

**Galwan Valley, Covid &  
Great Power Politics  
in the Indo-Pacific**

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Over the past two decades, the two Asian giants – China and India – have emerged as major players on the international stage. Their concomitant rise as an economic powerhouse has enabled them to wield influence on the global platform. China and India share several common traits. The two are the world's most populous nations, the catalysts of economic growth, the fastest-growing major economies, and both face the daunting task of lifting the standards of living of large proportions of their vast populations. In the past too, India and China, as two ancient sister civilisations, have had shared religious, cultural, and trade links. Both have been victims of colonial powers. Together, India and China shared 50 per cent of the world GDP till the second half of the 18th century.

However, since the 1962 Sino-Indian War, their relationship has been mired in suspicion and mistrust. Peaceful negotiations,

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summit-level talks, huge India-China bilateral trade, and many attempts to restore normalcy since the 1990s, from both sides, have not yielded significant results. Instead, the India-China relationship is stuck in a classic security dilemma and remains rough and volatile.

Over the past decade, their growing economic capabilities have enabled them to spend more on defence and to expand their influence in their immediate neighbourhood and beyond. Both are also pitched as rising great powers competing for the market, resources, energy, and global influence. Their competitive relationship has further intensified and is evident in the standoffs between Indian and the Chinese troops in the Himalayan border, their growing naval build-up in the Indo-Pacific, and their diplomatic tussle at international forums, including the United Nations and the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Since April 2020, the India-China relationship has worsened and the two world powers have been at a standoff against each other along their ill-defined border on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh. At the outset, the standoff was the culmination of long-standing border disputes and a continuing conflicting relationship, which has aggravated in recent years. The standoff on the Indo-Tibet border finally turned into a deadly conflict on the night of June 15, 2020, in the Galwan Valley, the first fatal confrontation between the two sides since 1975. China claimed the Indian territory of Galwan Valley as its own, a claim India rejected as a unilateral attempt to alter the *status quo*, and as unfounded, unacceptable, and unreasonable. Again, in August 2020, India blamed China for provoking military tensions on the LAC twice within a week.<sup>1</sup> China denied both charges and

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1 “India accuses China of ‘provocative military movements’ at border”, *BBC News*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53971397>.

blamed India for the stand-off. In September, China accused India of firing shots at its troops, which India denied, and accused Chinese troops of firing into the air.<sup>2</sup> Then again, on January 20, 2021, in a clash along the border in India's Sikkim state, soldiers on both sides were injured. Efforts along both diplomatic and military channels to defuse the standoff finally resulted in disengagement along the border from both sides. The military disengagement began with China pulling back its troops two kilometres from the Galwan Valley on July 6, 2020. On February 10, 2021, both sides began to de-escalate on the north and south banks of the Pangong Lake.<sup>3</sup>

The deadly Galwan Valley standoff is primarily attributed to the long-standing India-China strategic rivalry, differing perceptions about the LAC, recent infrastructure development in the border areas, and the military build-up at the LAC. But, the deadly India-China clash, not seen since 1975, has a larger canvass that needs to be assessed in the context of China's desperate attempt to use the humanitarian crises of the COVID-19 outbreak to push its geopolitical goals, as well as the emerging patterns of great power politics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

This paper examines the latest India-China conflict in the context of their complex border dispute, the recent standoff culminating in the Galwan Valley standoff, the negotiations, disengagement process, and the triggering of the great power strategic rivalry amidst COVID-19 geopolitics, evident in the

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2 "China says Indian troops fired 'provocative' shots in border dispute", *BBC News*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54067400>.

3 "India, China agree to pull back troops from disputed Himalayan lake after months-long standoff", *ABC News*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-11/india-china-agree-to-pull-back-troops-from-himalayan-lake/13146658>.

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Indo-Pacific region. In the end, the analysis concludes that, despite the de-escalation and withdrawal of troops at the LAC, the relationship between India and China will remain tense and suspicious, and the likelihood of such standoffs in the future cannot be denied. The India-China strategic rivalry, moreover, is going to be further aggravated by the revival of the US-China strategic rivalry.

#### **AN ENDURING BORDER DISPUTE AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT ALONG THE LAC**

At the outset, the violent conflict on the night of June 15, 2020, in Galwan Valley was a culmination of more than a month of tension that was building up on the LAC. The standoff is attributed to divergent perceptions about the LAC – a 3,488-kilometre-long undefined border between India and China – their enduring strategic rivalry since 1962, and increased patrolling and infrastructure build-up along the India-China border in recent years. The Galwan Valley clash goes back to the nearly six decades of enduring conflict between India and China over the border issue, which dates back to the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The India-China border dispute, moreover, is rooted in the 1914 McMahon Line Agreement between British India, Tibet, and China, over the status of Tibet, which sought to acknowledge Tibet as an autonomous region. However, China accepted neither Tibet's autonomy nor the McMahon Line. In the post-World War II period, after gaining independence, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru pitched for Indian-Chinese brotherhood (Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai) and advocated warm ties between the two Asian giants, emphasizing Asian solidarity in the emerging world order. Nehru also backed China's candidature for the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). However, China responded to India's friendly initiatives with belligerence. As a result,

the two Asian powers could not forge cordial ties and their relationship began to worsen. Finally, the growing tension over Tibet culminated in a full-fledged war between India and China in 1962.<sup>4</sup>

China dominated the war in which 1,000 Indian soldiers were killed and around 3,000 were captured, while an estimated 800 Chinese soldiers were killed.<sup>5</sup> China also occupied about 45,000 square kilometres of Indian territory in the Himalayas. Five years later, in September and October 1967, a full-fledged Sino-Indian war broke out again, in which India prevailed, destroying Chinese fortifications and pushing back Chinese troops. An estimated 340 Chinese and 150 Indians soldiers were killed.

Serious standoffs also took place in 1987 and 2013, but full-fledged wars were averted. Nevertheless, the two sides were again on the verge of conflict during the 2017 India-China standoff on the Doklam issue. India responded swiftly to foil the Chinese intrusion attempt by marshalling around 40,000 troops along the border.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, standoffs have also been frequent because both countries have increased their road connectivity for the

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4 For detail see, Ashok Sharma, *India's Pursuit of Energy Security: Domestic Measures, Foreign Policy and Geopolitics*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2019; Bruce Riedel, *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and Sino-Indian War*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC., 2015.

5 Russell Goldman, "India-China Border Dispute: A Conflict Explained", *The New York Times*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/world/asia/india-china-border-clashes.html>.

6 A. Sharma, "The recent deadly India-China border clash", *New Zealand International Review*, Volume 45, Issue 5, 2020, pp. 4-7; Russell Goldman, op.cit.; A Sharma, "India-China Standoff Ends India's Hopes for Asian Unity", *Australian Outlook*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/india-china-standoff-ends-indias-hopes-for-asian-unity/>.

smooth movement of troops along the LAC. The growing economies of both countries have enabled them to focus on spending heavily on enhancing their defence capabilities and modernising military assets, and border security related infrastructure: building roads, rail links, and airfields along the LAC. This has also aggravated suspicion leading to accidental and sometimes deliberate incursions.

China has been building roads and railways links on the Sino-Indian border since the 1950s, in line with Mao's famous line dictum, when he ordered the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to "advance while building roads". As a result, a vast road and railway network to link Tibet to provinces of Xinjiang, Yunnan, Sichuan and Qinghai has been constructed.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, China's infrastructure-building activities have intensified to enable the smooth movement of its troops and weapons on the LAC. Some of the notable Chinese projects in the pipeline are: linking of the old Xinjiang-Tibet Road to National Highway G219 running along nearly the entire China-India border; a concrete road between Medog and Zayu near India's Arunachal Pradesh State; a new rail line to connect Shigatse – the second largest city in Tibet – to Chengdu via Nyingchi, close to the Indian border; and a rail link between Shigatse and Yadong, a trading centre next to the Himalayan Indian State of Sikkim. China has also focused on its air power capabilities and has built about a dozen airfields.

After years of negligence, over the past decade and a half, India has also stepped up its defence on the LAC, not only increasing the number of troops and improving weaponry, but

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7 Indrani Bagchi, "LAC face-off: Our border infra not your business, India tells China", *The Times of India*, October 16, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/our-border-infra-not-your-business-china-told/articleshow/78691265.cms>.

extensively focusing on building posts, roads, and railways to counter the Chinese forces and their logistical vantage. India's road and railway construction programme in the Himalayan region along the LAC is massive. India has approved 73 strategic roads and 125 bridges, and nine railway projects along the LAC for the strategic positioning of heavy weapons. India has also focused on enhancing its air-power capabilities along the LAC, increasing and modernising its network of helipads and Advanced Landing Grounds, in addition to its 25 airfields along the LAC, and installation of the surveillance equipment along the entire LAC in Ladakh at Qizil Zilga, 70 kilometres east of Daulat Beg Oldi.<sup>8</sup>

But it is the new road to a high-altitude Indian forward airbase that reportedly triggered the deadly clash in the Galwan Valley. The 255-kilometre (140 mile) Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi (DSDBO) road – which winds through mountain passes up to the world's highest airstrip more than 5,000 metres above sea level in the Ladakh region – was completed in 2019, after almost two decades of work. Its completion could enhance India's ability to move troops and materiel rapidly in a conflict.

India's recent building work, including the DSDBO road, has irked China. This was clearly stated in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's statement

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8 Pratik Jakhar, "India and China race to build along a disputed frontier", *BBC News*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53171124>; Snehes Alex Philip, "China continues infrastructure build-up along LAC, amid disengagement talks with India", *The Print*, November 20, 2020, <https://theprint.in/defence/china-continues-infrastructure-build-up-along-lac-amid-disengagement-talks-with-india/548504/>; Snehes Alex Philip, "After missile sites, China now builds heliports along LAC in Ladakh and near Doklam," *The Print*, August 31, 2020, <https://theprint.in/defence/after-missile-sites-china-now-builds-heliports-along-lac-in-ladakh-and-near-doklam/492534/>.

that urged India to refrain from stepping up of infrastructure building and military deployment along the border on the Indian side which is the main cause of tensions.<sup>9</sup>

The stand-off at Doklam in 2017, on the other hand, was sparked because of the construction activities by China to expand the border road near the tri-junction between India, China and Bhutan, threatening India's Siliguri Corridor. This infrastructure development became one of the main contributors to the face-off between Indian and Chinese troops.

In recent years, especially after the Doklam standoff, there have been increased and rigorous patrols along the border, rapid increases in the frequency of ingression, encounters, and fistfights. The increased mobility has resulted in larger numbers of troops, heavier equipment, and temporary infrastructure moving forward quickly. This results in ever more intense shows of military strength. Indian and Chinese forces are often taken by surprise as there is no agreed and established mechanism to inform each other about their patrolling plans in advance, frequently resulting in a sudden confrontation.<sup>10</sup>

Past de-escalation processes at the LAC at the higher official and top political levels have failed to prevent such standoffs. There is a disconnect between the higher military and political levels, on the one hand, and the troops who operate on the ground. These ground-level troops and officers are often driven by emotions, and the lack of a mutually accepted set of rules of engagement, unavailability of proper communication

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9 "Urge India to refrain from complicating situation along border, says China", *The Economic Times*, January 25, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/urge-india-to-refrain-from-complicating-situation-along-border-says-china/articleshow/80450447.cms>.

10 Swaran Singh, "Recognizing the changed reality of India-China relations", *Global Times*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1193925.shtml>.



channels, and the disagreement over the official maps claiming the land, complicate the situation.<sup>11</sup> The PLA has often violated the LAC and crossed into the Indian side while patrolling, and this, in recent years, has met with strong resistance from the Indian forces. After a protracted and restrained standoff, the Galwan Valley conflict sharply worsened the situation.

The infrastructure and road building activities of both sides have only heightened suspicion, as each tends to see the construction activities of the other as a deliberate attempt to augment their respective strategic edge. Tension builds up whenever a new project is announced or initiated on either side, only adding to the prevailing mistrust and the security dilemma.

The way China continues to work rapidly to enhance infrastructure build-up, including roads and bridges along the LAC, even in the midst of disengagement talks with India, gives rise to speculation that China will attack India with greater force in the near future. India, too, has ramped up its infrastructure building along the LAC. Experts believe that it is likely that China has agreed to disengage because of the freezing weather, and that PLA forces might come later in greater strength and at a faster speed. With large numbers of upcoming roads, railway network, and bridges emerging on the Indian and Chinese sides of the LAC, there is enough ground to believe in a rising risk of further confrontations in the Himalayan region between Indian and Chinese soldiers.

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11 Huma Siddiqui, “India China Galwan Valley standoff: Why have the India-China tensions escalated? Experts explain”, *The Indian Express*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-china-galwan-valley-standoff-why-have-the-india-china-tensions-escalated-experts-explain/1993321/>.

## **DIVERTING INDIA'S STRATEGIC FOCUS FROM THE INDO-PACIFIC**

In recent years, India's defence preparedness has intensified. According to experts and a recent study by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School, India is ahead of China in air power with more advanced aircraft and airbases along the LAC. China's J-10 fighter is technically comparable to India's Mirage-2000, and the Indian Su-30MKI is superior to all theatre Chinese fighters, including the additional J-11 and Su-27 models. China possesses around 101 4th-generation fighters and India 122 in the theatre. India's fighter aircrafts are all directed exclusively against China, whereas China must preserve a quotient for a potential Russian offence.

Further, India has fought more wars than China over the past 45 years. China fought her last war against Vietnam in 1979, while India has fought several wars against Pakistan over the years and won all of them, and has also faced a relentless proxy war mounted by Pakistan. India's forces are, consequently, much more battle hardened and have a better familiarity with the terrain because of their protracted conflict with terrorists and insurgents in multiple theatres.<sup>12</sup>

India's defence preparedness and force structure have also more recently been developed to tackle the dual-threat from China and Pakistan. To deter a potential Chinese attack, Indian force preparedness has concentrated on infrastructure

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12 Frank O'Donnell and Alexander K. Bollfrass, "The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide", Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, March 2020, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/strategic-postures-china-and-india-visual-guide>; "How India military stacks up vis-a-vis Chinese defence forces," *Hindustan Times*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/how-india-military-stacks-up-vis-a-vis-chinese-defence-forces/story-OHXDNM1X3al4DBSohTgZRI.html>.

hardening; base resilience; improved air and maritime defence; and redundant command, control, and communications systems.<sup>13</sup> China, on the other hand, has been almost exclusively engaged with perceived security threats from the US in the South China Sea.

China's aggression against India in the Himalayan border region is also seen as Beijing's strategy to divert New Delhi's attention and resources from the Indian Ocean. Over the past two decades, India has significantly focused on building its capabilities in the Indian Ocean and has emerged as a major Indo-Pacific power. Under "Look East" and "Act East", India has augmented its defence and naval capability in the Indian Ocean and engaged China-wary countries under strategic partnerships with strong military overtones, making it difficult for China to unilaterally map the future of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>14</sup>

India's navy is strategically well located on a number of choke points from where a large number of commercial ships traverse. The Indian Navy has acquired a sufficient capacity to efficiently track and prevent the movement of PLA Navy ships and submarines across these choke points into the Indian Ocean. In recent years, India has concentrated on developing its Maritime Domain Knowledge and enhancing its Anti-Submarine Warfare capabilities in all three dimensions (air, land and underwater), to deter China's naval attempt to enter the Indian Ocean.

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13 Daniel Kliman, et. al., "Imbalance of Power: India's Military Choices in an Era of Strategic Competition with China", Center for a New American Security, October 23, 2019, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/imbalance-of-power>.

14 For details, see Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future*, Monash University Press, Melbourne, 2020; David Brewster, *India as an Asia-Pacific Power*, Routledge, London, 2011.

India's ambitious project to build six nuclear-powered attack submarines, currently under construction, is expected to be a force multiplier for the Indian naval capability to tackle China's naval build-up and increasing military assertion in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which is strategically significant to throttle Chinese ships at the strategically important Strait of Malacca.<sup>15</sup> A large number of Chinese ships carrying goods and oil from Latin America, Africa, and the Persian Gulf traverse through the Indian Ocean. In case of a full-fledged war, the Indian navy is well-placed to cut this supply chain at various choke points in the Indian Ocean, on the shipping lanes running between the straits of Hormuz and Straits of Malacca. This scenario has been a major concern for China, not only due to commercial reasons but also as a major hurdle to Beijing's intent of dominating the Indo-Pacific region.

China, under its 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), has been taking steps to blunt India's strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean. To this end, China has built and is further developing the Gwadar Port in Pakistan's Balochistan province, from where goods and oil will be transported to China through a 1,872 kilometre-long rail line as a part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by linking Kashgar in China with the Gwadar Port.<sup>16</sup> China is also opening the Northern Sea Route in the Arctic, which could create a 'Polar Silk Road' to blunt India's Indian Ocean advantage. Pakistan's Gwadar Port

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15 "India begins project to build 6 nuclear-power submarines", *The Hindu*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/policy/india-begins-project-to-build-6-nuclearpowered-submarines/article9979397.ece>.

16 "Pakistan approves \$7.2bn rail project", *Railway Technology*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.railway-technology.com/news/pakistan-approves-7-2bn-rail-project>.

remains vulnerable to Indian airstrikes, in the case of a full-scale India-China war, which would involve Pakistan as well on the Chinese side.<sup>17</sup> Though these are still under construction and the pipeline is not at full operating capacity, China's policy is clear – that it, too, has a strong foothold in the region, and will blunt and encircle India.

China's naval presence, moreover, has been growing rapidly, which would enable it to project power into the Indian Ocean. According to some experts the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will have 110 submarines by 2030 and world dominance by mid-century.<sup>18</sup> China views the choke points in the Indian Ocean as strategically and commercially important and has been investing and engaging countries, particularly island nations in the Indian Ocean, under its 'Belt and Road Initiative.' This includes the development of commercial ports, airports, and bases, which India views as China's attempt to encircle India.

But the Strait of Malacca will remain a bottleneck between China's home waters and the Indian Ocean. India through a series of initiatives has not only engaged these island nations on a commercial, diplomatic and strategic front, but has focused strongly on building naval defence in the Indian Ocean. China values the Indian Ocean and any move by India could disrupt its massive trade route. Though China's naval presence in the South China Sea is strong, it is the Indian Navy, which is

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17 H.I. Sutton, "Could The Indian Navy Strangle China's Lifeline In The Malacca Strait?", *Forbes*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/07/08/could-the-indian-navy-strangle-chinas-lifeline-in-the-malacca-strait/?sh=62cac21078e8>.

18 James E. Fanell, "China's global Navy eyeing sea control by 2030, superiority by 2049", *Sunday Guardian*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/chinas-global-navy-eyeing-sea-control-2030-superiority-2049>.

powerful in the Indian Ocean and has a strategic advantage. The latest Chinese attack on Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley is an attempt to divert India's attention from the Indian Ocean.

Nevertheless, this is not new and China has been pursuing this strategy for a long time. China's backing of Pakistan on all fronts and the China-Pakistan All-Weather Friendship, which goes back to the 1960s, has been aimed to engage India on the north-western front and constrain India in South Asia.<sup>19</sup> The Chinese design to use Pakistan as a front for waging asymmetric war against India goes back to the 1950s, when Zhou Enlai advised Ayub Khan that Pakistan should organise itself for a prolonged battle by raising a military to act behind enemy lines. Much later, Pakistan raised and nurtured *jihadis*, indoctrinated youths in the region with *jihadi* ideology, and started planting armed modules in India in 1992-93. Since then, Pakistan has been using these tactics by masterminding and carrying out terrorist attacks along India's north-western bordering region and in the main cities of India. China is Pakistan's main arms supplier, selling advanced fighter aircraft, supplying missile development capability, upgrading Pakistani submarines, and jointly producing the Joint Strike Fighter-17 aircraft. The Trans-Karakoram Highway, vital for commercial and strategic purposes, connects the northern areas of Pakistan to the Xinjiang Province in China.<sup>20</sup> Chinese support to Pakistan is a key aspect of China's strategy of preventing or delaying India's ability to challenge Beijing's growing presence in the

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19 J.N. Dixit, *India-Pakistan in War and Peace*, Routledge, New York, 2006; "China, Pakistan reaffirm all-weather friendship," *China Daily*, May 18, 2011, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-05/18/content\\_12535978.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-05/18/content_12535978.htm).

20 This is revealed in a book authored by a Pakistani national and published in Karachi in 2000; P.C. Katoch, "China: A Threat or Challenge", *CLAWS Journal*, Summer, 2010, pp.79-91.

Indian Ocean and beyond.<sup>21</sup> While supporting Pakistan, China has put aside the international laws and norms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as evident in the export of nuclear reactors and technologies to Pakistan. China justifies its action on the ground of strategic reason, including the US-India nuclear deal that made a nuclear exception for India.<sup>22</sup> China's military and economic support to Pakistan are part of the its India encirclement strategy.

Terror networks in Pakistan have been one of the strategic balancing moves to keep engage India on the north-western frontier. China has protected the Pakistani terrorist network by using its veto power at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The resolution to designate some of the terrorists in Pakistan at the United Nations have been blocked by China at the UNSC. This has increased dramatically over the past couple of years.

### **REVIVAL OF THE US-CHINA STRATEGIC RIVALRY AND GREAT GAME**

In the Galwan Valley clash, 20 Indian soldiers died as they were taken off guard and outnumbered by the Chinese *actus reus*. In the clash, a primitive brawl, Chinese troops outnumbered Indian troops and used nail-studded metal rods and stones. While India's casualties were known, China hid its casualties, but these were estimated at 43 fatalities by

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21 Mohan Guruswamy, "Pakistan-China Relations: Higher than the Mountains, Deeper than the Oceans", *CLAWS Journal*, Summer, 2010, pp. 92-107.

22 Ashok Sharma, *India's Pursuit of Energy Security: Domestic Measures, Foreign Policy and Geopolitics*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2019; Mark Hibbs, "Pakistan Deal Signals China's Growing Nuclear Assertiveness," Carnegie Endowment, April 27, 2010, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=40685>.

media outlets, and 35 confirmed by US intelligence. Chinese state media claimed that hiding the number of deaths would help prevent further escalation of tension.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese army confirmed only one casualty of their Commander, but there were reports of protests in China by the families of deceased Chinese soldiers, and demands to recognise their martyrdom. Finally, nine months later, China officially confirmed the death of four soldiers in February 2021. This is not surprising, as China is known for hiding such deaths, be the casualties during the 1962 India-China War, the drought in 1959-61, or the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

According to some reports, the hiding of the casualties during the Galwan Valley clash has been attributed to the internal challenges that the Chinese President Xi Jinping was facing at home. The attack on India and hiding of casualties was to divert the attention of the Chinese citizen to cover his leadership's problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, handling of the outbreak and the trajectory of the worst decline

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23 James Oaten, "China, India blame each other for border clash as death toll remains unknown", *ABC News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-18/china-india-blame-clash-casualties-pledge-to-end-border-standoff/12367952>; "35 Chinese soldiers dead in Galwan Valley clash: US intelligence sources", *WION*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/35-chinese-soldiers-dead-in-galwan-valley-clash-us-intelligence-sources-306447>; Aadil Brar, "What Are Chinese Saying About the Deadly Sino-Indian Border clash?", *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/what-are-chinese-saying-about-the-deadly-sino-indian-border-clash/>.

24 Mayank Singh, "India lost 20 jawans but killed more than 40 Chinese soldiers: Union Minister VK Singh", *The New Indian Express*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/jun/21/more-than-40-chinese-pla-soldiers-were-killed-in-galwan-valley-clash-says-union-minister-vk-singh-2159457.html>; Vaclav Smil, "China's great famine: 40 years later," *BMJ*, Volume 319, Number 7225, 1999, pp.1619–1621.



of the Chinese economy.<sup>25</sup> The death reports would have only worsened his problems. However, there has been no solid report of any leadership challenge to Jinping.

The latest Chinese aggression against India needs, in fact, to be seen against the backdrop of the simmering great power rivalry and the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region, which escalated during the COVID-19 outbreak. The disease has already infected more than 194,962,145<sup>26</sup> people, killed nearly 4,178,291<sup>27</sup> and pushed the world into the worst financial crisis since the Great Economic Depression of the inter-war period. The disease originated in the Chinese province of Wuhan, but China suppressed evidence of the severity of the outbreak and its human-to-human transmission, manipulated the World Health Organisation (WHO), and engaged in spreading disinformation. The world began to take note of China's actions and the US and its allies demanded an impartial inquiry into the origin of the disease. But China stonewalled the demand, instead, resorting to medical aid diplomacy to project itself as a saviour. At the same time, Beijing began to exploit the humanitarian crisis for its geopolitical ends, evident in the stripping of Hong Kong's autonomous status through a draconian security law, flaunting its military powers against Vietnam, Japan, and the Philippines in the South China Sea, the imposition of tariffs against Australia for Canberra's demand for an impartial inquiry into the origins of the pandemic, the standoff on the Indo-Tibet border, and finally the attack against India.

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25 Tom Mitchell, "What Xi knew: pressure builds on China's leader", *Financial Times*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/3a294233-6983-428c-b74b-3cc58c713eb8>.

26 "COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic", *Worldmeter*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

27 Ibid.

In recent years, China's ambition for world dominance has accelerated under Xi Jinping's leadership and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to spread its model of authoritarianism. Through its 'One Belt One Road' initiatives, China's sights are set on the entire world, with a strong emphasis on the Indo-Pacific. During COVID-19, China sensed an opportunity to dislodge US primacy in the Indo-Pacific, and the US considered this a serious threat to its strategic interests, and its proclaimed values of a free and democratic world. The US ramped up its assault on CCP tyranny and became more engaging amidst the COVID-19 geopolitics to balance China. The then US President Donald Trump and then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticised China's authoritarianism and military aggression. In the G7 meeting, the member nations – the US, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan – lamented China's misinformation on the severity of the outbreak. Trump and Pompeo used the "China Virus" phrase for the disease and criticised Chinese authority for disinformation, propagating conspiracy theories, and medical aid diplomacy to project itself as a white hat.<sup>28</sup>

During the outbreak, the imperative to balance China's assertiveness and to fix the global supply chain which the world had, by default, allowed China to control, became more obvious than ever.<sup>29</sup> India's growing military and economic capabilities

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28 Ashok Sharma, "Great Power Politics in the Post-COVID-19 World", *Australian Outlook*, April 1, 2020, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/great-power-politics-in-the-post-covid-19-world/>; "Pompeo says G7 agrees China spreading virus 'disinformation'", *France 24*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200325-pompeo-says-g7-agrees-china-spreading-virus-disinformation>.

29 Raghendra Jha and Ashok Sharma, "India's Pharmaceutical Industry: Global Supply Chain and Governance in the Post- COVID-19 World", ASARC Working Paper, May 2020, pp.1-29, <https://acde.crawford.anu.edu.au/publication/asarc-working-papers/16743/indias-pharmaceutical-industry-global-supply-chain-and>.

have been seen as a credible strategic counterbalance to China in the Indo-Pacific, and India is, potentially, the only country that could match China's manufacturing scale. China's assault on Indian troops in the Galwan Valley and military assertion along the LAC are Beijing's direct message to the world and to its adversaries that India is not a match for China, and that Beijing would not tolerate any resistance to its geopolitical ambitions.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the US and China have been locked in great power rivalry. China's growing economic power has enabled it to assert itself militarily. The US sees the Chinese threat looming large and over the past two decades, successive US administrations have focused on building strong ties with India as a part of a China containment strategy. The US balancing act began to take shape under President George W. Bush's Grand Strategy and President Barack Obama's Re-Balancing Act in the Asia-Pacific. The Trump administration, in continuity with this strategy, changed the name of the US oldest and largest Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command, emphasizing and continuing India's strategic significance in US foreign policy.<sup>30</sup> The United States' strategic moves to balance China included a strong strategic partnership with India, which began to take shape under the George W. Bush administration. The US-India Ten Year Defence Agreement and the US-India Nuclear Deal were the two landmark developments in the deepening US-India strategic partnership, which China viewed as a hurdle to its agenda of expansionism, and as a US-backed strategy of containment, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. China

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30 Idrees Ali, "In symbolic nod to India, U.S. Pacific Command changes name", *Reuters*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-india/in-symbolic-nod-to-india-us-pacific-command-changes-name-idUSKCN11V2Q2>.

tried to disrupt the passing of the US-India nuclear deal by aligning with nuclear *ayatollahs* and with Pakistani lobbying in the US Congress, to block the nuclear agreement under the international nuclear regime.<sup>31</sup>

Amidst the revival of the simmering US-China strategic rivalry, the US-India strategic partnership acquired immense tactical significance and witnessed the strongest bonding. Just before the COVID-19 outbreak, President Trump's India visit in February 2020 elevated the US-India strategic partnership to the US-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. India's comprehensive strategic partnership with the US has very strong defence and military overtones – with no vagueness on balancing China – reflected in the US occupying the top slot as the defence supplier to India with a range of high-tech weapons, joint military drills, and intelligence sharing. India conducted the maximum number of military exercises with the US as compared to any other country in the world.<sup>32</sup> The US-India partnership is a comprehensive force-multiplier and its strategic significance increased when the rules-based order and stability of the Indo-Pacific were seriously being challenged by China, particularly as this became evident amidst the COVID-19 geopolitics. In the fight between US democratic values and Chinese authoritarianism, the US-India strategic partnership has acquired further significance, as both continue to emphasise their shared democratic commitment.

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31 Ashok Sharma, *Indian Lobbying and its Influence in the US Decision Making: Post-Cold War*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2017.

32 For detail on India-US strategic partnership, see Ashok Sharma, *Indian lobbying and its Influence in US Decision Making: Post-Cold War*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2017; Ashok Sharma, "US-India Defence Industry Collaborations: Trends, Challenges and Prospects," *Maritime Affairs*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 2013, pp. 129-147; Ashok Sharma, "Counter-terrorism Cooperation in the Indo-US Strategic Framework," *India Quarterly*, Volume 68, Number 4, 2013, pp. 315-30.

Besides, China's geopolitical ambitions have been obstructed by the converging strategic interests of the maritime democracies of which India is a major player, strongly supported by the US. The Quad, of which India is a member, has emerged as another powerful US-backed containment strategy. The Quad emerged in the wake of the Tsunami disaster, with the navies of four countries – the US, Japan, Australia, and India – conducting the Malabar exercise in 2007. India, for the first time, joined the multi-nation US security alliance. The Quad went backstage after China protested that it was a US-backed China containment arrangement.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, in the wake of the Chinese military expansion in the Indo-Pacific, the Quad re-emerged in November 2017. Recently, in the wake of Chinese aggression, the Quad has been extended to include South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand, under the nomenclature of Quad-Plus.<sup>34</sup> Further, the Quad is now no longer confined to ministerial and official level meetings, but Australia also joined the Quad drills in November 2020 and, for the first time, a Quad summit-level meeting took place in March 2021.

Moreover, India's closer strategic engagement with China-wary democratic nations in the region, especially Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore, and the evolution of strategic ties with US allies, mainly Australia, Japan, and South Korea, in the region, are significant elements of an Indo-Pacific strategy. During the COVID-19 crisis, India's ties with Australia moved towards a formidable defence partnership, and this accelerated during the skirmishes with the Chinese

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33 Ashok Sharma, "Quadrilateral Initiatives: An Evaluation", *South Asian Survey*, Volume 17, Issue 2, 2012, pp. 237-253.

34 Derek Grossman, "Don't Get Too Excited, 'Quad Plus' Meetings Won't Cover China", *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/dont-get-too-excited-quad-plus-meetings-wont-cover-china/>.

along the LAC. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, during their virtual meeting concluded defence agreements on Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and the Defence Science and Technology Implementing Arrangement.<sup>35</sup> These strategic alignments have received significant backing from the US, which aggravated already tense China-India relations.

Some strategic moves during the India-China LAC standoff are noticeable. In the wake of the Chinese aggression against India and the US allies in South East Asia, a clear message was sent out on China's belligerence against India and there was no ambiguity on US support to India. New Delhi was also invited to the G7 meeting; the US moved a significant number of troops from the European theatre to the Indo-Pacific; the US-India 2+2 dialogue was initiated; and the US open and unambiguous support for India was explicitly articulated, further strengthening the mutual trust and confidence between the two nations. The current US administration under President Joe Biden has, moreover, unambiguously declared that the US values its strategic allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, and would protect the free and rules-based order among them. Beijing is set to face a more challenging future under President Joe Biden, a foreign affairs veteran who promises to restore US global leadership.

These strategic issues will further crystallize with the emerging need of shifting the global supply chain. COVID-19

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35 R. Thakur and A. Sharma, "India in Australia's Strategic Framing in the Indo-Pacific," *Strategic Analysis*, Volume 42, Issue 2, 2018, pp. 69-83; "Australian Government, Joint Statement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Republic of India and Australia", Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/Pages/joint-statement-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-between-republic-india-and-australia>.

will prompt the US and the Western world, especially the industrialised nations of G7, to manage their supply chains to mitigate over-reliance on China, shifting instead to the developing countries with manufacturing capabilities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In this context, India, considered to be the only country with the potential to match China's manufacturing scale, is going to be important. The Modi government has focused on the manufacturing sector through the "Make in India" initiatives.<sup>36</sup> A noticeable development amidst the outbreak, India, the world's largest producer and exporter of generic medicine, has emerged as the largest producer and supplier of the COVID-19 vaccine and has outstripped China on vaccine diplomacy. These are trends that will exacerbate India-China competition and strategic tension, as any effort to diversify supply chains from China will be aggressively countered by Beijing.

## CONCLUSION

China's actions during COVID-19 have exposed China's peaceful rise and benign power argument. In addition, China's military aggression and intimidating trade policy have exposed its geopolitical intent and predatory trade policy. The Galwan Valley conflict has jolted India's delusion with China of imagined togetherness in the so-called Asian Century, a Nehruvian legacy that continues to haunt till date. India has no option but to respond to China's aggression and China's "Free India Economic Ride". India will look to provide an open, trusted and transparent alternative to the global supply chain and cooperate with like-minded nations to deter China's aggression.

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36 R. Jha, "Modinomics: Design, Implementation, Outcomes, and Prospects", *Asian Economic Policy Review*, Volume 14, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 24-41.

In India, there was a strong protest against China and the demand for curbs on Chinese investment. China's predatory trade policy and the balance of trade, with a trade deficit of around USD 55 billion heavily tilted in favour of China, are also under scrutiny.<sup>37</sup> The Indian Government has banned some Chinese products and taken steps to restrict Chinese investments in India, putting on hold large Chinese projects and blocking new contracts with the Chinese firms. In June 2020, after the Galwan Valley incident, India banned 59 Chinese apps and Chinese investment in highway projects.<sup>38</sup> India-China trade as usual is not going to continue and this will hit China the most. This has been made obvious from China's state media editorials which argue that India must not let the border scuffle fray economic relations with China.<sup>39</sup>

China's repeated violation of the LAC requires a revision of all possible options and mechanisms to reduce the tension and further standoffs. The frequency of military and diplomatic level talks, consultations, negotiations to reduce any prevailing confusion and to fix the ill-defined border, need to be constantly pursued. The dis-engagement and pulling back of troops from

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37 "China may have found a way to keep India in the dark over trade deficit", *The Economic Times*, April 15, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/china-may-have-found-a-way-to-keep-india-in-the-dark-over-trade-deficit/articleshow/68884958.cms>.

38 Samrat Sharma, "Maharashtra puts Chinese deals on hold, Yogi Adityanath's UP takes tough stand on imports from China", *Financial Express*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/maharashtra-puts-chinese-deals-on-hold-yogi-adityanaths-up-takes-tough-stand-on-imports-from-china/1999333/>; "India bars Chinese companies from highway projects", *Asia Times Financial*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.asiatimesfinancial.com/india-bars-chinese-companies-from-highway-projects>.

39 Li Hong, "India must not let border scuffle fray economic relations with China", *Global Times*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192317.shtml>.



both sides will temporarily ease border tensions. However, in the past, too, standoffs and disengagements between both nations have taken place and it is unlikely that China abide by the disengagement agreement.

The deadly clash in the Galwan Valley has intensified the already tense, competitive and conflicting Sino-Indian relations, and the possibility of more standoffs cannot be escaped. Both China and India are aware of the danger of full-fledged war and its disastrous consequences. Unlike 1962, both are nuclear-weapon states. Notwithstanding nuclear deterrence, the two Asian giants remain vulnerable to border skirmishes, standoffs and, in the worst case, war. In the Post-COVID-19 world, India-China relations will be intense and competitive, further fed by US-China great power geopolitics, competition for the same resources and markets, and the struggle for international clout and the pursuit of great power status.

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