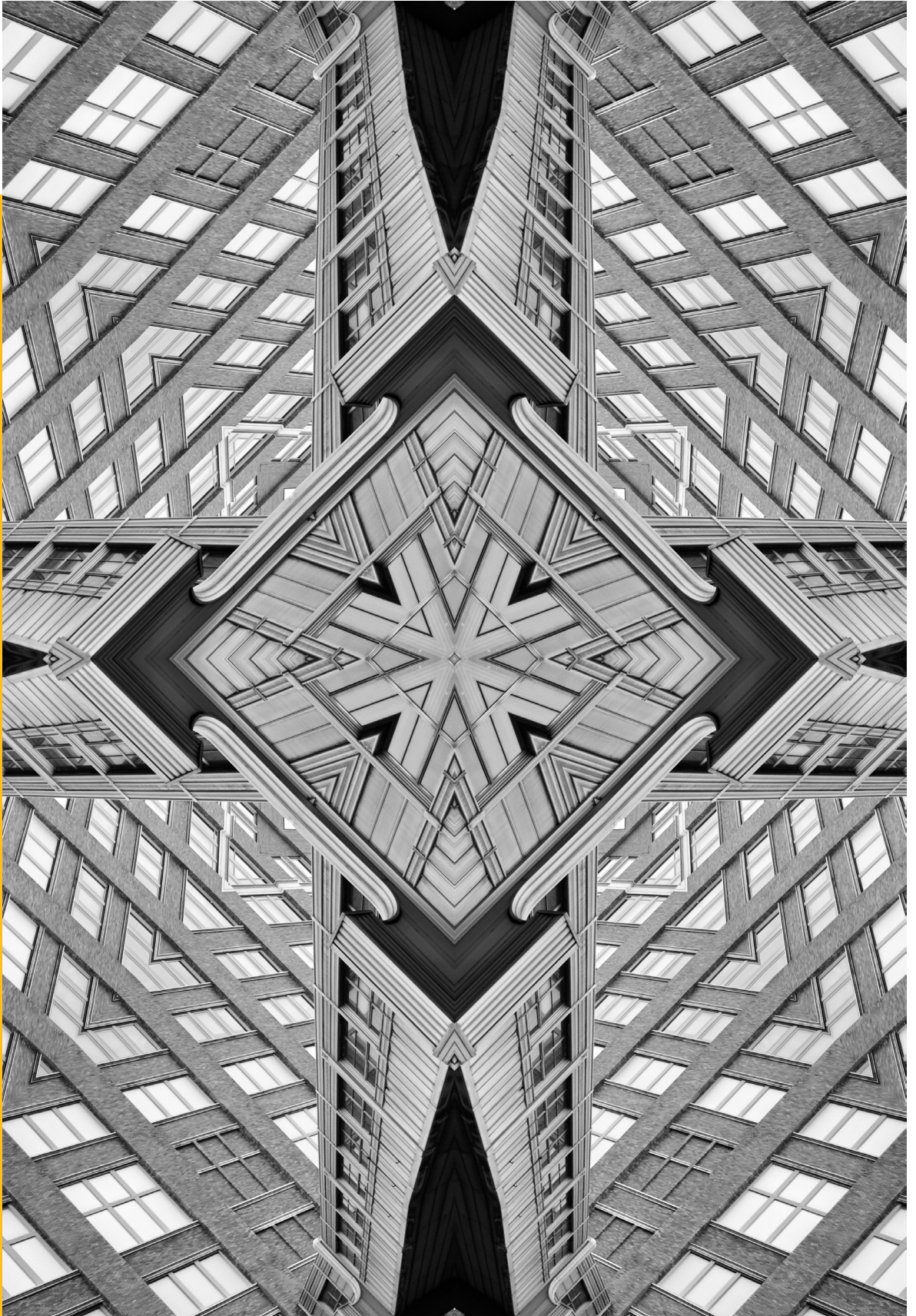


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Eastern Ladakh, the Longer Perspective

Manoj Joshi

Abstract

This paper makes an assessment of the situation in eastern Ladakh following the Chinese occupation of several areas across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the summer of 2020. That occupation led to an incident in the Galwan river valley in mid-June, which resulted in deaths on both Indian and Chinese sides—the first such casualties since 1975. The paper outlines the course of events since then, and the negotiations that have been only partially successful and seem deadlocked in achieving a *status quo ante*. It ponders why the events of 2020 happened, what China's goals were, and how India reacted. The paper seeks to examine the larger political-diplomatic options for India, and offers recommendations for the future course of Sino-Indian relations.

Chinese Troops Buildup

In January 2020, Indian newspapers reported that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) had begun military exercises in Tibet in the areas bordering India, and were deploying armoured vehicles, helicopters, heavy artillery, and anti-aircraft missiles to the region.¹

The exercises featured the Type 15 light tank and the new 155mm vehicle mounted howitzer that had been displayed in the 1 October 2019 National Day military parade. Shortly after, in a paper in February, ORF analysts Rajeswari Rajagopalan and Pulkit Mohan noted the surge in PLA military exercises in Tibet—"both service-specific and joint ones"—in recent years.² They speculated that the reports of these exercises in the Chinese state-run media were aimed at signalling China's "supremacy [over India] in the military domain." According to *India Today*, the Indian side had been watching these exercises for several years and did not find them unusual.³ In April, however, two formations—the 6th Mechanised and 4th Highland divisions—that had been conducting exercises near Hotan, in the province of Xinjiang, did not return to their bases and instead drove 1,000 km south, through Highway 219 that crosses Aksai Chin, and then turned west towards the Line of Actual Control that marks the Sino-Indian border^a in Ladakh.

To be sure, the Indian side also reinforces its deployment in the border areas when such exercises take place—a routine precaution that armed forces take when adversaries undertake exercises near the country's borders. When the PLA began to move some of these combat personnel westwards towards the LAC, the Indian Army received intelligence reports regarding the movement but did not pay heed.⁴ The initial onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, and India's drastic, nationwide lockdown delayed the Army's response.

a Hereinafter, when the paper uses the word "border", the author refers to the de facto situation represented by the Line of Actual Control (LAC). As for the boundary—it is disputed, and subject to ongoing negotiations between India and China. In Ladakh, India asserts that the boundary comprises of the entire Aksai Chin area. China claims, and currently occupies this area, even while the extent of their boundary claim is somewhat flexible.

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Towards mid-April the PLA, using these forces, occupied a number of areas claimed by both sides.^b The Chinese moved at five points simultaneously—Galwan river valley, the northern bank of the Pangong Tso lake, Hot Springs/Gogra, Depsang plains and the Charding Nala area of Demchok —and blocked Indian efforts to patrol up to what they understood to be the border.

On 5 May, clusters of Chinese forces began appearing near the Galwan Valley and Gogra-Hot Springs, and still the Indian Army did not realise the seriousness of the threat. In Galwan, the troops reached at least a kilometer across the LAC and sought to push farther to the confluence of the Shyok and Galwan rivers. They were, however, blocked by Indian soldiers who were then constructing a road up the Galwan river valley to Patrolling Point 14 (PP14) which had hitherto been patrolled on foot.⁵ First reports on developments in the area appeared in the Chinese state-run *Global Times* on 18 May, accusing the Indian forces of crossing into Chinese territory and blocking the PLA from patrolling, and of trying to “unilaterally change the status quo.”⁶ It was the opposite of what was happening.

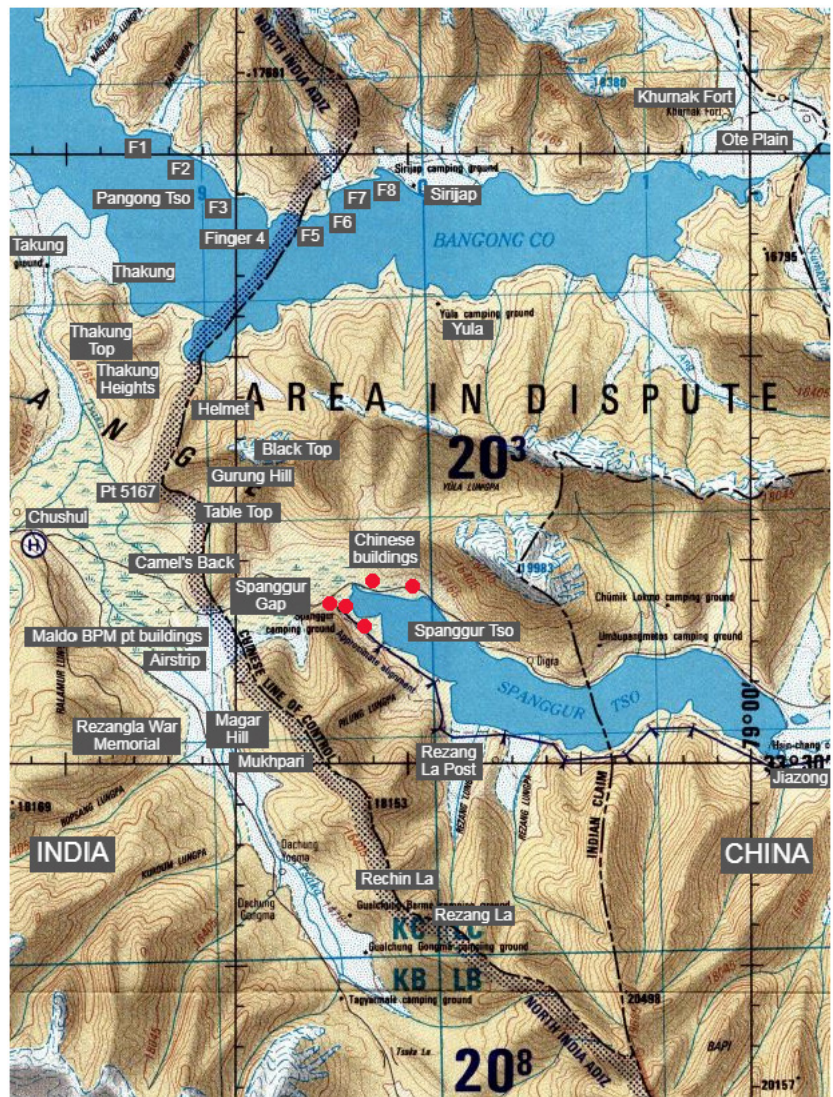
In Pangong Tso, beginning on 17 May, Chinese border guards began blocking India’s efforts to patrol up to Finger 8^c in the north bank, and PP 17A in the Kugrang river valley beyond Gogra. (See Map 1) Earlier that month, there had been a scuffle near Finger 5 in Pangong Tso where soldiers on both sides injured one another with sticks and stones.⁷ There are eight distinct fingers, and where India considered the border to be at Finger 8, China claimed that it was at Finger 4. Indeed, India should not have missed the Chinese troops massing near Finger 4 since the area is visible from across the lake which is just about 4 km at its widest.

b Neither side permanently holds these areas, although they both conduct regular patrols there.

c These “fingers” are ridges that come down from the heights to the north bank of the Pangong Tso.

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Map 1:
Pangong Tso and Spanggur area



Source: US Defence Mapping Agency annotated by DiplomatTesterMan in Wikipedia, September 2020⁸ - in the Public domain

India's Belated Response

The problem for India was not lack of information but its assessment. Until mid-May, Army Chief Gen. M.M. Naravane was insisting that the face-offs were “routine” in an area where both sides had overlapping claims of the LAC. On 14 May, responding to reports of face-offs in the Pangong Tso region, the spokesperson of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Anurag Srivastava made an anodyne statement to the media that India and China “attach utmost importance to maintenance of peace and tranquility in all areas of the India-China border regions.”⁹ He added that in their recent informal summits, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping had directed their militaries to “earnestly implement various confidence building measures [and] as a result, India-China border has largely been peaceful.”

The PLA's moves took India by surprise by their breadth and scope and in April-May, the solitary Indian Army division deployed in the area could not have stopped the Chinese troops from capturing larger areas of the Union Territory of Ladakh. That was not the Chinese aim, though. From the manner in which they were deployed, it was evident that the PLA wanted to display their forces, rather than position them in combat-mode. It was only in mid-May that India started reinforcing its troops in the Ladakh region.

According to Yun Sun, analyst at the Stimson Centre in Washington DC, the PLA were seeking to assert the line they had reached following their offensive in 1962.¹⁰ Though China maintains that they have been holding this line since even earlier, 7 November 1959. In the ceasefire following the war of 1962, China announced a 20-km withdrawal from this November 7 line. India did not accept the proposals, either for the ceasefire or the 20-km withdrawal, but was forced to live with the so-called November 7 line, that has only been spelt out in some detail during officials talks in 1960.¹¹

As Former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran noted in his book published in 2017, in eastern Ladakh, as a result of the war, “the Chinese forces created an alignment further west [of the November 7 line], which is, broadly the current LAC.”¹² This assessment was shared by Maj. Gen. (retd.) P.J.S. Sandhu, who as the Deputy Director of the tri-Service United Services Institution (USI), anchored an Indian study of the 1962 war, using Chinese sources. He says while the Chinese HQ

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was strict about restricting their forces to the 1960 claim line, in the Depsang Plains, they “overstepped their claim line and straightened the eastward bulge”—in other words moved westward from their own claim line.¹³ When India sought to maintain its claim, as per China’s own maps relating to the 1960 claim line, the Chinese began to find Indian activity irksome. In the summer of 2020, they reoccupied that line.¹⁴ Lt Gen H.S. Panag, a former chief of the Northern Army Command that looks after this area, shares this view as well.¹⁵

It was only by early June 2020 that India finished a massive counter-deployment: it pushed two additional divisions, including armour and artillery, into eastern Ladakh. India’s objective, too, was limited to preventing further Chinese gains and obtaining a situation of *status quo ante* through diplomatic means.

On 6 June, the senior military commanders of the two sides met at Moldo/Chushul meeting point near the Pangong and Spanggur lakes. They agreed to a disengagement of forward troops in Galwan, Gogra, and Hot Springs, to be followed by a de-escalation of the forces in the depth areas near the LAC. Meetings of junior officers to work out the process were also scheduled.

At this point, however, things had already gone out of control. First, there was no pull-back in Gogra and Hot Springs. Second, for reasons yet unknown, the Chinese troops pulled back their post and observation point in Galwan—which was intruding more than 500 metres into the Indian side of the LAC—only to soon re-establish that post. On 15 June, when the Indian forces went to the area to remonstrate, a clash broke out, leading to the deaths of 20 Indians and four Chinese soldiers. That these deaths were due to hypothermia, drowning, and stones and clubs, suggested that the violence was a breakdown of established processes resulting in violence, rather than part of a deliberate plan. Senior officers of both sides managed to bring things under control the next morning, and in early July 2020 the disengagement plan was implemented and the two sides pulled back a kilometre and a half each from the point of the clash.¹⁶ There has been no problem in the area since. A report that there had been a face-off between patrols of the two sides in early May 2021 was sharply denied by the Indian Army.¹⁷ The deaths on the Galwan river valley, the first along the LAC since 1975, were catalytic and worsened Sino-Indian relations. Though the two sides have managed a partial disengagement in eastern Ladakh, their main line forces remain close to the LAC and their ties have been negatively impacted.

Disengagement and De-escalation?

Meanwhile, further talks between the two sides stalled. At this point, the Indian Army through a surprise manoeuvre secured the heights of the Kailash range overlooking Spanggur Tso on the night of 29 August 2020, which put them in a position to threaten Chinese troops in the region. The PLA had the option of escalating but chose not to. The situation soon became fraught, however, as tanks from both sides faced one another at several places like Rechin La (See Map 1).

It took several months and 10 rounds of talks before the two sides agreed to a pull-back in the Pangong region in early February 2021. Announcing the pull-back, Minister of Defence Rajnath Singh said that the next meeting of the commanders would convene in 48 hours “to address and resolve all other remaining issues;”¹⁸ he was referring to Gogra- Hot Springs, Depsang and Charding Nala, though he did not mention them by name.

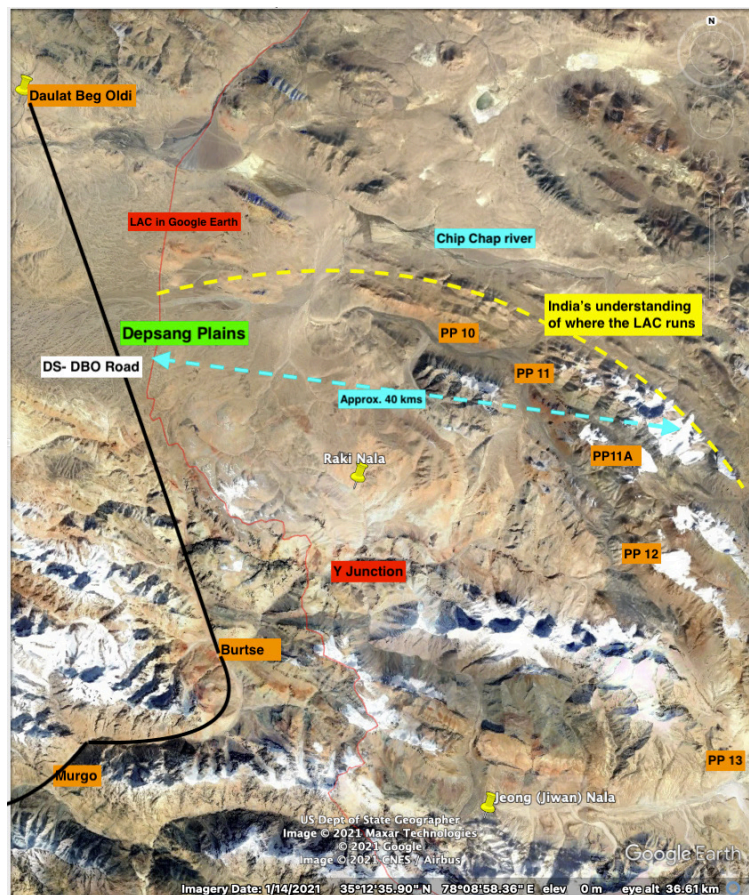
But as of now, the last meeting of the commanders was held on 9 April 2021 and in the meeting the Chinese adamantly refused to discuss those areas. Reportedly they told the Indian side that “India should be happy with what has been achieved (in terms of disengagement).”¹⁹ Equally important was that while the forces may have disengaged from face-to-face situations in Galwan and Pangong Tso areas, but they remain close to the LAC in significant numbers. De-escalation will only happen when these forces return to their peacetime locations.

The developments in Pangong Tso and Galwan are, of course, well-known and have been discussed in the media in the past year as well as by government spokesmen and ministers. However, little or no information has been provided through any authoritative source as to the situation in Depsang, Gogra-Hot Springs, and the Charding Nala. In fact, there has been an element of obfuscation around them.

“The 15 June skirmish at Galwan river valley, which led to deaths on both Indian and Chinese sides, was catalytic and worsened Sino-Indian relations.”

The PLA blockade at the Bottleneck or Y junction in the Depsang area, is some 7 km north-east of Burtse, which is itself some 30 km south of the Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) post. (See Figure 1) This junction is at a strategic point through which Indian soldiers for five patrolling points (PPs), 10, 11, 11A, 12, and 13 must pass. These lie in an arc of around 30 km from Raki Nala in the north, to the Jeong or Jiwan Nala in the south. Because of the terrain, these PPs are actually short of the LAC which lies another 5 km to the east. The Chinese blockade has thus effectively denied India the right to patrol some 600-800 sq km of its territory. This point had been blockaded in March 2013 as well, but subsequently, the Chinese pulled back after a negotiated settlement with the Indian side.

**Figure 1:
Depsang blockade**



Source: Author's own, made by annotating Google Earth imagery.

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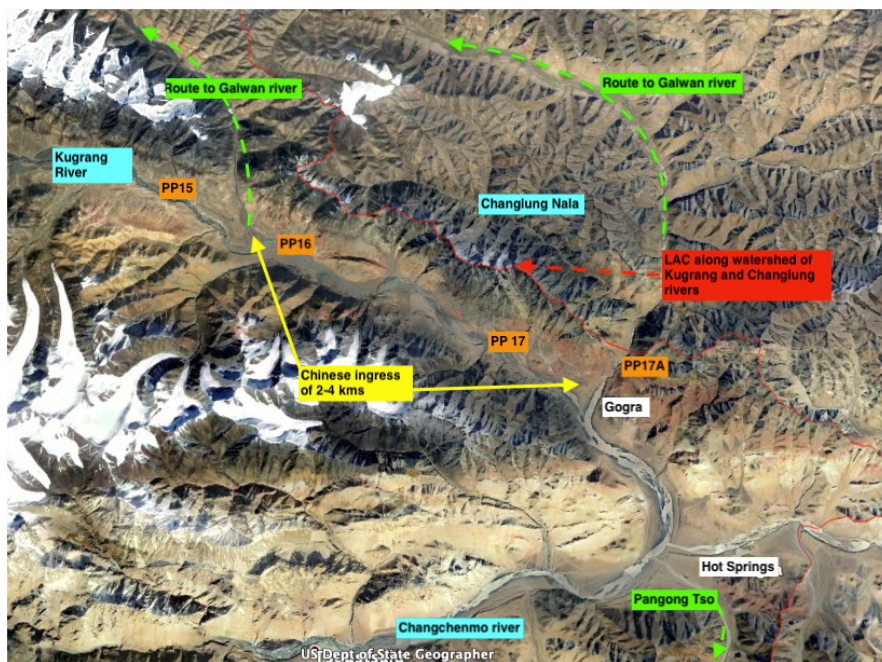
The first hint that India had of a problem was when in early August 2020, the two sides held Major General-level talks to discuss the Depsang Plains problem. These talks were held at the Indian post of Daulat Beg Oldi. A defence source told *The Hindu*, that the talks were routine and discussed patrolling patterns and that there was no discussion on disengagement or de-escalation. This the report claimed was on account of the fact that the problem of patrols being blocked there pre-dated the 2020 developments.²⁰ Subsequent to this, there was little or no reportage on the issue through 2020.

Then, in an interview with a news channel in mid-February 2021, Lt Gen. Y.K. Joshi, the new chief of the Army's Northern Command reiterated the official view that no land had been ceded to China. When asked about the Depsang situation, he said it was a "legacy issue" that "predates the present situation."²¹

A telling rejoinder to these claims came in April 2021 when retired Lt. Gen. Rakesh Sharma, who had been commander of the XIV Corps dealing with Ladakh, wrote a commentary on the website of the Vivekananda International Foundation, an entity close to the government. He questioned the narrative that had been put out on the Depsang region, and took issue with the view that it was a "legacy issue" and that Indian forces had not been able to visit Patrolling Points (PP) 10-13 since 2013. He insisted that despite difficulties, including the PLA obstruction, a "minimum of eight to ten patrols per year from 2013-2019" would have visited the area, for which records are with the authorities.²² Indeed, according to defence sources, the last patrol to the area had taken place in February 2020, just months before the Chinese troop movements in other parts of eastern Ladakh.

Another serious development was the blockade of the Kugrang river valley. (See Figure 2) Here, the LAC, as accepted by China itself in 1960, is supposed to be on the watershed between the Kugrang river and its tributary, the Changlung Nala. Chinese forces, however, came down 2 to 4 km to the valley and blocked access to PP 15 and PP 16 and massed opposite Hot Springs and the other posts in the area. As a result of these actions, India's border forces have been unable to patrol the Kugrang river valley. According to Lt Gen H. S. Panag, who has been highlighting the issue, "the Chinese intrusion here denies India "access to nearly 30-35 km long and 4-km wide Kugrang river valley beyond Gogra."²³

**Figure 2:
Hot Springs-Gogra and Kugrang
River Valley**



Source: Author's own, made by annotating Google Earth imagery.

The general says that in his assessment, China issued a “direct/indirect” threat to “to go on the offensive in DBO and Gogra-Hot Springs area” and compelled India to accept a “stand alone” agreement limited to the withdrawal at Pangong Tso.²⁴ This seems to be borne by the fact while the military leaders of the two sides managed to work out the disengagement of forces from the site of the clash in the Galwan Valley and the north and south banks of Pangong Tso, there has been no change in the Chinese blockade in Depsang, Gogra- Hot Springs, and Charding Nala.

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The Indian bottom line as revealed in interviews given by Indian Army chief, Gen. M M Naravane in May 2021 is that India would deal with China in a firm but “non-escalatory” manner to seek a return to status quo ante as of April 2020 in eastern Ladakh. While he spoke about the success of the disengagement process in the Pangong Tso area, he insisted that de-escalation could only happen if there was “complete disengagement at all friction points.”²⁵ This was as far as he would go in referring to the situation in the Depsang area, Kugrang river valley, and Charding Nala. Towards the end of May, however, he was quoted to have repeated the point that Depsang was a “legacy issue.”²⁶

The Charding-Ninglung Nala problem is a miniaturised version of the Depsang dispute. In this area south of Demchok, Chinese forces keep track of Indian patrols and the moment they set off for the area, they are confronted by a PLA blockade. This is something that has been going on for several years and the issue has now merged into the larger eastern Ladakh problem.

“While military leaders of both India and China managed to work out the disengagement of forces from the site of the Galwan clash, Chinese troops continue to block Depsang, Gogra-Hot Springs, and Charding Nala.”

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These events happened between March and June 2020, only months after the informal summit between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi in October 2019 in Chennai. There is a palpable element of deception—a factor intrinsic to Chinese strategy. The Indian side should not have been caught unawares, but indeed, they were.

Journalist and former military officer, Sushant Singh had written in July 2019 that the first informal summit in Wuhan some months earlier, in April 2018 had resulted in the laying out of new rules of engagement for the two armies. These rules were laid sector by sector. In the east, for example, the idea of staggered patrolling was mooted: one side patrols in the first fortnight of the month, and the other, in the second. Other ideas, such as escorted patrols, were also implemented in certain sectors. All these were backed up by greater interaction between the military officers of the two sides. Notably, however, these changes proved a challenge to implement in the “difficult” eastern Ladakh area; in October that year, the clash in the Pangong area would take place.²⁷

Summer 2020 as a Culmination

The events of 2020 were not a sudden occurrence, but rather a culmination of developments over the past decade. In an interview in April 2021, former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon pointed out that “roughly since 2012 the basic understanding on which you maintained your border from 1988 onwards was no longer valid.”²⁸ When the process of détente began in 1988, the GDP of the two countries was roughly equal; by 2012, China’s GDP was five times larger.²⁹

This inevitably affected the way China looked at the world, and at India. China’s economic growth over the decades, and India’s own laggard growth, was probably behind the various incidents on the border in Depsang, Chumar and Doklam. It could also be key to Beijing’s stand on both, India’s membership to the Nuclear Suppliers’ Group (NSG), and the Masood Azhar issue.^d It manifested itself in the intensification of Chinese support to Pakistan as well.³⁰ To be sure,

d Since 2009, India has been seeking to put Masood Azhar, founder of the Jaish-e-Muhammad terrorist group, in the UN sanctions list, but was repeatedly blocked by China. In May 2019, on the eve of the Indian elections, the Chinese agreed to put him under sanctions. He has been charged with master-minding several terror attacks in India.

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such a shift in Chinese policy was not unique to India; it was visible in Chinese assertiveness in the East Sea with Japan, as well as towards Taiwan and the South China Sea. China felt that somehow India was not recognising the growing gap in their relative economic status—and the fact that this should have had consequences for their dynamic. When China perceived that India was seeking to get closer to the United States (US) to balance China, Beijing decided that it needed to demonstrate its power.

American Sinologist M Taylor Fravel has noted that the Chinese view is that the border dispute with India is a secondary threat. China would prefer to “manage” the dispute, rather than end it by force by overwhelming or eliminating the Indian threat.³¹ India, he noted, “has never been China’s main or primary opponent.” While China may use force in a “secondary south-western direction,” it would do so mainly to maintain stability in that secondary area. From the Chinese point of view, importantly, the basis of this “stability” does not come from settling its border issues with India, but “dominance on the border and deterring Indian challenges.” The “primary direction” was from the north-east in the 1950s and 1960s (the US), the north in the 1970s and 1980s (the USSR), and today, the south-east (Taiwan and US maritime forces).

India sought to challenge this Chinese point of view outlined by Fravel in many ways. First, by building up its border infrastructure to more effectively maintain a deterrence capacity against the PLA along its borders. Second, by developing a relationship with the US which appeared to merge the threats from China’s primary and secondary strategic directions. Third, using the “Tibet card” by promoting its ties with exiled Tibetans and maintaining its relationship with the Dalai Lama. Fourth, challenging China’s efforts to develop ties in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, and fifth, leading the global critique of Xi Jinping’s signature Belt & Road Initiative. All these threatened to “destabilise” Sino-Indian relations, as Beijing viewed them, and there was need for China to restore the situation to its version of normality.

“The Chinese view is that the border dispute with India is a secondary threat that must be managed. India has never been China’s primary opponent. ~ M Taylor Fravel.”

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The Fallout

The trajectory of sharpened geopolitical competition between India and China is not an entirely comfortable one for either country. Yet now, not only do Chinese and Indian armies face each other across thousands of kilometres, but they are rapidly enhancing their military capacity along the LAC. Indian warships collaborate with the US to track Chinese movements in the Indian Ocean, and diplomats and spies face off against each other across the South Asia-Indian Ocean Region. In addition, after viewing India as a favourable market, Chinese investors are shying away in the face of hostility from consumers and the government.

Beginning in 1993, even though the two countries did not have an agreed Line of Actual Control (LAC), they had worked out agreements and laid down protocols that ensured that despite this disputed border—one being guarded by their respective militaries—there would be no degeneration to armed confrontations. Despite many disputes and alarms, they have largely succeeded. Even though there was a breakdown in Galwan in 2020, and a near confrontation along the Kailash range overlooking Spanggur Tso, peace has been maintained along the LAC. But there can be little doubt that the trust which was shattered by the events of April-May 2020 has yet to be restored, as has the *status quo ante* with regard to the LAC itself. This trust was built on several interlocking agreements, beginning with the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (BPTA) of 1993 and culminating in the Border Defence and Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) of 2013. The disequilibrium in their relationship—visible since the mid-2000s and arising from a combination of factors—continues to prevail. The question is whether the relationship can go back to a measure of civility, and what they can do to replace these agreements.

In some ways, both sides have tried to limit the fallout of Ladakh. No less than Prime Minister Modi had declared that there had been no “intrusion” in Galwan; only an attempt, which was thwarted by Indian forces. Of the Galwan incident, too, Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had spoken before Parliament and said, “In mid-May the Chinese side made several attempts to transgress the LAC in other parts of the Western sector. This included Kongka La, Gogra and

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North Bank of Pangong Lake. These attempts were detected early and consequently responded to appropriately by our armed forces.”³² In other words, there had been no loss of territory. Singh said nothing about the Depsang blockade, he clearly played down the one in Kugrang river valley, and prevaricated on the Pangong Lake issue where Chinese troops had stationed themselves in Finger 4 and were blocking Indian patrols.

Chinese officials, meanwhile, soon began to understand the extent to which the Galwan clash had altered Indian mainstream attitudes towards China, and made efforts to mitigate the situation. In August 2020, Defence Ministry spokesperson Senior Colonel Wu Qian called on India to continue the dialogue and calm the tension, adding that New Delhi should “bear in mind the big picture of bilateral ties” and put the border issue “in an appropriate position in this big picture.”³³

Some months later, in January 2021, this was echoed by foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who said that an important lesson to move Sino-Indian ties forward was the need to delink the border issue with bilateral relations.³⁴ Zhao was to reiterate this point in response to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar’s address at the end of January, which will be discussed later in this paper. On 29 January 2021, speaking in Beijing, Zhao made clear that it was China’s belief that the border issue “shall not be linked with bilateral relations.”³⁵ He added, “We hope the Indian side will work with us to properly manage differences, promote practical cooperation, and get the bilateral relations back on the right track.”

Chinese officials like Ambassador Sun Weidong conducted a series of outreach meetings in August and September where the message was that their country’s basic policy towards India had not changed. “China sees India as a partner instead of a rival, and an opportunity instead of a threat.”³⁶ He hoped to use dialogue and consultation to “push bilateral relations back on track at an early date.”

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In November 2020, at an interaction with the MP-Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi, Dai Bingguo, who had served as China's Special Representative for border talks between 2003-2014, called for a return to the Wuhan and Chennai "consensus": that the two countries "should be partners and should not become rivals of each other."³⁷ In his view—and this has been expressed by other Chinese writers as well—it was not a good idea to club bilateral relations with the boundary question.

The Chinese message was amplified in March 2021 when China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed the customary press conference at the National People's Congress. He said the boundary dispute was "not the whole story" of the relationship between India and China. The two countries were "each other's friends and partners, not threats or rivals," and that it would take efforts by both sides to set things right.³⁸ Two weeks earlier in a telephonic conversation with his Indian counterpart, S Jaishankar, Wang Yi had complained that "there had been some wavering and back pedalling in India's China's policy" which had affected "practical cooperation."³⁹

Yet, changes on the ground cannot be ignored. The most important has been the sharp enhancement, of both sides, of military capacity in eastern Ladakh. According to media reports, India intends to retain a substantial additional military capacity in the region. In some ways, this is a response to the PLA establishing cantonments and facilities to house troops closer to the LAC. In April 2020, the soldiers that had surged to the Indian border had originated 1000 km away, in their bases in Xinjiang. Today reports suggest that these troops are being based in western Tibet.⁴⁰ India has also begun a process of rebalancing its forces and reinforcing the deployment dedicated to the LAC. Where it earlier had one strike corps, now it has committed itself to have two. This is also a signal that it no longer views its LAC strategy to be merely based on defence.

A second change is that the utility of certain procedures and protocols that the two militaries had followed for 30 years to keep peace on the border are now under question. For example, Indian forces are now authorised to use guns to protect themselves. In the western sector, the two sides are either locked into "no patrolling zones" or else are in situations involving a stand-off.

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Border Infrastructure

It would appear that for China, today, Indian behaviour—in general, and on the border—has been inexplicable. Instead of accepting that it was now irretrievably behind China in nearly all aspects of national power, India insisted on intensifying its efforts to build a deterrence capability on the Sino-Indian border. Beijing saw this as a somewhat impertinent attempt to destabilise its military posture, which was based on maintaining a dominant position along the Line of Actual Control. In line with this, what China was seeking to do in 2020 was to strengthen their border defences against what they viewed as Indian encroachments.

The problem arises from their differing perceptions of the LAC. Before the 1993 BPTA, India accepted the LAC as defined as of 8 September 1962; China, meanwhile, spoke of the one as of 7 November 1959, which they said was the same as the one depicted in 1956 maps. This 7 November 1959 line is what they detailed during official talks in 1960 and for which they provided a map. The reality is that both India and China were quite far apart from each other in several parts of eastern Ladakh in 1959 and moved forward only in the 1960-1962 period when India initiated its “Forward Policy”.

In the 1962 war, China wiped out a number of Indian posts in the Depsang Plains, Galwan river valley, and in Pangong Tso established through the “Forward Policy”; the LAC that resulted—and to which India had to acquiesce—was a consequence of that war. India was not willing to accept this version of the LAC, but as of 1993, it did accept the *notion* of an LAC when it signed the BPTA. China’s assertion that this LAC was the same as the 7 November 1959 line—which, in turn, was based on a 1956 map—was seen by India as pure fiction: after all, Indian posts existed to the east of this line and were only eliminated as a consequence of the war.

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Incidents on the border—the stand-offs in Depsang and Chumar in 2013 and 2014, and the various incidents and clashes in Pangong Tso and Demchok—were all linked to Chinese proposals in the BDCA and on the Code of Conduct on border affairs. These were for the Indians to freeze construction in the border areas. But far from freezing, the Indian construction process which had slowly gathered speed since the mid-2000s, began to move expeditiously after 2010. The completion of the Darbuk Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi (DS-DBO) road in 2019 was an important marker of India's determination to maintain some degree of parity with China. (See Figure 1)

Perhaps an even more important marker of Indian behaviour was the Doklam episode of 2017: Chinese forces, who were positioned at the end of a long and narrow valley dominated by Indian troops along the ridgeline—were outplayed. China initially took a hard-line stance but soon decided on a compromise. It was following this incident that the PLA reviewed its entire posture along the Sino-Indian border and began a systematic buildup they stationed more troops proximate to the LAC, plugged gaps in the air defence system, and hardened airfields and helipads. Presumably, as part of this, the decision was taken to iron out the LAC wherever possible, especially near the DS-DBO road.

“China's assertion that the LAC is the same as the 7 November 1959 line is seen by India as pure fiction.”

China's sudden military move in April-May 2020 was partly an act of strategic coercion aimed at quelling what Beijing felt was an overweening Indian posture on the LAC. It would go out of control in the icy banks of the Galwan river, and lead to casualties—something which China could not have expected. The government of India tried its best to limit the fallout of the action, even denying any incursion had occurred. Even now Indian officials have not given a clear picture of the PLA ingresses in places like the Depsang Plains, the Kugrang Valley, Gogra-Hot Springs, and the Charding Nala area, south of Demchok.

The US

Using Fravel’s categorisation, in the past decade China has been seeing that the challenge from their secondary, south-western direction (India), was steadily merging with the primary. China has long viewed the primary threat as coming from the US-led alliance system in the western Pacific. The Indo-Pacific strategy and the emergence of the Quadrilateral Dialogue was seeking to contain China in a larger framework. India, with its enduring border dispute with China, was emerging as a key anchor of such a strategy.

Chinese scholar Ye Halin has suggested that the US is the crucial element that has prevented India from accepting its subordinate position in the regional hierarchy. He complained that even as China led India in almost any parameter of national power, “The US’s rejection of China is enough to offset China’s power advantage over other actors.”⁴¹ He lamented that “it is difficult to prove who has the higher absolute international status between the sub-power [India] supported by the hegemony [US] and the power [China] suppressed by the hegemony.”

Ye was referring to the US-India military partnership that has steadily grown beginning in 2008. The US has become a key supplier of defence equipment to India, while the latter signed up to a number of US “foundational agreements” to promote inter-operability. This process intensified under the Modi government, marked by the revival of the Quadrilateral Grouping (or ‘Quad’), strongly supported by Japan under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.^e

The Trump administration that took office in 2017 shifted gears when it moved from a policy of engagement with China to one of confrontation and competition. It crafted a new Indo-Pacific policy and challenged Beijing in the western Pacific, especially the South China Sea. The US also made clear their view that the new prefix “Indo” had to do with India’s pivotal role; this was underscored by the decision to change the name of the US Pacific Command— with which the Indian military had been interacting since the mid-1990s— to “Indo-Pacific Command.” There was shift to yet a higher gear when the Quad was revived in 2017.^f India and the US’s military ties began

e The US, India, Australia, and Japan.

f The Quad started out as a talking shop of junior officials, with each country issuing its own press release after meetings. In 2018, the Observer Research Foundation’s semi-official Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi featured the navy chiefs of Japan, US, Australia and India, signalling the Quad’s serious military intent. In 2019, as the US-China relations went south, the Quad was elevated to a higher level when its foreign ministers decided to meet in a summit in New York on the side lines of the UN General Assembly session.

to take qualitative jumps. It was, perhaps, the revival of the Quad in 2017 that would have sent alarm bells ringing in Beijing. That it took place in the year of Doklam was, of course, coincidental.

Simultaneously, the erstwhile India-US Strategic and Commercial Dialogue, which began in 2009, became a full-fledged annual “2+2 Strategic Dialogue”.^g The inaugural meeting in September 2018 resulted in an expansive joint statement listing the new India-US agenda. New Delhi signed another “foundational agreement”—the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)—which enabled the US and India to share monitoring data gathered through common platforms such as the US-made P8I reconnaissance aircraft that the Indian Navy also operates, as do the Australian naval forces.

By 2019 the military hue of the Indo-US relationship had deepened with the activation of the Quad, the foundational agreements, and the qualitative enhancement of military-to-military cooperation and ongoing Indian acquisitions of US defence equipment. India was already emerging as a key player in managing information on commercial shipping in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through its Information Fusion Center located in Gurgaon in the National Capital Region. At the end of 2019, the US, UK, France, Japan and Australia had agreed to post their personnel as liaison officers at the centre.

In 2020, as the China-India confrontation in Ladakh unfolded, the Sino-American tensions, too, heightened with developments in Hong Kong and issues relating to Xinjiang and Taiwan.^h US officials seemed to suggest that the US thought of the Quad as the core of an “Asian NATO”.⁴² Underscoring this was the fact that in an era of virtual summits amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad foreign ministers decided on a face-to-face summit in Tokyo in October 2020. Simultaneously, India signed the last of the four foundational accords—the Basic Exchange of Cooperation Agreement (BECA)—which enabled the sharing of geospatial information.

g It is where the foreign and defence ministers of India and the US meet in a joint format.

h The passage of the draconian National Security Law in Hong Kong led to strong reactions in the international community but no tangible repercussions for China. The continuing issues arising from large-scale detention of Uighurs in Xinjiang led to US sanctions on Chinese officials involved, as well as a ban on cotton produced in the region. As for Taiwan, the Hong Kong events increased its sense of vulnerability and the Chinese enhanced it by holding drills and exercises on the island.

Tibet

In Sino-Indian relations, the issue of Tibet is never too far from the surface. This owes as much to geography as to the political calculations on both sides. Many scholars believe that it was China's insecurities over Tibet that eventually pushed it to making war against India in 1962.⁴³ In the past decade where there has been a shift in Chinese behaviour, one important development was the termination in 2010 of the dialogues between China and representatives of the Dalai Lama, which had gone on, albeit intermittently, since the 1980s.

The Modi government trod on Chinese toes early, when in 2014 Lobsang Sangay, the then Tibetan Sikyong, head of the Central Tibetan Administration or government-in-exile, was invited to attend the prime minister's inauguration. In January 2017, the Dalai Lama was invited to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, though for an event organised by an NGO. Later that year, he visited Tawang, in Arunachal Pradesh, home to the largest Buddhist monastery outside of Lhasa. And during the Doklam crisis, the government had allowed Sangay to unfurl a Tibetan flag near Pangong Tso. But, India had withdrawn the "Tibet" card on the eve of the first informal summit in Wuhan in 2018 when it pointedly advised its officers not to participate in meetings to celebrate the 60th year of the Dalai Lama's arrival in India to be held in 2019. Later, at the end of August 2020, when India made its counter-move against China in the Pangong Tso area, it did so using Special Forces comprising Tibetan exiles.ⁱ The use of this force to recapture the heights opposite Spanggur Tso was publicised, meant to be the bullfighter's red cape to taunt the Chinese bull. Beijing did not escalate the situation, uncertain as it was of the outcome.

Despite all the wars and alarms, the long and inhospitable terrain where the border runs has little intrinsic value. In recent years, though, China has discovered vast deposits of zinc at a mountain called Huoshaoyun, some 45 km north-east of Kongka La in Aksai Chin. Cross-border trade, valuable for the residents of the area, was

i The Special Frontier Force (SFF) was created in the 1960s by the Indian external intelligence agency Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW).

Other Stakeholders

in its heyday in the 1950s about the basic necessities of life; economic activity was about primal needs such as accessing pastures for sheep, goats and yaks. Even if highways and railway lines come up, this will not change, though peace could possibly bring a windfall in tourism. Right now, the problem for both sides is of having people populate the border regions. Life is tough, and economic growth elsewhere acts as a magnet to draw away people. First, the able-bodied leave and soon ghost villages are left.

China is now making dedicated effort to ensure that its border areas are not depopulated. There has been a sharp increase in the number of model villages that are appearing along the LAC. These *Xiaokang* (moderately prosperous) villages serve two functions: to upgrade the quality of life of the citizens along the border, and to ensure security in that border. An analysis by Jayadeva Ranade notes of plans to build more than 600 such villages along the LAC over the next few years.⁴⁴

“In Sino-Indian relations, the issue of Tibet is never too far from the surface.”

A lot has happened between India and China since 2020 to expect that they can easily return to the trendline obtaining at the end of 2019. Yet, as large neighbours—and indeed who still share significant trading relations, and common regional and global interests—the two sides will necessarily have to work out a new *modus vivendi* based on an entirely new set of rules to address the current conditions.

There are two fundamental questions: Can the ties between India and China return to some semblance of normality? Can there be an intersection of what China wants and where India stands?

To start with, there has long been a dissonance in the way they view the Confidence Building Measures (CBM) regime that enabled them to maintain normal relations over the decades, despite a long-running border dispute. At the heart of the 1993 BPTA, as well as the 1996 agreement on CBMs on the military field, is the importance of clarifying the differences in the LAC. India has sought to seriously address this, as is evident from Prime Minister Modi's repeated efforts to draw the attention of the Chinese leadership to the issue during the visit of Xi Jinping to India in 2014, and during his own visit to China in 2015. Chinese officials have never categorically provided India the reasons why they have gone back on their commitments to do so. Their claim that the process will complicate matters has no backup of detail. The belief that a mutually accepted LAC will somehow “freeze” into a permanent boundary is simply not tenable.

The 1986-87 confrontation between the Indian Army and the PLA had alarmed the latter sufficiently to accept these interlocking agreements to limit military deployments including heavy weapons and systems along the LAC. In contrast, the year 2020 witnessed the PLA choosing to deploy mass combat formations near the LAC at several points in eastern Ladakh, and even display their equipment as if on parade. It would appear that they are ready to write-off the 1993 and 1996 agreements along with all talk of promoting “mutual and equal security”.

S Jaishankar's important speech to the 13th All India Conference of China Studies at the end of January 2021 and on the eve of the pull-back agreement in Pangong Tso, laid out the issues with China.⁴⁵ He repeated his theme that China was yet to explain the reason for massing forces at the border regions, noting that India and China could compete and co-exist beneficially, provided they observed the "three mutuals" between them and followed the eight propositions.^j Accepting S Jaishankar's three "mutuals" and eight "propositions" does not seem to sit well with China's larger goal of achieving primacy in the South Asia and Indian Ocean Region (SA-IOR). For China, moving towards that goal is better served by a border that remains unsettled and unclear, and a Pakistan that remains hostile to India. China seems to have rejected Jaishankar's point that peace and tranquillity on the border is a necessary precondition for the development of normal relations.

There is nothing to suggest that China is willing to underwrite a multipolar Asia in which it is an equal partner to India. It is one thing to talk about "understanding Indian aspirations" in relation to India's claim for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, and quite another to offer formal support for the process, as other P-5 countries have done.

In early 2020, before the outbreak of the Ladakh crisis, US scholar Yun Sun wrote: "China believes in power politics and its own natural superiority. Beijing's vision for Asia is strictly hierarchical—with China at the top—and does not consider India an equal."⁴⁶ In her view, despite their respective public postures, "distrust and hostility" between China and India runs deep.

j EAM S Jaishankar named India and China's "three mutuals": mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest. He also outlined eight propositions, of which three addressed the border issue directly. First and most important was that existing agreements "must be adhered to in their entirety". Second, that the LAC be "strictly observed and respected." Third, that "peace and tranquillity in the border areas is the basis for development of relations in other domains." The remaining five points were essentially a call to China to treat Indian aspirations at par with its own.

What China Wants

While China's actions in eastern Ladakh had many causative factors, including a desire to assert the so-called November 7, 1959 LAC and to overawe India militarily, what mattered more were its larger perspective towards India and its goals in the South Asia-Indian Ocean Region (SA-IOR). China needs to be accepted in its periphery as the foremost economic and military power, before it is taken seriously as a global power. Indeed, geography has dealt China a difficult hand. In its south-west is India, equally huge and populous and with aspirations of its own, and its neighbours most certainly see India as being the naturally pre-eminent power in South Asia. Russia to its north is out of China's calculations for now. China's biggest problem is in the western Pacific where Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines are backed by the US, whose own grand strategy is to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon on either ends of Eurasia.

India may well be, in Fravel's typology, a secondary strategic direction for China. This still poses a significant challenge to China's longer-term interests in protecting its sovereignty in Tibet and for expanding its influence in SA-IOR. With an economy five times the size of India's, and ahead in almost every metric of comprehensive national power, Beijing would like New Delhi to accept the reality of its "sub" power status, and it is willing to offer India "partnership" much in the way that the US is doing. India may not be able to match the resources China deploys in the SA-IOR, but geography hugely favours India in relation to countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and, of course the Indian Ocean.

“There is nothing to suggest that China is willing to underwrite a multipolar Asia in which it is an equal partner to India.”

In recent years, India has developed strong military ties with the country which China believes is its primary threat—the United States. China would like to focus on the western Pacific challenge and retain stable ties with India in South Asia. India’s constant efforts, however, to upgrade its border infrastructure and strengthen its “partnership” with the US destabilises China’s calculations. The very aim of the US-Japan-led counter strategy is to stretch the old Asia-Pacific to include the Indian Ocean. Within the Asia-Pacific, China looms large; in the Indo-Pacific, it looks a bit smaller because of India.

It was not surprising that Chinese writings on the 2020 crisis analysed by Mathieu Duchatel, a leading French Sinologist with the Institut Montaigne, converged “on the key importance of US-India relations in explaining tensions.”⁴⁷ Associated with this were issues raised about India abandoning non-alignment and its adherence to strategic autonomy.

Writing in mid-June 2020 in a Chinese military publication, Zhang Jiadong, a professor at the Fudan University in Shanghai noted the growing gap between the level of Sino-Indian relations and their strategic importance.⁴⁸ He said India had “continuously strengthened” its relations with the US, Japan and other countries to “check and balance China.” At the regional level, too, India was taking steps to compete with China in South Asia and north Indian Ocean Region. Yet, he claimed, Chinese policy would not change provided, first, that “India does not join any anti-China alliance system” and second, “India does not undermine the interactive norms and habits formed by the two sides in the border since 1993.” With the second condition having been trashed by Beijing itself in 2020, it remains to be seen which direction China would take.

“The optimal state” of China-India relations, the scholar Ye Hailin notes, would be one where the border issue is resolved to China’s satisfaction, “India accepts China in South Asia” and promotes the BRI, and India and China join hands “to oppose US bullying.”⁴⁹ All these would help China to expand its strategic space and national interests. He concedes it would not be rational to expect this. The reality is that in making those moves in 2020, China may have inadvertently worsened the situation for itself. As Yun Sun has put it: “China might

have just won the battle [in Ladakh] and lost the war.”⁵⁰ What it has done is to have deepened suspicion of its behaviour, not just in India, but also abroad. This could very well “eliminate any possibility, however thin, for India to accept China’s regional ambitions.”

This analysis was echoed by M Taylor Fravel who told Happymon Jacob in an interview, “China miscalculated. They wanted to assert themselves on the border without worsening its ties with India. But [after] what happened in Galwan, they were unable to strike that balance.”⁵¹ Fravel did note, though, that China’s desire to go back to the past could well provide India “some diplomatic space to address some issues.”

Where India Stands

There is little doubt that India was not keen and agile enough in 2020 and this enabled the PLA to swiftly occupy key disputed areas along the LAC, or block Indian access to them. New Delhi has so far refused to go along with the *fait accompli* and conducted a limited counter-move in the south bank of Pangong Tso, which challenged China to raise the ante. Eventually China calculated that it was better to negotiate a pull-back in the Pangong Tso area—which was done in February 2021. However, the fate of other areas like the Kugrang river Valley, Depsang, and the Charding Nala remains uncertain. It is up to India to make the next move.

The chances of conducting a military operation of the kind that was done in the southern bank of Pangong Tso, however, is remote. The terrain and communications do not favour an Indian escalation in either the Kugrang valley or Depsang. The fact that the government of India has said little about these areas would suggest that it could be willing to live with a *fait accompli* under certain conditions.

For now, the Indian side seems to have settled down for prolonged negotiations; it is aware that it could take years to persuade China to restore *status quo ante*, as in the case of Sumdorong Chu. India has indicated that it will continue to seek a Chinese withdrawal by diplomatic means, although it has not spelt out what Chinese forces are doing in Depsang, Kugrang river valley, and Charding Nala area.

India is unlikely to give comfort to China on Tibet. This is evident from an April 2021 report which said, “senior security officials in India, including the Prime Minister’s office have been involved in discussions about how New Delhi can influence the choice of the next Dalai Lama.”⁵² As part of this, India convened five separate assemblies of senior monks from the different sects of Tibetan Buddhism with a view of shaping the narrative on the legitimacy of any successor of the Dalai Lama. In July this year, the Dalai Lama will turn 86; his aides have in the past said that they will begin thinking about his successor when he turns 90.

As for the United States, at present, its own China policy is under review. President Joe Biden’s State of the Union address in April focused on domestic issues.⁵³ It spoke of the importance of out-competing China and its sole reference to the “Indo-Pacific” was that American military deployments in the region were to “not to start a conflict, but to prevent one.” This was underscored earlier by the first virtual summit of the Quad leaders in March, which self-consciously widened the remit of Quad activities to engage in longer-term competition with China in the area of vaccines, critical technologies, and climate action.⁵⁴ Modi’s own cursory remarks indicated that India is not viewing the Quad as any kind of a security shield.⁵⁵

Speaking at the annual Raisina Dialogue in April 2021, EAM S Jaishankar had rejected the notion that the Quad was any kind of NATO. He said that building it was an effort to form a coalition of like-minded countries to fill the gaps that had arisen in multilateralism.⁵⁶ He added that the latest summit had made it clear that it dealt with a wide variety of issues, ranging from vaccine collaboration to resilient supply chains and maritime security.

The issue of Quad’s emergence as a full-fledged military alliance remains moot. Two of its members are already formal military allies of the US. India so far has shown no inclination to seek a formal military alliance as well. The US does not expect the Indian military to play more than a symbolic role in the western Pacific; it would be happy if the Indian Navy is able counter PLAN in the Indian Ocean Region in the coming decades. This was the import of a strategic framework document of the Trump Administration that was declassified and released in January this year.⁵⁷

Immediately after the Galwan incident, India took several economic measures against China. This included a ban on mobile applications of Chinese IT firms, restrictions on FDI, and cutting China out of the 5G trials. Yet this did not lead to any large-scale disengagement: Indian exports to China rose by a record 16 percent to \$20.86 billion, though overall trade went down by 5.6 percent at \$87.6 billion.⁵⁸ India is aware of its over-dependence on China as a source for a variety of products like mobile phones, active pharmaceutical ingredients (API), electronics, automotive parts, and rare earths. An October 2020 study showed that China accounted for more than 80 percent of India's imports in 375 categories of items in 2018-19; in 57 product categories it was as high as 100 percent. As a result of the COVID-19 experience, and the political fallout with China, India has announced a Production Linked Incentive scheme to reduce dependence.⁵⁹

India's Options

1. Accept *fait accompli* in relation to the Chinese blockade in Depsang and Kugrang valley and incorporate them under the concept of "no patrolling zones", of the type that have now been created in Galwan valley and the north bank of the Pangong Tso. Or else the ones that were implemented in July 2019.⁶⁰ Qian Feng, a former journalist who has worked in India, and who is now with the research department of the National Strategy Institute of Tsinghua University had suggested in September 2020, that "the concept of a 'zone of actual control' can replace the concept of 'line of actual control' in some areas.⁶¹ There are pros and cons: the larger dispute relating to the boundary will not go away. The Chinese are adept at shifting goalposts, as they did in the case of Galwan where they began to claim a new border out of the blue. There are many other circumstances in which the boundary dispute can be brought into the play at any time. The border may become more peaceful if these zones are created, but the 2020 events have enhanced mistrust on both sides and currently the older CBMs are non-functional and there is no clarity as to what can replace them.

The Bigger Picture

2. Insist on *status quo ante* in Ladakh. Refuse to back down and keep up diplomatic pressure on China. Enhance military capacity across the entire LAC—the western sector where a build-up has already taken place, as well as the central sector which is somewhat vulnerable, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. However, enhancing military capacity along the LAC will impose huge additional costs on an already strained Indian military budget and will have the inevitable consequence of India de-emphasising its naval development, which has an intrinsic importance for an economically thriving India.
3. Echo Beijing's view that the border issue should be delinked with the larger bilateral relations and restore normality to the relationship.
4. Push to formalise the Quad into a military alliance, so as to get the formal support of the United States, Japan and Australia in military dealings with China. This will not be one-way, however, and New Delhi may not be prepared to give as it takes.
5. Reach out to Pakistan and resolve bilateral issues in order to neutralise the challenge of a collusive two-front threat. This could mean picking up from where the 2004-2007 negotiations left off. However, Pakistan would likely demand a price if India wants it to loosen its quasi-alliance with China.
6. Understand that the United States is itself trying to come up with a balance with regard to its policy towards China. The US has clearly indicated that while there is no return to the past, future policy does not seek confrontation; at the same time, the US emphasises competition. The Biden Administration's focus is to effect a domestic economic transformation in the US, and for that it needs a good working relationship with China in the near to medium term.
7. Accept that Indian economic, technological and military power lags behind that of China. Work on a long-run strategy to enhance economic growth, decrease the asymmetry with China, work with coalitions to build resilient supply chains to bypass China.⁶² This most certainly cannot happen overnight. Moreover, it is something that India cannot do alone; India will need a changed attitude on the trade front, and to put in work on supply chain coalitions to enhance technology.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Manoj Joshi is Distinguished Fellow at ORF.

A. Border

1. Understand that diplomacy will not deflect China from its goals. Beijing is pursuing a policy whose key drivers are internal; with India, it is not really about the border. Here the interests of other countries, big or small, do not matter. Witness how China has steamrolled Bhutan on the boundary issue and is physically occupying disputed areas, notwithstanding commitments that it would maintain status quo in the region.⁶³
2. Be prepared to cut losses in eastern Ladakh and consolidate where forces are. Accept the *fait accompli*. Gen. Panag bluntly pointed out that the Indian military options are limited in the Depsang and Gogra-Hot Springs area and “it may be prudent to diffuse the crisis by negotiating buffer zones in these critical areas even if these entirely are on our side of the LAC.”⁶⁴
3. Peace and stability on the border are an important goal in itself. Work out new and more realistic confidence-building measures and protocols with the PLA. This could be a mix of strategies: expanding the border zone concept in select areas, coordinating patrolling in other areas, and decreeing a no-contact regime where patrols stay 100 metres apart if and when they encounter each other. This can also involve agreements to not build in areas considered sensitive by the other side, even while creating a proximate network of high-quality roads.
4. Do not rush to push more forces up on the border in defensive and static deployments. India already has a strong border defence posture, but there is a need to identify and plug areas of perceived weaknesses such as the central sector. Military deployments should be based on military considerations and not political requirements. Even while changing the orientation of the Army to deal with China, rather than Pakistan as the primary threat, there is need to restructure and reform the military in a prudent and calibrated manner.
5. Take measures to strengthen Indian surveillance capabilities along the entire LAC, whether through patrolling, using optronic sensors or UAVs. India must react with much greater speed to Chinese activity. Fill the gaps that have been ignored. Some of the Patrolling Points (PPs) could be converted to regular posts.

Recommendations and Conclusion

6. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) should be placed under Army control to make for quicker and more fluid reaction. Note that the Chinese troops did not ingress in areas where there was a physical Indian presence.

B. Diplomacy

7. India's efforts to allay Chinese concerns by reassuring them on the status of Tibet being a part of China have not really worked. India needs to nuance its stand to assert that like China, India, too, has millennia-old cultural ties with Tibet and a stake in the stability of the region. New Delhi needs to avoid using the "Tibet card" for diplomatic convenience, and instead, endorse a negotiated settlement between China and the Tibetan exiles on the basis of the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way."
8. Given where it is located, India has natural geographical advantages vis-à-vis China in the Indian Ocean. While continental commitments will impose great pressures on the already strained defence budget, ways and means must be found to strengthen India's maritime and naval capacity. The decision to proceed with the project of building nuclear attack submarines is a step in the right direction, as well as the strengthening of the Indian posture in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.
9. Parlay this advantage into a strong relationship with the United States and the European Union, both of whom seem to be interested in a wider Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at checking China. This strategy is shaping up to be one of economic, technological and military competition. A strong Indian economy and military posture in the Indian Ocean will be welcomed by the two parties.
10. Seek détente with Pakistan, taking off from the understandings that were reached in the 2004-2007 period. Certain deployments and military holdings such as tanks, related to the India-Pakistan context, can also be subject to negotiated reduction. Also, work out a *modus vivendi* on Afghanistan with Islamabad.

Recommendations and Conclusion

11. Accept that India cannot match China's diplomatic reach and resources at this juncture, and stop behaving as if believing otherwise. Instead of offering symmetrical competition—organising summits with Pacific island nations to mimic the Chinese—work along asymmetrical lines using the country's natural advantages, such as the ones in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region.
12. Find a balance between conflict, cooperation, and competition with China. India should carefully calculate the costs and benefits when making policies under each of these heads. Unless there are some startling revelations about the truth of the lab-leak hypothesis about the origins of SARS-CoV-2, expect that the rest of the world, including the US, has no plans of decoupling with China at this stage.

c. Economy

13. Build up India's strengths at home, something that the Biden Administration seems to be keen on doing for the US. Structural reforms, policies that promote modernity and a scientific temperament, are needed to revive the Indian economy and get it back on to the path of high growth. After all, great-power status is assumed, not conferred by others.
14. Work along a longer-term plan to reduce critical dependencies on China. Policy needs to be nuanced and carefully calibrated instead of being based on mercurial actions against Chinese firms or investments in India. India's goal must be to create an advanced economy and the policy measures that India takes must aid that process. Pragmatism should be the watchword and India should not hesitate to interact with China on trade and investment, if it will serve its larger goal.
15. Play the trade issue on the front foot. India has a reputation as a naysayer on trade and tariffs. In 2017 it cancelled some 50 bilateral investment treaties, hoping to renegotiate them, but it has failed. It should simultaneously seek to reach trade and investment deals with the US and EU focusing on long-term, rather than short-term gains. The growing estrangement between the west and China can provide India opportunities in the trade and investment front, provided it does its homework well.

Recommendations and Conclusion

16. India should join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) where it has friends who will provide it a platform and help it establish supply chains with countries that want to bypass China. At the same time, India should get serious about groupings where it is the natural anchor, such as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical Cooperation (BIMSTEC). [ORF](#)

“India must find a balance between conflict, cooperation, and competition with China. Expect that the world has no plans of decoupling with China at this juncture.”

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org