

## The Origins of Today's Sino-India Tensions

*Jonathan Ward discusses the historic origins of the ongoing India-China border disputes.*

By **Ankit Panda**

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Earlier this month, India and China experienced the worst violence along their disputed border in more than 50 years. The shadows of history continue to hang over this border and the legacy of the 1962 war looms large, particularly in Indian understandings of the border. As talks continue through diplomatic and military channels, it remains unclear how the two sides might successfully deescalate and disengage. To explore these issues, *The Diplomat's* senior editor, Ankit Panda, spoke to Jonathan Ward, an expert on Sino-India relations and the founder of Atlas Organization.

***The Diplomat:* The 1962 war is remembered differently in India and China. In your research in China, what did you learn about the lessons Beijing took away from that conflict?**

*Jonathan Ward:* I think what China's leaders concluded after 1962 – and this has important implications for Chinese foreign policy today – is that they could successfully confront multiple major powers at once. Today we see the Chinese Communist Party waging a two-front strategic competition: against the United States and its Allies in the West Pacific and also against India in the Himalayas and Indian Ocean. In 1962, China chose war with India in the midst of the Sino-Soviet split and while the United States was an avowed enemy. China's leaders believed that they were better off confronting all three powers, and striking a military blow to the weakest one, rather than giving in to what they saw as three important nations that sought to impede the path of what Mao called the "New China." We should keep this in mind when we think that today's China will be exhausted by its confrontations with the entire Indo-Pacific region. It won't be. It will take coordination between the entire region to deplete China's expansive energy. In 1962, there was no coordination among the major powers against Beijing, and China was successful, in the eyes of the leadership, at striking a blow that would count. This is likely how they view their situation today as well.

**We know from Chinese statements that Beijing is now claiming total sovereignty of the entire Galwan Valley. What does that tell us about the conditions under which the current impasse might be resolved?**

It's typical for Beijing to make sovereignty claims that completely ignore the legitimacy of the opposite party. We have seen this in their conduct in the South China Sea, and certainly ahead of the Border War of 1962, when Chinese leaders worked themselves into a frenzy, claiming that India's first Prime Minister Nehru "...sees China's Tibet, Xinjiang, and the Aksai Chin all as theirs. Nehru has always wanted to inherit the Great British Empire." The problem in the Galwan situation is leverage on the Indian side. We have to assume at this point that China seeks to build leverage in the broader relationship with India, using their advantages in the border regions to put pressure on India. It may be possible to deescalate the current situation and return to some kind of status quo ante, but what India needs to focus on is building leverage in the broader bilateral relationship. This is going to mean deepening India's relationships with like-minded regional democracies, moving closer to the United States, building its economic and military power, and reducing its economic exposure to China. The entire Indo-Pacific region is going to have to come together to reject and oppose China's claims against its neighbors and only through regional coordination can individual nations, large and small, begin to resist China's pressure in bilateral relationships. The border disputes won't be resolved anytime soon so India must focus on improving the relative balance of power. This will take time.

**How do you make sense of why the Chinese side decided to initially embark upon the separate provocations along the Line of Actual Control back in early May? What's driving this?**

Provocations in multiple sectors of the border is part of what distinguishes the current crisis from others, for example in Daulat Beg Oldi in 2013 and Doklam in 2017. Prior standoffs took place in just one sector, but this year you've had confrontations in both the Sikkim border areas and in the western sector. In that sense, the current crisis is a kind of culmination of prior crises, as each side works to build logistical advantages. China has also made a show, since the beginning of this year, of new military systems, joint force exercises at high altitude, and the use of extensive civilian infrastructure in moving troops to the Himalayan front. I would assume that, in contrast to other crises, China is demonstrating a level of coordination across the Himalayan frontier and also signaling to India that, despite other pressure points such as a deteriorating relationship with the United States, including an ongoing trade war, the situation in Hong Kong, and the pressures of a

major pandemic, they are still ready and able to use force against India. This is part of why I thought that the chance of violence this time was higher than normal and indeed that proved to be true. In the past, the Communist Party has also seen India as a place to use force when challenged on multiple fronts. This is why India's leaders must focus on improving the balance of power.

**Do you see good options for India in responding to what China is currently doing?**

I would say, play the long game. India needs a strategic vision for the year 2025 and the year 2030, as do all democracies. We will have to work together to blunt China's military power and undercut their economic and military advantages. In short, this will mean a containment strategy, executed by like-minded nations across the globe. India should see that America is the right partner for this moment, and that the service that has been done by the 20 fallen soldiers is not only to their country but to the world in showing us just how dangerous the People's Republic of China really is. I've explained the Chinese Communist Party's objectives in *China's Vision of Victory*, and I am sure that this will not be the last use of force against one of China's neighbors. Xi Jinping has made it absolutely clear that his military is built for use in the region. India should also begin to rethink its classical strategy of maintaining strategic autonomy by choosing both America and Russia as partners. I believe that, in fact, the closer that India moves to America, the more likely it becomes that Russia will ultimately join or lean towards the democratic camp as well, rather than become entrapped as a junior partner in China's quest for dominance. India has always had a great deal of clout on the world stage and it is time to use it wisely to shape the global balance of power. Begin by solidifying a brilliant relationship with the United States.

**Finally, given the recent clashes, have we crossed an important line pertaining to the use of force between the two countries? Is the possibility of escalation significant, in your view?**

Yes, we have crossed a very important line. This is the first time that China has used its military against another country in the 21st century. I have written on this in more depth for the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China [here](#). In the 20th century, China fought wars and limited conflicts against the United States, India, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and against United Nations Forces in Korea. Today, Xi Jinping makes it clear that the use or threat of force will once again be central to the mission of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," as it was under Mao Zedong's "New China." This means that we must all work together to guard

against China's true aims. And yes, in dealing with an ambitious new power such as this, that seeks to test its strength against the region, the possibility of escalation is always there.

*This interview has been edited.*

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