

5

India–China Border Disputes and Strategic Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

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China and India's rise over the last two decades has enabled them to wield increasing amounts of influence on the global stage. Even though they share several characteristics—including being the world's most populous nations, the fastest-growing major economies, and developing status—their relationship has been fraught with skepticism and hostility since their war of 1962.

Amid the COVID-19 outbreak, Chinese and Indian forces clashed in the Galwan Valley on 15 June 2020, the first deadly collision

between the two sides since 1975. China claimed the Indian territory of Galwan Valley as its own, which India rejected as an unfounded and unacceptable unilateral attempt to change the status quo. Though both sides agreed to withdraw troops from the border in February 2021, the situation remains volatile.¹

At first blush, the Galwan Valley clash is seen primarily in the context of a long-standing border dispute and differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, it is the strategic rivalry between India and China that undergirds the conflict—part of the unfolding geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region, which has become more intense during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After successfully controlling the virus at home, China attempted to use the humanitarian crisis of COVID-19 to advance its geopolitical goal of displacing US primacy, especially in the Indo-Pacific. The United States and its allies reacted to China's diplomatic offensives on economic and strategic fronts. For its part, India has emerged as a strategically significant player in the Indo-Pacific, the only country capable of matching China's manufacturing scale amid the debate over the global supply chain's over-

reliance on China. China’s aggression along the LAC was intended to send a message to India that it was no match for China. This has only exacerbated the already tense relationship between the two nuclear-armed nations and heightened their strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

Concerns about international security and stability in the Indo-Pacific have grown in recent years, as China’s economic and military policies in the region have grown more assertive. China’s bravado over its military and economic might have hinted at its geopolitical intentions in the Indo-Pacific, the region most significant for the global prosperity in the twenty-first century.²

China’s Belt Road Initiative (BRI) is driven by China’s economic and military intentions: to ensure the economic growth necessary to underpin the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, and to present China as a viable alternative to the United States in terms of global leadership. This is concerning for New Delhi, given the BRI’s visible footprint in India’s immediate South Asian neighbors and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. China’s debt diplomacy (aimed at enticing India’s South Asian neighbors), the China-Pakistan all-weather friendship, and the construction of new ports and bases

across the Indo-Pacific constitute additional concerns from the Indian perspective.

India’s Indo-Pacific strategy is driven by its economic and cultural links in the region, its security concerns, and the larger aim of playing a more pro-active role on the international stage. India has been expanding its presence in the region since Narsimha Rao Government launched “Look East Policy” in the 1990s, which accelerated under the Modi Government’s “Act East Policy.” During the COVID-19 outbreak, the latent geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, as well as China and India, escalated—an unpropitious backdrop for border clashes to emerge.

That the Galwan Valley clash was discussed at the summit-level by Quad leaders is a sign that the India-China relationship has deteriorated to a significant low point. China’s perceived aggression has sparked concern among like-minded democracies, prompting them to take countermeasures. This is a major development: China’s geopolitical ambition is being now countered by the converging strategic interests of like-minded states, of which India is a major strategic player. The reemergence of the Quad in

November 2017 is the surest sign of this new dynamic.³ Moreover, the Quad is now moving beyond the military dimension,⁴ has developed vertically from the secretariat level to the summit level and is likely to expand horizontally to include more nations concerned with the Indo-Pacific stability such as Vietnam, South Korea, New Zealand (the “Quad Plus” states).⁵

Growing strategic competition between India and China is also visible in New Delhi’s growing focus on strengthening Indo-Tibet border infrastructure, augmenting its naval capabilities, and forging strategic ties with China-wary nations in the region, including Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. This is in addition to India’s deepening and robust strategic partnership with the United States, which has been elevated to the level of Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership,⁶ as well as strategic ties with Japan, Australia, and South Korea. Amid heightened tensions with China, both India and Australia have intensified their engagement on the economic, political, and military front. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India and Australia strengthened their defense ties, as evidenced by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison signing two defense agreements:

the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement,⁷ as well as Australia joining the Quad for a military drill in November 2020. These strategic alignments have received significant US support.

In conclusion, the deadly clash in the Galwan Valley strained already acrimonious Sino-Indian relations. More confrontations are likely unavoidable. However, unlike the 1962 situation, both India and China today have nuclear weapons. They are each well aware of the dangers of full-fledged war and its fatal consequences. India-China relations will be intense and competitive in the post-COVID-19 world, with both vying, in many cases, for the same resources, markets, and influence in pursuit of their great power ambitions. The India-China relationship will be marked by suspicion and mistrust. To overcome this worsening international environment, massive political and diplomatic efforts will be required to restore normalcy to India-China relations. ■

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Notes

¹ “India, China agree to pull back troops from disputed Himalayan lake after months-long standoff,” 11 February, 2021, ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-11/india-china-agree-to-pull-back-troops-from-himalayan-lake/13146658>.

² Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2020).

³ The Quad—the US, India, Japan, and Australia—emerged after the Malabar Exercise in 2007 but went backstage after protests from China. See Ashok Sharma, “The Quadrilateral Initiative: An Evaluation,” *South Asian Survey* 17, no. 2 (2010): 237–53.

⁴ John Blaxland and Ashok Sharma, “Bolstering the Quad beyond its military dimensions,” 30 April 2021,

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/04/30/bolstering-the-quad-beyond-its-military-dimensions/>.

⁵ Derek Grossman, “Don’t Get Too Excited, ‘Quad Plus’ Meetings Won’t Cover China,” *The Diplomat*, 9 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/dont-get-too-excited-quad-plus-meetings-wont-cover-china/>.

⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for India-U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership,” 25 February 2020, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint_Statement_Vision_and_Principles_for_IndiaUS_Comprehensive_Global_Strategic_Partnership.

⁷ Department of Defence, Government of Australia, “Australia and India sign Defence arrangement,” 4 June 2020, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/media-releases/australia-and-india-sign-defence-arrangement>.