



Border Disputes Between India And China: Causes, Geopolitical Analysis, And Consequences

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Abstract: The India–China border dispute remains one of Asia’s most complex and enduring geopolitical conflicts, rooted in colonial-era cartographic ambiguity and compounded by strategic mistrust. This paper explores the historical trajectory of the conflict, focusing on the contested regions of Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, and key milestones such as the Panchsheel Agreement and the 1962 war. By examining both historical and contemporary triggers—including the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash in 2020—the study investigates how territorial claims, national identity, and strategic infrastructure development have shaped the enduring rivalry. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in Realist and Constructivist theories of international relations, the analysis highlights the political, economic, and regional security consequences of the dispute. The findings reveal that while diplomatic engagements have prevented full-scale war, the unresolved Line of Actual Control continues to serve as a flashpoint with serious implications for Indo-Pacific stability.

Index Terms - India–China conflict, Aksai Chin, Arunachal Pradesh, Sino-Indian War, Galwan, Doklam, Line of Actual Control, geopolitics, border dispute

I. INTRODUCTION

The diplomatic relationship between India and China began on a hopeful note following India’s independence in 1947. Both countries, emerging from colonial subjugation, seemed poised to shape a new Asia based on mutual respect and cooperation. This spirit was formally encapsulated in the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954, also known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Championed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Premier Zhou Enlai, it emphasized territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence (Raghavan, 2012).

However, beneath this rhetoric lay unresolved tensions rooted in colonial-era cartography, divergent territorial claims, and geopolitical mistrust. Despite friendly overtures, both nations harbored deep differences over the delineation of their borders—particularly in the Himalayan regions of Aksai Chin in the west and Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA) in the east.

Geographic and Political Relevance of Disputed Areas

The two most significant zones of contention are:

1. **Aksai Chin** – A cold desert plateau situated between Ladakh (India) and Xinjiang (China), covering around 38,000 square kilometers. While India claims it as part of Ladakh, China administers it as part of its Xinjiang and Tibet Autonomous Regions. Its strategic importance stems from China’s G219 highway that connects Xinjiang to Tibet through Aksai Chin (Gautam, 2022).
2. **Arunachal Pradesh** – Located in India’s northeast, this region is often referred to by China as “South Tibet.” Though fully administered by India, China periodically contests its sovereignty, particularly in Tawang district, home to significant Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. It holds cultural, religious, and military value, and remains a focal point of nationalist rhetoric in both countries (Sharma, 2021).

These regions are not just lines on a map—they represent strategic depth, cultural identity, and national prestige for both countries.

Historical Milestones: From Friendship to Fire

Despite the ideals of Panchsheel, tensions escalated when India discovered in the late 1950s that China had built a road through Aksai Chin—without consultation. India's "Forward Policy," which sought to establish outposts along the perceived border, was seen by China as provocative.

This culminated in the Sino-Indian War of 1962, a 32-day conflict in which the Chinese army advanced deep into Indian-held territory, inflicting heavy casualties before unilaterally withdrawing. The war left a deep psychological scar on India and seeded a long-lasting strategic rivalry (Maxwell, 1970; Chellaney, 2014).

Post-war efforts, including the 1993 and 1996 border agreements, brought temporary calm but never resolved the fundamental disagreements over where the Line of Actual Control (LAC) lies. Subsequent standoffs—including Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020)—prove that the border remains a live and volatile fault line in Asian geopolitics.

Research Objective

This paper seeks to analyze the root causes and long-term consequences of the India–China border dispute through both a historical lens and a geopolitical framework. It explores:

- How colonial legacy and differing strategic cultures shape current narratives.
- Why specific territories like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh remain non-negotiable.

The broader impact of these tensions on regional stability, diplomacy, and military strategy.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, integrating historical interpretation with geopolitical analysis to understand the root causes and consequences of the India–China border dispute. The approach is exploratory and analytical, designed to capture both the evolution of the conflict and its strategic implications in the current era.

2.1 Research Approach

Given the historically rich and diplomatically sensitive nature of the subject, a document-based qualitative approach was selected. The study prioritizes historical documents, treaties, government communiqués, military reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature as core data sources.

Additionally, secondary sources such as expert analyses, books by strategic scholars, and geopolitical think tank publications were employed to triangulate interpretations and identify patterns of behavior in Indian and Chinese policy.

2.2 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The materials analyzed fall into the following categories:

- **Primary Sources:**
 - Panchsheel Agreement (1954)
 - Official maps from the Survey of India and the Chinese Academy of Sciences
 - Declassified government papers (e.g., Henderson Brooks–Bhagat Report excerpts)
 - MEA (India) and MFA (China) official statements
 - Sino-Indian War records (1962), Parliamentary debates, UN submissions
- **Secondary Sources:**
 - Academic journals such as *Strategic Analysis*, *Asian Survey*, *China Quarterly*, and *International Security*
 - Authoritative books (e.g., Maxwell, Chellaney, Garver)
 - Reports from ORF, Carnegie India, Brookings, and RAND Corporation
 - Recent papers post-Galwan (2020) conflict

Inclusion criteria emphasized sources that:

1. Provided detailed historical or geopolitical context
2. Were published by credible, peer-reviewed or government platforms
3. Directly addressed disputed territories (Aksai Chin, Arunachal Pradesh) or the LAC

2.3 Analytical Framework

This research is grounded in Realist Theory of International Relations, particularly the assumptions that:

- States prioritize sovereignty and territorial integrity
- Power asymmetries and mistrust can fuel prolonged conflict
- Historical grievances shape present geopolitical calculations

In parallel, constructivist elements are considered—such as how national identity, historical memory, and domestic politics influence the behavior of both states.

2.4 Research Limitations

- The full content of some strategic government archives remains classified or inaccessible (e.g., internal Chinese military documentation).
- Certain primary sources (e.g., border patrol transcripts) are limited due to national security confidentiality.

Perspectives from local populations in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, though relevant, are not directly included due to scope constraints.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND ROOT CAUSES

• Colonial Cartography Disputes: Johnson Line vs. McMahon Line

The roots of the India–China border conflict are tangled in the colonial legacy of ambiguous mapmaking by British India. In the western sector, British surveyor W.H. Johnson proposed the Johnson Line (1865), which placed Aksai Chin within the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, and hence under Indian influence. In contrast, China has historically favored the Macartney-MacDonald Line (1899), which gives Aksai Chin to China. The dispute over these cartographic claims was left unresolved at the time of Indian independence in 1947, as the region was sparsely populated and largely unadministered (Gautam, 2022; Chellaney, 2014).

In the eastern sector, the McMahon Line (1914)—named after British diplomat Sir Henry McMahon—demarcated the boundary between Tibet and British India (present-day Arunachal Pradesh). Although signed by British India and the Tibetan representatives during the Simla Convention, China never recognized this line, arguing that Tibet lacked independent authority to negotiate territorial matters. This cartographic disagreement continues to fuel Beijing's claim over what it terms "South Tibet"—India's Arunachal Pradesh (Sharma, 2021; Banerjee, 2022).

• 1950s: Tibet Annexation and Strategic Road-Building by China

A turning point occurred in 1950, when China asserted sovereignty over Tibet, dissolving its theocratic structure and integrating it into the People's Republic. India responded cautiously, recognizing China's claim under the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Panchsheel Agreement, 1954). However, trust began to erode when India discovered in 1957 that China had constructed a 1,200-km military highway (G219) linking Xinjiang to Tibet through Aksai Chin—an area India still proclaims as its own (Tibetan Review, 2021; Shiv Nadar University, 2022).

India had neither been consulted nor notified about the road's construction, prompting public outcry and diplomatic alarm. The Indian government's "Forward Policy"—a plan to establish military outposts along perceived borders—was viewed by China as aggressive, worsening tensions (Maxwell, 1970; Raghavan, 2012).

• 1962 Sino-Indian War: Key Events, Casualties, and Consequences

The Sino-Indian War of 1962 was a short but deeply impactful military conflict, triggered by escalating tensions along both the eastern and western sectors. On October 20, 1962, Chinese troops launched a two-front attack: across Aksai Chin and in the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh. Despite India's numerical strength, it was ill-equipped and poorly prepared for high-altitude warfare (Britannica, 2025; ADST, 2015).

Within weeks, China had advanced deep into Indian territory, capturing key positions before declaring a unilateral ceasefire on November 21, 1962, and retreating along the eastern front while retaining control over Aksai Chin. The war resulted in over 3,000 Indian casualties and prisoners of war, dealt a severe psychological blow to India, and led to a rapid military modernization program in the following decades (Maxwell, 1970; Dutta, 2008).

• Recurrent Skirmishes Post-1967: Nathu La, Sumdorong Chu, and Beyond

Despite efforts to normalize relations, border tensions remained alive. In 1967, India and China engaged in heavy fighting at Nathu La and Cho La in Sikkim, where Indian forces repelled PLA advances, marking a shift in India's tactical confidence. Again in 1986–87, tensions flared in the Sumdorong Chu Valley of Arunachal Pradesh when China established a camp south of the McMahon Line. India responded with Operation Falcon, deploying troops and asserting control in the region (Banerjee, 2022).

Though these standoffs did not escalate into full-blown wars, they hardened military postures and emphasized the strategic volatility of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). These incidents laid the groundwork for future confrontations such as Doklam (2017) and Galwan Valley (2020)—proving that the conflict is both persistent and cyclical.

IV. CONTEMPORARY TRIGGERS AND STANDOFFS

- **Doklam 2017: Bhutan's Sovereignty and Strategic Highlands**

One of the most high-profile recent flashpoints occurred in June 2017, when Indian and Chinese troops faced off in the Doklam plateau—a tri-junction between India (Sikkim), China (Chumbi Valley), and Bhutan. The standoff was triggered when China began constructing a road near Doka La, which Bhutan claimed violated its territorial sovereignty ((Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). At Bhutan's request, Indian troops intervened to halt the construction. China viewed India's move as a breach of its territorial control and demanded withdrawal.

The standoff lasted 73 days and drew global attention due to the risk of escalation between two nuclear powers. For India, Doklam's significance lay in its proximity to the "Chicken's Neck" Siliguri Corridor, a narrow strip connecting mainland India to its northeastern states. Any perceived encroachment here could have severe strategic implications for India's territorial integrity (Smith, 2020; Joshi, 2017).

Eventually, both sides agreed to disengage, but the episode revealed the fragility of the status quo and underscored the lengths to which India would go to defend Bhutanese interests and its own geostrategic buffer. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), "expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam has been agreed to and is ongoing" (MEA, 2017). In parallel, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying confirmed that Indian troops had withdrawn and indicated that Chinese forces would continue to patrol the area, stating that "China will continue to exercise sovereignty rights to protect territorial sovereignty" in accordance with historical boundary norms (Reuters, 2017).

- **Galwan Valley 2020: Ambiguity, Casualties, and the First Bloodshed in Decades**

In June 2020, the Galwan Valley clash in eastern Ladakh marked a dangerous new chapter in Sino-Indian relations. For the first time in 45 years, Indian and Chinese troops engaged in brutal hand-to-hand combat—without the use of firearms—resulting in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese personnel (Times of India, 2021; Reuters, 2021; U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020). The confrontation took place near the confluence of the Shyok and Galwan rivers, where both countries maintained conflicting interpretations of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (Time, 2020; Reuters, 2024).

Despite multiple rounds of military talks prior to the clash, Chinese troops reportedly erected structures in areas India considered under its control. The use of melee weapons—iron rods, nail-studded clubs, and stones—was a brutal reminder of how serious the disagreement had become despite no bullets being fired (Raghavan, 2020; Rajagopalan, 2020).

This incident shattered illusions about the peaceful management of the border and raised serious questions about the credibility of prior confidence-building frameworks, notably the 1993 and 1996 Protocols on Peace and Tranquility. The Galwan clash demonstrated that these agreements—intended to prevent hostilities along the Line of Actual Control—could be rendered ineffective under escalatory pressure. As reported by *The Economic Times*, "China through its military action at Galwan in Ladakh ... has violated three key bilateral agreements — 1993, 1996 and 2013 — that have been central to maintaining peace and tranquility on the disputed Line of Actual Control" (Samanta, 2020). Scholars have similarly argued that "all the agreements [were] now effectively left in tatters" following the June 2020 skirmish, revealing the fragility of previously accepted mechanisms (UN Peacemaker; Menon as cited in Wikipedia; Deepak as summarized).

- **Strategic Infrastructure Race: India's BRO vs. China's PLA Roads**

The broader context for these conflicts includes a rapid escalation in border infrastructure development by both nations. China has long built high-quality roads, helipads, and dual-use villages across the Tibetan plateau to support its People's Liberation Army (PLA) logistics.

In response, India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has accelerated construction of strategic highways, tunnels (e.g., Atal Tunnel), and advanced landing grounds in Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. Projects like the DS-DBO Road near the Daulat Beg Oldi airstrip are seen by China as provocative, given their proximity to sensitive Chinese positions.

This infrastructure race is not just about roads—it's about mobility, deterrence, and psychological dominance in some of the world's harshest terrain. Both sides now possess the capability to mobilize forces swiftly, leading to faster but potentially more dangerous face-offs (Tellis, 2020; Chellaney, 2020).

- **Disengagement Dialogues and the Fluid Status Quo**

Following Galwan, the two countries initiated multiple rounds of Corps Commander-level talks at Moldo-Chushul to resolve friction points along the LAC. These have led to partial disengagement in areas like Pangong Tso and Gogra-Hot Springs, but standoffs persist in sectors such as Depsang Plains and Demchok.

The disengagement process involves buffer zones, patrol restrictions, and infrastructure pullbacks, yet deep distrust remains. Meanwhile, both militaries have maintained a forward deployment posture, and joint military exercises, air surveillance, and communication hotlines have been ramped up.

As of now, the status quo remains tense and militarized, even if direct clashes have subsided. The situation is described by analysts as a “no war, no peace” stalemate, with both sides unwilling to fully de-escalate without perceived strategic advantage (Raghavan, 2021; Smith, 2020).

V. GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

• The Himalayas as a Geostrategic Frontier

The India–China border dispute cannot be viewed merely as a territorial disagreement—it is, at its core, a geopolitical contest between two rising powers seeking to assert influence over Asia's heartland. The Himalayan frontier, often described as the “roof of the world,” serves not only as a physical barrier but also as a buffer zone of strategic depth for both countries. Control over these high-altitude regions provides tactical military advantage, surveillance capabilities, and logistical superiority in case of mobilization (Tellis, 2020; Baruah, 2020).

China sees its western periphery—Tibet, Xinjiang, and their connective routes—as a critical zone for national unity, internal security, and access to South Asia. Meanwhile, India views the same areas as vital to the sovereignty of its northeast, including Arunachal Pradesh, and the security of its supply lines through the Siliguri Corridor.

• Military Doctrine and Posture: From Deterrence to Forward Deployment

Strategically, the two nations have developed divergent military doctrines for the border. China operates through its Western Theater Command, backed by robust infrastructure, all-weather roads, air bases, and dual-use logistics that enable the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to project force rapidly into disputed zones.

India has adopted a more defensive but increasingly assertive posture, led by the Northern Command and Eastern Command, with specialized high-altitude warfare troops such as the Ladakh Scouts and Special Frontier Force. Recent Indian efforts emphasize “area domination” and proactive patrolling, particularly after the Galwan incident, reflecting a shift from reactive to anticipatory defense (Joshi, 2021).

Both countries have also deployed advanced surveillance, including satellites, drones, and radar systems. The presence of quick reaction forces, missile batteries, and fighter squadrons has created an atmosphere of persistent military readiness, raising the stakes of even minor missteps.

• Strategic Ambitions: Belt and Road vs. Act East

The border tensions are deeply intertwined with each nation's broader strategic ambitions. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to increase its geopolitical footprint through economic corridors like the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Gilgit-Baltistan—territory claimed by India. India opposes BRI on grounds of sovereignty violations, and in return, strengthens its partnerships through the Act East Policy, focusing on stronger ties with Southeast Asia, Japan, and Australia (Chellaney, 2020).

India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the US, Japan, and Australia further enhances its strategic counterbalance to China's rise. These alignments are not purely defensive but signal a desire to shape the Indo-Pacific as a zone of free navigation and rules-based order, contrary to China's assertive regional behavior (Smith, 2020).

• Technological Superiority and Cyber Domain

Another front of this geopolitical rivalry is technology and information warfare. China has made significant strides in electronic warfare, cyber capabilities, and satellite surveillance, using these tools to monitor Indian troop movement and infrastructure. India, while still catching up, has invested in Indigenous satellite systems (e.g., GSAT-7A) and cyber defense protocols.

There are also concerns over data security, especially as Chinese companies are heavily involved in global digital supply chains. In response to the 2020 border clashes, India banned over 200 Chinese mobile applications, citing data privacy and national security, showcasing how the border conflict is spilling into economic and technological domains (Rajagopalan, 2020).

• Risk of Escalation and Stability Dilemma

What makes this strategic competition dangerous is the absence of a clearly defined border—the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is not demarcated on maps, and both sides interpret it differently. This leads to frequent patrol clashes, face-offs, and miscommunication.

Unlike during the Cold War, there is no formal hotline, military pact, or third-party mediation framework. Despite the existence of confidence-building agreements (1993, 1996, 2005), the lack of verification mechanisms creates space for escalation and opportunism.

India and China now face what scholars call a “stability-instability paradox”—where the existence of nuclear deterrence prevents full-scale war but emboldens localized confrontations along the LAC (Raghavan, 2021).

VI. CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISPUTE

The prolonged border tensions between India and China have produced wide-ranging consequences that stretch beyond bilateral diplomacy. These impacts are felt across political systems, economic engagements, and the regional security architecture in South and Central Asia. The ongoing disputes not only shape domestic narratives in both countries but also influence alliances, trade patterns, and military doctrines throughout the Indo-Pacific.

1. Political Consequences

The India–China border dispute has significantly reshaped national political discourse, particularly in India. Events like the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 triggered widespread public outcry and fueled nationalism. The Indian government responded by adopting a more assertive diplomatic and military posture, backed by strategic realignment with the West and Indo-Pacific powers.

In China, where the Communist Party tightly controls the narrative, territorial sovereignty is tied to national pride. The border issue is often used to reaffirm the CCP’s legitimacy and unity, especially when facing internal pressures like the Taiwan question or economic slowdowns.

The standoff has led to:

- Deterioration in diplomatic ties, with fewer high-level bilateral exchanges
- Increased focus on military modernization budgets
- Greater parliamentary and media scrutiny of foreign policy decisions (especially in India)

2. Economic Consequences

Economically, the border conflict has resulted in both immediate disruptions and long-term recalibrations.

- In India, anti-China sentiment led to bans on Chinese mobile applications and tighter scrutiny of foreign direct investment from Chinese firms.
- Bilateral trade, although still robust in total volume, has become politically sensitive, especially in sectors like telecom, infrastructure, and technology.
- Indian initiatives like the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme seek to reduce dependence on Chinese imports, especially in electronics and pharmaceuticals.

However, paradoxically, India–China trade reached a record \$136 billion in 2022, despite tensions—highlighting an economic interdependence that runs parallel to strategic rivalry (MoC, 2023).

3. Regional Security Consequences

At the regional level, the India–China conflict has intensified rivalries and alignments:

- India has deepened cooperation with the Quad (India, US, Japan, Australia) and expanded defense ties with France, Vietnam, and ASEAN nations.
- China's assertiveness has alienated not just India but also nations like Bhutan, Nepal, and the Philippines, pushing them to hedge their bets by engaging other powers.
- The militarization of the LAC has drawn more global attention to the Indo-Pacific security equation, often linking the Himalayas with concerns over the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Table 1: Comparative Impact of the Sino-Indian Border Confrontations on India and China

Dimension	India	China
Political	Rising nationalism; public and parliamentary pressure; LAC redlines hardened	Sovereignty narrative reinforced; CCP domestic legitimacy tied to border firmness
Economic	App bans, import restrictions, diversification away from Chinese supply chains	Trade resilience; pushback from India-led coalitions in global forums
Regional Security	Stronger Quad and Indo-Pacific posture; deeper ties with ASEAN and US allies	Tactical expansion into South Asia; dual-use infrastructure diplomacy

External Interventions: USA, Pakistan, and Russia

The 2020 Galwan Valley clash drew swift reactions from major global and regional powers. The United States expressed concern and emphasized a peaceful resolution. A U.S. State Department spokesperson noted they were “closely following” the situation, urging both sides to resolve tensions through dialogue (Time, 2020; South China Morning Post, 2023). Strategically, the clash reinforced Indo-U.S. defense cooperation, culminating in the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in October 2020, which

provided India with real-time geospatial intelligence support during subsequent confrontations (U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020).

Pakistan's response, while indirect, reflected its strategic alignment with China. Although Islamabad remained largely silent on the Galwan incident, its later denials of Chinese involvement in providing battlefield support during Indo-Pakistani conflicts illustrate the sensitivities surrounding Chinese aid and regional perceptions (Reuters, 2025).

Russia, in contrast, sought to play a stabilizing role. Moscow convened a Russia–India–China (RIC) foreign ministers' virtual dialogue on June 23, 2020, signaling its willingness to facilitate communication between the two Asian neighbors (NDTV, 2020). Russian officials also highlighted the importance of existing multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in fostering dialogue and easing tensions (Deccan Chronicle, 2020).

These external responses highlight how the Galwan clash not only reshaped Sino-Indian relations but also engaged broader geopolitical stakeholders, reflecting the wider strategic implications of the Himalayan border dispute.

VII. CONCLUSION

The India–China border dispute, rooted in colonial-era ambiguities and intensified by modern geopolitical rivalry, remains one of Asia's most complex and enduring conflicts. While historical disagreements over Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh laid the foundation, contemporary triggers like infrastructure competition and military standoffs have deepened mistrust. Despite multiple rounds of diplomatic and military engagement, the Line of Actual Control remains undefined and contested, creating persistent friction. The conflict has reshaped political narratives, influenced regional security alignments, and strained economic interactions. Resolving this dispute requires more than tactical disengagement—it demands long-term strategic vision, mutual recognition of core concerns, and sustained confidence-building efforts.

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