
Chinese Belligerence on the Line of Actual Control (LAC): India's Approach

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Abstract

The article traces the background to the Chinese belligerence on the LAC right from the early 1950s and brings us up to date on the many instances of clashes or standoffs between the two countries. It carries a sector-by-sector brief analysis and thereafter gives out nine crisp points that come up as an assessment of the actions taken by India to get an understanding of India's approach. This brings out that India has been adopting measures commensurate with the time, resources, state of infrastructure and diplomatic and military capabilities to handle the situations that arise along the LAC.

Introduction

India and China became independent entities nearly two years apart. At that time, both countries had their own aspirations. India wanted to become the leader of the non-aligned world and China a leader of the communist world. In the initial years of their existence, both tried to be nice to each other. So much so, that they signed the Agreement

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between the People's Republic of China and India on Trade and Intercourse with Tibet in 1954 based on the Panchsheel.¹ Even today China's foreign policy is based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. It is a different matter that China acknowledges Mr Nehru's contribution to the Panchsheel less today. The bonhomie of the early years soon gave way to animosity. The primary reason for that was the intrusions by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA)

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from 1954 onwards. The bilateral relationship further deteriorated when it was discovered that China had constructed a road through Indian territory in Aksai Chin in 1957.² Thereafter, the relationship between India and China went through a downward spiral. The 1962 war by China on India further exacerbated the situation. After going through several ups and downs, today the bilateral relations between India and China are at crossroads after the Galwan incident of 2020. This article traces India's approach to the incidents on the Line of Actual Control. In order to do that it is imperative to understand how the issue on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) started manifesting. It all seems to have started from the Barahoti area in 1954.

1954-59³

Middle Sector. The first note on the boundary violation seems to have originated from the counsellor in the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi on 17 July 1954 to India's Ministry of External Affairs complaining that 30 Indian troops had crossed into the Wuje (Barahoti) area after crossing Niti Pass in the Middle Sector. He further reinforced his stand on 13 August 1954. India responded on 27 August negating the Chinese counsellor's claim and India's note also included a counter claim that the Chinese

troops had crossed into Indian territory in that sector. Further India's response ended by saying, "It is hoped that the Government of China will instruct the local authorities in Tibet not to cross into Indian territory as we have instructed our authorities not to cross into Tibetan territory".⁴

On 18 August 1955, in a note to the counsellor in the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi, India raised the issue of the Chinese collecting taxes from graziers in the area of Barahoti. The Chinese denied it. On 15 September 1955, an Indian patrol was stopped by the Chinese in the area of Damzan which is 10 miles short of Niti Pass. However, the Indian patrol managed to go ahead but the Chinese patrol remained in Indian territory. On 28 April 1956, an armed Chinese patrol intruded in the area of Nilang which is on the Indian side of Tsang Chokla. On 7 June 1956, for the first time, India issued orders to its patrols not to allow Chinese to pass through Tunjun La. On 8 June 1956 China indicated that Tunjun La was part of China. This was contrary to the 'Agreement between the People's Republic of China and India on Trade and Intercourse with Tibet' in 1954, wherein Tunjun La was identified as one of the border passes. This seems to be the start of the boundary question between India and China. A joint investigation was proposed by India and accepted by China.

The complaints and counter-complaints continued. The second place where the intrusion took place was in the area of Shipki La on 1 September 1956. The Indian government took up the issue again with China. Shipki La was also identified as a border pass in the 1954 agreement mentioned above. This was followed by two more incursions on 10 and 20 September 1956. In the 10 September incident when the Indian patrol tried to move ahead, the Chinese threw stones at them and threatened to use grenades. So, throwing stones at each other at the border incidents started at that time. Things took a different turn when in 1958, the Chinese moved into two places in the Middle Sector and established posts when the Indian posts withdrew for winter, at Laphal

(latitude 30°-44'N; Longitude 80°-8'E) and Sangcha Malla side of the Balcha Dhura Pass (latitude 30°-40'N; longitude 80°-12'E), which is considered as the traditional boundary between India and China.

Western Sector. In July 1958, Chinese troops moved in and occupied Khurnak Fort in Eastern Ladakh. India in a note dated 2 July 1958 mentioned that in an inconclusive conference in 1924 held between the Tibetan Region of China and Kashmir State, the status of Khurnak Fort was never questioned and intimated that the Indian government would be sending a reconnaissance party to the fort area. On 18 October 1958, India sent an informal note to the Chinese embassy in Delhi regarding the road constructed by the Chinese in Eastern Ladakh. This road is the Western Highway as we know it today. On the same note, information was requested from the Chinese government regarding a patrol which went missing at the end of August 1958. China protested the intrusion of two patrols and many aircraft, confirmed the apprehension of two Indian patrols, and informed that these patrols would be deported from China on 22 October 1958 through the Karakoram Pass. On 30 July 1959, India sent a note regarding a patrol that went missing in the Western Pangong Tso area and the establishment of a Chinese post at Spanggur.

Eastern Sector. The third sector that opened up was the Lohit sector in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh. In a note given to the Chinese Embassy on 17 January 1959, the Indian foreign Office protested the intrusion of Chinese personnel in Lohit area on 27/28 September 1958 who after camping in Indian territory had moved towards Burma from there. The note also mentioned about an earlier intrusion in October 1957, wherein the intruding party came up to Walong. In response, China complained that Indian troops in conjunction with "Tibetan rebel bandits" occupied Migyitun area. Indian response to that Chinese note accepted Migyitun and other areas mentioned in the Chinese note as Chinese territory and denied any action by Indian troops. It also denied any collusion with "Tibetan Rebels". On 7 August 1959, an intrusion by an armed patrol

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was reported in Khinzemane sector which was protested through a note on 11 August 1959. On 25 August 1959, a Chinese patrol opened fire on an Indian picket south of Migyitun and moved further South and opened fire on Longju Post and on 26 August 1959. This was protested on 28 August 1959.

In early 1959 both countries also intimated each other of air violations from each other's territory. Thereafter, there was a heated exchange between both countries regarding the Tibetan Movement. Throughout this period, both India and China protested incidents on the border and countered each other's protests with their own. Starting from 1958 onwards, Indian patrols were either apprehended or ambushed by the PLA, particularly in the Western Sector.

India's response was to adopt a limited defensive deployment, a euphemism for forward deployment. As part of this, 43 posts were established in the Western sector and 25 posts in the Eastern sector. These were small, isolated posts which did not have adequate reinforcements or logistics support. Therefore, when the 1962 war took place these were easily overrun by the PLA.

Other Major Incidents

Nathu La and Cho La Incidents—September-October 1967. A skirmish took place in Nathu La in Sikkim due to disagreement over the laying of the border fence at Nathu La by Indian armed forces from 11 to 14 September 1967.⁵ The PLA fired at the Indian troops attempting to lay the boundary fence. India responded strongly causing heavy casualties on the Chinese. The issue was resolved after three days. On 1 October 1967, in Cho La which lies a few kilometres north of Nathu La, a skirmish

took place between Indian armed forces and the PLA over the location of a stone.⁶ The issue was whether it was in Indian or Chinese territory. In the ensuing firefight, casualties occurred on either side.

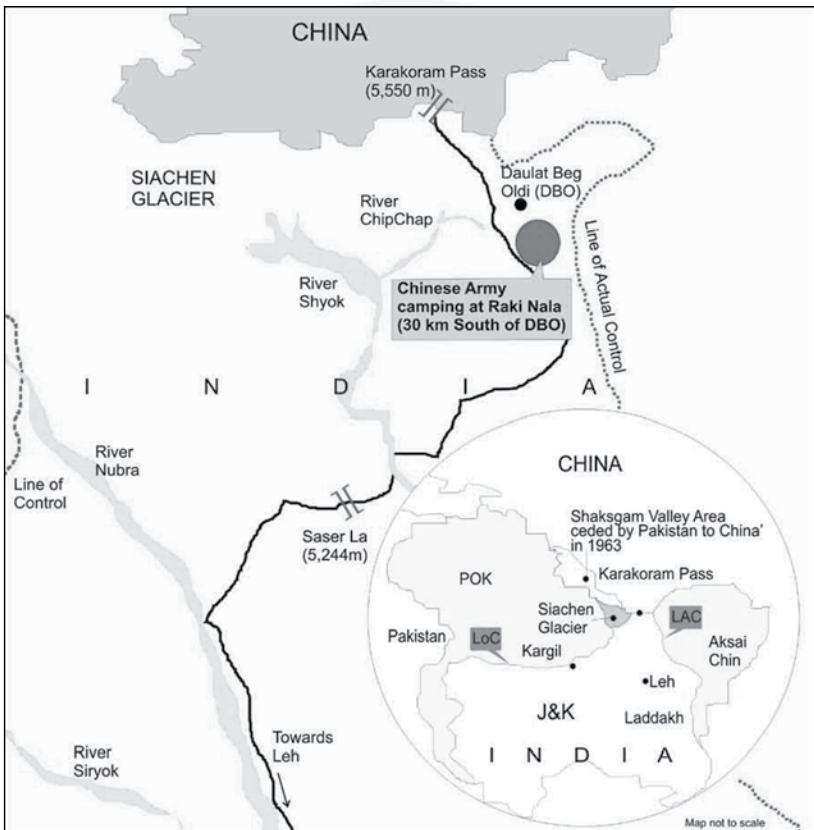
Tulung La Incident—1975.⁷ In 1975, the Chinese had moved a company to the India-China boundary at Tulung La in Arunachal Pradesh and despatched a platoon forward which had erected stone walls 500 m south of that pass. When an Assam Rifles Patrol went to that area, they were fired upon killing four soldiers⁸ of the 5 Assam Rifles Battalion who were doing the job of scouts for the battalion.

Sumdorong Chu Incident.⁹ The Intelligence Bureau (IB) Personnel of India used to occupy a seasonal post at Wangdong near Sumdorong Chu from 1984. When they withdrew from the post for the winter of 1985, the PLA moved in and constructed a helipad and a post and deployed 200 troops. When the IB personnel went back in the summer of 1986, they were surprised to see the Chinese in Indian territory. Immediately, Operation Falcon and Operation Chequerboard were launched in which a brigade of Indian troops were Heli-lifted and deployed in counter penetration and dominating positions. De-escalation started in 1987 and in 1995 both India and China vacated two posts each. See Map below:



Source: <https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=12/27.7649/91.7607&layers=C>

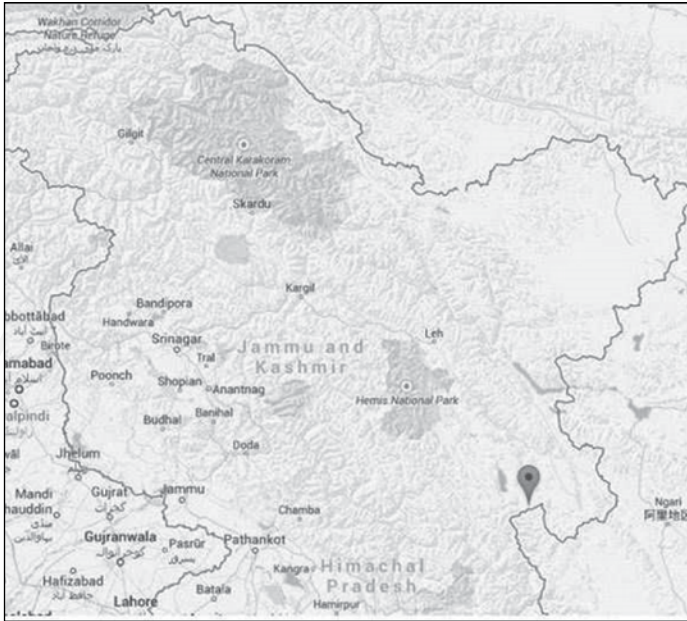
Depsang Incident. On 15 April 2013, a Chinese patrol came into the Indian side of the LAC and pitched tents near Burtse.¹⁰ Indian army also pitched tents close to the Chinese patrol. After three weeks of negotiations, the face-off was resolved on 5 May 2013. This incident took place when Mr Li Keqiang was visiting India for the first time as Premier of China. See Map below:



Source: <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/looking-beyond-the-dbo-face-off/>

Chumar Incident 2014. When Mr Xi Jinping was visiting India for the first time as President of China, China moved heavy machinery into Indian territory to construct a road in the Chumar area in Eastern Ladakh

on 10 September 2014.¹¹ A face-off ensued thereafter. Military and diplomatic efforts diffused the situation and the situation was resolved on 25 September 14. See Maps below:

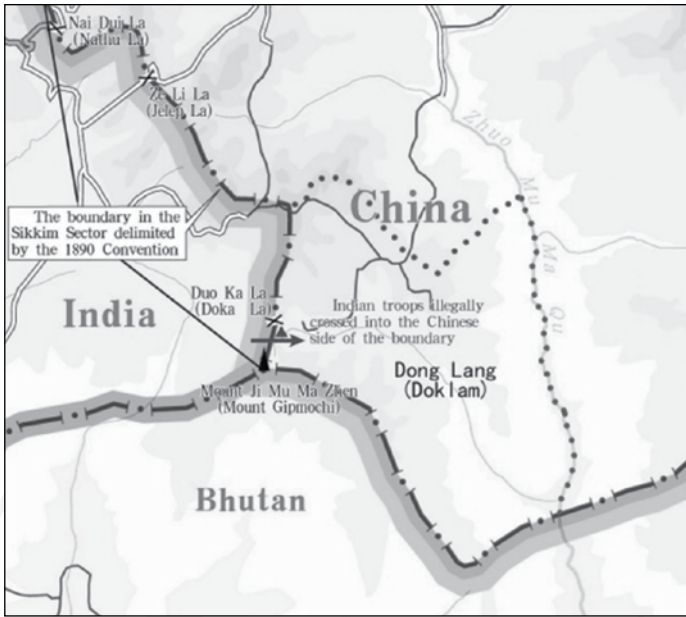


Dolam (Doklam) Incident 2017. On 16 June 2017, the Chinese started constructing a road from Dokala to Jampheri Ridge. Indian troops moved in and stopped the construction. This was because the Chinese action violated an understanding reached between the Special Representatives of both countries in 2012¹² that any change to the tri-junction areas will only be carried out with the prior concurrence of all three countries. This resulted in a standoff that lasted for 72 days. It was resolved through negotiations and the Chinese stopped the construction of the road.

Please refer Maps below for the Dolam incident:



Source: <https://thewire.in/uncategorised/doklam-india-china-bhutan>



Source: Map released by Chinese Spokesperson

Incidents of 2020



Source: <https://theprint.in/defence/5-maps-that-tell-you-all-you-want-to-know-about-india-vs-china-in-ladakh/507289/>

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The year 2020 became an inflexion point in the bilateral relationship between India and China. The clashes that took place in the Galwan Valley resulted in casualties on both sides after a gap of 45 years. When China diverted a large number of troops that had been mobilised for the annual exercises that are conducted by PLA opposite Eastern Ladakh, Indian army mobilised its troops mirroring the mobilisation of PLA. That resulted in a stalemate. Indian army's occupation of Kailash range on the southern bank of Pangong Tso on 29-30 August 2020 took the PLA by surprise and facilitated in speeding up the disengagement process. However, even after 18 rounds of Corps Commander Level talks and an equal number of Working Mechanisms for Consultation and Coordination, the process is still in the works.

The Period 1988-2013

While the work on the boundary question started after the deployment of the Indian Ambassador late Mr K R Narayanan in 1976, it really got a boost after the visit of late Mr Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988. Work on various agreements started and during the visit of Mr Narasimha Rao in 1993, India and China signed the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas. This was followed by the visit of Mr Jiang Zemin to India in 1996 during which both countries signed the 'Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas'. Simultaneously, joint working groups and expert groups

were set up to resolve the boundary issue. These groups met approximately 15 times, but the progress achieved by them was considered not up to the mark. Therefore, when the late Mr AB Vajpayee visited China in 2003 a Special Representative Mechanism was instituted to speed up the progress. A three-step mechanism was agreed upon to resolve the boundary question.¹³ The first step was to establish the political parameters and guiding principles. This was achieved

when an ‘Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question’ was signed between both countries during the visit of Mr Wen Jiabao, then Premier of China on 11 April 2005. The second step, that is, establishing the framework for a final package settlement is still in progress. The third step of delineating and demarcating the boundary will come later.

Despite all these measures, there were face-offs still happening. A number of Standard Operating Procedures were set up and agreed upon by both sides to ensure face-offs are resolved amicably. Around the year 2000, a process of exchanging maps showing respective perceptions of the boundary started. Maps of the Middle Sector were exchanged. But when the process of exchanging the maps of the Western sector started, the Chinese delegation pulled out of the process. Notwithstanding subsequent efforts, this process has not restarted again. In order to further streamline the procedures an ‘Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of India and the government of the People’s Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation’ was signed on 23 October 2013. In spite of all the standard operating procedures and agreements that were signed between both countries, the major incidents mentioned above still happened.

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Post Galwan Incident

During the negotiations that took place between military commanders initially and thereafter they were joined by the Ministry of External Affairs representatives, the methodology for disengagement included a temporary moratorium on patrolling. This implies that in each of the disengagement points, namely, Galwan, Patrolling Point 15, Patrolling Point 17 and Pangong Tso, a mutually accepted distance (it varies as per the understanding reached during negotiations for each of these points) will not be patrolled by both the sides, till this issue is resolved. As this article goes to print, it is presumed that further negotiations are going on, in the Depsang Bulge and Demchok areas.

Assessment

It was necessary to recapitulate the incidents and the actions carried out by India so that an assessment could be made. There are nine points that come up as an assessment of the actions taken. These are explained in the succeeding paragraphs.

- **Protests and Counter Protests.** In the initial period of the intrusions and faceoffs it was protests and counter-protests that was the norm. 1958 onwards even though our forces suffered casualties India's approach was to lodge protests and counter-protests. This can be attributed to the remoteness of the area where these incidents occurred, lack of ability to reinforce and logistically sustain the small detachments and patrols.
- **Standing Ground and Responding to Chinese Actions.** In the incidents of Nathula, Chola, Sumdrong Chu, Depsang, Chumar, Dolam and incidents of 2020, the response of India and her forces seems to be to stand the ground and respond supported by strong diplomatic support. This also negates the feeling that India has been meek in her response and cedes ground to the Chinese.

- **Eastern Ladakh Seems to be More Important for China.** While there have been incidents in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the number of incidents in Eastern Ladakh, out number them manifold. Infrastructure development along the northern borders which was sluggish earlier, has been given the necessary impetus. Moreover, formations have been reoriented from the western to the northern border, thus indicating the resolve to face any threat that could emanate along that border.
- **Influence Operations and Grey Zone Warfare.** Prior to the Dolam incident of 2017, China always complained that Indian media is very active and that creates problems in resolving the issues. During the Dolam incident and thereafter, China's media has become very proactive and tried to create and shape the narrative in her favour. It is not that faceoffs have not been happening earlier. Many incidents were resolved through discussions between local commanders. The new-found media activism acts as an added factor that complicates the resolution of the issues.
- **Cyber War.** The number of cyber-attacks on Indian entities was much higher after the Galwan Incident. India's response has been measured and efforts have been made to strengthen the cyber defence capabilities.
- **Three Mutuels.** As mentioned earlier, Galwan incident has been an inflexion point in the bilateral relationship between India and China. India has taken a stand that bilateral relations will be guided by three mutuels—mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest.

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Also, it is being conveyed constantly that the status of the border will determine the status of the bilateral relations thereby implying that unless the situation on the LAC gets back to pre-April 2020 levels and an understanding not to alter the status quo on the LAC unilaterally is arrived at, the bilateral relationship is unlikely to improve.

- **New Confidence Building Measures (CBMs).** During their meeting on the sidelines of the SCO meeting in Moscow in September 2020, foreign ministers of India and China had agreed in the fifth of their five-point statement that new CBMs may be considered to avoid incidents such as Galwan. CBMs have been a way to handle such incidents.
- **Bold Action as per Need of Situation.** Bold actions like occupying the Kailash Ranges, and Op Chequerboard have paid rich dividends. This is one of the methods adopted by India. Similarly, when needed she has also accepted a temporary moratorium on patrolling. Therefore, a flexibility of approach has been adopted by India as per the need of the situation.
- **Non-Lethal Weapons.** As mentioned earlier, the effort to not use lethal weapons and use sub-lethal weapons has its roots as early as 1956. It has also been seen that the Chinese have placed orders for sabres, etc. with particular specifications. The use of non-lethal weapons may become common in future.

Conclusion

The above brings out that India has been adopting measures commensurate with the time, resources, state of infrastructure and diplomatic and military capabilities to handle the situations that arise along the LAC. We need to study the course of actions so far so that we are better prepared to handle whatever form Chinese belligerence takes in the future. Along with that, we need to encourage confidence-building measures to reduce

the chances of misperceptions leading to uncontrolled escalation. This is in the interest of both countries.

Notes

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