



# Hustling in the Himalayas: The Sino-Indian Border Confrontation

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Once again, Chinese and Indian forces find themselves locked in a tense border standoff. Confrontations between Chinese and Indian soldiers in contested territories along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayan borderlands are not new. But, for the most part, these encounters end uneventfully, without the firing of weapons or loss of life on either side. Patrolling platoons have, however, often engaged in intense physical altercations involving scuffles and stone throwing, which are then calmed through flag meetings between Chinese and Indian senior military officers.

On occasion, both nations have reacted vigorously to considered attempts by the other to change the status quo by either entrenching a new physical presence or creating new physical infrastructure in the disputed areas. In the last decade alone, three such episodes—at Depsang in northern Ladakh in 2013, at Chumar in eastern Ladakh in 2014, and at Doklam on the Sino-Indian-Bhutanese border in 2017—produced local crises severe enough to require higher political intervention to defuse them.

## CHINA'S LATEST FORAYS IN THE HIMALAYAS

The current crisis unfolding along the LAC appears on one level to be a continuation of the trends witnessed in foregoing years. But this time, there is one important difference: unlike the discrete and geographically localized confrontations of the past, the latest encounters are occurring at multiple locations along the LAC in Ladakh in the eastern section of Jammu and Kashmir, which suggests a high degree of Chinese premeditation and approval for its military's activities from the very top.

If the armigerous skirmish at Naku La in Sikkim in late January 2020—over one thousand miles to the east of the current standoff in Ladakh—is set aside because of its similarity to past platoon- and company-level jostling along the border, the problems in Ladakh are different and more serious. The exact details are still unclear, but it appears that beginning in May, Chinese forces shifted beyond merely conducting transitory patrols in the disputed borderlands, as both sides routinely do, to physically occupying portions of the contested terrain.



These efforts to bring new territorial enclaves under Chinese control are occurring simultaneously at several different locations, such as on the northern bank of the Pangong Tso, at Hot Springs, and in the Galwan Valley, places that all lie astride the LAC in eastern Ladakh (see map 1). The Chinese military now appears to have occupied some 40–60 square kilometers of territory claimed by New Delhi in these areas. Moreover, these intrusions, however they began, have grown in strength over time and now involve battalion-sized forces, many with heavy weapons, bivouacked in spaces that previously lacked a Chinese presence.

In some instances, these Chinese forces are deployed to protect the new physical infrastructure now being built, like roads, bunkers, and barracks, but in other instances they are seeking to establish a new presence across critical avenues of access to both sides. In almost all cases, the Chinese penetrations are relatively shallow, on the order of 1–10 kilometers west of their routine operating areas. In fact, the new Chinese occupation likely has occurred within the limits of China's own claim line, but precisely because this perimeter is disputed by India, New Delhi finds itself confronting fresh Chinese troops deployed on territories the Indian government has hitherto treated as its own.

MAP 1. CHINA AND INDIA'S DISPUTED BORDER



Source: Adapted from U.S. State Department and Natural Earth

These incursions, accordingly, cannot be dismissed as insignificant because, in the polluted post-colonial politics of South Asia, all the involved states have fought bitter battles in the past over marginal portions of territory. Moreover, even modest territorial acquisitions can have outsize operational consequences depending on their location and defensibility, especially in the complex mountainous terrain along the Himalayas. Hence, the new Chinese penetrations are especially troubling to India, and it is not surprising therefore that the Indian military (just like its Chinese and Pakistani counterparts) traditionally has bent over backwards to protect critical pieces of terrain or deny the other permanent control of key geographic features.

## THE POLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS OF THE SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE

Even if the military consequences of the current usurpations are debatable in any particular instance, the political significance of the Chinese intrusions is not. Given the disputes about what the territorial boundary between the two countries should be, any permanent Chinese presence up to the limits of its own claims inevitably implies an invasion of Indian territory and as such represents an unacceptable affront to New Delhi.

The current Chinese efforts to suddenly seek physical control over new locations in the Himalayas have been widely attributed to the general increase in Beijing's friskiness in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic. According to this reading, signs of new Chinese aggressiveness along the Sino-Indian border is all of a piece with the new security law Beijing has enacted to control Hong Kong, the enunciation of new administrative structures in the South China Sea, and the new language on Taiwanese reunification used during the May 2020 National People's Congress plenary session in Beijing.

In other words, China is pushing back on all fronts to signal resolution when there is widespread international

dismay about its contribution toward the spread of the pandemic. There is a danger, however, in conflating coincidence with causality where the current Sino-Indian crisis is concerned: China's aggressiveness in the high Himalayas is qualitatively different from the other developments exemplifying increased Chinese assertiveness.

In fact, Chinese pugnacity toward India along the LAC represents deliberate intimidation through the use of military force, a development with roots in events that predate the pandemic. If Beijing's protestations are anything to go by, Chinese anxieties appear to have grown since the August 2019 Indian decision to transform Ladakh, which previously had been part of the autonomous state of Jammu and Kashmir, into a union territory directly governed by New Delhi.

This Indian decision was driven entirely by domestic exigencies. The only international consequence India intended was to signal to Pakistan (and to Pakistani-supported dissidents within India) that the door to secession was conclusively shut and that all parties to the conflict accordingly would have to reconcile themselves to the reality of Jammu and Kashmir forever being part of the Indian Union.

Senior Indian policymakers repeatedly emphasized that their August decision involved only the political question of Jammu and Kashmir's relationship with the rest of India; this action did not in any way prejudice the territorial issues relating to the boundaries with China. Beijing, however, remained unpersuaded by these reassurances and, in collusion with Islamabad, attempted to rally international opposition to New Delhi. These efforts failed miserably, in part, because the United States supported India in key international forums such as the UN Security Council.

It will never be known with certainty whether this failure intensified China's desire to punish India in other ways (and for other reasons, such as New Delhi's increasing diplomatic proximity to Washington), or whether the



failure only reinforced the Chinese determination to wrest control of disputed territories that were long desired but were now judged to be imperiled by India's domestic decisions.

But China's fierce opposition to the transformation of Ladakh's status, something that received only passing attention hitherto, set the stage for the militaristic power play that is now under way along the LAC. Other developments since have accentuated China's determination to "fix" India: New Delhi's criticism of Beijing's failure to help contain the international spread of the coronavirus and the Indian decision to limit Chinese investments at a time when similar global sentiments were gathering steam deepened China's resentment and strengthened the prospects for a riposte when circumstances permitted.

Only weather conditions likely prevented China from responding earlier than it did: the onset of summer in the high Himalayas dramatically improves China's access to the hostile front lines and enhances its ability to build up the infrastructure necessary to sustain a new military presence significantly. The annual summer military exercises in Tibet made things even easier because it allowed Beijing to divert troops to the borderlands without calling undue attention to its activities. While the changing seasons may explain much about the timing of current Chinese actions, the thrust of China's policy—the incremental acquisition of claimed territories along the Sino-Indian borderlands—resembles the patterns Beijing's behavior has exhibited elsewhere in the world such as the South China Sea.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT RULES

China's territorial disputes with India in Ladakh date back to the modern founding of the two countries. And Beijing's claim lines have shifted west on at least two occasions, each involving demands for additional territory amounting to many thousands of square

kilometers. Since at least the late 1980s (if not earlier), Chinese encroachments on claimed Indian possessions in Ladakh have intensified even as Indian leaders have attempted to negotiate new rules for managing the countries' disputes along the entire frontier.

From the early 1990s until as recently as the 2018 summit in Wuhan between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a series of agreements and understandings have been negotiated. These measures were intended to prevent violent conflict at the LAC in order to give political authorities on both sides a chance to resolve the border dispute through negotiations, which would in turn permit the delineation of a single common boundary between the two rivals.

Until such a perimeter could be agreed upon, patrols on both sides were expected to operate in the undefined gray zone—the interstices where neither country had a permanent presence—without threats of physical obstruction by the opposite side. While Chinese patrols often penetrated into new areas, albeit within the limits of their own claim lines (in places that nonetheless lie within Indian-controlled territory), Indian forces rarely reached the limits of their own claim lines (lying within Chinese-controlled territory).

In any case, while the negotiated agreements served periodically to calm tensions, they failed to produce any lasting tranquility for the simple reason that they did not specify the actual positions that each side routinely occupied relative to their claimed boundaries. As a result, Chinese patrols over time extended the ambit of their operations, expanding their reach into territories that they had not patrolled before and that often have lain in areas that lacked settled Indian populations. These tactics have set the stage for China to pursue expansive claims when boundary negotiations finally begin.

The dramatic modernization of Chinese infrastructure on the Tibetan plateau has only enabled the more effortless expansion of Chinese patrols in these

borderlands, something that India could not match traditionally, given its failure both to encourage permanent settlement (especially on the part of its nomadic populations in these areas) and to build up its own infrastructure commensurately.

India is now desperately trying to catch up on both counts, and its efforts to upgrade its own road and air networks along the Himalayan borders have caught China's attention. Beijing seeks to thwart these efforts in order to freeze its current superiority indefinitely. By occupying new segments of Indian territory, it thus aims to change the facts on the ground either to enhance its bargaining leverage in future negotiations, to simply annex spaces it covets for political or military reasons, or to compel India to abort the ongoing infrastructure modernization that could advantage it in any future conflict.

The pattern of Chinese patrolling since the late 1990s suggests that Beijing seeks to eventually control the entire Aksai Chin plateau (on which parts of Ladakh are located). China has laid claim to this region since the 1950s, but as the Sino-Indian rivalry has increased after the Cold War, Beijing has attempted to gradually bring bits and pieces of the disputed frontier under its *de facto* authority. The term *de facto* authority itself is inadequate in this context because, in the absence of maps that clearly delineate which areas each side actively controls, China's creeping appropriation of territory cannot be either contested or contained except by physical Indian obstruction.

On this count, Chinese actions have been singularly mischievous: although both countries have long committed to exchanging maps describing their presence in the disputed territories as the first step toward a boundary settlement, Beijing has thus far consistently declined to follow through on its obligations. In large measure, this is because accepting any Indian map that marks an extant Indian presence would make it difficult for China to claim that territory in future negotiations—what China actually wants is the entirety

of the disputed borderlands simply on the strength of its claim that it once possessed them.

## INDIA'S PAINFUL CHOICES

The latest Chinese intrusions in the Ladakh region, accordingly, leave India only with painful choices. Beijing has moved into disputed territories that did not host a continual Chinese presence as recently as January 2020. China's first-mover advantage has now locked India into the awkward position of trying to negotiate a Chinese withdrawal from these new occupations, which is an unlikely prospect especially in areas like Pangong Tso, where China is aggressively completing a motorable road, and in the Galwan Valley, where it is reportedly building bunkers and barracks. Even if China withdraws as a result of successful Indian negotiations, the new infrastructure it has created would likely survive as a ready asset to be utilized in some future contingency.

If fruitful negotiations for withdrawal cannot be concluded—because China has successfully confronted India with a *fait accompli*—India can attempt to eject Chinese forces from their new emplacements through force, thereby risking further escalation in what would inevitably be a serious armed confrontation. Or India could simply maintain its own forces, which have now been deployed from the rear in matching strength, in blocking positions. Such a response would prevent China from expanding into new pockets of control, but it would not roll back any of China's recent gains even if both sides end up in a long and interminable standoff.

The unfortunate truth is that China, having exploited the initiative to seize pieces of India's claimed territory, can now hold on to its new acquisitions forever unless India chooses to eject Chinese troops by force or decides to impose tit-for-tat costs on China by symmetrically occupying other pockets in disputed territory where it possesses a tactical advantage. This rejoinder admittedly carries risks because China could parry such Indian actions using its significant reserves already deployed at



key locations along the front, in which case the stage would be set for perhaps a wider confrontation.

The current Sino-Indian border crisis has revealed that China has little respect for India's long-standing efforts to freeze the status quo along the two countries' disputed frontiers or for New Delhi's cautious efforts to avoid the appearance of balancing against Beijing. Rather, treating India's internal actions regarding Jammu and Kashmir as a provocation, it has chosen to expand its control over new parts of the Himalayan borderlands through brazen actions that confront India with the difficult choice of either lumping its losses or escalating through force if the negotiations presently under way yield meager returns. By so doing, it has forced India to join the rest of Asia in figuring out how to deal with the newest turn in China's salami-slicing tactics, which now distinctively mark its trajectory as a rising power.

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## NOTES

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