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China's Coercive Tactics on the Line of Actual Control: Incident Analysis along the India-China LAC

**Vivek Sehgal
Ashu Mann**

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

China's Coercive Tactics on the Line of Actual Control: Incident Analysis along the India-China LAC

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China's Coercive Tactics on the Line of Actual Control: Incident Analysis along the India-China LAC

“The belief that a balance of resolve drives outcome, more so than balance of power, is the foundation of China's newfound assertiveness”.

— *Oriana Skylar Mastro*

Abstract

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China, spanning approximately 3,488 kilometres of undelineated and undemarcated Himalayan frontier, has emerged in the post-2020 period as one of the most militarised bilateral boundaries in Asia. This paper examines the pattern, drivers, and strategic logic of Chinese coercive activity along the LAC by combining a transgression analysis for the period 2006–2020, comparing official Government of India data with incidents reported in the national press, with a comparative examination of eight major incidents: Nathu La and Cho La (1967), Tulung La (1975), Sumdorong Chu (1986), Depsang (2013), Chumar (2014), Burtse (2015), Doklam (2017), and Eastern Ladakh (2020).

Three broad findings emerge. First, transgressions and standoffs have risen appreciably since 2010, tracking the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) forward basing, improved cross-border connectivity, and the establishment of the Western Theatre

Command. Second, while the immediate triggers have been diverse- fencing, patrolling, road construction, or the establishment of observation posts- the underlying drivers appear consistently strategic, encompassing sensitivity to the Chumbi Valley, Aksai Chin, the security of Tibet and Xinjiang, the revocation of Article 370, and the perceived tilt in the operational balance in India's favour. Third, incidents have functioned less as accidents than as instruments of coercive signalling, frequently timed to serve wider political and diplomatic objectives; the 2020 Eastern Ladakh crisis marks a decisive transition from the "peace and tranquillity" framework of the 1990s to one of armed coexistence.

The paper concludes that where India has combined firmness on the ground with sustained diplomacy, as at Nathu La, Sumdorong Chu, and Doklam, Chinese attempts at a *fait accompli* have generally been rebuffed, whereas passivity has invited pressure. Absent genuine clarification of the LAC, credible deterrence, anchored in matching infrastructure, continuous surveillance, and calibrated statecraft, is likely to remain the principal basis for stability along the frontier.

Introduction

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China stands as the most complex and volatile undemarcated boundary in the modern world. Spanning approximately 3,488 kilometres across the rugged terrain of the Himalayas, the LAC is not merely a geographic divider but a live manifestation of the shifting power dynamics between two of the world's most populous nations (Singh, 2020). For over seven decades, this nebulous frontier has transitioned through phases of war, localised skirmishes, and systemic militarisation. The contemporary situation along the LAC, particularly following the 2020 Eastern Ladakh crisis, represents a fundamental shift in the bilateral relationship, moving from a

framework of "peace and tranquillity" established in the 1990s to an era of "armed coexistence" defined by high-altitude tactical friction and an exhaustive infrastructure arms race. The evolution of the LAC is intrinsically linked to the broader strategic visions of New Delhi and Beijing. For India, the LAC represents the protection of territorial integrity and the maintenance of a sovereign perimeter against an assertive neighbour. For China, the LAC is a tool of strategic leverage, used to manage its periphery and to signal its dominance in the Asian hierarchy.

The dynamic nature of the LAC due to it being undelineated and undemarcated has led to several incidents of a violent nature since 1955. This very nature of the LAC often leads to intrusions, transgressions (mostly by the People's Liberation Army [PLA]), and incidents. While most incidents have been small and have been resolved at the local level, there are some that have turned into skirmishes/clashes, often leading to long standoffs requiring diplomatic and military manoeuvres. The Galwan valley clashes in 2020, and the ensuing standoffs at various places in Eastern Ladakh are a case in point. These skirmishes and standoffs have always been initiated by the PLA with different goals such as testing India's resolve to defend its territory, operationalising the "salami-slicing" tactics, using them as coercive leverage over the wider bilateral relationship, and to slow, deter, or contest India's growing border infrastructure. While China's main aim has always been to use border incidents to impose a *fait accompli* on India, one thing stands out. Whenever India has stood its ground and faced China, it has always been able to reverse China's actions, as seen in Nathu La/Cho La in 1967 or Eastern Ladakh in 2020. Therefore, it is pertinent to study and analyse these incidents at the LAC for a better evaluation of PLA's actions and how to deter them.

This paper starts with a transgression analysis at the LAC by doing a comparative analysis of government data and

transgressions reported in the media. The transgression analysis covers the period between 2006 and 2020 due to the availability of government data up to that time period only. Then the study goes on to do incident analysis of major incidents at the LAC such as *Nathu La/Cho La (1967)*, *Tulung La (1975)*, *Sumdorong Chu (1986)*, *Depsang, Raki Nala (2013)*, *Chumar (2014)*, *Burtse (2015)*, *Doklam (2017)*, and *Eastern Ladakh (2020)*.

Line of Actual Control (LAC) and Incident Analysis

“In trans-border relations, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies or even permanent borders. There are only permanent interests, and everything should be done to secure these interests.”

—Chanakya

LAC – Genesis

The LAC was first mentioned in November 1959 by Zhou Enlai in a letter to the then Indian Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru. He



wrote that “In order to maintain effectively the status quo of the border between the two countries, to ensure the tranquillity of the border regions and to create a favourable atmosphere for a friendly settlement of the boundary question, the Chinese Government proposes that the armed forces of China and India each

withdraw 20 kilometres at once from the so-called McMahon Line in the east, and from the line up to which each side exercises actual control in the west^a.” However, this proposal was rejected by the Indian government because, since 1956, China had slowly crept westward into Indian territory in Aksai Chin and, by September 1962, faced Indian outposts running from Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) to Pangong Tso (Dr. P.B. SINHA, Col. A . A . ATHALE, 1992). Consequent to the 1962 war, the Chinese ingress into Indian territory is as shown on the map (the October 1962 line). This line has since become known as the 1959 claim line (claimed by China as LAC). For the Indian government, however, the LAC was aligned along Haji Langar, Shamal Lungpa, and Kongka La. It needs to be mentioned that the Chinese claim lines have never been static and have changed according to China's power dynamics and the leverage it had in negotiations. Even during the talks between the two countries in 1960, the Chinese advanced their claims further westwards in Indian territory, including Galwan and Demchok.

The term Line of Actual Control (LAC) was formally recognised in the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA) (MEA, 1993). The Agreement avoided the aspect of differing connotations of the LAC of 1959, 1960 or 1962 by referring to the LAC as ‘existing at the time of signing the Agreement.’

The commitment by both parties to maintain minimal military presence in the areas along the LAC is a fundamental component

a India, C. N. M. M. (n.d.). *Premier Chou En-Lai's letter to Prime Minister Nehru*. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/india/sino-india-boundary-question/ch04.htm>

Note: The map above has been taken from the document titled “Chinese Aggression in Maps”. It can be accessed at <https://www.claudearpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/1963-Chinese-Agression-in-Maps.pdf>.

of the 1993 BPTA and the Agreement for Confidence Building Measures in the Military Fields signed in 1996.

These agreements also require that the two sides strictly respect and observe the LAC until the boundary issue is resolved. India and China further committed to clarifying and confirming the LAC in these agreements to arrive at a shared understanding of the alignment. As a result, the two parties worked to validate and clarify the LAC starting in the late 1990s and continuing until 2003. However, the Chinese side did not indicate that they were willing to continue with the LAC clarification process after that. Moreover, the process was fraught due to a Chinese desire to exaggerate claims. Thus, there are specific areas in which the perception of LAC held by the Chinese and the Indians do not coincide. However, it was felt that the negotiation of various treaties post-1993 could keep the LAC calm until the border resolution takes place.

It would be prudent to mention here that during the discussions between the two Prime Ministers in April-May 1960, the Chinese proposed settling the boundary dispute. This involved an acceptance of a renegotiated McMahon Line (as the Chinese were averse to accepting any treaty negotiated by imperial powers) in the east by the Chinese on the condition that India would accept their claim on the Western portion^b. This proposal was made by China during a period of internal instability (the Great Leap Forward and the desire to assimilate the recently annexed Tibet and Xinjiang provinces). The same was not acceptable to India. Deng Xiaoping once again made a similar proposal in the 1980s. It appears that the desire to offset vulnerability along its restive

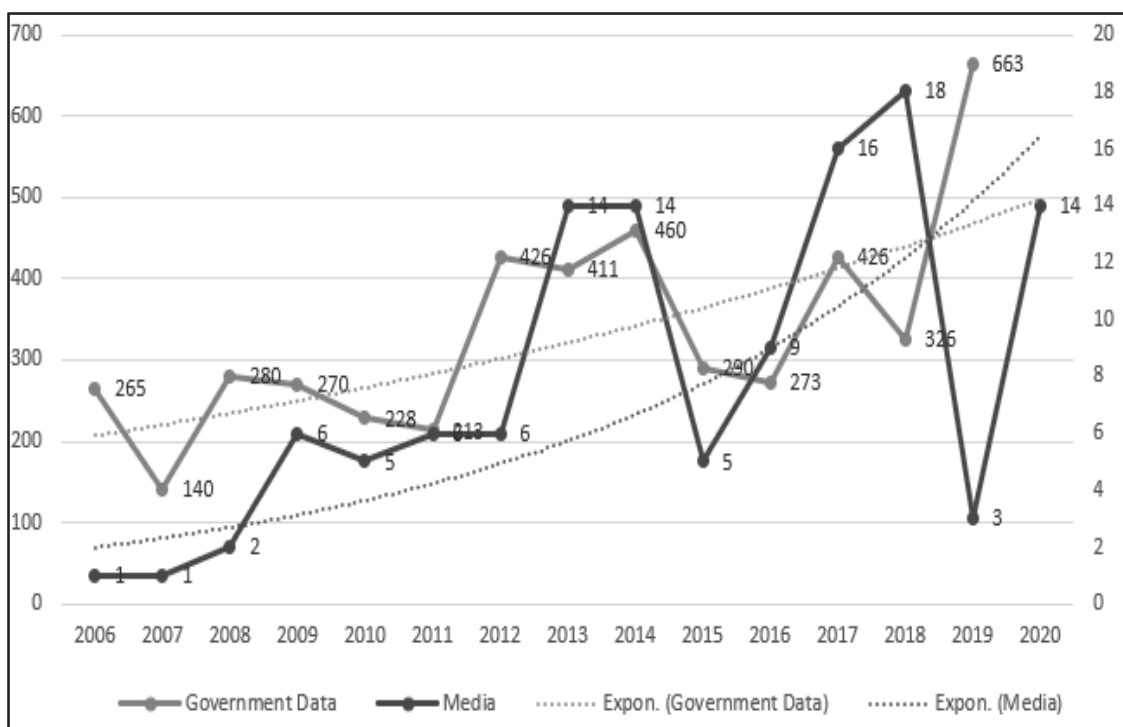
b Garver, J. W. (2001). **Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century**. University of Washington Press.

periphery was necessary to enable the institutionalisation of the reforms and opening up of the Chinese economy.

In a similar vein, the negotiations of the 1993 treaty for maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC and the 1996 treaty on confidence-building measures appear to have been accepted by the Chinese in their desire to ensure the border dispute does not become a hindrance to the necessity of continued impetus for economic growth, military modernisation and facilitating the development of consensus on global issues with India. A strategic imperative at the time, these protocols seem to have lost their relevance in present times of widening trust-deficit, an outcome of the increased Chinese aggression on India's Northern Borders.

Transgression Analysis

Two sets of data permeate the strategic discourse in all analyses of incidents along the LAC. One is the official government data, which tends to be much higher than the second, incidents reported in national dailies. The most logical reasoning for this discrepancy is that while the government figures list all incidents, including minor transgressions that get resolved at the local levels, the media reports more sensitive intrusions / clashes. The figures covering the period from 2006 to 2020 are appended in the line graph below:



Incursions per Year (2006 – 2020)

Note: Graph constructed by extrapolating official government data and media reports

While depicting peaks and troughs, an analysis of the same indicates a rising trend from 2010 onwards. This is further substantiated by the increase in major standoffs post-2013. Significant deductions that can be arrived at are:

- An increase in incidents over time.** An increase in infrastructure development by the Chinese resulted in forward basing by the PLA. Moreover, the improved connectivity to the border resulted in enhanced speed, strength, and frequency of PLA patrols. Though delayed, a desire to match the aggressive push by the Chinese has resulted in a fillip to Indian infrastructure development. This, coupled with an increased forward presence of troops, has resulted in a similar increase in patrolling on our side with a desire to ensure our writ to our perception of the LAC. Patrols of both sides coming face to face is the natural

outcome. However, while in most cases, the existing protocols have been able to resolve the issue amicably, the increasing instances of premeditated actions to deny access to the established patrol points is a source of concern and the reason behind the current volatile situation along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh.

- **Increasing belligerence resulting in stand offs since 2013.**

As a sequel to the articulation above, the increased impetus towards infrastructure development and orientation of the Indian Army towards a China threat post 2008 resulted in greater focus by the troops on the ground towards domination of the LAC. This has resulted in the Chinese perceiving a graduated shift in the advantageous balance existing along the LAC. In a similar vein, the establishment of the Western Theatre Command by China appears to have resulted in the command intensifying focus on the only volatile and contentious borders (India and Bhutan). The issue gains prominence when viewed in the context of the prevailing geostrategic environment (the containment theory, Indian engagement with the QUAD, the United States and countries in the Chinese periphery), which appears to have heightened the Chinese sensitivities, resulting in a more aggressive push to re-establish their dominance across the LAC.

- **More incidents in the Eastern Ladakh region.** Though the Chinese dispute the entire LAC, a greater impetus towards Eastern Ladakh appears to be in accord with their sensitivity towards Aksai Chin (connectivity and resources), accentuated due to the alignment of the new highway, G695. A probable reason also being touted for the increasing incidents in this region is the changed status of J&K.

- **Timing.** Incursions along the LAC have been generally restricted to the period between May and September. This appears to be in consonance with the dictates of weather. Moreover, the period is co-terminus with the yearly exercises undertaken by the PLA in the Tibet Autonomous Region, ensuring the ready availability of acclimatised formations as backup.
- The increased transgressions with incidences of face-offs are in contravention of the existing protocols and confidence-building measures in place. The resultant trust deficit further accentuates the desire towards an aggressive orientation along the LAC.

Changing Dynamics of Disputed Areas

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese claim lines have never been static and have continued to increase in accord with the prevailing power dynamics. In order to obviate the differing perceptions of the so-called November 1959 line, the BPTA of 1993 does not make a specific reference to any of the lines and instead proclaims the LAC as existing during the signing of the agreement. It is apparent that perceptual differences continue to persist and are taken advantage of in accord with the existing operational balance.

It would also be pertinent to mention that at the eighth meeting of the Joint Working Group (JWG) held in August 1995, both sides had agreed that "there were twelve areas where a difference of perception existed over the location of the LAC." The areas were Trig Heights near Daulet Beg Oldi, Demchok in the Western Sector; Shipki La, Kaurik, Barahoti, and Pulam Sumda in the Central Sector; and Namka Chu, Wangdung/Sumdorong Chu, Yangtse, Asaphi La, Longju, and Dichu in the Eastern Sector (Joshi, 2022). Additionally, the Joint Working Group also identified eight

disputed areas (mutually accepted as disputed) along the proposed LAC (Gokhale, 2022).

Over time, almost all of the above-mentioned areas have witnessed increased scuffles and intrusions, including standoffs. As a consequence of the May 2020 clashes, Galwan and Hot Springs have now joined the list of sensitive / disputed areas^c in the Western sector and Naku La (North Sikkim) in the Eastern sector. It needs to be mentioned that enhanced infrastructure development and force accretions along the LAC, with improved accessibility to the LAC is liable to result in the emergence of more sensitive areas. India needs to be on guard for such a development to ensure it is not surprised.

Incident Analysis

Changing Geopolitical Landscape

China has traditionally regarded India not as a rival but within the context of regional and global geopolitical shifts. Xuecheng Liu suggests that the Sino-Indian border disputes have involved various triangular security dynamics in Central Asia (Liu, 1994). Before 1945, this comprised a larger triangle of Britain, Russia, and China, and a smaller one involving British India, Tibet, and China. Post-PRC emergence, the larger triangle has included the United States, the Soviet Union (now Russia), and China, while the smaller one has featured China, India, and Pakistan.

Ambassador Vijay Gokhale similarly notes that since Mao's ascent to power and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's policy towards India has been influenced by

^c While Galwan was never accepted as mutually disputed, China's action in 2020 has led to them unilaterally terming it as disputed. Therefore, for India, Galwan is a sensitive area now.

its perception of the broader strategic triangle involving China, the Soviet Union (later Russia), and the United States (Gokhale, 2022). Over the past seventy years, China, driven by security and status concerns, has seen India as a regional competitor. Below is an overview of the evolution of India-China relations and Chinese designs:

Period	Situation	Design
1949 - 1962	US the prime Adversary	Keep India neutral
1962 – mid 1970s	- Deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations - Developing Indo-Soviet Ties - Internal instability due to Cultural Revolution - Sino-US rapprochement	- Counter India by building closing relationship with Pakistan and create rift in Indo-Soviet Relations. - Secure the periphery^d (Nathu La/Cho La to offset vulnerability to Chumbi Valley)
Mid 1970s – 1990	- Sino-Soviet split - Improved relations with the US	Re-establishment of diplomatic relations (1976)

-
- d During times of internal instability in China, the Chinese leadership often intensified efforts to assert control over peripheral regions. This strategy served to consolidate authority, project an image of strength domestically, and divert attention from internal challenges. By exerting control over these peripheral areas, China aimed to secure its borders, prevent potential threats to its authority, and maintain stability. This approach involved various tactics, including increased military presence and political coercion to ensure compliance from peripheral regions. However, such efforts could also lead to tensions with countries neighboring China. For reference, see Ashley J. Tellis (2000), *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past Present and Future*, Rand Corporation.

Period	Situation	Design
	• Internal political turmoil (post Mao) • Reforms and opening up (Deng)	• Border Talks (1981 onwards) Differing stance resulted in assertiveness in the east for leverage in the west (Sumdorong Chu Incident)^e.
Post-Cold War – mid 2000s	• Fears of a US endeavour at a regime change in China. • Necessity of a secure periphery for sustained economic growth.	• Negotiation of BPTA and CBMs along LAC. • Actively leveraging India's neighbouring countries to constrain its strategic space and confine its influence

- e Border negotiations between China and India commenced in December 1981. The initial four rounds of talks yielded no progress due to conflicting approaches put forth by both sides. India advocated for negotiations to proceed sector by sector, while China proposed a territorial exchange where India would gain sovereignty over the Eastern Sector (Arunachal Pradesh) in return for China retaining control over the Western sector (Aksai China). However, at the fifth round of negotiations in 1984, Beijing agreed to India's proposal for sector-by-sector discussions under the condition that the final agreement be comprehensive. During the sixth round of talks in November 1985, China unexpectedly presented a proposal to India, suggesting that New Delhi should make territorial concessions in the Eastern boundary sector, posing a significant hurdle to progress. Previous indications from China regarding a comprehensive border settlement had implied a territorial swap, confirming the British-established McMahon Line alignment in the east in exchange for India recognizing Chinese claims and control over Aksai Chin. For reference see, Ganguly, S. (1989). The Sino-Indian Border Talks, 1981-1989: A View from New Delhi. *Asian Survey*, 29(12), 1123–1135. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644760> and CIA (1987), China-India Border Tensions: Origins and Prospects, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP04T00907R000200530001-3.pdf>.

Period	Situation	Design
		within the subcontinent. Engaging India to project a unified front on contentious issues
Mid 2000s to 2013	- Period of high growth. - Improving Sino-US relations and evolving Sino-Russian friendship. - Global Financial Crisis.	- Increasing confidence in capability resulted in graduated debunking of Bide Time postulate of Deng^f. - Escalating tensions along the Line of Actual Control through accelerated infrastructure build-up and the augmentation of forward-deployed forces.
2013 onwards	A more assertive China.	Increased friction on the Sino-Indian Border.

^f The 2008 global financial crisis left China relatively unscathed, bolstering its confidence in its economic resilience and capability. This newfound confidence contributed to a gradual departure from Deng Xiaoping's "Bide Time" strategy, which had guided China's foreign policy for decades. In a notable departure from this strategy, Hu Jintao, then China's paramount leader, emphasized the need for proactive action, stating in a speech, "China needs to actively accomplish something." This shift in rhetoric underscored a broader trend within Chinese leadership circles towards a more assertive and proactive stance on the global stage, marking a departure from the previously cautious and reserved approach characteristic of Deng's era. For reference see, Doshi, R. (2019, January 22). Hu's to blame for China's foreign assertiveness? *Brookings*.

Period	Situation	Design
	• US backlash. • US wooing India as lynchpin in Indo-Pacific Strategy • Invigoration of QUAD	• Attempts at coercion to keep India away from an alignment with the US.

China has historically viewed India through the prism of its relationships with the Soviet Union and the United States. However, India's recent economic and influential growth signals the emergence of an alternative power centre in Asia, which challenges China's desire for hierarchical dominance based on the idea of the 'Middle or Central Kingdom (Lind, 2024).' Consequently, China's Cold War-era policy aimed at keeping India neutral has evolved into a post-Cold War strategy focused on containing and coercing India to prevent interference with China's strategic aim of hegemony.

The incidents being analysed below need to be viewed in the context of the prevailing geopolitical trends as established on the table above.

Nathu La/Cho La (1967)

Background (Nathu La) Nathu La (height 14,140 feet) is a mountain pass located on the India-China border in Sikkim, about 54 kilometres east of Gangtok, along the Jawaharlal Nehru Road. The clash at Nathu La (11 -13 Sep 1967) on what was then China's border with Sikkim, adjacent to the Chumbi Valley between Sikkim and Bhutan, was the first instance of a violent clash between the Indian Army and the PLA post the 1962 conflict. The area became a source of tension in 1965 when, in a desire to express support for Pakistan in the ongoing 1965 war, the Chinese demanded the vacation of strategic passes overlooking the Chumbi Valley,

including Nathu La (Thapliyal, 2018). However, India not only refused to vacate the pass; the hierarchy decided to lay a barbed wire fence on the pass as a demarcation measure. The Chinese objected to the same, and consequent to a refusal by the Indian side, the Chinese opened unprovoked fire on the exposed Indian troops, causing casualties, including the wounding of the commanding officer entrusted with the task. The consequent escalation to an artillery duel resulted in both sides suffering fatal casualties. However, the Indian Army was able to stall all PLA attempts to take control of the Nathu La Pass

Background (Cho La). The PLA being stymied in its designs to gain a foothold at Nathu La, made a fresh attempt at securing a foothold on the watershed at Cho La, a pass located four miles northwest of Nathu La. Here again, sentries from both sides were located in very close proximity. On 1 October 1967, a dispute occurred with respect to control over a boulder located along the boundary (in accord with the watershed principle) between the two sides. In the ensuing scuffle, a sentry on the Indian side was bayoneted, resulting in the Gorkha troops attacking the Chinese with Khukuris. This scuffle triggered a fight that escalated in both sides using mortars, heavy machine guns, and RCLs in a heavy exchange of fire. Here again, an aggressive Indian response resulted in the Chinese being repulsed and the status quo being retained.

Analysis

The Nathu La incident occurred in the backdrop of continued Chinese aggression. Emboldened by their prevailing in the 1962 war, the Chinese felt that an aggressive stance would result in the Indian Army backing down and vacating Nathu La as they desired. Moreover, the Indian force accretions since 1962 were a source of concern that further accentuated the already persisting

vulnerability in the Chumbi Valley. The trigger for the incident at Nathu La was India refusing to bend to Chinese dictates, protecting its territorial sovereignty, and scuttling Chinese attempts at salami slicing. At Cho La, the immediate trigger was the dispute and consequent scuffle between sentries over control of a boulder located along the watershed. However, the driver for these incidents can be attributed to a larger sensitivity towards the vulnerability of the Chumbi Valley due to the Indian Army presence along the watershed^g.

Tulung La (1975)

Background. In October 1975, a skirmish took place at the Tulung La pass when Chinese border troops shot at an Indian patrol from the Assam Rifles, killing four of the six members. India maintains that this ambush by the Chinese occurred 500 metres south of Tulung La on Indian soil. On the other hand, China denies this and accuses Indian troops of entering Chinese territory and triggering the skirmish. An Indian military officer who collected the bodies a week later expressed the belief that the deaths were not due to the shooting but rather to subsequent torture.

Analysis. Though the incident in 1975 was reminiscent of similar incidents before the 1962 war, the Tulung La incident did not result in aggravation of the situation along the LAC. Post-1975,

g The 1967 Nathu La clashes were fueled by immediate tensions, such as India's construction of a barbed wire fence and the scuffle involving a Chinese political commissar. However, deeper geopolitical concerns, particularly India's military presence along the Chumbi Valley watershed, served as the underlying driver. The strategic significance of the Chumbi Valley, sandwiched between India and Bhutan, made it a focal point of regional power dynamics. China's sensitivity to Indian military activities in this area, coupled with historical border disputes, amplified tensions. Thus, while the clashes were triggered by specific incidents, they underscored broader strategic anxieties and territorial ambitions, shaping the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations in the region.

there were no more shooting incidents. An isolated incident; however, it resulted in both India and China desiring to avoid any escalatory actions along the LAC. The establishment of formal bilateral relations through exchange of embassies seems to substantiate the above. In 1993, India and China signed an agreement aimed at maintaining peace and tranquility along the border, which includes a ban on the use of firearms near the border.

Sumdorong Chu Standoff (1986)

Background. An observation post was established by India in the summers of 1984 on the bank of Sumdorong Chu, a river that flows by the India-China border for some distance (Duttade, 2020). The Special Security Bureau (SSB) manned the same throughout the summers; however, they left it vacant during the winter because of inclement weather (Arpi, 2013). When the Indian forces returned during the summer on 16 June 1986, they discovered a group of Chinese soldiers erecting some permanent structures.

A formal protest was registered by the Government of India (GOI) on 26th June 1986, stating that the PLA troops intruded into the Thandrong pasture, which lies in the Zimithang circle of Tawang district and on the banks of Somdurong Chu (Pardessi, 2019). However, the Chinese did not accept this intrusion. In August, the PLA increased its presence in this location by deploying 200 soldiers.

The Indian Government offered a truce by stating that if China withdrew from Sumdorong Chu, they would not send their forces to occupy the area next summer. However, this was not accepted by China, and this led to the Indian Army launching Operation Falcon. An entire brigade was airlifted to Zimithang. The Indian Army built pressure on the Chinese Army by occupying Hathung La, which was on the opposite side of the Namka Chu River from Thag La. (Joshi, 2017) During a stopover in New Delhi from Beijing,

visiting US Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger delivered a strong message from Deng Xiaoping: it was time to "teach India a lesson." The threat was met with India granting Arunachal Pradesh full statehood within two months, in December 1986.

The PLA simultaneously moved 20,000 soldiers from the 13 Group Army and the 53 Group Army, as well as artillery and helicopters. Consequent to the build-up initiated by the Chinese, a similar force accretion was initiated by the Indian Army and the heights overlooking the Wangdung area were occupied. Concurrently, the Indian Army carried out a large-scale air-land exercise known as "Chequerboard," which started in October 1986 and ran until March 1987 (Bharat Rakshak, 2006). This took place in tandem with "Brasstacks," a significant military exercise on the western frontier (Defence Desk, 2026). The Indian armed forces' force posture, readiness, and capacity to wage a war on two fronts were showcased during these exercises.

Intense diplomatic discussions between the two nations soon followed to diffuse the situation. The field commanders decided to de-escalate by disengaging from the point of confrontation in August 1987. The eighth round of border negotiations, which were held in November, called for an end to "military confrontation" and laid out the framework for military withdrawal. Realising the futility of its military plan, China initiated talks with Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv Gandhi visited China in 1988, in the midst of military confrontation. During Rajiv Gandhi's visit, India and China agreed to reduce tensions on their border and established a Joint Working Group (JWG) to deal with boundary disputes.

India and China had agreed upon an agreement in 1993 for "the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)". The eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between Indian and Chinese troops at Sumdorong Chu ended in August

1995, two years after the agreement was signed. Diplomacy and military strategy employed by India compelled China to agree.

Analysis

Since the Indo-China war of 1962, India had been avoiding strengthening its position along the LAC and the international border with China. It was felt in the government of India that any military or infrastructural buildup in the area might antagonise China. This policy of “neglect” was reversed in 1980. The government approved a plan for upgrading infrastructure and military strength in the area prepared by the then Army Chief. The plan also included sporadic deployments of the Indian Armed Forces along the LAC with China. This was felt to be necessary because of pressure from China for infrastructural development in areas along the border and LAC, including Tawang.

Sumdorong Chu incident can also be attributed to the establishment of an observation post by the SSB (the trigger). However, the unprecedented build-up and a refusal to vacate the post despite an Indian assurance that the same will not be reoccupied portends a more sinister cause. It appears that the Chinese wanted to emphasise the disputed status of the eastern region, aimed at creating a linkage with the western region and thus substantiating their demand for the entire border being discussed together as against the Indian demand for a sector-by-sector approach towards border resolution. Frequent articulations of their claim over the State of Arunachal Pradesh in general and the Tawang region in particular, despite the treaty of 2005 stating that settled populations will be considered during the resolution of the Sino-Indian boundary, substantiate the desire to link the East and the West for retaining an edge in the negotiations for settlement of the Sino-Indian border.

However, what stands out is the fact that both these incidents (Nathu La and Sumdorong Chu) saw an aggressive stance being taken by the Indian Army. The onus of escalation having been shifted to the Chinese, arriving at a negotiated return to the status quo was the preferred option.

Sumdorong Chu resulted in the Indian Army adopting a forward posture by occupying the McMahon Line in strength in the Tawang sector. Frequent transgressions in the Yangtse region in recent years appear to be motivated by a desire to establish a foothold along the watershed, thus creating a wedge in the defences of the Tawang Sector.

Depsang Standoff (Raki Nala) 2013

On the night of 15 April 15, 2013, a platoon of PLA troops had crossed the LAC at the northern edge of Ladakh and had pitched their tents at Raki Nala, at an altitude of 5,000 meters. This camp was detected by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) forces the next day (Saint-Mézard, 132-139). Aerial surveillance indicated that the new location of the PLA was at a considerable distance from their original location. More importantly, the PLA was on the Indian side of the LAC, thus contravening the CBMs of 1996, which were agreed upon between India and China. The Indian Army, in turn, established its tented camp at a location just a few hundred meters away from the Chinese Army at Raki Nala. A standoff ensued on both sides on 17 April 2013, as the status quo was changed.

The area where the standoff took place is the Depsang plains, which is located in a strategic area known as Sub-Sector North (SSN), located to the south of DBO. The Depsang plains are crucial for the defence of Ladakh because they straddle the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road, which is an all-weather supply route to Leh to the SSN outpost at DBO (Hindustan Times, 2020).

The PLA forces remained in the same place for twenty days. More pertinent, however, is the fact that the forces were moving into the area on the Indian side of the border, and they pitched their tents. Subsequently, a meeting of the border patrol was convened at Spanggur Gap, at Chushul. The PLA, on being requested to move back to their original positions as per the agreement on the border patrol of 1976, produced a map of 1959 to dispute the claim of India. The map showed the LAC running parallel to the Raki Nala, thereby indicating that the area of the Depsang Bulge was on the Chinese side of the border. The preparedness of the PLA at the meeting of the border patrol indicated the intention of the Chinese to alter the ground positions (Mehta, 2023).

In accordance with the directions of the political hierarchy, diplomatic initiatives to include registering a formal complaint against the Chinese actions were undertaken. Additionally, it was also conveyed that the standoff is liable to impact the forthcoming high-profile visit of the Chinese premier, Li Keqiang. Beyond bilateral negotiations with China, it was agreed that diplomatic gestures in Japan by the Prime Minister and in Iran by the External Affairs Minister would send a strong message to Beijing.

It was also decided that while the diplomatic efforts to diffuse the situation would continue, the Northern Army Command would take care of the situation at the border without allowing the issue to spill over to other areas of the LAC. As part of the response mechanism, the Indian Army put up a tin shed at Point 30R in the Chumar area, which provided better visibility over the PLA forces in the area. The issue of simultaneous disengagement was also discussed during an unscheduled border meeting that the Chinese side called on 4 May 2013. By nighttime the next day, both Indian and Chinese forces had disengaged from the Depsang plains.

While increased frequency of patrol by the Indian Army may have been the trigger for the standoff, it would be pertinent to mention that the incident was timed as a prelude to the visit of the Chinese Premier to India on 18 May (MEA, 2013). Speculations were rife that the incident may have been to create a defensive tenor in the scheduled political interaction. However, the plan to minimise escalation involving negotiations at multiple levels, telephone calls between senior officials in New Delhi and Beijing, and flag meetings between Indian and Chinese military commanders in the field resolved the incident without escalation. Indian Army's response of undertaking construction at Chumar created a vulnerability through intimate observation of the PLA forces deployed in the area, leveraging the Indian position in the ongoing negotiations. This is evident from the fact that the removal of the construction was stressed upon by the PLA before resolution^h.

The Chinese official position is based on silence and opacity in the incident, denying any intrusion, a trend evident in almost all such incidents. Underplaying the seriousness of the issue at hand

^h During the 2013 India-China Depsang Standoff, the Indian Army's decision to undertake construction at Chumar was a strategic move that aimed at gaining an advantageous position over the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces. By constructing facilities at Chumar, the Indian Army could observe PLA activities closely. This tactical move by India was perceived as a threat by China, leading to the PLA's demand for the removal of these constructions as a precondition for de-escalating the standoff. The PLA's insistence on removing the Indian construction before any resolution could be seen as an acknowledgment of the strategic disadvantage posed by these Indian positions, which had the capability to closely monitor and potentially disrupt PLA operations in the region. Thus, the construction at Chumar became a focal point in the negotiations, illustrating the complex interplay of military posturing and diplomatic negotiations in resolving such international disputes.

while espousing a normal situation along the LAC is a part of their design to prevent such incidents from derailing the larger India-China relations.

The Depsang standoff did not derail or even divert the relationship. However, the incident itself was a departure from the pattern of military activity since the prolonged standoff in the Sumdorong Chu valley in 1986.

Chumar Standoff (September 2014)

Background. On 10 September 2014, Indian forces discovered that Chinese troops had brought in heavy equipment to build a makeshift road inside Indian Territory from Chepzi towards Chumar. After the first road-cutting operation, 300 PLA soldiers were camped in the area, and Indian troops monitored them for the next twenty-four hours. China claims Chumar, the last village in Ladakh, as its own territory, which has been a cause of tension between the two sides (Shukla, 2020).

Generally referred to as 30R, Chumar, at a height of approximately 15,000 feet, provides the Indian troops with a clear view of Chinese movements from its vantage point at the summit of a ridge. The Chinese wanted India to withdraw from the height, redraw the border, and annex the Tible-Mane region.

The Indian Army set up camp in Chumar by 14 September and built up the strength to approximately 1500 personnel in response to the intrusion. Simultaneous diplomatic endeavours were initiated by the Indian side to resolve the issue. However, despite these efforts, the standoff continued during President Xi Jinping's visit.

On 17 September, as Xi and his spouse arrived in Ahmedabad, another 1,000 PLA soldiers arrived in Chumar. On the Chinese side, troops were also observed close to Chepzi. Public events honouring

China's first couple proceeded according to schedule to avoid embarrassment and preserve appearances, while border flag meetings were conducted between local commanders in Chushul, a border personnel meeting point in Ladakh. Two more Indian Brigades were airlifted into Chumar (Mehta, 2023).

The issue of the standoff was highlighted by the Prime Minister in his meeting with the Chinese President (Press Information Bureau, 2014). However, despite an assurance that the Chinese troops had been ordered to withdraw, the standoff continued, and it was only on 26 September that the process of disengagement commenced. A meeting between the military commanders of both sides at Spanggur Gap, a pre-designated Border Meeting Point, on 30 September resulted in both sides agreeing to revert to the status quo on 01 September.

Analysis

It would be pertinent to mention here that consequent to Xi Jinping assuming the presidency of China, He articulated the concept of the 'Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation' and stressed the importance attached to sovereignty and territorial integrity, "Do not expect any foreign country to trade with our core interests, and do not expect us to swallow the bitter fruit that damages China's sovereignty, security and development interests (Ilda, 2020)." The timing of the standoff and the level of belligerence on display seem to indicate the Chinese ability to make aggression along the border a new normal to coerce India against any perceived intransigence. The standoff resulted in a stiffening of attitude by India in relation to the border. The summit with Xi was used to convey not only the urgency of termination of the current standoff but also the Chinese contention that leaving the resolution of the border for future generations was also called out.

Simultaneously, India decided to increase its bargaining power with China by articulating common interests with allies like the US.

Burtse (Depsang): 11-15 September 2015

Background. There was another incident in 2015 at Burtse in the Depsang plains, which was smaller in scope than the 2014 incident. From September 10–11, Indian satellite imagery revealed a PLA installation near India's side of the LAC. Burtse, a historical caravan halt point on the route between Ladakh and Xinjiang, is located at the confluence of Qazi Langer and Raki Nala (Mehta, 2023). It is at the southernmost point of the Depsang plains. Chinese surveillance in the region jeopardised Indian activities at Daulat Beg Oldie, a forward airbase and placed the ITBP camp under observation.

The army and ITBP jointly destroyed the watchtower-like structure. The camera and other materials were also taken by Indian troops, who would not give them back until the PLA soldiers had left for their original positions. The PLA then requested more troops to be sent to the area. In response, the area also saw an accretion of troops by the Indian Army. Banner drills as legislated in the 2005 agreement, aimed at fostering confidence, were initiated. Finally, the issue was resolved when the Chinese returned to their original position.

Analysis

The occurrence of the incident in Depsang Plains highlights the sensitivity to the area attached by both sides. The ability of the PLA to monitor the activities in the ITBP post in close vicinity and maintain observation over the axial connection to DBO was the trigger for the Indian response. However, following high-level flag meetings on 15 September 2015, at the DBO and Chushul sectors, the parties decided to withdraw from their previous positions in

Burtse and to stop building semi-permanent structures in the disputed area near the LAC. The local army delegations broke off the standoff within a week, and unlike the other two cases, no political intervention was necessary.

Doklam: June – August, 2017

Background. Doklam is a disputed area at India, China, Bhutan's tri-junction.

China bases its claim on Doklam on the 1890 Calcutta Convention between China and Britain (Dutta, 2017). Since 1984, Bhutan and China have undertaken 25 rounds of discussions to resolve this issue, with notable agreements signed in 1988 and 1998 (Mehta, *On Thin Ice: Bhutan's Diplomatic Challenge Amid the India-China Border Dispute*, 2024). In the early 2000s, China built a road up the Sincha La and then over the plateau (in the disputed territory), leading up to the Doka La, reaching within 68 meters from the Indian border post on the Sikkim border. The incident was caused by a Chinese attempt to extend this road southwards towards the Jampheri Ridge.

China launched manoeuvres in Doklam on the evening of 8 June 2017, which set off a series of events that resulted in a standoff between India and China. The PLA was reported to have quietly entered the plateau and destroyed stone bunkers-built years prior by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) and sporadically manned by its soldiers. China appeared to have taken deliberate action to change the long-standing status quo in a delicate area by doing this. On 16 June, a team of PLA road construction corps arrived in Doklam equipped with excavators, bulldozers, and road rollers. The RBA put up a fight against the Chinese forces and the construction crew. The latter referenced bilateral agreements not to change the status quo in contested areas, the most recent of which was inked in 1998. There were heated exchanges and rumours of some jostling

between the two forces as well. However, the PLA troops refused to back down, which led Bhutan to turn to India for assistance. The PLA was halted in its endeavour two days later by the Indian Army, which sparked a standoff.

Analysis

China's intention behind Doklam was to establish a permanent presence in the area to advance its security interest vis-à-vis India, force Bhutan to settle the Sino-Bhutan border as per their proposal, and create a wedge in India's relationship with Bhutan. China was expecting weak Thimpu to squabble and accept the unilateral alteration in the status quo done by themⁱ. Further, it did not expect India to step in and obstruct the construction work being undertaken by the PLA. However, India, on the request of Bhutan, intervened in the matter due to its special relationship with Bhutan and the perceived threat to its own security and strategic interests. India's move surprised the Chinese, who portrayed themselves as a victim of India's transgression. China launched an intense media campaign as part of its psychological warfare, accusing India of

i The 2017 Doklam Standoff between China, India, and Bhutan was rooted in strategic territorial claims by China. By attempting to build a road in the Doklam plateau (an area strategically important to India), China aimed to assert its dominance and influence regional geopolitics. The construction not only threatened Bhutan's sovereignty by potentially forcing it into territorial concessions favorable to China, but it also aimed to undermine the longstanding Indo-Bhutanese relationship, testing the resilience of their alliance. China's actions in Doklam can be interpreted as an attempt to create a permanent presence in the area, enhancing its security posture against India. By pressuring Bhutan, which has historically relied on India for military support and strategic guidance, China likely hoped to exploit perceived vulnerabilities in Bhutan's foreign policy decisions, driving a wedge between Thimpu and New Delhi. The expectation was that Bhutan, with its limited military capabilities compared to China, might capitulate to Chinese demands, thereby altering the status quo unilaterally in favor of Chinese territorial expansion. This move was strategic, aiming at reshaping the security landscape of the region in China's favor.

distorting the facts, infringing Bhutan's sovereignty, and pressurising Bhutan to take a position on the same. The Chinese also linked the Indian action to its US policy, disruption of China-Bhutan border negotiations, interruption of BRI and consideration of domestic politics.

Contrary to the Chinese provocative strategy, India adopted a balanced approach to resolve the issue. It defended its military presence in Doklam by inking Beijing's attempt to alter the status quo in the area with actions that had broader security implications for India. Further, it informed China that its attempt to change the status quo was a violation of its bilateral agreements of 1988 and 1998 with Bhutan and of 2012 with India (the fixing of the tri-junction between the three countries will be decided through consultation between India, China and the third country).

In concert with the military standoff, intense politico-diplomatic talks were instrumental in the resolution of the standoff. The de-escalation is said to have begun with a conversation between the top leaders of India and China at the G 20 Hamburg Summit on 07th July 2017. The September 04th BRICS meeting, taken as a self-imposed deadline, may also have contributed towards the resolution. While depicted as a major diplomatic victory by the Indian side, the Chinese have continued their presence in the Doklam plateau. However, the attempts at constructing a road towards Jampheri have been successfully halted.

Eastern Ladakh, 2020

Background. Though the Galwan incident, resulting in both sides suffering fatal casualties, occurred on 15 June 2020, the belligerence on display by the Chinese commenced in May 2020. A broad chronology of Chinese actions along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh leading to the Galwan incident is appended below:

Date	Activity
April 2020	A military exercise is turned into an operational deployment by the PLA, deploying 30,000 soldiers along the LAC.
Early May 2020	PLA transgresses into multiple spots along the LAC—Gogra-Hot Springs, Galwan Valley, and Pangong Tso.
5 May 2020	Counter deployment of two divisions by India by the end of the month after a violent confrontation with the PLA on 5 May 2020.
9 May 2020	In a confrontation in the Naku La area, Sikkim, four Indian and seven PLA soldiers were injured during the melee involving 150 soldiers.
6 June 2020	Initiation of the corps commander-level talks for de-escalation along the LAC
15 June 2020	Violent clashes between the Indian troops and PLA in Galwan River Valley leading to 20 fatalities on the Indian side and an unconfirmed number of casualties on the Chinese side.

On 15 June 2020, there was a violent clash between the Indian and Chinese forces that claimed 20 fatal casualties on the Indian side and an unconfirmed number on the Chinese side (Gokhale V., 2021). The incident is significant not only because of these fatalities but because the situation along the boundary has fundamentally changed. There is enhanced activity in terms of military deployment and infrastructure building. It can be anticipated that even if a reversion to the status quo ante of 2019 is desired, it may not be possible due to the infrastructure created and troop deployment by both sides. A series of talks at the field commanders' levels have been ongoing. Progress in activities post-June 15 is as appended:

Date	Activity
June 30 2020	Corps commanders agree to withdraw soldiers from Patrolling Points 14, 15, and 17, which stretch from the Galwan Valley to the Gogra-Hot Springs region, during the third round of talks. The PLA retreats from Indian-claimed territory by hundreds of metres.
29–30 August 2020	On the southern side of Pangong Tso, Indian soldiers seize control of the heights along the Kailash Range. On the southern bank of Pangong Tso, the Indian Army and PLA engage in a face-off for the first time.
21 February 2021	China and India agree to disengage from Pangong Tso. Until a resolution is achieved through further negotiations, neither party will patrol the disputed territories.
13 July 2021	PLA troops enter Demchok and protest a celebration of the Dalai Lama's birthday.
26 July 2021	Chinese "civilians" set up tents in the Demchok sector's Charding Nullah in Indian area and refuse to leave.
12 September 2022	Soldiers from China and India evacuate the Gogra-Hot Springs region. There is still no progress in Demchok and Depsang.
9 December 2022	After 300 PLA forces try to cross the LAC, there are skirmishes between the troops in the Tawang Sector in the Northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. During the face-off, a few soldiers on both sides suffer minor injuries.
20 December 2022	The sides could not agree on a way out of the impasse at Demchok and Depsang in the

Date	Activity
	seventeenth round of discussions between the corps commanders.
21 October 2024	India and China agreed on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control in the Depsang and Demchok sectors on 21 October 2024, resulting in disengagement at all the friction points that had emerged in 2020.

Following the resolution of standoffs at Depsang and Demchok in October 2024, the Corps Commander mechanism has continued with its focus now on “resolve any ground issues along the border to maintain stability” (MEA, 2025).

Analysis

The Eastern Ladakh incident has been fundamentally different in that, for the first time since 1975, the two sides have incurred fatal casualties. The activation of several points simultaneously indicates a premeditated attempt at altering the status quo along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh, duly approved by the Military and Political hierarchy. It appears that, satisfied with the ability of the People’s Armed Police Force to control the prevailing situation in Xinjiang, the Western Theatre Command has decided to permanently deploy formations of the Xinjiang Military District in the higher reaches along the LAC, thus offsetting the necessity of acclimatisation.

Increased and fast-paced infrastructure development, including improvement in airfields, construction of heliports, development of logistics nodes and forward presence of advanced and heavy calibre weapon systems, are indicators of a permanent presence along the LAC.

The incident was an outcome of complete disregard for the protocols and institutionalised confidence-building measures that had been laid down. The aspect of 'mutual and equal security,' an important provision of both the agreement on 'protocols for maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC' (1993) and the agreement on the institutionalisation of confidence-building measures (1996), stands violated. A disregard for the geographical constraints impacting either side, resulting in the forward presence of PLA, necessitates a matching forward presence by the Indian Armed Forces. Thus, the LAC stands militarised, and similar incidents are likely to increase^j.

Sensitivities to the Indian claim on Aksai Chin and its increasing strategic importance to China as a link between Xinjiang and Tibet and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor may be seen as the driver for the aggressive orientation on display. The negotiated creation of buffer zones with a moratorium on patrolling appears to indicate that the Chinese intend to keep

j The 2020 Galwan clash between India and China highlights a severe breakdown in the longstanding protocols designed to ensure peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). These protocols, established by the 1993 and 1996 agreements, were intended to maintain "mutual and equal security" and institutionalize confidence-building measures. However, the incident was a direct result of the disregard for these measures, which mandate both sides to respect territorial integrity and refrain from aggressive posturing. The escalation at Galwan can be attributed to the PLA's forward deployment in strategically sensitive areas, previously demilitarized, prompting India to enhance its military presence in response. This reciprocal increase in military activities not only violated the spirit of the agreements but also led to the militarization of the LAC, increasing the likelihood of future conflicts. The fundamental breach of trust and the unilateral actions by China undermined the mechanisms intended to prevent such escalations, pointing to a need for a reassessment of the strategies to manage border disputes and maintain peace effectively.

Indian forces under observation and thus obviate the perceived negative tilt in operational balance once again in their favour.

In essence, a new reality has been institutionalised by PLA creating a forward presence of acclimatised troops and improving the ability to manifest at points along the LAC in a faster timeframe. This, in turn, necessitating a drive for matching capabilities in the Indian strategic discourse, creating a dilemma for allocating the comparatively meagre military budget between securitising the land frontier vis a vis the maritime domain. A summary of triggers and drivers in the major incidents that have resulted in the prevailing trust deficit is as appended in the table below:

Summary of Triggers and Drivers resulting in major incidents

Incident	Trigger	Sensitivity/Drivers
Nathu La	Laying of barbed wire fencing by Indian Army.	➤ Sensitivity to Chumbi valley. ➤ Indian force accretion. ➤ Insecurity due to Cultural Revolution. ➤ Non-vacation on Chinese diktat.
Cho La	Physical control over a boulder located along the watershed.	➤ Sensitivity to Chumbi valley. ➤ Indian force accretion. ➤ Insecurity due to Cultural Revolution.
Tulung La	➤ As per data available in open-source no specific trigger can be identified. However, a probable explanation could be sought in the mounting distress due to multiple factors such as India's Operation Smiling Buddha (1974); Merger of	

Incident	Trigger	Sensitivity/Drivers
	Sikkim with India (1975); and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The re-establishment of diplomatic relations immediately after the incident (1976) seems to substantiate the above.	
Sumdorong Chu	Establishment of observation post by India.	➤ Indian assertion towards claims along McMahon line. ➤ Chinese desire to club the eastern and the western sector. ➤ Aggravated sensitivity due to grant of statehood to Arunachal Pradesh in December 1986.
Depsang (2013)	Increased frequency of patrols by Indian Army.	➤ Heightened sensitivity to an aggressive orientation of the Indian Army along LAC. ➤ Instil a defensive tenor in the forthcoming high-profile visit of the Chinese premier.
Chumar (2014)	Occupation and construction of observation posts and bunkers on 30R. Chinese road construction activity in Chepzi area.	➤ Desire to offset the visual advantage enjoyed by the Indian Army through occupation of Chumar /30R. ➤ Defensive tenor in high profile visit. ➤ Aggression in accord with Xi's articulations on Sovereignty.

Incident	Trigger	Sensitivity/Drivers
Burtse (2015)	Destruction of a watchtower by Indian Army and ITBP.	➤ Enhanced sensitivity to observation over Indian Army activities in DBO and the ITBP camp.
Doklam (2017)	➤ Chinese attempts at road construction in Doklam. ➤ Indian interception and denial of construction.	➤ Chinese attempt to pressure Bhutan in resolution of dispute on Chinese favour. ➤ Show India as incapable of coming to the assistance of Bhutan. ➤ Offset own vulnerability of Chumbi Valley. ➤ Indian sensitivity towards Siliguri corridor.
Eastern Ladakh (2020)	DS-DBO Road and construction of bridge over Shyok River.	➤ Perception of a negative shift in prevailing balance. ➤ Abrogation of special status of J&K by India. ➤ Increased bonhomie between India and the US. ➤ Adverse impact of Covid pandemic (regime stability).

Though the immediate triggers for the Chinese actions, as articulated by them, are an increased forward presence and assertive orientation towards the LAC by the Indian Army and the construction of infrastructure (DSDBO Road), the timing seems to indicate the play of larger sensitivities in the realm of geo-strategy.

The PLA actions indicate a premeditated and deliberate expansionist intent.

Increasing Aggression

The LAC has witnessed increased aggression by the PLA with effect from 2010 onwards^k. Moreover, there has been a distinct change in pattern with the transgressions resulting in standoffs between the two-armed forces since 2013. These crises have necessitated increased and prolonged negotiations at the politico-

k Since 2010, the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between India and China, has seen a noticeable uptick in aggressive manoeuvres from the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This increased aggression marks a significant shift from the previously more restrained engagements along the border. Several factors contribute to this escalation. Firstly, China's assertive foreign policy under President Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012, aligns with a broader strategic aim to assert China's dominance in regional affairs. This policy shift has often manifested in more assertive military postures along various territorial claims, including those in the South China Sea and along the LAC with India. Secondly, the PLA has improved its infrastructure and military capabilities along the border. This enhancement includes new roads, airstrips, and advanced surveillance systems, which facilitate quicker mobilization of forces and a more sustained presence in disputed areas. Such developments have given China the confidence to adopt more forward postures along the LAC. Additionally, the area has witnessed several specific incidents that have heightened tensions. These include the 2013 Depsang Plains standoff, the 2017 Doklam standoff, and the violent clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020. Each of these incidents has contributed to a cycle of retaliation and increased military readiness on both sides. Overall, the increased PLA aggression post-2010 appears to be part of a strategic calculus by Beijing to reinforce its territorial claims and challenge India's position along the LAC, affecting the stability and security of the region. This strategy seems to test the thresholds of Indian response mechanisms and international patience, with significant implications for regional security dynamics. For reference, see: "Clarify and Respect the Line of Actual Control." (2019). In *Off Ramps from Confrontation in Southern Asia* (p. 111). Stimson Center. Retrieved from [\[https://www.stimson.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/OffRamps_Book_R4_WEB.pdf#page=111\]](https://www.stimson.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/OffRamps_Book_R4_WEB.pdf#page=111).

diplomatic levels and amongst the field commanders of the two-armed forces. The probable causes for the increased aggression result from both bilateral issues and the geostrategic dynamics. The same are given in succeeding paras.

Infrastructure Buildup: One of the most important sources of acrimony between both countries has been the infrastructure build-up along the borders. China began the infrastructure race in the 1990s by investing massively in Tibet's railways, roads, and air facilities right up to the LAC. India eventually started responding in the second decade of the 2000s. For instance, in 2019, India constructed the DSDBO road along the LAC, connecting Darbuk-Shyok to Daulet Beg Oldie. DBO is one of the world's highest airfields and is strategic for India's military prepositioning and logistics delivery along the LAC. The improving infrastructure along the Indian side of the LAC appears to have heightened Chinese sensitivity towards a negative tilt in the prevailing operational balance.

Amendment to Article 370 in J&K: India's revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and the creation of the Union territory of Ladakh has been vehemently objected to by the Chinese. The inclusion of Aksai Chin and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, with an expressed desire to retake these areas, appears to have heightened Chinese sensitivity. The alignment of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) running through these areas further aggravates the sensitivity.

Assertiveness across the Neighborhood: The Chinese intrusions into Ladakh can be seen as one of many such aggressive and militaristic foreign policy moves that could jeopardize regional and possibly global stability. These include breaching Taiwan's airspace on multiple occasions, using aggressive posturing in the South China Sea to intimidate Malaysia, Vietnam, and the

Philippines, and even sinking a Vietnamese fishing trawler in these waters. Enacting a strict new National Security law in Hong Kong restricting civil liberties can also be seen in the same light.

Deteriorating US-China Relations: China's irate posturing in Ladakh can also be related to the deteriorating diplomatic relations between Beijing and Washington, D.C. It used its aggression along the LAC with India to express its dissatisfaction with India's alleged cosy relationship with the United States¹.

Internal Dimensions: The COVID-19 pandemic and its inept handling could be understood as causing internal dissatisfaction in China. This, coupled with rising inflation and unemployment, resulted in doubts about Xi's leadership. Thus, in order to restore

¹ China's aggressive behaviour in Ladakh since 2020 can be contextualized within the broader framework of its international relations, especially in light of its deteriorating ties with the United States. As Sino-American relations have experienced significant strain, particularly over trade disputes, technological competition, and geopolitical rivalry, Beijing's military posturing along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India is not just a regional issue but also a manifestation of its global strategic calculations. The intensification of the U.S.-India strategic partnership, marked by increased defence sales, joint military exercises, and diplomatic alignment, particularly concerning the Indo-Pacific region, has been viewed warily in Beijing. China perceives this closer India-U.S. alignment as a counterbalance strategy against its rise. Thus, China's military manoeuvres in Ladakh serve multiple purposes: testing India's resolve, signalling to the United States about China's willingness to assert its territorial claims, and expressing its displeasure over what it sees as India's increasingly cosy relationship with Washington. This strategic posturing is also reflective of China's use of military means to address diplomatic frustrations and send broader geopolitical messages. By escalating tensions at the LAC, China not only directly challenges India but also indirectly communicates its discontent with the U.S., leveraging its regional actions to reflect its stance on larger international disputes.

For Reference, see: Pant, H. V. (2019). "The US-India-China 'Strategic triangle': theoretical, historical and contemporary dimensions." *India Review*, 18(4), 343–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1662192>.

lost legitimacy, an outside opponent was required. The incursions in Ladakh, therefore, were carried out on the pretence of accusing India of constructing roads in controversial areas, but the goal was to use this aggression to unite the Chinese people behind Xi Jinping after his reputation had taken a hit.

The increased aggression must be viewed according to Xi's articulation of Comprehensive National Security/Total National Security in 2014. One of the tenets of which was an emphasis on preventive solutions to security challenges and harnessing foreign policy initiatives to shape the external environment. As a sequel to this, the land border law and increased impetus towards infrastructure development in Tibet and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region have been ongoing. According to the 2022 report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, "In 2022, China deployed one border regiment, supported by two divisions of Xinjiang and Tibet Military Districts with four combined arms brigades (CAB) in reserve in the western sector of the LAC. China also deployed as many as three light-to-medium CABs in the eastern sector from other theatre commands and an additional three CABs in the central sector of the LAC. Although some elements of a light CAB eventually withdrew, most of the deployed forces remain in place along the LAC. It is apparent, therefore, that activism along the entire length of the LAC is a reality. The Indian Armed Forces must exercise vigilance through 24/7 ISR and forward-based deployment to mitigate any adverse situation.

Red-Flags for India

The LAC between India and China remains a region of strategic sensitivity and potential conflict. Several red-flags indicate circumstances that could escalate tensions along the LAC, necessitating heightened vigilance. Probable red-flags at the

strategic and operational/tactical level are given in succeeding paragraphs.

Strategic Level

1. **Indo-US Strategic Partnership.** China perceives the India-US partnership as a significant red flag that could potentially lead to incidents at the LAC. Hence, any developments in the geostrategic environment heightening Chinese sensitivities in issues enumerated below must entail an increased vigil along the LAC.

- 1.1 **Strategic Encirclement:** China sees the deepening partnership between India and the United States as a part of a broader strategy of containment or encirclement aimed at constraining China's rise as a global power. The strengthening military and strategic ties between India and the US, including defence cooperation, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing, are viewed with suspicion by China as efforts to encroach upon its sphere of influence.

- 1.2 **Regional Balance of Power:** China perceives the India-US partnership and India's Act East policy as a challenge to its efforts to establish dominance and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The strategic alignment between the world's largest democracy (India) and the world's most powerful democracy (US) threatens China's ambitions for regional hegemony and could potentially upset the existing balance of power in the region.

- 1.3 **Military Capabilities and Interoperability:** The enhancement of India's military capabilities through collaboration with the US, including acquiring advanced defence technology, joint military exercises, and

interoperability between Indian and US forces, raises concerns for China. It perceives these developments as potential threats to its security interests and could lead to pre-emptive actions or provocations along the LAC to test India's resolve or capability to confront China.

2. **Escalation of Territorial Disputes in Adjacent Regions:** Any escalation or aggressive actions by China in other territorial disputes such as Taiwan, in the South China Sea or with neighbouring countries like Nepal or Bhutan, could be indicative of a broader strategy to assert dominance in the region.
3. **Diplomatic Provocation:** Sudden shifts in Chinese diplomatic stances, provocative statements by Chinese diplomats, or attempts to internationalise the border dispute may indicate a strategic shift towards a more confrontational approach.
4. **Heightened Rhetoric or Propaganda:** An increase in inflammatory statements or propaganda from Chinese officials or state-controlled media aimed at India could indicate a deteriorating situation.
5. **Deterioration of Political/Economic Situation:** The CCP is sensitive to any threat to regime security and is liable to engage in more belligerent behaviour against an external force to divert the populace's attention. A close watch on the developing internal dynamics in China is imperative to be able to identify probable red flags that may result in adverse situations along the LAC. Similarly, the internal dynamics within India may also allow the Chinese. The current period of the nation going in for elections is sensitive, and we may see an increased assertiveness along the LAC.

6. Deteriorating situation in Tibet/Xinjiang and issues related to succession of Dalai Lama.

Operational/Tactical

1. **Increased Surveillance Activities:** Heightened Chinese reconnaissance or surveillance operations along the LAC, including aerial patrols, drone activities, and foot patrols, would indicate preparations for future actions.
2. **Increased Chinese Troop Movement:** Any significant buildup of Chinese military personnel or equipment in operational depth along the LAC would indicate potential aggressive intentions.
3. **Incursion into Disputed Territory:** Frequent intrusions along the LAC by PLA, or establishment of new outpost beyond previously held positions, are clear red flags. This would include pushing into areas claimed by India or establishing new outposts beyond previously held positions. The promulgation of the Land Border Law that came into force on 1 January 2022 indicates a more stringent orientation towards the entire LAC^m.

m The repeated intrusions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), along with the establishment of new outposts beyond previously held positions, signal escalating tensions and strategic assertiveness by China. Such activities not only challenge the status quo but also represent significant tactical concerns for India, as they imply a direct challenge to Indian claims and an attempt to unilaterally change the ground realities. The enactment of the Land Border Law by China, which took effect on January 1, 2022, further complicates the situation. This law codifies China's approach to managing its land borders and asserts its legal framework over disputed territories. It reflects a more rigid and formalized approach to border management, which could potentially lead to stricter enforcement of claims by China and less flexibility in negotiations. The law's implementation amid ongoing tensions indicates a strategic move by China to solidify its stance over disputed territories along the LAC, thereby institutionalizing its territorial claims. For India, these developments are operational and tactical red flags at the LAC, signaling a need for heightened vigilance and possibly a re-

While limited disengagement has been undertaken in the areas of Galwan, Hot Springs, Pangong Tso (north and south banks), Depsang, and Demchok, complete de-escalation is yet to take place. In addition, other areas of perceptual differences, such as Barahoti, Yangtse, Asafillah, and Fish Tail 1&2, need extra vigilance against future incidents.

4. **Interference in Broader Infrastructure Projects:** Efforts by China to interfere with India's infrastructure development projects along the border, such as roads and bridges, aimed at improving connectivity and mobility for Indian forces, through physical obstruction or lodging of frequent complaints at BPMs may signal a desire to maintain an asymmetric advantage or hinder Indian military preparedness.

Conclusion

The paper demonstrates that the Line of Actual Control is not simply a disputed boundary but a dynamic strategic space shaped by ambiguity, military signalling, infrastructure competition, and wider geopolitical rivalry. Because the LAC remains undelineated and undemarcated, incidents are not accidental in any simple sense; they emerge from overlapping territorial perceptions, deliberate patrolling patterns, and China's recurring use of coercive tactics to alter facts on the ground. The paper's transgression analysis shows a broad rise in incidents over time, especially from 2010 onward, while the case studies from Nathu La to Eastern Ladakh reveal a consistent pattern: major crises have generally

evaluation of its border management and negotiation strategies. These actions by the PLA, underpinned by legislative changes, suggest a more assertive and possibly aggressive posture by China in the future, requiring careful monitoring and strategic countermeasures by India.

been initiated by the PLA, often at moments of larger strategic sensitivity for Beijing.

A second major finding is that these incidents cannot be understood only through local triggers. Immediate flashpoints such as fencing, patrol confrontation, road construction, observation posts, or access to patrol points were important, but they were usually linked to deeper Chinese concerns about operational disadvantage, India's improving border infrastructure, the security of Tibet and Xinjiang, Aksai Chin connectivity, the Chumbi Valley, and the broader regional balance of power. In that sense, border incidents have repeatedly served China as instruments of signalling, pressure, and coercive leverage within the wider bilateral relationship. The 2020 Eastern Ladakh crisis marked the sharpest expression of this pattern, transforming the LAC from a space governed imperfectly by confidence-building agreements into one defined by forward deployments, denial of patrol access, and long-term militarisation.

At the same time, the historical record assessed in the paper also offers an important policy lesson for India. The evidence suggests that when India has combined firmness on the ground with political clarity and sustained diplomacy, China has been prevented from fully imposing a *fait accompli*. Nathu La, Sumdorong Chu, Doklam, and aspects of the Ladakh crisis all indicate that resolve, preparedness, and a capacity to impose costs matter greatly in shaping outcomes along the LAC. This does not remove the risk of escalation, but it does underline that passivity or neglect invites pressure, whereas credible deterrence backed by infrastructure, surveillance, military readiness, and calibrated diplomacy improves India's position.

The paper therefore concludes that the future of the India-China border will likely remain unstable unless there is either

genuine clarification of the LAC or a new equilibrium of deterrence. Until then, India must treat the frontier as a permanently contested military-political space requiring sustained vigilance, rapid response capability, and close attention to strategic and operational red flags. The core lesson is clear: China's actions along the LAC are neither episodic nor isolated, but part of a larger strategy of coercive assertion. India's response, accordingly, must be long-term, integrated, and rooted in the recognition that preserving stability on the border now depends less on old agreements alone and more on the credible defence of national resolve and territorial interests.

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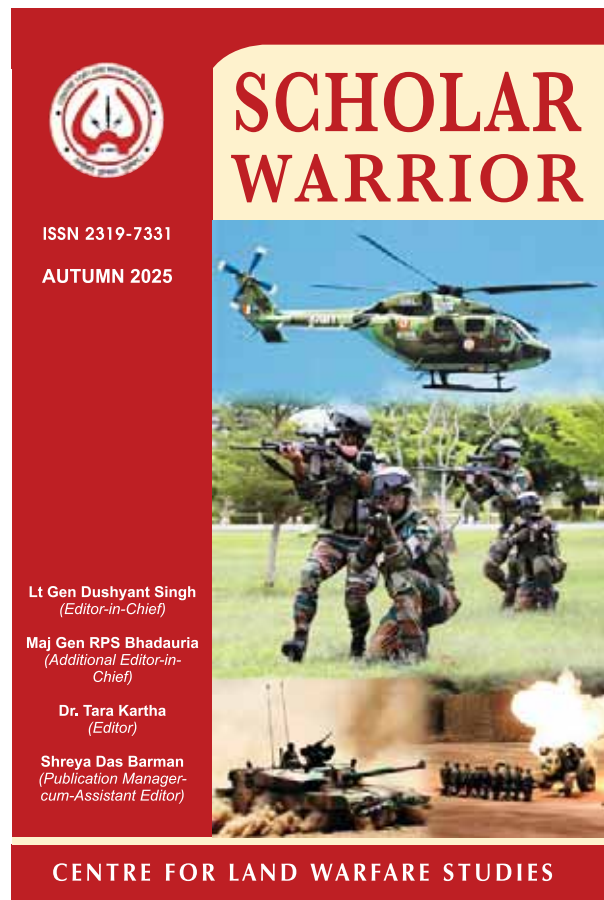
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The research presented in the paper "China's Coercive Tactics on the Line of Actual Control: delivers an examination of the world's most volatile and complex boundary. The text traces the evolution of the Sino-Indian border from a period of relative peace to a modern reality of armed coexistence and aggressive infrastructure competition. Through detailed case studies of major skirmishes, ranging from the 1967 Nathu La clash to the deadly 2020 Eastern Ladakh standoff, the analysis exposes a consistent pattern of deliberate expansionist intent and coercive signalling by the People's Liberation Army. It reveals that whenever India has combined military firmness with sustained diplomacy, it has successfully thwarted unilateral changes to the status quo. The paper offers critical policy lessons, emphasising that long-term stability along this contested frontier requires credible deterrence, rapid response capabilities, and unwavering national resolve.

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