's actions betrayed a disregard for India's territorial integrity and sovereignty, leading to a significant conflict.

In addition, China seemingly disregarded the concept of non-interference in each other's internal affairs. During the 1950s and 1960s, China supported various insurgent groups and factions within India's northeastern states, seeking to destabilize the region and exert influence. This interference in India's internal affairs contradicted the spirit of Panchsheel and strained bilateral relations.

Additionally, the Panchsheel Principles emphasized peaceful resolution of disputes and advocated for the avoidance of use of force. However, China's military aggression in 1962 contradicted this principle and demonstrated a willingness to use force to assert its interests, particularly in the border areas.

Contrary to Nehru's proclamation of the demarcated border and proposition of check-posts along its entirety, the initial military confrontation was instigated by India's presence in specific segments of the

¹⁰ Wong, Edward. "China and India Dispute Enclave on Edge of Tibet." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Sept. 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/09/04/world/asia/04chinaindia.html

McMahon Line which led to calls for modifications, sparking the first military clash. The initial border dispute emerged in the middle sector in 1954, and later, tensions escalated in the western sector due to China's road construction projects in Aksai Chin.

The formal assertion of Indian sovereignty over Aksai Chin in 1958 prompted Prime Minister Nehru to write a memorandum to Zhou Enlai. Zhou's response recognized the absence of formal border demarcation and acknowledged existing border disputes between the two nations. This laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in the complex Sino-Indian border dynamics.¹¹

Following the Kongka Pass incident, Zhou Enlai visited India in an attempt to peacefully resolve border disputes through negotiations. Despite China's explicit proposal for reciprocal acceptance of present actualities and the formation of a boundary commission, India rejected the proposition, asserting no compromise, standstill agreement, or negotiations. As a result of the summit's failure, China tried to expand its military presence in contested regions while India pursued its Forward Policy in 1961 and 1962.

Due to the culmination of these tensions on October 20, 1962, China launched a pre-emptive offensive, initiating the Sino-Indo border war. The war concluded with China's victory and a unilateral ceasefire on November 22, 1962. Post-war, India refrained from negotiating with China on border issues, leading to frozen Sino-Indian relations until the late 1970s.¹²

In 1971, India renamed NEFA to Arunachal Pradesh, despite China's non-recognition of the region. Efforts to normalize relations commenced in 1976, and in 1979, Deng Xiaoping proposed a package plan during India's foreign minister's visit. India, however, rejected the proposal and insisted on Chinese troop withdrawal as a precondition for negotiations.

¹¹ PANDEY, UTKARSH. "The India-China Border Question: An Analysis of International Law and State Practices." *Orfonline.Org*, 2020, www.orfonline.org/research/the-india-china-border-question-an-analysis-of-international-law-and-state-practices

¹² Dutta, Prabhaskar K. "This Day in 1962: China-India War Started with Synchronised Attack on Ladakh, Arunachal." *India Today*, India Today, 20 Oct. 2017, www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-china-war-1962-20-october-aksai-chin-nefa-arunachal-pradesh-1067703-2017-10-20

Rajiv Gandhi's tenure witnessed a shift in India's border policy, with talks held at the vice-minister level from 1981 to 1987, though no substantial progress was achieved. The 1986-1987 military standoff in the Sumdorong Chu Valley added to the complexity, but fortunately, it did not lead to another war.¹³

Bilateral relations improved in the early 1990s, marked by the signing of agreements in 1993 and 1996 to ensure peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Despite occasional setbacks, border talks continued. As part of an agreement inked during Vajpayee's 2003 visit to China, better relations were fostered, and India formally accepted Chinese claims to Tibet. The ongoing border talks aim for a peaceful resolution, but as of now, no breakthrough has been achieved.

Recent years have seen increased military presence and media reports of incursions along the border. Both China and India have strengthened their forces in the region, creating concerns for regional and global peace and stability. China has deployed substantial troops and reaction forces, while India has initiated a five-year expansion plan to enhance its military presence in the eastern sector. The Sino-Indian border dispute remains a significant obstacle to sustaining positive bilateral relations.¹⁴

Galwan Valley Clash (2020)

The Galwan Valley, nestled between formidable mountain ranges along the Galwan River, assumes strategic importance due to its geographical location between Ladakh in the west and the Chinese-controlled Aksai Chin in the east, forming part of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Originating in Aksai Chin, the Galwan River flows eastward into Ladakh, where it merges with the Shyok River on India's side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This valley is delineated by the Shyok River and the

¹³ Mingjiang Li, Hongzhou Zhang. *SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTES - ISPI*, 2013, www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_181_2013.pdf

¹⁴ Kalha, R. S. "The McMahon Line: A Hundred Years On." *The McMahon Line: A Hundred Years on* | Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, www.idsa.in/idsacomments/TheMcMahonLine_rskalha_030714

Darbuk-Shyok-Daulet Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road at its western extremity, while its eastern boundary lies in proximity to China's crucial Xinjiang Tibet Road, now denoted as the G219 highway¹⁵.

The escalation of tensions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) prompted increased troop deployments by both India and China. China's territorial expansion was challenged by India, leading to negotiations that culminated in a mutually agreed-upon disengagement process on June 6. A subsequent conflict, which occurred during the establishment of a buffer zone, resulted in casualties. A reevaluation of historical occurrences in 2021 unveiled that China had employed unconventional weaponry in the Galwan conflict.

Subsequent to the clash, Major Generals from both armies convened at Patrolling Point 14, contributing to the stabilization of the situation. Intensive diplomatic and military dialogues ensued, leading to the release of ten Indian Army personnel who were initially captured by the Chinese. India advocated a return to the status quo ante, emphasizing the withdrawal of troops to their pre-faceoff positions from May. Conversely, China maintained its claim to the Galwan Valley, aligning with its interpretation of the Line of Actual Control.

The heightened tensions persisted in September, with China alleging that Indian troops had fired warning shots in the contentious Pangong Tso sector of Ladakh. Chinese aggression has been ascribed to a multitude of factors. These include the India's border infrastructure development, modifications in the status of Jammu and Kashmir, strained bilateral relations, internal dynamics within China influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, and India's perceived alignment with the United States. Additionally, India's waning influence in its regional neighborhood created a conducive environment for China to assert its dominance along the LAC.

Despite these intricate challenges, discussions on the Sino-India border issues have endured. The Galwan Valley dispute remains a pivotal obstacle to sustaining positive bilateral relations, carrying potential

¹⁵ “Galwan Valley: China and India Clash on Freezing and Inhospitable Battlefield.” *BBC News*, BBC, 17 June 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53076781

implications for regional and global peace and stability. Recent years have witnessed an augmentation of military presence and reports of border incursions, underscoring the enduring complexities within this geopolitical landscape.¹⁶

Post-Galwan Valley Incident

The incident triggered a wave of nationalist sentiments in both countries, leading to heightened rhetoric and increased militarization along the border. In India, the clash fuelled anti-China sentiment and prompted calls for a more assertive stance against Beijing. On the other hand, China's response was characterized by defiance and assertiveness, as it sought to assert its territorial claims and maintain its strategic interests in the region.

The initial significant breakthrough in addressing the prolonged military standoff between China and India materialized in February 2021. China's Ministry of National Defense officially declared that synchronized and organized disengagement of Chinese and Indian troops on the southern and northern shores of Pangong Tso, a notable lake in the region, had commenced. This accord adhered to the consensus achieved during the ninth round of military talks on January 24, as outlined by the Corps Commanders.

Senior Colonel Wu Qian, spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, articulated in a written statement that the disengagement process unfolded on February 10, encompassing both the southern and northern banks of Pangong Tso. Rajnath Singh, the defence minister of India, acknowledged the advancements made but also recognised the continued challenges pertaining to deployment and patrolling along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). He emphasized a focus on addressing these concerns in subsequent discussions. Notably, areas such as PP15 in Hot Springs, PP17A in Gogra Post area, PP14 in Galwan Valley, and the Depsang Plains in the far north remained contentious. The Bottleneck area, where Chinese troops impeded Indian soldiers' access to traditional patrolling points (PP10, PP11, PP11A, PP12, and PP13), posed a specific challenge¹⁷.

¹⁶ PTI / Sep 12, 2022. "Indian and Chinese Troops Disengage from Patrolling Point 15 in Eastern Ladakh: India News - Times of India." *The Times of India*, TOI, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indian-and-chinese-troops-disengage-from-patrolling-point-15-in-eastern-ladakh/articleshow/94160155.cms>

¹⁷ Kaushik, Krishn. "Explained: What Is the New Disengagement Agreement in Eastern Ladakh?" *The Indian Express*, 18 Feb. 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-china-ladakh-disengagement-pangong-tso-explained-7184040/>

Post the disengagement at Pangong Tso's north and south banks, Army Chief General M M Naravane, on May 19, noted a notable absence of transgressions and violations in the disengagement zones. Expressing a sense of trust-building, he indicated that troop levels persisted at the same magnitude observed during the peak of the standoff. This development marked a pivotal step forward in de-escalating tensions along the contested border, signifying a gradual restoration of stability in the region.¹⁸

In his address on June 17, 2020, Prime Minister Modi emphasized India's commitment to upholding sovereignty, signaling a hesitancy to make territorial concessions in favor of China¹⁹. However, the prospect of engaging in conflict amid economic challenges and a persistent rise in COVID-19 cases remains unattractive. Consequently, New Delhi is likely to explore alternative nonmilitary policy avenues. Although there was growing support in India for a comprehensive boycott of Chinese goods, the government opted for additional measures, potentially intensifying scrutiny on incoming Chinese investments. As an additional measure in response to security concerns, India blocked access to numerous Chinese apps, bringing the total count of restricted mobile applications to over 300. These actions serve as a supplementary component to the government's broader strategy, reflecting a comprehensive approach that includes not only economic considerations but also concerns related to national security. This could mirror the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) review process. Recently, India introduced review protocols for foreign investments from "neighboring" nations, a framework that may undergo further expansion. Notably, China plays a pivotal role as an investor in some of India's leading startups. Media reports indicate forthcoming restrictions on Chinese equipment in India's expansive telecom sector, including a prospective ban on Chinese companies' involvement in constructing 5G infrastructure²⁰.

¹⁸ WIRE, THE. "Disengagement at Pangong Tso a Win-Win Situation, but Long Way to Go: General Naravane." *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/security/disengagement-pangong-tso-win-win-situation-trust-deficit-china-general-naravane>

¹⁹ print, the. "'India Committed to Protecting Its Sovereignty & Integrity' - PM Modi on 'China's Military Expansion.'" *ThePrint*, 22 May 2023, <https://theprint.in/world/india-stands-for-respecting-sovereignty-peaceful-resolution-of-disputes-pm-modi-on-chinas-military-expansion/1584944/>

²⁰ Singaravelu, Vignesh Radhakrishnan & Naresh. "Data: Is an Economic Boycott of China Feasible for India?" *The Hindu*, 24 June 2020, www.thehindu.com/data/data-is-an-economic-boycott-of-china-feasible-for-india/article61665106.ece

Conclusion

Despite enduring border tensions, India and China have cultivated significant multilateral collaboration through various global institutions established over the past decade. The BRICS bloc, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, along with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), where India stands as the second-largest capital contributor, the New Development Bank, and the recently joined Shanghai Cooperation Organization, have served as arenas for cooperation despite concurrent security competition. Nevertheless, the escalating security tensions may prompt New Delhi to reassess the extent of its engagement in these cooperative frameworks.

Ultimately, the border clash is poised to underscore a crucial realization for India's foreign policy strategists. The idealistic formulation of "the world is one family," derived from a Sanskrit saying, may not uniformly apply to all bilateral relationships. The interpretation of a unified family might necessitate scrutiny, particularly when family members' actions run counter to India's national interests.