

Reasons and Reactions to the Galwan Clash: An Indian Perspective

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Structured Abstract

Article Classification: Viewpoint

Purpose—India and China have been locked in a border standoff since May 2020. Even after 14 rounds of border talks between the two militaries, a resolution is nowhere in sight. This paper aims to outline how the events unfolded, track reactions from countries worldwide, and analyze the Chinese rationale behind the attacks.

Design, Methodology, Approach—The paper follows an inductive form of reasoning and moves from the particular to the general. Statements on the digital platform from heads of state and important people in positions of power from both sides are taken cognizance of and analyzed. Both primary and secondary literature sources are looked into to outline how the crisis unfolded.

Findings—The Galwan crisis is a watershed moment in the history of India-China relations and has implications for regional and global stability. As China, owing to its economic and political clout in the international arena, continues rising and posing challenges for the liberal, democratic Western world, countries like India have to take cognizance of the new realities around China and accordingly tweak their foreign policies in accordance. For example, for India, it becomes essential to understand how it can recalibrate its relationship with China by taking note of the countries that stood by it during such a crisis with China.

Practical implications—Useful for students of international relations and in research surrounding India-China relations. Literature on the crisis in one place, whether in the digital domain or otherwise, is complex. This paper will fill in that lacunae.

Originality, Value—This paper presents a detailed account of how the crisis unfolded, where it currently stands, how countries across the globe responded and the underlying

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reasons behind China opting for this course of action. This article will help in understanding how future international relations will unfold.

Keywords: aggression, China, conflict, India, national security, PP14

I. Introduction

India and China, which have emerged as essential players in a multilateral system, have had a bittersweet relationship before 2020. Points of cooperation include trade, climate change and cultural exchanges. At the same time, conflict looms large in a decades-long unsettled border, Chinese support for the insurgency in the northeastern part of India, the China-Pakistan bonhomie, the ever-widening trade deficit for India, among a long list of others.¹ Despite several points of conflict in the relationship, India-China relations still leaned in favor of amicability. Cordiality got wiped off in May 2020 as China unilaterally unleashed military aggression against India, necessitating India to recalibrate its relationship and rethink its diplomacy. The border clash between the two, which began at the Galwan River Valley, was one of the most serious national security crises witnessed along India's border with China in about four decades. On June 15, 2020, the clash happened in the Galwan River Valley along the western sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC)—a region straddled by Ladakh, Aksai Chin, and Tibet. The point of conflict was near the confluence of the Shyok and Galwan Rivers.

The LAC where the clash happened is challenging for the soldiers to patrol. It takes ten days for a soldier to acclimatize to function normally, and more demanding tasks take longer! It is difficult to patrol the LAC because of the inhospitable terrain, inclement weather, and high altitude, which cause breathing issues along with poor infrastructure. Militarily these high-altitude regions are different from the mountains like the Alps and Rockies because of oxygen issues, rarified atmosphere and Himalayan weather.²

In 2020, Chinese aggression against India started in Eastern Ladakh, and multiple new friction points were created, including at Pangong Lake, Galwan Valley, Hot Springs and Gogra heights. Table 1 outlines the standoff unfolding from May 2020 to January 2022.

Table 1: Unfolding of the Galwan Valley Crisis

Month/ Year	Details
May 5, 2020	Violent confrontation between Indian and Chinese patrols near Pangong Tso.
May 9, 2020	Skirmish in Naku La area of Sikkim.
June 15, 2020	Galwan Valley Clash, in which India reported deaths of 20 soldiers, while China reported deaths of only four while TASS reported 45 Chinese deaths.
August 29-30, 2020	India takes control of multiple heights along the Kailash range. Indian Army and the PLA face off for the first time on the southern bank of Pangong Tso.
October 19, 2020	Chinese soldier identified as Corporal Wang Ya Long apprehended after he crossed into Indian territory in the Demchok sector of Eastern Ladakh.

Month/ Year	Details
October 21, 2020	Corporal Wang Ya Long released from Indian custody after completion of due protocols and formalities
January 9, 2021	A Chinese soldier captured in Ladakh by the Indian Army. He was returned to China on January 11.
January 20, 2021	Minor border clashes take place in Naku La, Sikkim.
February 11, 2021	Initial and partial disengagement of Indian and Chinese troops near Pangong Tso take place.
February 22, 2021	Indian and Chinese troops complete the pull-back of forces from Pangong Lake.
July 13, 2021	PLA troops enter the Demchok sector and protest against the Dalai Lama's birthday. A village community center was marking the occasion.
July 26, 2021	Chinese "civilians" enter Indian area at Chardin Nala in Demchok sector and set up tents and refuse to leave.
August 6, 2021	Analysts point out that PLA structures are still visible through satellite imagery at Gogra, despite so-called disengagement at the site.
January 4, 2022	China begins construction of bridge at Pangong Tso.

The existence of a motorable road on the Chinese side made patrolling easy for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In the Galwan River Valley, patrol point 14 (PP14) was the point until which the Indian and Chinese troops used to patrol on either side. In 2020, the Chinese troops crossed over to the side where Indian soldiers patrolled near the bend of the Galwan river and set up their camp.³ The Indian soldiers removed the camp upon discovery. After this, the Chinese set up at least one camp with a few soldiers inside, again on the Indian side.⁴ The camp was removed by a team of Indian troops led by Colonel Santosh Babu when scuffles broke out between the two sides, which later became a long-drawn border conflict for the two sides.

Soldiers trained in martial arts ambushed the Indian troops at PP14 during the clash. The Chinese side struck the Indian soldiers in a pre-planned attack. The PLA attacked the Indian side with baseball bats studded with barbed wires and wooden sticks with nails attached to them. This brutality of the attacks reveals how the PLA had pre-planned the entire ambush. Besides, the Indian Army and American intelligence have pointed out that the movement of the Indian Army was being tracked for at least 2.5 days before the June 15–16, 2020, clash, confirming Chinese ulterior motives to target India's national security. As stated by the U.S. intelligence assessment, General Zhao Zongqi, who has overseen previous standoffs with India, saw the standoff between the two sides as a way to "teach India a lesson."⁵ Zhao has previously stated that China must not appear weak to avoid exploitation by the United States and its allies, including New Delhi.⁶

The Indian side lost 20 lives in the attack, and the Chinese side lost 45 lives, as stated by the Russian news agency TASS.⁷ China has officially not announced the number of soldiers they lost at Galwan and has used the issue more to spur nationalism within China from time to time. State-run Global Times had stated in 2020 that China refrains from releasing the numbers to avoid further spiraling of the conflict. In February 2021, China released the names of four soldiers who had lost their lives in the Galwan Valley clash with India, eight months after it refused to disclose the casualties in the deadly brawl with India. Chinese state-run media also released videos of the conflict

at Galwan, showing hundreds of Indian and Chinese troops confronting each other. In one of the videos, soldiers can be seen crossing a river, meeting on the banks, and subsequently pushing each other.⁸ The video also shows soldiers from the two sides with flashlights, batons and shields.

In another released video, Chinese troops are seen talking and behaving aggressively with an Indian soldier, who is heard saying that hitting vehicles is unnecessary and that misunderstandings can be settled through talks.⁹ Even though released by the Chinese side, the video contradicts the official Chinese narrative that the Indian military initiated the conflict and violently assaulted and attacked the Chinese Army.

The PLA resorted to the use of rudimentary tools even though China is among the world's top military spenders, with its military budget standing at US\$252 billion in 2020.¹⁰ China chose to use medieval-type of weapons as the usage of firearms is prevented by agreements signed between India and China. The two sides had often used such barbaric weapons in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which were sought to be done away with through the various agreements signed.¹¹ In addition, the Chinese side used less sophisticated weaponry because it wanted to show an adherence to the rules of engagement, which urge nations to show minimum force and exercise restraint.¹²

The last time the PLA fought a war was in 1979 against Vietnam. Since then, the Chinese Army has only been used to quell dissent like the Tiananmen square or maintain what China calls stability in the peripheral regions of Xinjiang or Tibet. Given that the PLA has not been in external combat since 1979, the resistance put up by the Indian Army took the Chinese side by surprise.

The Indian Army has had long experiences in the Himalayas, such as the Siachen Glacier. In comparison, PLA soldiers need 10–14 days of acclimatization before being combat-ready.¹³ What was even more unexpected for the Chinese side was not just the resistance put up by the Indian Army but the capability to inflict casualties, despite China having the first-mover advantage of having unleashed aggression on the Indian side first.

In June 2020, when the skirmishes were yet to unfurl fully, an Indian Army squad of about 50 soldiers led by Colonel Santosh Babu reached a contested site near PP14. Before this, as part of a de-escalation plan discussed on June 6 by senior commanders from both sides, Chinese soldiers were to withdraw from the location. However, violating that understanding, the Chinese troops did not pull back, and their tents and an observation post were still around.¹⁴ Indian soldiers were unarmed as part of a protocol between the two sides. Forward troops patrolling the disputed border do not carry guns or, if they do carry them, have to keep them slung on their backs with pouches and magazines not clipped on. When confronted by the Indian side, the Chinese PLA started engaging in aggressive behavior. As a response, the Indian side removed the tents and the observation post on India's side of the LAC.¹⁵

The Chinese side had numerical superiority over the Indian side, as more than 250 of them were present in the area. Despite being fewer in number, the Indian side asked the PLA to withdraw to status quo, which is when the scuffles broke out, resulting in casualties. The Chinese side had not expected the Indian side to push back to its aggression despite being numerically inferior.

II. Reactions to These Attacks

2.1 Immediate Reactions of India and China

The Chinese side, as it has done in the past in all previous conflicts with India, stated that India was to be blamed as it was illegally constructing defense infrastructure in what China considers as their rightful territory.¹⁶ State-owned Global Times parroted the same narrative and blamed India for the standoff.¹⁷ The Indian side has held that construction has been undertaken strictly on its side of the LAC, and at no point was this LAC ever transgressed. Since the 1960s, China has claimed the entire Galwan River Valley as Chinese territory, but until these attacks in 2020, both India and China had respected the PP14 as the point up to which each side would patrol.¹⁸

Both sides increased troop and armament deployment along the LAC as an initial reaction.¹⁹ Multiple talks between the two parties have also been ongoing to reduce tensions. So far, there have been fourteen rounds of talks without a complete resolution of the conflict. Despite talks still being in the ongoing stage, China built a bridge in disputed territory in eastern Ladakh, which, as stated by the Indian side, has been an area “under illegal occupation” of China for around 60 years.²⁰

Talks so far have been conducted between military leaders, special representatives of the borders and external affairs ministers of both countries.²¹ Phased de-escalation from the points of incursion by the Chinese has been agreed upon, along with disengagement by both sides. The two sides concur on keeping a buffer of 1.5–2 kms on both sides of the points of the recent standoff, particularly PP14. The nature of disengagement at other points remains unclear with negotiations still on, especially given Chinese resistance to pulling back. Both sides even used drones and satellite imageries to confirm whether the other is honoring the disengagement plan and de-escalation. After the 14th round of talks reached no concrete solution, the two sides could not decide upon a date for the next round of talks.

Since the 14th round of talks between senior military commanders in October 2021, the Indian side has sent several proposals for the next round of talks. In these proposals, the Indian side maintained that all friction points between Depsang and Chumar should be collectively tackled by military commanders of the two sides, so that there can be total disengagement and de-escalation in the Ladakh sector LAC.²² However, the Chinese side does not agree with the proposals made by the Indian side and the goalposts identified by the Chinese side themselves keep changing.

In 2021, India’s ambassador to China, Vikram Misri, urged China to separate the ongoing border tensions in eastern Ladakh from the overall boundary dispute to restore peace and tranquility along the LAC. The rationale was that resolving the larger LAC would need a much longer time frame.²³ At the very least, the new conflict that emerged due to Chinese aggression at the LAC needs to be resolved.

The entire de-escalation process is intricate and requires constant verification, given the nature of the terrain, heavy deployments on either side and the Chinese tendency to go back on agreed tenets. In 2021, China built additional accommodation in the depth areas along the LAC on its side despite talks for de-escalation taking place simultaneously. The PLA made temporary and permanent accommodations in Rudok, Kangxiwar, Gyantse and Golmud areas, along with the construction of field hospitals and procurement of additional

snow mobility vehicles by the PLA.²⁴ China also intensified construction work behind the main confrontation points in Aksai Chin.²⁵

So far, partial disengagement from Galwan, Hot Springs, and Gogra occurred between June and July 2020, while complete disengagement from Pangong Lake's North and South banks occurred in February 2021. After the Gogra disengagement in August 2021, the LAC shifted westwards at P.P. 17A.²⁶ At no place in eastern Ladakh have the two sides reached the status quo as it was before May 2020. Also, as revealed by satellite imagery after the disengagement, the PLA's semi-permanent bases in Gogra remain where they were earlier; only the administrative area along the Changlung area has been cleared.²⁷

2.2 Reactions from Different Countries

As Chinese aggression against various countries keeps increasing in different forms, be it the Philippines, Vietnam, the U.S. or Taiwan, the world watches how the military conflict between two nuclear states in Asia unfolds. While several countries made diplomatic comments to ensure their ties with either India or China were not affected, countries like the U.S., France and Japan were more direct and indicated stances against unilateral aggression unleashed by China.

The U.S. reacted with a level of public criticism which was unprecedented. Senior officials in the U.S. have publicly upbraided China for its aggressiveness along the LAC.²⁸ The White House, for the first time, openly said that it would stand with India should a military conflict between India and China arise.²⁹ Ambassador Ken Juster expressing solidarity, tweeted that the U.S. Mission in India sent its heartfelt condolences to the families of the lost soldiers at Galwan. He added that their bravery and courage would not be forgotten.³⁰ In 2021, Admiral Philips Davidson, the Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the U.S. had provided information, cold-weather clothing, and other equipment to India during the border crisis with China.³¹

Japan also reacted by publicly supporting India and expressed condolences over the deaths of Indian soldiers in the Galwan River Valley; however, it said nothing about Chinese casualties.³² Japan stated that it opposed "any unilateral attempts" to change the status quo in the region.³³ Japanese Ambassador Satoshi Suzuki stated that Japan hoped for a peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogues.³⁴ A naval exercise with Japan was conducted at the end of June 2020,³⁵ which was a routine exercise, but the timing and location in the eastern Indian Ocean bracket it in the context of the military standoff between India and China in Ladakh.

France was the first country to offer India the support of its armed forces amid growing tensions at the border with China. France also extended support to India in the Galwan clash. In a letter to India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, French Defense Minister Florence Parly stated that India is France's strategic partner in the region. She also conveyed condolences for the loss of lives of Indian soldiers on June 15, 2020.³⁶

Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid had tweeted that the Maldives extended its deepest condolences to the people of India for the lives lost in the recent clashes on the border. He added that thoughts and prayers were with the families, loved ones and communities of the soldiers.³⁷

Italian Ambassador to India, Vincenzo de Luca, told the national daily *Indian Express*

that India and China are crucial partners not just for Italy but for the E.U. as a whole.³⁸ He also expressed his sympathies to the families of the Indian soldiers who lost their lives.

In 2020, Russia stated that it welcomes de-escalation efforts between India and China. In a message, Russia's Ambassador to New Delhi, Nilolai Kudashev, said that Russia welcomes all steps aimed at de-escalation at the LAC and that Russia remains optimistic about the de-escalation efforts between the two.³⁹

The European Union spokesperson for foreign affairs, Virginine Battu-Henriksson, stated, "In light of the recent worrying developments along the LAC between India and China, we encourage both sides to show restraint and to engage in military de-escalation, as well as to continue dialogue."⁴⁰

United Nations (U.N.) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also expressed concern over the violent face-off and urged the countries to exercise maximum restraint. U.N. Spokesperson Eri Kaneko stated that the reports of violence and death at the LAC between India and China are concerning. She added that the U.N. "takes positive note of information that the two countries have begun engagements to de-escalate the situation."⁴¹

Britain has also expressed concerns over the violent clashes and appealed to the nation to sort the issue through dialogue.⁴² The German Envoy to India tweeted, "Our heartfelt condolences to the families and loved ones of the soldiers who lost their lives in Galwan."⁴³ The Brazilian Embassy in Delhi expressed similar sentiments and stated, "Our heartfelt sympathies to the people of India and deepest condolences to the families, loved ones and colleagues of the soldiers who lost their lives in the line of duty in Galwan."⁴⁴

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, while launching Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update, referred to the standoff between India and China and stated, "tensions over territorial claims are rising across the Indo-Pacific region as we have seen recently on the disputed border between India and China, the South China Sea and the East China Sea."⁴⁵ While hiking Australia's defense budget to US\$270 billion for ten years, he stated that it would not be just China and the U.S. that will decide the future of the region, but countries like India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam too have choices to make and parts to play.⁴⁶

In his speech at Delhi-based think tank Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), Australian High Commissioner stated that both India and Australia are grappling with the implications of creeping authoritarianism and its risks to democracy, transparency, and openness. He added that Beijing's moves to alter the status quo in the South China Sea are not in line with consensus building and dialogue.⁴⁷

Growing Chinese assertiveness has also augmented rationales for strengthening regional cooperation. Australia joined the Malabar naval exercises as a permanent member.⁴⁸ Australia joining the Malabar exercise generated a formal security apparatus for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) grouping of the four maritime powers in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad can restore the balance of power in favor of the Indo-Pacific, led by the Quad countries, instead of it being led by China. Beijing has viewed the coming together of these four countries—the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, with which it has less than pleasant relations as the formation of a China containment group—referring to it as "Asian NATO." An officer of the Indian Army stated on conditions of anonymity, "until the Galwan clash India was ambiguous about the Quad, but the Galwan clash makes the necessity of Quad a reality for India—a grouping which can threaten China's backyard—the

South China Sea.”⁴⁹ Another interviewed officer of the Indian Army noted that if China’s belligerence in the South China Sea continues, a war may erupt, which will impact India, mainly because India shares borders with China and because India is a Quad member.⁵⁰ If the Quad is forced to take a stance on China’s belligerence in the South China Sea, India will have to make difficult decisions since it is a Quad member. Thus, its location and its engagements with members of the Quad will lead to tough choices and challenges for India in the case of a war breaking out between China and any other nation.

2.3 Further Reactions from India

Apart from the increased troop and arms deployment along the border, responses also included economic measures and political signaling. For instance, India’s policy has seen certain distinct changes concerning Taiwan. On July 12, 2020, India posted Gourangalal Das, an officer from the 1999 batch member of the Indian Foreign Services, as India’s envoy to Taiwan. As India does not have formal relations with Taiwan due to the One China Policy, Das has been heading the India-Taiwan Association in Taipei. In addition, on May 20, 2020, two members of the BJP government virtually attended the swearing-in ceremony of the Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. This was a departure from the past, as Indians had not attended such ceremonies previously. China expressed disappointment at this overture by India. As India does not have diplomatic ties with Taiwan, from that angle, India’s attention to Taiwan becomes essential as it could be perceived as tacit support to Taiwan and its government.

On the Double Ten Day or Taiwan’s National Day in October 2020 and 2021, when China warned Indian media not to refer to Taiwan as a country, posters wishing Taiwan a Happy National Day were put up outside the People’s Republic of China’s Embassy in New Delhi. Several Indian media went ahead and wished Taiwan a happy National Day!

The Indian government launched a fresh diplomatic offensive against China by breaking its silence on China’s new security law for Hong Kong. India said, “We have heard several statements expressing concern on these developments.

We hope the relevant parties will take into account these views and address them properly, seriously and objectively.”⁵¹ This was a one of a kind, as India had maintained silence on Hong Kong or Taiwan before this. India was making a statement at the third meeting of the 44th regular session Human Rights Council.⁵²

India has always advocated a free and open Indo-Pacific and a rules-based order which it considers crucial for global stability but has never hitherto directly named China for its strategic assertions in the South China Sea. India has traditionally been against singling out any particular country on the issue. Still, as seen in 2020, India has directly called out China and lent support to the South-East Asian countries with territorial claims in the South China Sea. In July 2020, India also spoke out against China’s assertions in the South China Sea (SCS) as detrimental to global stability. India reiterated its abiding interests in the SCS and raised concerns about the developments in the SCS, which is a departure from the past. The comments were made by India’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Anurag Mishra. He answered questions on India’s response to Mike Pompeo’s statements in which he had called Beijing’s claims in the South China Sea “unlawful.”

India’s reaction to China’s border belligerence has also included specific economic measures directed at hostile countries. In April 2020, India changed its Foreign Direct

Investment policies, and on July 23, 2020, it operationalized such guidelines. As per new rules, any country that shares a land border with India must secure a permit from the Central Government before investing in India. Even though China was not named in particular, the decision was taken to prevent opportunistic investments from bordering countries, especially China, and stop Chinese investors' hostile takeover of Indian companies. Added to its, close on the heels of the border standoff, India first banned 59 Chinese apps and another 47 such apps. This was in response to China's usage of the cyber domain for warfare. Between June 15 and 20, coinciding with the flare-up at the border, there were 40,000 cyber-attacks on the Indian cyberspace, most of which were traced to Chengdu in the PRC.⁵³

The order from India's I.T. ministry to ban the Chinese apps stated that the apps were prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, defense of India, security of state and public order.⁵⁴ The apps had been given a chance to explain their positions on issues, whether they censored content or not, worked on behalf of foreign governments or lobbied influencers.

India also invited the U.S. to be a significant investor in defense, insurance, startups, telecommunications and medicine. Significantly, these areas are dominated by Chinese investments. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was vocal that India should come forward to replace the dependence of global supply chains on China. India has been attempting to diversify its supply chains to Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa to replace its reliance on China.

The measures are similar to those that have long been employed regarding Pakistan. In 2020, India's Ministry of External Affairs stated the need for prior security clearance for visas for Chinese business people, academics, industry experts, and advocacy.⁵⁵ In 2021, responding to Indian Ambassador Vikram Misri's criticisms of China's travel restrictions, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying ruled out the easing of curbs soon.⁵⁶ In September 2020, China also tested drones and a new rocket launcher near the disputed border with India and sold armed drones to Pakistan, triggering fears in India of a two-front war with Pakistan on one side and China on the other.

The Indian Navy also sent a warship to the South China Sea after the clash at Ladakh. The Chinese side complained to the Indian side about the Indian warship's presence during diplomatic level talks.⁵⁷ Additionally, state-owned Indian oil majors stopped hiring Chinese tankers to ship their crude and petroleum products.⁵⁸ India also scrapped a Rs. 471 crore contract given to a Chinese company for a World Bank-funded railway project.⁵⁹

Kashmir has not been on the U.N. Security Council's agenda since 1971. In August 2020, China sought a discussion on Kashmir under the "Any Other Business" category in the U.N. Security Council. Chinese Foreign spokesperson Wang Wenbin stated that Beijing pays close attention to the Kashmir issue. Any unilateral changes to the status quo in the Kashmir region are illegal and invalid. India responded by stating that the Chinese side has "no locus standi whatsoever on the matter" and advised China not to comment on other nations' internal affairs.⁶⁰

India's education ministry in 2020 also announced its decision to review Confucius Institutes at Indian universities and cooperative agreements signed between Indian and Chinese institutions. India's latest national education policy also dropped Chinese as one

of the foreign languages offered to secondary school students. Following the move from India, Beijing called upon New Delhi to “avoid politicizing normal cooperation.”⁶¹

Reactions to Chinese aggression have transcended into spheres of diplomacy, economics and culture as well among others, and as stated by India’s foreign minister Dr. S. Jaishankar India is in the process of recalibrating its relations with China, as the border standoff⁶² in eastern Ladakh has produced a “very deep public and political impact” on India-China relations.

III. Reasons for the Galwan Clash

3.1 *The Border Is Contested*

The border was kept ambiguous by the British and continues to be vague and not properly defined—leading to possibilities of multiple interpretations regarding its actual placing. There is a Chinese perception of the border, and there is an Indian perception of the border, both of which overlap.⁶³ This leads to competing contestations, which sometimes leads to flare-ups like the Galwan standoff. China claims the entire Galwan River Valley, while India maintains that it falls on its side of the LAC based on their respective perceptions of the LAC. Every summer, the fact that there is an incursion of some nature from China along the LAC underscores the complexity of differing interpretations. In 1960 Premier Zhou Enlai presented a map to India’s then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, showing the Galwan River Valley as Chinese territory. Both sides subsequently agreed to respect a point in the region called PP14. However, in the recent border flare-up, as stated previously in one of the preceding sections, the PLA violated all understandings and agreements, crossed the PP14, which was countered by Indian soldiers leading to the flare-up, which then turned into a standoff. China now suddenly claims the Galwan area, which was traditionally a part of the Kashmiri princely state and at no point in China’s history did it have control over it.⁶⁴

Another reason about the border was the infrastructure building along the border by India, which China objected to, leading to the recent clashes.⁶⁵ The point to be noted is that China has constructed roads along the border but objects to India building roads in the region. China’s objections to India’s road construction need to be further contextualized.

In 2019, India constructed the Darbuk Shyok Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road along the LAC, connecting Darbuk-Shyok to Daulat Beg Oldie. Daulat Beg Oldie is one of the world’s highest airfields and is strategic for India’s military repositioning and logistics delivery along the LAC. In early 2020, India began constructing a tributary road connecting DSDBO to PP14—the Galwan River Valley clash point. This road, once completed, would block China’s vision preventing it from seeing the movement of India’s troops, logistics and arms along the DSDBO. Until this road, China had clear visual access to all the military movement along this road due to the topography on their side. This new road between DSDBO and PP14 would obstruct this vantage point that the Chinese military enjoyed until now. The clash at PP14—which is the point to which the road would be constructed—can thus be seen as China’s way to indicate its displeasure or an attempt to prevent its construction to retain a strategic advantage over India.

China also objected to India's infrastructure development along the border as it could have a bearing on the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC, as an economic corridor planned between China and Pakistan as a part of China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI), seeks to link several countries by creating connectivity infrastructure for more effortless trade flow between China and the countries linked by the BRI. India objects to the CPEC as its proposed route would pass through the disputed territory of Pakistan administered Kashmir.

Daulet Beg Oldie is situated about 8–12 kms near the CPEC, putting India in strategically advantageous proximity to the critical Karakoram Pass,⁶⁶ which is often described as the neck of the CPEC. Since the new road built from DSDBO to PP14 will disrupt the Chinese view, China would be in the dark about what India is transporting to Daulet Beg Oldie, leaving the CPEC highly exposed and vulnerable to an Indian strike in case of future flare-ups in this region.

On border infrastructure construction, a senior military official of India consulted for this article noted that India's infrastructure development is unique. For many decades post-1962 war India had a defensive mindset. So, infrastructure development was not a priority if the Chinese used it to advance further. However, modern technology and re-prioritization have become an important issue. This has happened not just during this government but since the post-Kargil war, but specifically in the last five years, there has been more vigor on such border infrastructure build-up by India.⁶⁷

Apart from the vague nature of the border and construction along the border as possible reasons for the Galwan clashes, there are other issues which have been causes for China to undertake the incursions. One of the most prominent ones is China's objection to the abrogation by India of Article 370 in the Indian Constitution. By abrogating Article 370, India created a Union Territory (U.T.) in Ladakh and included Aksai Chin.⁶⁸ It also included the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, where China has sped its construction activities like the Daimar-Bhasha dam. China opposed this move, as it claims that Aksai Chin is China's territory. Aksai Chin is part of the Leh district of India's Ladakh UT. Aksai Chin is vital to China's control of Tibet and Xinjiang as a highway connecting these two places runs across it. With the revocation of Article 370, India issued new maps, which showed Aksai Chin as part of Indian territory. This has always been India's stand. But the recent administrative move of turning Ladakh into a U.T. (thereby bringing the region under federal control) and including Aksai Chin in it ruffled Chinese feathers, as it claimed the move, which otherwise is purely a domestic one is "illegal" and "invalid."⁶⁹

3.2 China's Increased Assertiveness Across Its Neighborhood

The incursions in Ladakh can be understood to be one in a series of such militaristic and muscular foreign policy actions, which can threaten not only regional but also global stability undertaken by China amidst a pandemic. Some of these include repeatedly violating Taiwan's airspace; aggressive posturing in the South China Sea with tactics of intimidation towards the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and even sinking a Vietnamese fishing trawler in these waters, which are contested by several littoral countries; and passing a new stringent National Security law in Hong Kong to curb civil liberties, among others. Chinese assertiveness has several underlying factors: First, President Xi Jinping, through such

muscular policies, is trying to show gain somewhere after global criticism faced by China over the origin, spread and mishandling of the pandemic.⁷⁰

The central geopolitical rivalry of today is between a revisionist China and a status-quo U.S., and the Ladakh standoff was a part of this larger rivalry that dominates contemporary world politics. The roots of China's angry posturing in Ladakh are also results of the worsening of diplomatic ties between Beijing and Washington, D.C. Its attack against India and threat to its national security was a way to persuasively register its discontentment with its perceived closeness of India with the U.S.

Secondly, these militaristic tactics towards Taiwan, Hong Kong, the South China Sea and the latest in Ladakh can be seen as China implementing the final steps in what has been called "salami slicing." Salami slicing implies gradual and insidious encroachment upon small parts of the enemy territory over a long period. Each strike is like slicing one piece of salami at a time and asserting complete control over it. China has had unsettled borders with India for a long while. Now that it has risen owing to its economic clout, it is slowly and steadily slicing into Indian territory over each episode of incursions and scuffles.

Thirdly, China is facing internal problems due to the pandemic. The Chinese economy grew by 4% in the fourth quarter of 2021, slowing from the 4.9% growth in the previous three months. Like the disastrous after-effects of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) in the 1960s, China faces acute employment, livelihood, and public health safety issues. In 1962 the Great Leap Forward, which was intended to bring industrialization and prosperity, left 45 million dead due to famine and starvation. It was then decided to create an external enemy and attack India to divert attention and regain Mao Zedong's lost credibility due to the disastrous results of the GLF. Similarly, Xi Jinping is currently facing internal problems with rising unemployment and global backlash over COVID-19, which has harmed his image.⁷¹

Growth rates have tumbled, unemployment has soared, inflation is wreaking havoc in China, and the zero-COVID policy coupled with the initial mismanagement of the pandemic in 2019 has led people to question Xi's leadership. Thus, an external enemy was needed once again to deflect this anger and regain lost legitimacy. Therefore, the attack on Ladakh under the garb of accusing India of building roads in contentious regions; while actually, the idea was to use this attack to rally the people of China around Xi Jinping when his image had been adversely affected.

Kewalramani (2021) stated that Xi Jinping's emergence as the "core" leader has not been without friction and has resulted in the Communist Party doubling down on nationalism and ideology.⁷² Weibo, a social media platform used widely in China, was abuzz with aggression from Chinese netizens against India every time China sparingly released names of their martyred soldiers.⁷³

Fourthly, aggressive Chinese posturing, including Ladakh, can directly result from Xi Jinping's ambitions outlined in the 19th party congress. He spoke of China entering a new era and taking Centre stage in the world.⁷⁴ Xi Jinping had announced a project to achieve China's national rejuvenation after a "century of humiliation." This assertion was a departure from a China which had until then followed Deng Xiaoping's dictum of biding time and hiding capabilities: keeping a low profile or the policy of *韬光养晦* (韬光养晦). Xi wanted to show that China was no longer rising but had already risen, and it was time for it to assume its rightful leadership role. Acting belligerently across its neighborhood can be

thus understood to have come from such a mandate whereby China feels it is now powerful enough to assert its control over areas it had always claimed militarily. While COVID-19 presented new challenges for India, the tension with China began in 2017 with the Doklam issue. It was further exacerbated in 2019 when India showed Aksai Chin as its territory on its maps after the dilution of Article 370.⁷⁵

Historically, China has used force to deter alliances against it. Unjhanwala (2021) stated that by attacking one opponent, China intimidates the others. Further, Chinese actions against India may be linked to its actions against Taiwan and its ultimate goal of securing the island.⁷⁶

It has been noted that the Ladakh crisis occurred because China believes that India is working closely with the U.S. to contain its rise.⁷⁷ In June 2020, China's state-owned media warned India about the U.S.⁷⁸ The U.S.'s public criticism of China in the recent attacks enhances the belief in this perception held by China. A certain degree of hubris also lies behind China's growing assertiveness. China believes that the U.S., which it considers its only rival, is in terminal decline and retreating from a global role, leaving a power vacuum that only China can fill. A section of leaders in China has urged the central leadership that China must move quickly to expand its power and assert domination of contested territories such as Ladakh before other major powers recover from the reverses of the pandemic. Such calculations have implications for both India's national security and global stability.

IV. Conclusions

The Galwan River Valley Clash was a one-of-a-kind clash between India and China as it was the first time since 1962 that a border assertion led to the loss of lives on both sides. India had earlier lost four soldiers in 1975 to China along the border.⁷⁹ This article sought to present how the clash unfolded, the global reactions, and analyze the reasons behind this crisis.

First, it was seen that the diplomatic community was quick to upbraid China on its aggression, which marks the growing consternation that the West and its supporters have on a prospect of an increasingly militaristic China. Even though several countries, in their statements, maintained a diplomatic balance between India and China, as exemplified by the Italian response, cognizance of China's aggression was taken. The loss of lives on the Indian side (which India made public in line with principles of respect for the dead) was regretted or mourned across the board (except for Pakistan). The crisis also enabled India to gauge the responses and reactions of the major powers, which have helped India calibrate its responses to subsequent crises in other parts of the world. These powers, Quad members, were quick to extend support to India in terms of increased naval exercises and information sharing after the attack. While expressing their condolences for the loss of lives, others such as Italy, Russia, Britain, and Germany were less forthright in their statements on China's attack on India than the Quad members. The U.S., Japan and Australia were more forthcoming in their support for India. At the current juncture when the world has been expecting a response from India against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the reactions from various parts of the world when China attacked India become pertinent to understanding realpolitik and how alignments in international politics are shaped.

Secondly, Chinese aggression against India is one in a string of such aggressions being

undertaken by China across its neighborhood, both continental and maritime, which are signs of an emerging power flexing its militaristic prowess to showcase its arrival on the global scene. The incursions and the subsequent clash are also attempts by China to deflect attention from its flailing domestic conditions, rake hyper-nationalism within China, and detract from the criticism it faced due to COVID-19. Third, the U.S. question in the whole episode cannot be dismissed because it is the power that China intends to replace on the regional and global stage. Given India's perceived closeness to the U.S., the Galwan clash was a strong indication by China of its discomfort with such a development.

The clash brought out the complications of figuring out a new *modus vivendi* between India and China on the border question. The older one of the late 1980s and early 1990s does not hold water in the contemporary era. India's diplomacy will have to consider the growing expectations of Western powers to stand up to China's aggression in the maritime and continental borders, which could lead to India having to make tough choices between balancing or band-wagoning against China. For India, China remains a neighbor with which it has numerous problems, such as a trade deficit and transboundary river water issues among others. India will have to take cognizance of how China has been weaponizing trade to penalize countries such as Lithuania or how it withheld river water data from India on the Brahmaputra during the Doklam clash of 2017. Even though India had paid a hefty sum for the data, which helps it be prepared for managing floods every year in its state of Assam, where the Brahmaputra flows into from Tibet, China refused the data. The year of 2017 saw one of the worst flood-induced calamities in Assam. China's cyber warfare capabilities are also unfolding, as seen in the 45,000 attacks on Indian cyberspace during June 2020. Indian diplomacy needs to take cognizance and decide upon ways to deal with increasing Chinese aggression across several fronts.

Finally, the clash showed the adverse implications such aggressions have on India's national security. Indian diplomacy has been made aware of its insecurities and vulnerabilities concerning its continental border, which can detract from its ability to realize its maritime potential and limit its reach in exploring Indo-Pacific's economic, security, and energy possibilities. Incursions on the border further add to the complications of an already precarious border. If powers as big as India and China become overtly adversarial, they do not bode well for global security.

In conclusion, the Galwan clash was a watershed moment in the history of India-China ties which has links to a regional and global dynamic which is fast unravelling in the world. Post the clash, India has become more forthcoming in berating China for its aggressions as well as is seen to be keen to promote maritime drills with countries which are overtly anti-China, but at the same time, it is actively participating in platforms such as the BRICS forum to keep channels of communication open. It has become necessary for India to formulate foreign policies and stances to cope with the changing forms of conflict and diplomacy emanating from China.

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