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China–India Border Crisis

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The crisis that began at the disputed China–India border in early 2020 was not the first - and almost certainly will not be the last - standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC). But the crisis was unique and its implications for China–India relations are likely to be far-reaching. It underscored the degree to which the longstanding border dispute, and the increasingly troubled relationship, have entered a new and more volatile chapter.

A great deal of ink has already been spilled analyzing the standoff, which began in May 2020 when People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers advanced to occupy a “grey zone” near the LAC claimed and patrolled by

both countries on the north bank of Pangong Lake in Ladakh. This was followed by a buildup of military forces at multiple junctures farther north along LAC where Ladakh meets Tibet, including at Hot Spring, Gogra, the Galwan Valley, and, later, the south bank of Pangong Lake.

Brief, nonviolent encounters between Chinese and Indian border patrols are not uncommon along the LAC but are generally well-managed thanks to a detailed set of de-escalation protocols. Prolonged standoffs at the LAC, in which Chinese forces set up camp beyond established patrol lines, are more uncommon. But they have been growing in frequency since 2013, the year Xi Jinping was elected president (and one year after he became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party).

The summer of 2017 saw a new form of border crisis emerge when Chinese and Indian troops engaged in a standoff in territory disputed by China and Bhutan, not far from a sensitive sector of the China–India border. India retains outsized influence over Bhutan’s foreign and security policy and when Chinese forces began extending a road southward into disputed territory, nearby Indian forces intervened, prompting a prolonged standoff.

The ten-week crisis was unprece-

dented in some ways, including the unusually incendiary rhetoric that emerged from official outlets in Beijing, which threatened India with war-like ultimatums if it did not withdraw from the standoff site unilaterally. However, like the prolonged standoffs in Ladakh in the years prior, the Doklam crisis was eventually de-escalated peacefully following the negotiation of a mutual withdrawal agreement.

Then, in 2019, amateur videos began surfacing online showing unusually hostile encounters between Chinese and Indian patrols near the LAC, engaging in fistfights and rock-throwing, including along the banks of Pangong Lake. There are a handful of disputed sectors in Ladakh where the two sides disagree about the precise location of the LAC; the videos helped to underscore how, in recent years, Pangong Lake has become one of the most volatile. The lake also registers a disproportionate share of Chinese “transgressions” of the LAC, according to official Indian statistics.

In years prior, an unstable status quo had emerged on the north bank of Pangong Lake, in a grey zone between an Indian military encampment near “Finger 4” and a Chinese encampment several miles to the east, near “Finger 8.” Both sides patrolled this area, although China enjoyed superior access and

infrastructure. The 2020 crisis began when, following a tense encounter between border patrols, several hundred Chinese soldiers pressed forward toward Finger 4, establishing new camps and staking more permanent claim to the grey zone behind them. Soon after, satellite imagery revealed a major buildup of Chinese forces at other volatile sectors of the LAC farther north in Ladakh. Unusually, this included the forward positioning of tanks and artillery. They were met by a comparable buildup of Indian forces at forward positions and a substantial escalation of political tensions.

Initial attempts at de-escalation turned tragic in June when Chinese and Indian forces engaged in a bout of medieval combat by moonlight, resulting in 20 Indian casualties and an unknown number of Chinese casualties. It marked the first deadly outbreak of hostilities at the border in over 40 years. The multilayered standoff endured through 2020, with India later occupying strategically valuable heights along the southern banks of Pangong Lake. Eventually, negotiators reached terms on an interim de-escalation agreement which saw both sides pull back from forward positions at Pangong Lake. The buildup of forces at the standoff sites farther north in Ladakh persist, even as the two militaries remain on their respective sides of the LAC. The PLA

has also reportedly blocked Indian forces from patrolling near the LAC in the Depsang Plains, though the phenomenon appears to pre-date the events of May 2020.

What does this crisis tell us about the broader relationship and accelerating rivalry? Why is the over-60-year-old China–India border dispute heating up now? And why have the two been unable or unwilling to resolve this legacy dispute? The secrecy surrounding the Chinese Communist Party and its decision-making often leaves analysts with more questions than answers. But the 2020 border crisis was likely precipitated at least in part by India’s attempts to upgrade its infrastructure near the LAC, and China’s attempts to coerce India to halt these projects.

China has long enjoyed an infrastructure advantage near the LAC in Ladakh and in recent years India has accelerated belated attempts to narrow that gap. This has prompted opposition from Beijing and several of the prolonged standoffs in Ladakh in the mid-2010s arose out of attempts by the PLA to pressure India to halt or dismantle new infrastructure projects. In some cases, it worked.

At the outbreak of the 2020 border crisis, India was advancing several new major infrastructure projects, including an important north-south road running parallel to the LAC,

complete with “feeder” roads extending east toward the LAC. When New Delhi refused to heed Chinese demands calls to halt or dismantle this infrastructure, Beijing may have calculated that it could compel such a change through military pressure. If so, China was drawing from a similar playbook it had adopted in years past, albeit with sharper edges and a greater appetite for risk, paralleling a broader trend of Chinese “Wolf Warrior” assertiveness in recent years. It is unlikely, however, that Beijing foresaw the bloodshed that might arise from the adventure, or the considerable blow it might deal to the already tense relationship.

The episode also revives a bigger question about whose purposes are served by the continuation of this border dispute. While the Indian government has not publicly committed to such a position, it is widely believed New Delhi would at least give due consideration to a form of status quo territorial “swap” that more or less enshrined the LAC as the international border. India would give up its outstanding claims to Aksai Chin in the “Western Sector”; China would do the same in the “Eastern Sector” where it claims most of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh; and some minor adjustments would be made to the relatively less contentious “Middle Sector.”

Such an agreement would appear to be eminently practical given that, today, there is very little prospect of either side “reclaiming” Aksai Chin or Arunachal Pradesh short of a major war that neither side desires. Arunachal Pradesh has been an Indian state or Union Territory for nearly 50 years and will not be negotiated away or easily seized by force. And the Indian government apparently has little interest in a conflict with a nuclear-armed rival to seize the relatively barren Himalayan territory of Aksai Chin.

What is obstructing this seemingly practical territorial swap? After registering tangible progress between 1993 and 2005, border negotiations that have been ongoing for roughly 40 years slowed to a halt in 2007. That year, China signaled that any territorial swap would have to include India ceding to China the town of Tawang, a nonstarter for New Delhi. Perched in the Himalayas only a dozen miles from the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh, Tawang carries historical and religious significance as the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. It was also the first refuge reached by the current Dalai Lama when he made a hazardous two-week trek to flee Chinese rule in Tibet in 1959.

As a result, Tawang has become enmeshed in the contentious set of

issues surrounding the 85-year-old Dalai Lama’s eventual reincarnation. In Tawang lies part of the history and traditions of Buddhism and the institution of the Dalai Lama. And in recent years the Chinese government has become increasingly concerned with securing a greater hold over the Tibetan plateau and Tibetan Buddhism, unveiling a wave of repressive measures, hand-selecting Buddhist monks, and claiming sole authority over the selection of the next Dalai Lama.

As many of India’s most astute China watchers have argued, for Beijing the border dispute and Tibet are inextricably linked. China has long expressed displeasure with India for its hosting the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Government in Exile, and a large population of Tibetan exiles. It has repeatedly accused India of interfering in its internal affairs on Tibet-related issues. It is indignant about the possibility the Dalai Lama may identify his successor within India’s borders.

In its own way, China has repeatedly sought to signal to India that the border dispute will remain an issue so long as the question of Tibet goes unresolved. When the LAC was relatively peaceful, the costs of that strategy appeared to be modest. But with the dispute entering a more volatile phase, one more destructive to

the overall bilateral relationship, it is becoming more costly for China to link the border disputes to Tibet. It remains to be seen whether China will double down on its more aggressive border tactics or reassess and re-adjust. ■

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