

## **Face-off between India and China in Galwan Valley: An Analysis of Chinese Incursions and Interests**

by

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### **Abstract**

The face-off between India and China in Galwan valley raises questions about Chinese incursion and interests in the valley. In early days of May 2020, the PLA settled with tents, trenches, and all requisite equipment into Indian claimed territory, consequent to India having built a several hundred kilometers long road, which connected to their airbase. The PLA movement is not a routine incursion according to observers in Delhi as according to the Chinese view, India has changed facts on the ground. As of June 2020, soldiers from both militaries have clashed on several occasions in Ladakh. The aim of this paper is to analyze in detail the PLA's incursion and interests in the Galwan valley and the factors that moved the Chinese Forces for this incursion. The paper concludes that although this is not a routine face to face conflict, however, it is not gearing up to full-scale war.

**Keywords:** Face-off, India and China, Galwan valley, Chinese incursion, Ladakh, etc.

### **Introduction:**

The military superpowers, China and India, have argued over decades for land at high altitude, largely uninhabited region. Their armies confronted at many points along the 3,440 km shared border with overlapping territorial claims (BBC, 2020). Indian media quoted that Chinese troops have intercepted their route into the Galwan valley of Ladakh, leaving the Indian leadership

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and military thinktanks stunned. This may not be a routine incursion as the situation seems deteriorated because the Chinese have intruded into the territory which they earlier accepted as India's part. This incursion has changed the status quo of the area completely (Schmidt, 2020). According to the Chinese view, India has changed facts on the ground. Standoffs between two forces are reported at three major locations, the Galwan Valley, Hot Springs, and Pangong lake (ET Online, 2020b).



**Figure 1 Reported Stand-off (Ethirajan & Pandey, 2020).**

The border patrols often scuffle but no single bullet has been fired in four decades from either side (Mansingh, 1994). The current military tension, apart from Ladakh, is also extended to Naku La, which is the border between China and Sikkim, the northeastern Indian state. Nepal also created and issued a new map, blaming India for illegally encroaching on Nepali territory by building a road (Sheikh, 2020; Bhaumik, 2020).

### **Limitations of the study:**

The analysis of the situation was carried out for the events happened that happened by June 20, 2020. Further developments are likely to happen after this date. The study is therefore limited in this regard.

### **Analysis of Chinese Incursion in Galwan Valley:**

There are several reasons for these incursions but India and China blame each other. The Galwan River has always been peaceful but it has now become a hotspot due to its location at

LAC. At this place, the LAC is closest to that newly built road by India along the Shyok River to Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO). This decision of India of building the infrastructure seems to have annoyed China because the Chinese media categorically said that the Galwan Valley is Chinese territory (Bhaumik, 2020; Philip, 2020).

The Chinese military said that India has angered China by changing the status quo of LAC and therefore forcing the PLA intrude into the Galwan valley. The road is important for India because India, in case of a conflict can rapidly move its men and material. China's massive deployment of soldiers, and the show of strength, make this faceoff more than a routine matter. India ended Jammu and Kashmir's limited autonomy redrawing the region's map, including Aksai Chin into Indian territory which is an area in Chinese control (Aurangzeb et al., 2020; Ahmed et al., 2020). Moreover, leaders of BJP have also been boasting about recapturing Pakistani administered Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan (Bhaumik, 2020) through which the strategic road of the Karakoram highway passes connecting China with Pakistan. China has invested about \$60 bn in Pakistan's infrastructure, and the CPEC which is important for transporting Chinese goods through the Gwadar Port, giving China an access to the Arabian Sea (Solangi, 2019). India also banned all exports of medical and protective equipment to China after coronavirus pandemic with a purpose to shore up its stocks. This also infuriated China (Bhaumik, 2020).

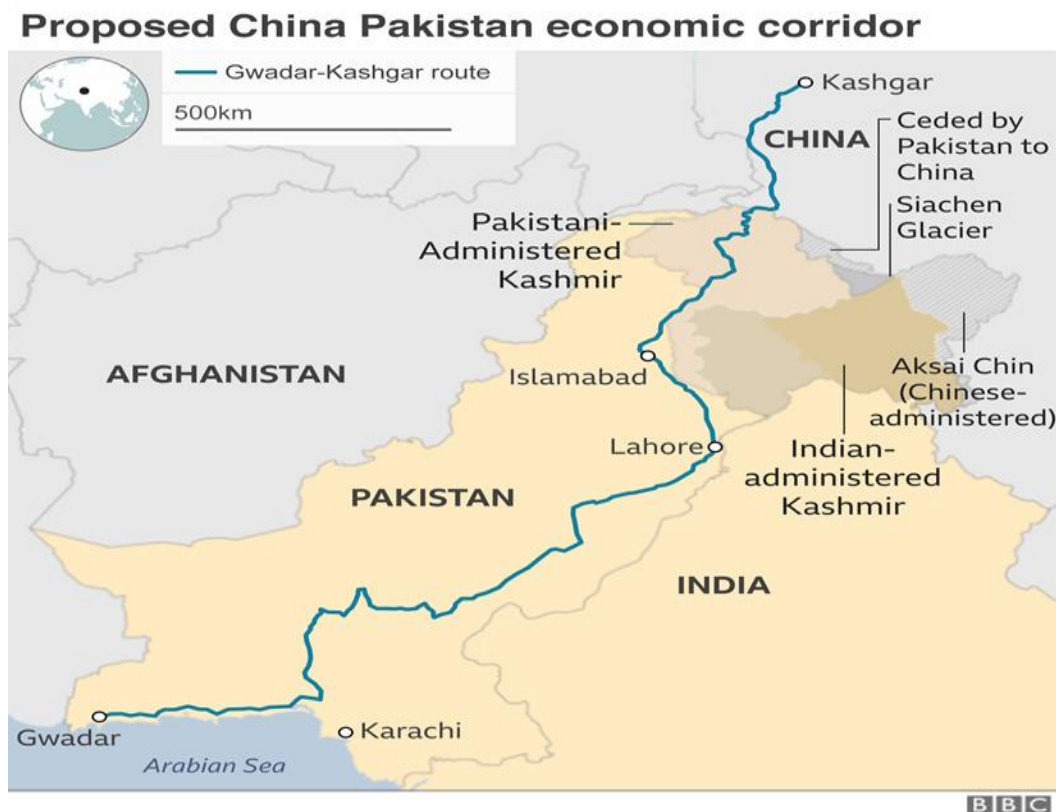


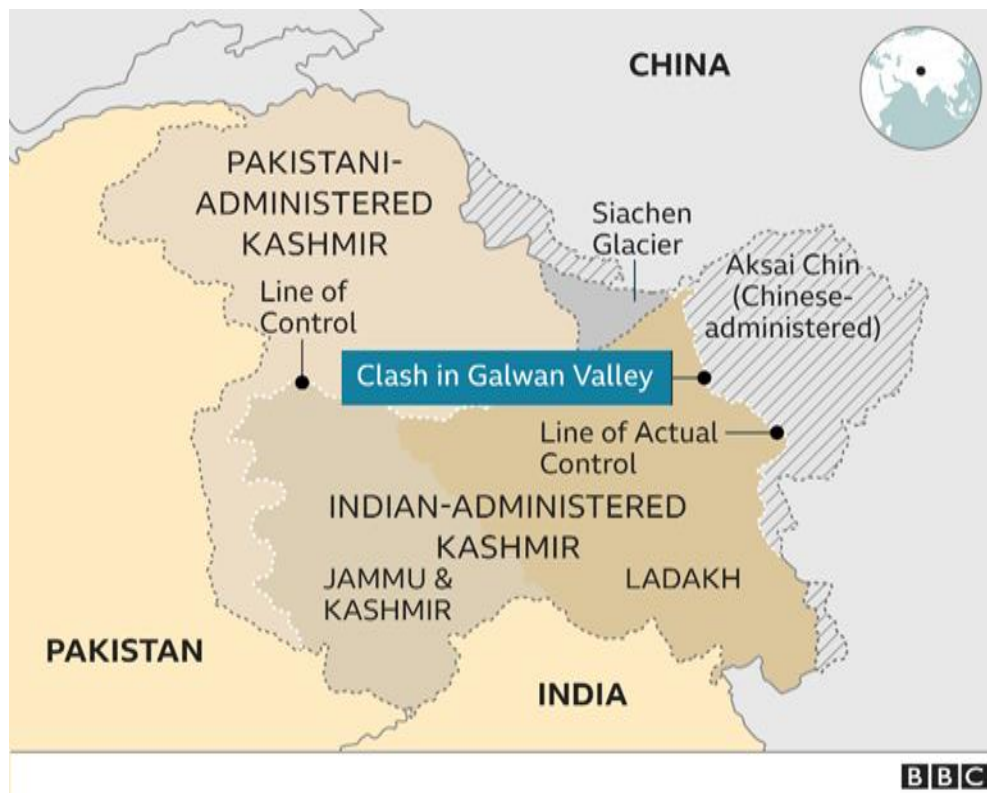
Figure 2 Proposed CPEC (BBC, 2020)

### Dangers Ahead:

Technologically China is superior to India, with a very advanced military and infrastructure (Sansa, 2020). China can utilize financial resources for its military goals, whereas the Indian economy is in the struggling stage since last many years even worsened by the coronavirus crisis.

Moreover, India has faced a humiliating defeat in 1962 war with China (Graver, 2006) and claims that China occupies 38,000 km of Indian territory. Talks in the last three decades could not resolve these boundary issues. The Indian claimed Aksai Chin is controlled by China. This area is strategically important for China because it connects Xinjiang and Tibet (Raghavan, 2009). There have been similar standoffs between India and China in Doklam plateau, in 2017 which lasted for more than two months. When China started building a road in the region which was claimed by Bhutan, India objected to it. The Chinese remained firm and within six months, they built a military complex there.

Both India and China have the ability to solve this dispute through mutual talks and as the Chinese media have not given any coverage to this operation, there may be a chance that the option of talks is left open. Moreover, both countries are interested in strengthening their economies and avoiding military escalation and have an admirable record of maintaining peace and stability in this disputed region (Ethirajan & Pandey, 2020).



**Figure 3 Clash in Galwan Valley (BBC, 2020)**

The June 15, 2020, confrontation was a result of the bubbled-up tensions in recent months due to the road India built in Ladakh, along the LAC. This angered China and PLA was deployed there. China also built an infrastructure of its own in disputed territory. This brought the two forces in closer proximity and heightened the risk of clashes. The area is important for both, strategically, economically, and militarily and the loss of lives raises the stakes. These deaths are the first in 45 years (BBC, 2020). On June 16, Indian army reported that a de-escalation process was underway and army generals have been involved in talks aimed to resolve the border tensions. It is important to note that similar reconciliation attempts have stalled in the past. So if the talks are unsuccessful, there is a risk of further clashes between them (Panda, 2020; Philip, 2020).

The Chinese have forced India's political leaders to react in such a way that is further disadvantaging the Indian armed forces. The forces are preoccupied with so-called counter militant operations in Kashmir and the PLA has created new facts on the ground taking already the distracted Indian army by surprise when it carried out these incursions. These incursions in May 2020, were multi-prong and deep with a range from three to five kilometers across North Sikkim and east Ladakh. It started on May 5, 2020, when China occupied the Indian territory and built concrete defenses there (Sawhney, 2020). The PLA maneuvering surprised the Indian Army, and this fact showed the total obliviousness of the Indian armed forces to the ground reality. Presently, there is no apparent signs of thinning of Chinese troop deployments or dismantling of the Chinese erected structures (ET Online, 2020a).

There are at least two group armies, three air force bases, and one rocket force base now in the Western Theatre Command of the PLA (Sawhney, 2020), responsible for guarding the LAC. This strength is a result of the ill-handled Doklam crisis by India in 2017. 13 combined armed brigades, support arms and services, armed border guards, and police, and a total of soldiers over 200,000 are present in the Tibet Autonomous Region which have created an excellent military ecosystem. Moreover, China has been regularly and realistically conducting combat training (Sawhney, 2020). The Indian Army may have similar surprises in future also, without blaming their intelligence service (Panda, 2020; Philip, 2020).

The Indian Army has been holding the Siachen glacier since April 1984 at the cost of lives and finances. It should not be caught napping. On May 15, 2020, the army chief General Naravane, about the possibility of a two-front war, said, "It is a possibility. It is not that it is going to happen every time. We have to be alive to all contingencies which can happen" (Sawhney, 2020; BBC, 2020). He probably had, in his mind, a localized two-front war, in north Ladakh, from Siachen to Sub Sector North (SSN). The chief of defense staff, General Bipin Rawat, his ill-informed predecessor, advised the defense minister Rajnath Singh on October 21, 2019, to open the Siachen area from the base camp to Kumar post for tourism (Sawhney, 2020), soon after the revoking of Article 370 (Aurangzeb et al., 2020; Ahmed et al., 2020), having irked both Pakistan and China. China also successively protested twice on the creation of the Ladakh Union Territory but its protests were not given heed by India, resulting in the present PLA intrusions (BBC, 2020).

### **Localized two-war front a possibility:**

Galwan valley was not a disputed area before but now the PLA is moving in strength into it. together with the Pakistan armed forces, PLA is well-composed to trouble the Indian Army on the Siachen glacier. Pakistan Army can keep Indian military busy on the west side and PLA can do the same on the east (Philip, 2020). Following reasons show that there is a chance of a two-front war;

- i. China and Pakistan both have political and military objectives that are achievable;
- ii. Both have been carrying out combined combat training since 2011, including in air,<sup>2</sup> and on ground.<sup>3</sup>
- iii. They have been carrying out combined military training, across north Ladakh, including Siachen since 2013; and
- iv. Both countries have the capability, the capacity and strong political will to achieve their military and political objectives.

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<sup>2</sup>the Pakistan Air Force-PLA Air Force'sShaheen exercises

<sup>3</sup>Pakistan Army-PLA Army'sWarrior exercises



Held in August and September 2019,<sup>4</sup> the Shaheen-VIII exercise was reportedly the most advanced, starting as a one-on-one dog fight, but then evolving into systematic mock battles. This exercise then featured more equipment in indulged further branches of both air forces and armies. The ground forces were trained in deploying missiles and electronic counter-measures. For the exercise, two opposing teams were formed. Red team comprising the PLA Air Force, and Blue team constituted of PLAAF and Pakistan Air Force (Sawhney, 2020) carried out these exercises, the scope of which does not require elaboration. A close analysis of the strategic, political, military and diplomatic objectives of this exercise reveals the following (Sawhney, 2020);

- i. The strategic objective of the Pakistan Army for a localized war in north Ladakh could be to provide depth to the CPEC.
- ii. The political objective of the Pakistani government could be to make India's hold over the Kashmir weaker.
- iii. The military objective of the Pakistan Army could be to force the Indian Army out of the Siachen Glacier.
- iv. The diplomatic objective of Pakistan could be to draw the world's attention to the possibility of a full-scale war between nuclear neighbors.

China may endorse Pakistan's war objectives. It may not use its kinetic war capabilities until the Indian military attacks China. Both Pakistan and China, together, can outwit Indian army on the Salto Ridge and the Siachen Glacier (Sawhney, 2020). The Pakistan Army may also attempt to capture NJ9842 in sub-sector west, together with the PLA, which can sever India's operational logistics. PLA may also share its non-kinetic capabilities in this adventure (Pillay, 2020; Ethirajan & Pandey, 2020).



**Figure 4 Galwan Valley faceoff point (Reyar, 2020)**

<sup>4</sup> close to border with north Ladakh

### Why Galwan matters:

China has a strong objection on the building of a feeder road in Galwan Valley by India. This has triggered PLA's present moves (Sawhney, 2020). This objection and movement of PLA should be understood in relation to any possible war plan. This feeder road is meant to link up Galwan valley with the 224 km long Durbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie road and the bridge. Moreover, in the military talks on June 6, 2020, the Chinese kept their incursions in the Galwan Valley off the table. This shows that for China, the importance of the Galwan Valley is connected with other objectives in Ladakh (Panda, 2020; Reyar, 2020). The Saltoro ridge in the west of the Siachen glacier separates Indian and Pakistani forces fighting for the glacier (Naz, 2019; Ali & Saeed, 2019) and the Sasser ridge separates Siachen glacier from east Ladakh. At this point, the PLA has gradually been shifting the 1993 LAC westwards towards its 1960's claim line closer to the Sasser ridge. This region is called Sub Sector North (SSN), and it has extreme weather due to an altitude of 18,000 feet. On the Indian side, SSN lacks in proper infrastructure and is extremely vulnerable to ingress by the PLA because China has roads right up to the LAC (Sawhney, 2020; Reyar, 2020).

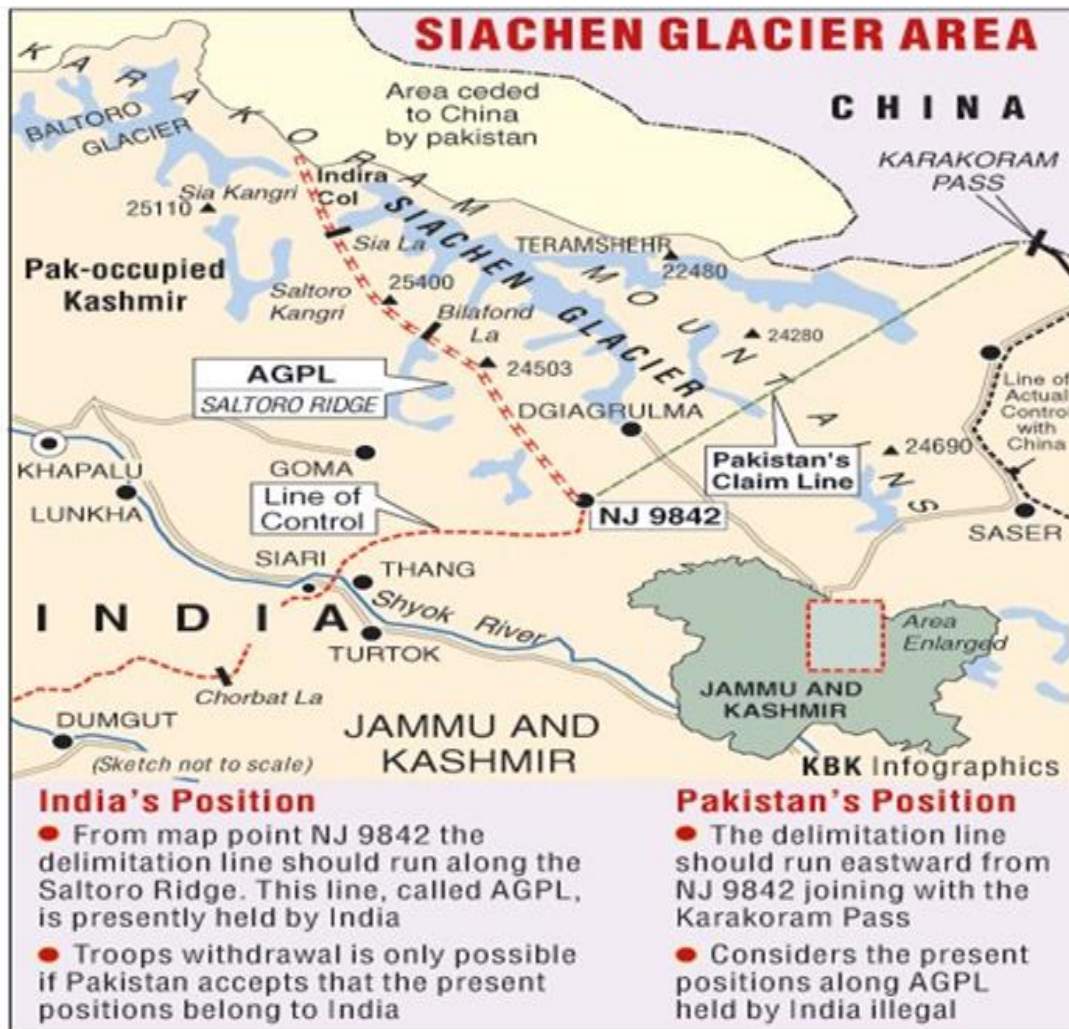


Figure 5 Map of the Siachen area (Cherian, 2015)





**Figure 6. The Daulat Beg Oldi road passes through Galwan (Sawhney, 2020)**

The Karakoram in the north of SSN provides the shortest route from Leh into China. China has a road from its garrison which has a combined-arms battalion.<sup>5</sup> China is now well positioned to watch Indian Army's activities on DBO road after its incursion into the Galwan valley. Further the PLA is there with a combined arms brigade backed by artillery and armor. This route is not available between May to October,<sup>6</sup> because the Shyok River gets flooded by the melting glaciers (Reyar, 2020). During summer, only the other route across the Sasser ridge is available to the troops to reach SSN which is a very difficult route without a proper road, and the troops take from 18 to 25 days to trudge this track. On this route, the Indian troops, after crossing the Sasser La and coming to Chungtash, are taken in vehicles towards DBO. A 430-meter long Colonel Chewang Rinchen Setu bridge across the Shyok river was inaugurated by India to make the Darbuk route to DBO available round the year. This facilitated their movements to SSN and reduced the travel time to half but at the same time compromised the PLA's movements and dominance of heights in the Galwan valley. As a result of this compromise, China refused to discuss Galwan during table-talks. The Pakistan Army could also fire its cruise missiles from the base camp to disrupt the Indian Army's positions and logistics lifeline (Reyar, 2020; Sawhney, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> basic tactical unit capable of conducting independent operations

<sup>6</sup> when the winter stocking for troops is done



## **PLA's Priorities vis a vis the Indian Army:**

Meanwhile, the PLA's through its non-kinetic capabilities could dominate. PLA'S unique Strategic Support Force<sup>7</sup> with cyber, space, electronic and electromagnetic spectrum management dominance may disrupt Indian military's C3 system<sup>8</sup>, its ISR,<sup>9</sup> its satellites, and Position, Navigation and Timing, which are required for firing the cruise missiles. The exercises which have been carried out extensively under the Western Theatre Command since 2018, have increased and manifold improved the PLA and the PLAAF's joint operations capabilities in advanced electromagnetic environments. The cooperation between the PLA and the Pakistan military in north Ladakh was previously thought unimportant by Indians. In their opinion, China had no political or military objectives nor reasons to build up its troops close to the LAC. The situation is changed now. Violations in Kashmir can play havoc with the Indian Army's lines of communications. The Indian army would remain engaged at LAC because of the threat of Advanced Landing Ground and air-strip at BDO capturing by the PLA. Moreover, there is also a threat from China and Pakistan because of their willingness to use military power for their foreign and security policies (Sawhney, 2020). India, with relatively little military capability, when compared to the PLA, is left with little options. The meeting between the two general officers<sup>10</sup> held on June 6, 2020, also ended without results and this also proves that the Indian military has a weak position during the table-talks. The Indian Army announced to the media beforehand its red lines. It also announced the demand for restoration of the status quo ante positions held by both sides as of April 2020. Resultantly, the PLA agreeing to the meeting, at the last minute, was itself the breakthrough. India is now reluctant to request China for raising the talks to the national security advisor or chief of defense staff level because China's agenda for discussions at the raised level would be an embarrassment for India (Sawhney, 2020).

## **Chinese aims:**

Through diplomatic talks, China wants India to adhere to Wuhan consensus,<sup>11</sup> and revoke the new constitutional status of Ladakh. This demand for revoking the status of Ladakh includes the revocation of the status of Jammu and Kashmir, cleverly inbuilt. If India agrees to this demand, the PLA would withdraw troops, tanks, and artillery guns. Its defenses and constructed roads would remain as they are (Pillay, 2020).

China never had a boundary<sup>12</sup> with Ladakh. Right from the time when Jammu and Kashmir were annexed with India, till the time when the British left, China could not be convinced by India to convert the existing frontier<sup>13</sup> into a boundary. In its 1950 map, India showed the western sector<sup>14</sup> as an "undefined boundary." PM Nehru also rejected the Chinese proposal<sup>15</sup> about this

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<sup>7</sup> PLASSF

<sup>8</sup> Command, control, and Communication

<sup>9</sup> Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance

<sup>10</sup> GOC 14 corps, Lt Gen. Harinder Singh and PLA's Maj. Gen. Liu Lin

<sup>11</sup>In April 2018, PM Modi informally met with the Chinese President in Wuhan. Both sides agreed to cooperate with each other avoiding rivalry. According to China, India has violated that agreement.

<sup>12</sup>i.e. well-defined jurisdiction limits

<sup>13</sup>undefined areas which allows free passage of people, trade and other civilizational matters

<sup>14</sup>Ladakh

<sup>15</sup>On November 7, 1959, a letter was written to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru by the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai proposing a boundary settlement with China agreeing to de facto accepting the McMahon Line<sup>15</sup> in the eastern sector.

area, therefore China called its actual position line as the Claim Line in Ladakh. When China declared unilateral ceasefire in the war of 1962, it ordered its forces to withdraw 20 km behind its Claim Line, thereby creating an unofficial demilitarized zone (Sawhney, 2020; Garver, 2006). The Chinese Claim Line was forgotten by both sides in later years and in 1993, both India and China agreed to call this disputed border the LAC, after an agreement of peace.

This resulted in three lines

- i. the boundary as India believed;
- ii. the boundary as China claimed;
- iii. the Line of Actual Control.

India never had the idea that in fact this LAC was a military line. It could be tactically shifted through implying greater power and through political will, without fighting a war. This LAC was made a millstone around their neck. The PLA's gradually improved its border management and the 1998 nuclear tests by India increased the PLA's transgressions across the LAC. Indian governments justified PLA's transgressions to their domestic audience declaring that the LAC is not an agreed line. They explained that these transgressions happened by India also although it was a lie. This was proved when the Chinese Ministry of External Affairs acknowledged on May 21, 2020, that the Indian Army always abides by LAC (BBC, 2020; Sawhney, 2020).

### **Impact of Doklam:**

The threat from China to India has raised after the Doklam crisis in 2017 and the response time for India has also reduced sharply. The PLA has been exercising regularly in TAR, with 10,000 to 15,000 troops, in eastern Ladakh. Its ingress<sup>16</sup> is at simultaneously at Demchok, Pangong Tso, and Galwan and it is also authenticated by satellite (Sawhney, 2020). These ingresses have forced India to admit that the "Chinese have come in large numbers." There are now very few political, diplomatic, and military options left available, so the Indian government is doing what it does the best, i.e. adopting a tough posture and building a self-proclaimed stories of victory for consumption by the population. In the middle of the border crisis, the PM Modi also held a virtual summit with Australian PM for raising the level of bilateral relations. This also led to a tense position between China and India at the diplomatic and military level talks (Sawhney, 2020; Pillay, 2020). Presently the Indian officials and media are spinning yarns of victory in the Himalayas suggesting that the PLA did not enter the Indian side of LAC despite their MEA's recent confession that Chinese have come in great number. Nobody thought why then the Indian soldiers had been holding this elevated line for 27 years,<sup>17</sup> round the clock, without proper habitat and infrastructure (Sawhney, 2020).

India has also asserted that the pace of infrastructure development would be fastened. It will commission 11 special trains when the pandemic is over. These trains would bring thousands of laborers for building operational roads close to the LAC. There is no chance that the PLA would not object on this. Resultantly, these laborers would only work in Arunachal Pradesh and the Indian

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The letter demanded India in exchange to accept the actual positions held by the two sides in the western sector, i.e. the eastern Ladakh.

<sup>16</sup>estimated three to five kms

<sup>17</sup>starting 1993

military efforts on the frontline would be made meaningless by the Algorithm war that the PLA is preparing for<sup>18</sup> (Sawhney, 2020).

The government of India believe that its strategy of hardened posture would work. As a matter of fact, it bring disadvantages for India. To avoid further surprises by PLA, the Indian Army would remain busy in policing the LAC including theatre reserves and troops of the 17 Mountain corps (Sawhney, 2020). Its plans to substitute technology on the LAC to relieve troops for training would also not be materialized. It would also be compelled to abandon military reforms required for network-centric warfare in which China has already gone well beyond (Chaturvedi, 2020; Raghavan, 2009; Biswas, 2017).

### **Conclusion:**

The Indian Army may now postpone its modernization for any futuristic war. It is highly committed in counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir, political strikes against Pakistan on the LOC, and guarding the LAC. In such a situation, the materialization of the modernization plans is too much for a weaker economy of a country like India. Hopefully, this situation does not move the militaries of Pakistan and China for further adventures in Kashmir or in Ladakh. China is warning that the stand-off could escalate into full-scale conflict and its media has begun reminding India of its defeat in the 1962 war, displaying old reports and pictures.

The latest clash happened in mid-June 2020, when India opposed China's attempt to extend a border road through a plateau known as Doklam in India and Donglang in China. It lies at a junction between China, the north-eastern Indian state of Sikkim, and the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. It is currently disputed between Beijing and Bhutan and India supports Bhutan over it. India is concerned that this road will give China greater access to India's strategically vulnerable "chicken's neck."<sup>19</sup> Since this stand-off began, each side has reinforced its troops and called on the other to back down. India believes that China is galled the close relationship and commitment of India to Bhutan which has always sustained all Chinese pressure.

Indian analysts are warning India not to ignore China's warnings but this does not mean that China is girding up for a full-scale war. Both countries can share some blame for this stand-off may it be China violating the status quo by building the road, or that the Indian troops were only sent to resist after Bhutan requested India to help. China may blame India for violating the international law.

India has a policy tool of trespass to reach or realize its political targets. India possibly made a mistake by combining the building of the road and the talk of potential security implications. It was wrong for India to voice the potential security threats so strongly. The Chinese are exploiting this situation. India could have just said that China had breached the status quo, the situation would have been different and India might have scored an own goal. Using the same logic of the Indian army to stop PLA from building the road in Doklam/Donglang, a third country's army could enter Kashmir at Pakistan's request. So India should have only remained limited to its established territory, even if were requested to defend Bhutan's territory.

Relations between both countries are at the weakest level and the countries also have missed an opportunity of resolving this crisis because the meeting between the Chinese President and the Indian PM in Hamburg did not happen. According to India, it was not on the PM's agenda while the Chinese FM declared the atmosphere not right for a meeting. It has become an issue of

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<sup>18</sup> and which the Indian military is oblivious of

<sup>19</sup> a 20 km wide corridor that links the seven north-eastern states to the Indian mainland.



prestige for both India and China. Diplomacy must keep on going despite difficult circumstances and deteriorating relationships so that the war becomes unlikely to break out.

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