

Chapter 8

India-China's Border Anxiety and Precautions

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I. Introduction

Since the outbreak of conflicts in Doklam in the middle section of the India-China border in 2017 and the Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso in 2020, although India and China have gone through many rounds of negotiations and reached a withdrawal from Pangong Tso only after the ninth negotiation in February 2021, the two sides have not completely withdrawn their troops from the disputed area. On the contrary, the two sides have intensified their troop build-up and training on long-range force projection along the western border. The recent visit of Chinese leader Xi Jinping to Tibet during the floods in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, and his talks with officers of the Tibetan army not only commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Communist army's entry into Tibet but also concern about the Communist army's defense and deployment during the border conflict between India and China in the eastern sector. Furthermore, In June 25, 2021, when the Lhasa-Nyingchi railway, (also known as Lalin Line) was finished, Xi specifically choose to take this railroad to Nyingchi, this highlights the strategic value both on defense and economic of this line. The Lalin Line will link the Sichuan-Tibet and Qinghai-Tibet railroads, and a railroad from Linzhi to Chengdu will be built in the future, making the Tibetan Railway a link between Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan, and Sichuan, which will play an essential role in long-range logistics and troop transport during border

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conflicts between India and China.

India and China have no plans to raise the border conflict on both sides. However, with China's external relations, internal stability, and economic downturn, an agreement to stabilize the Ladakh border conflict, which is essential for the next Chinese 20th Congress's Beidaihe Conference, would help Xi Jinping stabilize his internal political situation. The problem is that as long as the border dispute between India and China remains unresolved, the military forces of both sides will habitually express their stance on territorial sovereignty and cross the border due to internal political changes and nationalist sentiments, which may still cause conflicts again.

II. Infrastructure Construction and Military Deployment Caused by Border Anxiety

Due to the dispute in India-China border, in case to gain better strategic stance, India has taken initiative on reinforce border's infrastructure. In July 2021, India built 63 new bridges and 12 new roads in seven states which border with China.¹ Of the 63 bridges, 11 are in the Ladakh region, and four are in the Jammu and Kashmir region. Other Indian states along the Line of Actual Control receive the remaining resources: three in Himachal Pradesh, six in Uttarakhand, eight in Sikkim, one each in Nagaland and Manipur, and one in Arunachal Pradesh. 1 each in Nagaland and Manipur, and 29 in Arunachal Pradesh. The total cost of building these bridges is 2.4 billion rupees (about \$32.2 million).² This is a symbol of India's changing strategy, but it remains cautious when it comes to the sensitive state of Arunachal Pradesh.

On the India-China border, the physical border infrastructure has operated for

¹ Kunal Purohit, "China-India Border Dispute: New Delhi Talks up Infrastructure Build-up in Strategy Shift Against Beijing," *South Chinese Morning Post*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3139929/china-india-border-dispute-new-delhi-talks-infrastructure-build>.

² Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Unabating Tension with China Spurs India's Border Infrastructure Efforts," *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/unabating-tension-with-china-spurs-indias-border-in-frastructure-efforts/>.

years in favor China. China has progressed in infrastructure and connectivity in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the India-China border region. China has also undertaken significant rehabilitation of the Karakoram Highway to improve connectivity between China and Pakistan. India, in particular, has neglected developments in the border region for decades, affecting the Indian military's long-range force projection ability in emergencies. Nevertheless, Indian government policy has changed to build and upgrade roads, bridges, and tunnels in the border region. The border dispute has required both India and China to station troops along the border to prevent the other side from crossing the border or taking advantage of the situation. However, because the border is located on a plateau, the identification of temporary buffer zones or boundaries near the actual line of control often becomes a point of contention as the landscape changes after river erosion or snow cover.

For example, in the Ladakh region, Aksai Chin, which India claims to own, is physically occupied by China, and there are other disputed areas along with Aksai Chin to Gavan and Bangong Lake, which become essential areas for the local garrison to assert their sovereignty when the situation between India and China is elevated. In the Gavan incident, for example, the Indian army took countermeasures against the Chinese army for crossing the border because the middle line of the river valley was shifted, and although the conflict was temporarily stopped, a second clash broke out at Bangong Lake due to mutual casualties. Although both sides did not use weapons, both sides were unwilling to back down because of the territorial sovereignty involved and subsequently took additional confrontation actions.

In June 2021, the Chinese Air Force deployed more than 20 Chinese 11 and some 16 to conduct air combat exercises on the India-China Line of Actual Control (ILC) in the eastern part the Indian city of Lehig, on the Chinese side of the border.³ The Indian Air Force responded by acquiring French fighters Rafel. These Chinese aircraft come from recently rebuilt and strengthened airports such

³ Lai Jinhong, "Indian Media: Communist J-16 Dominates the Frontline in India and China, Indian Fighter Jets Cannot Prevail," *United News Network*, June 13, 2021, <https://udn.com/news/story/7331/5530434>.

as Hotan, Ali Kunsha, and Kashgar. These airports have been rebuilt with solid shelters, longer runway lengths, and additional logistics and human resources to accommodate additional aircraft types. Alikunsa Airport is the closest to the border, but the 3,000-meter terrain has limited the number of fighter deployed. Xinjiang's main air force base is in Hotan, about 350 kilometers from the border, where 50 to 60 fighters can be deployed, H-6K, and Kashgar air base, about 600 kilometers from the border, which can serve as a backup airport.

In addition, according to the *Hindustan Times*,⁴ China has established a new joint air defense system for the Western Theater, which will be responsible for air defense operations along the India-China Line of Actual Control. To establish this system, China has transferred new weapons systems and aircraft formations to Tibet and Xinjiang to enhance Chinese air defense combat capabilities behind the Line of Actual Control, validated through exercises in the Western Theater. Because joint air defense operations involve Army and Air Force units under the command and control of the theater air force, at least 10 PLA Army and Air Force units are integrated into the chain of command to become the new joint air defense system.

In addition, China is building hundreds of new facilities to support its troops in the Ladakh border towns of Rudok and Kangxiwar in order to strengthen its combat readiness. Kangxiwar is located north of the Aksai Chin plateau, connecting Tibet and Xinjiang regions. In addition, the Chinese have established about 20 permanent and temporary camps in Rudok, with a capacity of 15,000 to 18,000 troops, compared to about 5,000 in the previous camps.

Besides the troops which belongs Western Theater, the 81st Group Artillery Brigade's Long-Range Multiple Rocket Company, part of the Central Theater, also conducted training in Xinjiang in conjunction with UAV units, this kind of cross-Theater support will this become a regular operation, worthy of follow-up observation. It was impossible to correct the target by forwarding observation

⁴ Rezaul H. Laskar, "China Creates Combined Air Defense System along LAC," *Hindustan Times*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-creates-combined-air-defence-system-along-lac-101622544473501.html>.

because of the long-range, so the target correction was done by drone. In this fire exercise, the Xinjiang military region used the new 122 mm wheeled self-propelled artillery and Type 08 infantry armored vehicles to engage in border operations and deployed the Red Flag 9 anti-missile system.

In order to counter Chinese firepower, India also used K9 self-propelled artillery purchased from South Korea to deploy near the border and purchased M777 artillery from the United States to enhance ground countermeasures firepower. In addition, 24 MH-60 multi-purpose helicopters, 6 Apache attack helicopters, 30 armed drones from the United States, and anti-aircraft missiles and Heron TP drones from Israel were purchased to respond to the India-China border situation.

On July 3, the media also reported that India and China had sent tens of thousands of troops and advanced equipment to the border, bringing the two countries' military deployments to the highest level in decades. Last year, there were about 15,000 troops, but now the number has increased to 50,000. Because of the increase in troop numbers, the two country are also working on strengthen their own military infrastructure, including underground tunnels, logistics facilities, field hospitals, helipads, and barracks with cold proof ability, in an attempt to enhance and ensure the deployment and capability of their troops during the harsh cold.

In summary, the situation between India and China at the border has not been eased by the withdrawal of troops, but rather, the two countries have stepped up their defenses against the expected rise in conflict and have drawn up battle plans for conflicts at different parts of the border, and used the summer months to enhance training for their border troops.

III. The Indian and Chinese Border Negotiations and Post-Border Negotiation Preparedness

Since the Gavan conflict, India and China have been negotiating at the corps level to stabilize the security of the Ladakh border. The eleventh round of corps level talks in April 2021 lasted for 13 hours, but the two sides had no sign of concessions. The Chinese refused to disengage in the Gogra, Hot Springs, and

Depsang areas of eastern Ladakh, where motorized infantry, artillery, and air defense brigades are deployed only a few dozen meters from Indian posts. If China does not withdraw its troops, the possibility of renewed conflict exists.

In all fairness, negotiations on the India-China border dispute are not a decision to be made at the level of the military commanders, and any major decision must follow strategic guidance from the top levels of both governments, which is influenced by the strategic situation in the region. The QUAD summit in April 2021 was a demonstration of the four countries working closely together to counter China. The subsequent summits between the U.S., Japan, South Korea, the U.S., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Group of Seven (G7) have already reached a consensus on China's "wolf diplomacy" and its brutal handling of the Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan issues. Under these circumstances, it is unlikely that China will show weakness on the India-China border issue, and it is only natural that China's military negotiators will stick to their established position and emphasize sovereignty.

However, on July 31, 2021, talks at the level of military corps, India has said that resolving the standoff between the garrisons in the region is very important to India-China relations. Furthermore, on July 16, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the India-China bilateral foreign ministers' meeting in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, that the continuation of the situation in eastern Ladakh would have a negative impact on bilateral relations between the two countries. The two sides agreed to hold another meeting of senior military commanders, and both sides agreed that a prolongation of the current situation would not be in the interest of either side.⁵

On July 5, the commander of the Western Theater was suddenly replaced by Xu Qizhi from Zhang Xudong and then by Wang Haijiang on September 6, as if there were signs of a temporary change of commanders to facilitate the outcome of the 12th round of corps level talks. The government's decision to replace the commander of the Western Theater with Wang Haijiang, who had just taken over as

⁵ Lin Wangjing, "India-China Foreign Ministers Talk, Border Situation Slows Down," *United News Network*, July 16, 2021, <https://udn.com/news/story/7331/5604842>.

commander of the Xinjiang Military Region, was a significant concern.⁶

The 12th round corps level talks statement mentioned that “the two sides continue to exchange frank and in-depth views on promoting the disengagement of troops in the western sector of the Indian-Chinese border along the Line of Actual Control” and that “the talks were constructive and further enhanced mutual understanding. The two sides agreed to maintain the momentum of dialogue in accordance with the bilateral agreement and to resolve the remaining issues as soon as possible.” The Chinese attitude has softened as the meeting ended in nine hours, probably the shortest round of talks between the Indian and Chinese militaries. Both countries want to stabilize the situation in Ladakh as soon as possible in this round of negotiations at the level.

It is worth noting that on August 1, the day after the talks, which is also the 94th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese army, India and China held a ceremony to open a hotline between the Indian army at Kongka Pass in northern Sikkim and the Chinese army at Gangba in the Tibetan Autonomous Region to demonstrate the trust and friendly relations between the two countries at the border. This is the second hotline between India and China in the Sikkim sector, with two hotlines in the western sector at the Ladakh border and two in the eastern sector at the Arunachal Pradesh border, making a total of six hotlines for conflict avoidance at the India-China border. Therefore, the opening ceremony will be held at this time means that the previous day's border talks will be held smoothly, and a consensus will be reached.

However, the problem is that no details have been released on how the two countries will disengage in Ladakh, and there will be no significant changes soon on whether the two countries will slow down their military deployments to prevent conflicts and whether additional troops will be deployed and military facilities will be expanded. If the two countries believe that adopting a strategic position on the border troop increase can effectively reach a negotiated agreement, it is unlikely

⁶ Ananth Krishnan, “Xi Names New General to Head Border Command, Third Change This Year,” *The Hindu*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/xi-names-new-general-to-head-border-command-third-change-this-year/article36331318.ece>.

that either side will take the initiative to withdraw their troops. Like Ladakh originally had two hotlines, but when one side insists on raising the conflict, such communication confidence-building measures can hardly work when a conflict breaks out.

IV. Future Development and Impact of India-China Border Situation

1. India and China Hope to Find a Way Down to Avoid the Escalation of the Conflict

In both the 2017 Donglang dispute and the 2020 Gavan conflict, it appears that the border troops were “serious” about their mission, resulting in casualties and causing conflict. The Indian side has no intention to escalate the conflict and take advantage of the situation to resolve the border issue. In China’s case, while China has isolated itself with its “war wolf diplomacy” in the face of the strained U.S.-China relations, provoking the border conflict has driven India to strengthen its cooperation with the U.S. and NATO countries, which has put China in a strategic position with its back against the enemy. Even though China is confident that after the military reform, it has surpassed India in terms of army size, infrastructure, and warfare capabilities, if a war is started, it will not be over in a short period and may extend from the conflict in Ladakh to Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh. The rise of conflict would be detrimental to Xi Jinping, who is eager to stabilize the transition to the 20th National Congress and remain in power. India may not be ready for a military confrontation with China, but a corps-level negotiation would allow the two countries to find a way down to ease the India-China border conflict.

2. India’s Approach and Changes to the QUAD Summit

In the face of the India-China border conflict, India needs time to strengthen its preparations for the military conflict and the assistance of other countries. Due to its tradition of non-aligned, India has not signed defense or alliance

agreements with any country and subjectively hopes to receive support from other countries when it is difficult to counter the Chinese threat. Although India has signed a military cooperation agreement with the United States and is active in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, it will not become an ally with the United States or demonstrate an attitude of cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia in the fight against China. Although India has acquired advanced systems from the United States, such as maritime patrol aircraft, Apache helicopters, Harpoon missiles, and aircraft engines, this is only a way for India to improve its armaments, and it cannot be taken for granted that the United States and India have strengthened their military alliance. Just as India also procures fighters from Russia and France, it cannot be said that India may form a military alliance with Russia and France.

However, India has to face the fact that there is a border dispute with a strong enemy, and if China does not give up its attempts to recover its territory, the two countries may come into conflict at the border. If India cannot stand up to China on its own, it needs the support and assistance of other countries. Whether it is the Asia-Pacific rebalance or the Indo-Pacific strategy, the U.S. needs India to play the role of a pillar in South Asia, so there is still room for military cooperation between the U.S. and India in the context of geostrategic interests. During Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's recent visit to India, Secretary of State Antony Blinken clarified that both India and the United States want to prevent the Chinese Communist Party and its allies from taking control of the Indo-Pacific region.⁷ That is, they want to strengthen security cooperation with India in the common interest of both the United States and India. The four countries are holding Exercise Malabar in the South China Sea region, which raises the level of security cooperation among the four countries.

It is possible that this mechanism was not mentioned in the joint statement because India views it as a broad security mechanism rather than a military alliance

⁷ Gurley, "Secretary Blinken's Visit to India Focuses on Afghanistan and China," *Radio France Internationale*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/tw/international/20210728> - US Secretary of State Blinken visits India - Focus on Afghanistan and China.

mechanism.⁸ The September 2021 summit of the four countries did not explicitly refer to the China-India border and Taiwan Strait issues. However, this does not mean that the China-India border is unimportant or that the U.S. policy toward China has changed.

3. Both Countries Continue to Adopt Offensive Defenses to Gain Deterrence and Advantage

Border troops operate in the front line of the Chinese military border from the Xinjiang Military Region and the Tibetan Military Region, but they have strengthened the formation and equipment of the two military regions' synthetic brigades. In addition, China is supporting the Xinjiang Military Region with the 77th Group Army in the Western Theater, the Tibet Military Region with the 76th Group Army, and the 81st Group Army and the Airborne Army in the Central Theater as reserve units, forming a strategic deployment that facilitates deep operations and maneuvering. Furthermore, the media reported that the former commander of the Strategic Support Forces, Li Fengbiao, was appointed political commissar of the Western Theater.⁹ He moved from being a commander specializing in space and cyber warfare to being the political commissar of the Western Theater, which supervises the Xinjiang and Tibetan military regions, possibly drawing on his experience in the Airborne Army and the Strategic Support Forces to integrate joint operations for border conflicts. In addition, the establishment of railway and highway networks in Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as the establishment of militarized villages along the Bhutan border, are all strengthening the military deployment along the India-China border in an attempt to "salami slicing" and achieve the fact of sovereignty in the border area.

While the Indian army along the border remains a traditional mountain army and mountain division, the Chinese army is deployed along the India-China border in a group army and synthetic brigade units. Although India understands China's

⁸ US White House, "Joint Statement from Quad Leaders," *The White House*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/>.

⁹ Zhang Qian, "Analysis of Xi Jinping's trip to Tibet: Declare India-China border position," *China Central News Agency*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202107270109.aspx>.

intentions and practices, there is no practical way to curb China's behavior in the gray-zone operation along the border other than deploying more troops. In particular, India's border battlefields are slow to operate, and India is currently strengthening the operation of railways and highways in the border areas, but the deployment of troops by road is less in number and more time-consuming, by using large military transport or helicopter can make up for the lack of infrastructure.

On October 10, 2021, the Chinese and Indian armies held their 13th round of corps level talks. China insisted that India withdraw the thousands of troops and weapons it had sent to the India-China border in 2020, including its garrison in the Depsang Plains.¹⁰ India rejected China's request because it believed that the Chinese military's frequent exercises there proved that China was ready to intensify its activities along the Line of Actual Control and that withdrawal was not possible. The twelfth round of talks between the two sides at the corps level showed that they had agreed to disengage their forces, but preparations for a possible border conflict were unlikely to be eased. The possibility of border conflict still exists in the Eastern, Central, and Western Sectors.

V. Conclusion

Although India and China have reached a consensus at the level of corps talks to withdraw reinforcements from the disputed area of Ladakh, the two countries have not backed down from their sovereignty views, nor have they established a model for a definitive solution. predictably, the Ladakh border issue is temporarily suspended, but the dispute remains. Although the tensions have subsided, there is still a risk that clashes between border troops on border patrol could escalate. Both countries have stepped up their defenses against possible military conflicts, but the more troops or infrastructure they build at the border, the more suspicion will be aroused by the other side, and the higher the suspicion, the harder it will be for both

¹⁰ Rajat Pandit, "India, China Lash Out at Each Other as Talks Reach Bitter Deadlock," *The Times of India*, October 12, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lac-row-no-breakthrough-in-13th-round-of-india-china-talks/articleshow/86928076.cms>.

sides to reach a consensus to ease the border, and there is still a possibility of stray fire.

With the strengthening of U.S.-India trade in armaments, joint exercises, personnel exchanges, and maritime security and anti-piracy cooperation, military cooperation has become an essential pillar of U.S.-India relations. After Biden took office, this trend showed no change, and the strategic partnership between the two countries is expected to be further strengthened under Biden's leadership. Biden will not change his mind about Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy, but its implementation will be adjusted. Because the U.S. and Indian leaders are concerned about the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific region, the two countries are deepening their military cooperation and strengthening each other's strategic assurances. Nevertheless, India does not expect the United States to intervene in the India-China border conflict, complicating the border issue. India is actively strengthening its military organization and upgrading its armaments, and it still needs U.S. assistance in the technology and defense industry.