

Bad Moon Rising Over the Himalayas: Nuclear-armed China and India Fight with Stones and Clubs

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Introduction

Albert Einstein famously said he did not know the weapons to be used in World War III, but he did know that the war after “will be fought with [sticks and stones](#).” The point of that was to warn of the catastrophic destructive power of nuclear weapons. Yet in an already surreal corona-hued 2020, we have witnessed two nuclear-armed neighbours fighting with fists, rocks and clubs at an altitude of 4,250 metres. On June 15, 20 Indian soldiers were killed and 66 injured. Chinese casualties have not been revealed by Beijing but Indian estimates put them at around 40 killed, according to cabinet minister and former army chief General (ret’d) [V.K. Singh](#). Each side blames the other for the deadly clash. China’s media is state controlled but India’s too is noisily jingoistic. The Modi government’s propensity to bluster and to impugn the patriotism of anyone asking critical or sceptical questions does not inspire confidence in its narrative significantly more than in China’s official narrative. As retired [Lt.-Gen. H.S. Panag](#) puts it: “It is beyond my comprehension as to why we are still in denial about the situation ... there is a simple solution to counter claims of PLA [People’s Liberation Army] incursions – take the press to these spots in helicopters and show them the reality.” India does not seem to have learnt anything from its [abysmal global public diplomacy](#) in the clash with Pakistan in February 2019.

With these caveats in mind, what happened; why; and what does it mean going forward?

What

The contested 3,488km China–India border is the world’s longest undemarcated boundary. In the western sector, India claims 38,000km² of territory in Aksai Chin that was once part of the independent princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. India also claims another 5,180km² of Kashmir ceded to China by Pakistan in 1963. In the eastern sector, Beijing claims around 90,000km² of territory comprising the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh which China calls “Southern Tibet.”

Strategic realities intersect with the border disputes. The title [Line of Actual Control](#) (LAC) is misleading, for there is no line and only limited control by either side. China’s approach to the border dispute is described by Yun Sun, director of the China programme at the Stimson Center, as driven by “[Three Nos](#): No Indian posts, No demarcation of the LAC, and No hurry.” Beijing has little incentive to push for a quick resolution. Its priority is crisis management and escalation prevention, meanwhile keeping India tied down locally in the subcontinent.

Compounding the problems is the reality of terrain and weather: snowfalls, rockslides and melting can make it literally impossible to say just where the LAC is. Constructions boost sovereignty claims and also upgrade military-grade infrastructure in strategic areas but can provoke incidents between patrols and crews from the two sides, each convinced it is still firmly on its own side of the LAC.

Previous skirmishes were localised incidents. The confrontations this time took place at several points and look like they were directed from Beijing. What was different in Galwan was the scale and size of the Chinese troops, the simultaneous incidents in three separate locations (Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso in Ladakh and Naku La near Sikkim), the intrusions into areas that previously were not under dispute, and, most importantly, the casualties, making it the deadliest clash since 1967. These features mean that the manoeuvre was carefully plotted at the highest military and political levels. China follows a familiar salami-slicing playbook in territorial disputes: change ground positions stealthily, move forward assertively, express outrage when discovered, denounce provocations and intrusions by the other party, threaten economic and military retaliation, step back in “good faith,” propose a summit and fresh border management procedures, ensure its own territorial creep becomes a de facto reality, and repeat the cycle in following years.

Tensions had been escalating since April, after China’s encroachment of thousands of troops, artillery and vehicles into disputed territory along the LAC and setting up camps. In May, reports began to circulate in Indian media that Chinese forces had put up tents, dug trenches and moved heavy equipment several kilometres on India’s side of the LAC. Based on four bilateral agreements in 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2013 to maintain peace and tranquility on the border, the two sides had established protocols for these patrols: no use of firearms, and whenever rival patrols met, they would unfurl banners claiming ownership of the territory and ask the other side to withdraw. On May 5, 250 Indian and Chinese soldiers clashed at Pangong Tso, a lake that straddles the LAC in Ladakh, followed by another skirmish involving 150 soldiers on May 9 at Naku La on the Sikkim-Tibet border. On June 6, the senior

military commanders agreed to a mutual disengagement. Commanders from the two sides met again on June 13 and each side agreed to retreat back two kilometres from the LAC.

[India's foreign ministry](#) said China “took premeditated and planned action that was directly responsible for the resulting violence and casualties.” Following weeks of intrusions into the Indian side of the LAC, Chinese soldiers built a tent on the Indian side, dammed a river, moved heavy equipment and ambushed an Indian patrol with stones and batons studded with nails and wrapped in barbed wire. When India's 16 Bihar Regiment, led by Col. Santosh Babu, challenged the Chinese refusal to retreat, they were ambushed by PLA forces on the steep mountain precipice. According to [an account by Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Lily Kuo](#) in *The Guardian* on June 20, the Chinese unblocked the dammed river and the rushing water destabilised Indian soldiers, who were then attacked with stones and spiked weapons. With reinforcements on both sides, over 600 soldiers fought hand-to-hand combat in the dark and icy conditions for four to seven hours.

Why

The short answer is that with both countries constructing infrastructure and conducting patrols along a long, often inaccessible, disputed and unmarked border to bolster sovereignty claims, periodic encounters are inevitable and a deadly clash was only a matter of time. The absence of fatalities for 45 years is a tribute to good sense on both sides but the failure to demarcate the contested LAC over six decades is deeply irresponsible.

India's military position is considerably better today than in 1962 and indeed part of China's motivation may have been to check India's modernisation of border troops and infrastructure, something that Beijing has done for decades and which now “[dovetails with China's Belt and Road Initiative](#).” Consequently, Beijing enjoys some ‘first mover’ advantages. With upgraded roads and the world's highest airstrip (5,065 metres) at Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), India can move reinforcements quickly as needed. China's Highway 219 that links Buddhist-majority Tibet and Muslim-majority Xinjiang—China's two ultra-sensitive “ethnic frontiers”—passes through India-claimed territory along the LAC. Indian troops at the DBO airfield can look down on the Karakoram Highway linking China and Pakistan. The 1,000km-long arc of pressure from DBO to Naku La may be designed to test India's military preparedness and political resolve and also send a message to India's regional neighbours and global partners.

According to an article in [The Strategist](#), analysis of satellite imagery “strongly suggests” PLA forces “have been regularly crossing into Indian territory temporarily on routine patrol routes.” The 255km Darbuk-Shyok-DBO all-weather road took 20 years to build and “the PLA's advances into the Galwan River Valley provide a superior vantage point for observing a supply route used by the Indian Army to reach its northernmost base, and the world's most elevated airfield, Daulat Beg Oldi.” The DBO sits just below the majestic Karakoram Pass linking Aksai Chin and Xinjiang to Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

India's “internal” rearrangements of the [constitutional status of Kashmir](#) last August and assumption of [direct responsibility for Ladakh](#) connect China's strategic interests in controlling Aksai Chin to Pakistan's in retaining control of its share of Kashmir. The transport

connectivity to DBO shrinks China's logistical superiority and the proximity to the Karakoram Pass opens up a vulnerability for the strategic highway linking Xinjiang with Pakistan. Conversely, at the tri-nation confluence in Ladakh, China and Pakistan can launch pincer movements to dislodge India from the Siachen Glacier. On the larger geopolitical canvas, the growing convergence of strategic outlooks of India with the US, Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific [Quad](#) is slowly putting in place structures and arrangements to check China's power projection capability across the vast maritime space. India's early and forceful opposition to the flagship Belt and Road Initiative was irksome to Beijing and has been reinforced by Australian, Japanese and US resistance to President Xi Jinping's vanity project.

Alarm has also grown in Indian strategic circles at China's advances around India's perimeter with generous assistance from New Delhi's own myopic approach to dealings with neighbours. In a Brookings paper, [Joshua White](#) argues that China's expanding engagements with a growing naval presence and the risk of "debt-trap diplomacy" could confer significant military advantages to conduct non-combat activities to protect Chinese citizens and investments, gather intelligence, engage in coercive diplomacy and conduct combat operations to neutralise US and Indian assets in an armed conflict.

Beijing has also found itself on the sustained defensive over its responsibility for the global spread of the coronavirus and all Quad countries were clear in their calls for accountability through a credible international inquiry. China's moves in Ladakh fit into a pattern of diplomatic, military, trade and "[wolf warrior](#)" aggressive postures in East Asia against Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan, in the South China Sea against Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, in the Indo-Pacific against Australia and Indonesia, and globally against European and US criticisms and decoupling measures. China's leadership may have concluded that the US is in terminal decline, the US imperium is receding and the time is ripe to act decisively to create new facts on the ground (and on water) while the West is reeling from the coronavirus pandemic. Xi seems less constrained by the fear of looking like a bully and more confident that China's economic power will force regional governments to accommodate to China.

What next?

Modi and his base have been strong advocates of chest-thumping nationalism and a muscular approach to neighbours. The unnecessary [changes to the citizenship law](#) needlessly irritated Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The neglect of Nepal gave space for Beijing to court Kathmandu and now India is embroiled in a cartographic war with Nepal. China's GDP is five times that of India and its defence expenditure is four times as much. [Debashis Basu](#) courageously (in the current environment) but correctly notes that the chauvinistic, anti-China narrative is a political tactic to deflect attention from the failure to make India economically strong. India's poverty and weakness is the result of the incompetent, corrupt and self-serving political-bureaucratic elite reflected in a "terrible education system, creaking health care, abysmal productivity, and weak innovation." Modi's neglect of urgently needed economic and governance reforms, lack of diplomatic finesse, love of travel to glamorous global destinations and gala events, obsession with destabilising state governments ruled by opposition parties, and tacit encouragement of Hindu bigotry have torn apart India's social fabric, crashed what was the world's fastest growing major economy, and paved the

path to China's encirclement of the subcontinent through courtship of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Modi has visited China nine times, five as PM, and invested substantial personal equity in building relations with Xi. Vainglorious and thin-skinned like first PM Jawaharlal Nehru, Modi will be desperate to avoid Galwan becoming his China epitaph like the 1962 war was Nehru's. Seduced by style, optics and social media messaging and susceptible to flattery from sycophants, Modi has [sidelined his foreign ministers](#) and dismissed the idea that he could learn from professional diplomats despite having two in his cabinet. Galwan is his watershed moment. India's strategic and economic policy choices will henceforth have a sharper anti-China tinge. In that sense June 15 will mark the date on which China finally "[lost India](#)" strategically, says Gautam Bambawale, former ambassador to China.

Weaker than China economically and militarily, India cannot reverse China's territorial advances by resorting to a shooting war. But quietly acquiescing to Chinese expansion would embolden Beijing to nibble at yet more Indian territory and diminish India in the region and the world. India played down the initial border incidents to avoid a nationalist backlash, while scrambling to supply reinforcements and engaging the Chinese in discussions. China used the confusion to annex about 60km² of Indian territory without firing a shot. Denying the loss of territory to China would effectively endorse the Chinese position.

China's state media has given the clash relatively low-key coverage, suggesting that [Beijing wishes to avoid being trapped](#) by inflamed public opinion. By contrast, the incident has dominated news coverage in India and piled pressure on Modi to push back harder against Beijing. Henceforth India will likely downgrade the cooperative elements of its China relationship and strengthen the competitive elements. India may have to clear away the intellectual-cum-sentimental cobwebs, shed strategic lassitude and the hesitations of history, and commit to modernising its military as an instrument of an assertive foreign policy. As [Raja Mohan](#) notes: "While India never stopped arguing with the West, China developed a sustained engagement with the US, Europe and Japan."

Modi must make some hard decisions about switching focus back to sustained high economic growth, accelerating military modernisation and construction of facilities in Andaman and Nicobar as a formidable tri-service base, and consolidating security arrangements and dialogues with Indo-Pacific friends and the US, starting with reinvigorated commitment to the "Quad Plus" that includes Indonesia, Vietnam, South Korea and Singapore. Already influential voices are being raised for the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangements—between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US—to be expanded to include [Japan](#) and [India](#). Asia is a congested and contested geopolitical space in which Australia, India and Japan are consequential middle power players. Caught between an increasingly assertive and bellicose China and a US that grows more unpredictable and less reliable by the month, Australia, India, Japan and others are having to "[thread the needle](#)" of a fraught future for the Indo-Pacific amidst the collapsing pillars of the liberal international order.

Modi cannot afford to be seen as a regional and global walkover. The otherwise nationalist and protectionist Modi reached out to China, celebrating its leader, ignored its serial provocations, and tolerated the trade deficit growing to \$60 billion. The stock explanation from Indian officials and ministers about the initial incidents was that this is about “differing perceptions of the LAC.” This only emboldened the Chinese to take greater liberties. If it wants to pay China in the same coin, India will need to identify and exploit multiple military, economic and diplomatic pressure points along the long border and across the Indo-Pacific. According to the online daily [The Print](#), the rules of engagement at LAC have been changed already, and the Chinese have been told about it both at military and diplomatic levels. “The Army commander on the ground will decide on the tactics to be used to counter any kind of aggression.” This is high-risk irresponsibility. As former Foreign Secretary [Shyam Saran](#) has argued, it is “an abdication of political responsibility and opens the door to future crises in the India-China relations and in other possible conflict situations.”

Against the backdrop of Trump’s unilateralism and erratic behaviour, the presence of strong middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region acts as a stabilising and reassuring force. The security and economic strengths and weaknesses of Australia, India and Japan overlap with respect to manpower, professionalism, technological sophistication, air-sea gaps, intelligence sources and analyses, etc. Australia and India signed a Mutual Logistics Support Agreement at the [virtual summit](#) between Modi and PM Scott Morrison on June 4. This will permit their militaries to use each other’s bases, supply lines and refuelling and maintenance facilities and should be particularly valuable for maritime activities. Morrison is due to sign a similar [reciprocal access agreement](#) with Japan’s PM Shinzo Abe in July. Handled right, deepening trilateral relations can be a “[factor of stability](#)” for the Indo-Pacific region and the world. In addition, the Quad countries should discuss with European friends a concerted establishment of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. As [I argued in The Times of India on September 17, 2007](#), the shunning of Taiwan—a prosperous and vibrant democracy with a population directly comparable to Australia’s—in a craven appeasement of Beijing’s bullying has been one the biggest global scandals of our time. India should also abandon appeasement of China on Tibet.

No evidence exists to suggest that Modi understands the need and urgency to reorient India’s economy from domestic demand to export-driven. China’s \$2tn annual exports are worth 19% of its GDP, compared to India’s \$345bn at 14% of GDP. Like China and the US, India too will be required to learn how to weaponise economic and trade policy. The April decision to subject Chinese investments to extra layers of vetting could be reinforced with additional barriers to bilateral commerce. The Indian market is the largest that China could have hoped for to compensate its setbacks in Europe and North America. For example, on June 29 India announced a [ban on 59 apps with Chinese links](#), including popular social media apps TikTok and WeChat. With 611 million downloads representing almost one-third of the video-platform’s worldwide base, India is the largest market in the world for TikTok, followed by China (with a different brand name) and the US. Chinese companies are unlikely to get many Indian public or private sector contracts and Huawei’s prospects of capturing India’s 5G market have dimmed considerably.

The US and many others have begun decoupling from China owing to geopolitical tensions and the desire to diversify supply chains in the wake of the corona crisis. China may thus

have reached the political limits of an export-based economy. India is the most obvious and best-placed country to replace China as the world's low-cost supplier but because Modi frittered away his massive two mandates on cultural and religious nationalism, India has missed the opportunity to preposition itself through the necessary economic and governance reforms.

The BBC reported on June 26 that satellite imagery showed [China had built new structures](#)—bunkers, tents and storage units for military hardware—over the past month on heights from which they look down on the Galwan Valley where the clash took place. China, India and the world should settle in for a long and hot summer of action and diplomacy with many more edgy moments on the icy heights of the majestic Himalayas. For, as former ambassador to China (2017–18) Gautam Bambawale puts it in a [refreshingly forthright article](#), “If China has thrown down the gauntlet, India has picked it up.” Months of angry skirmishes along the LAC could lead to more accidental deaths but also a serious escalation of hostilities.

In the six years that he has been in office so far, Modi has frittered away the powerful mandates of two massive electoral victories on cultural and religious nationalism, destabilisation of opposition-ruled state governments, and attention-seeking globetrotting. Judged on results, without urgent course corrections, Modi may well end up being the most successful politician but the worst prime minister in independent India's history. He has another four years left in his second term during which to abandon the divisive Hindutva agenda and turn attention back to promoting social cohesion, implementing the necessary economic and governance reforms and restoring India's mana.

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