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Conflict on the Sino-Indian Border: Background for Congress

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Key Findings

- China and India have engaged in a deadly clash along their shared border for the first time in decades. The two countries have engaged in various physical clashes along the border multiple times before, though all conflicts after 1975 have been settled without loss of life.
- Under General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping, Beijing has stepped up its aggressive foreign policy toward New Delhi. Since 2013, China has engaged in five major altercations with India along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).^{*} Beijing and New Delhi have signed a series of agreements and committed to confidence-building measures to stabilize their border, but China has resisted efforts to clarify the LAC, preventing a lasting peace from being realized.
- The Chinese government is particularly fearful of India's growing relationship with the United States and U.S. allies and partners. The latest border clash is part of a broader pattern in which Beijing seeks to warn New Delhi against aligning with Washington.

Beijing's Strategy of Escalation on the Border

In mid-June, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Indian troops engaged in a massive physical brawl in the Galwan Valley, located in the far-western Ladakh region along the LAC separating the two countries. The clash, which followed a series of standoffs beginning in early May along multiple sectors of the LAC, led to at least 20 Indian deaths and an unconfirmed number of Chinese casualties.¹ The skirmish marks the first time since 1975 that soldiers from either side lost their lives. The proximate cause of the fatal clash appeared to be India's construction of a strategic access road to support troops stationed along the LAC. China has also built extensive infrastructure along the LAC in recent years.²

China and India have engaged in a number of clashes along their border for decades.³ After CCP General Secretary Xi assumed power in 2012, there was a significant increase in clashes, despite the fact that General Secretary Xi

^{*} The LAC is the demarcation that separates Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory on the two countries' shared border. It is made up of three sectors: eastern, middle, and western. The two countries do not agree on many details of the LAC, including the exact length. Beijing and New Delhi have been unable to overcome their differences despite signing agreements and committing to various confidence-building measures. Ananth Krishnan, "The Hindu Explains | Who Does Galwan Valley Belong To?" *Hindu*, June 21, 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-hindu-explains-who-does-galwan-valley-belong-to/article31879418.ece>; Sushant Singh, "Line of Actual Control: Where It Is Located, and Where India and China Differ," *Indian Express*, June 1, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/line-of-actual-control-where-it-is-located-and-where-india-and-china-differ-6436436/>; Dean Cheng and Lisa Curtis, "The China Challenge: A Strategic Vision for U.S.-India Relations," *Heritage Foundation*, July 18, 2011. <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-china-challenge-strategic-vision-us-india-relations>; Lisa Curtis, "U.S.-India Relations: The China Factor," *Heritage Foundation*, November 25, 2008. <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/us-india-relations-the-china-factor>.

has met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi several times and Beijing and New Delhi have agreed to a series of confidence-building mechanisms designed to mitigate tensions.⁴ Prior to 2013, the last major border clash was in 1987. The 1950s and 1960s were a particularly tense period, culminating in 1962 with a war that left thousands of soldiers dead on both sides, according to PLA records.⁵ (For a timeline of these and other previous confrontations, see below.)

The 2020 skirmish is in line with Beijing’s increasingly assertive foreign policy. The clash came as Beijing was aggressively pressing its other expansive sovereignty claims in the Indo-Pacific region, such as over Taiwan and in the South and East China seas. Several weeks prior to the clash, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe called on Beijing to “use fighting to promote stability” as the country’s external security environment worsened, a potential indication of China’s intent to proactively initiate military tensions with its neighbors to project an image of strength.⁶ According to former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, the latest skirmish could also be a bid by Beijing to warn New Delhi against aligning more closely with Washington.⁷ Indeed, a May 2020 editorial in China’s state-owned news tabloid *Global Times* warned India would suffer a “devastating blow” to its trade and economic ties with China if it got “involved in the U.S.-China rivalry.”⁸

Figure 1: Disputed Areas along the Sino-Indian Border



Note: This map depicts the area around Sikkim as the middle sector of the LAC. Analysts usually also include the relatively less volatile areas around Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh in the middle sector, which are depicted as falling within the western sector on this map. For more, see Sushant Singh, “Line of Actual Control: Where It Is Located, and Where India and China Differ,” *Indian Express*, June 1, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/line-of-actual-control-where-it-is-located-and-where-india-and-china-differ-6436436/>. Source: Dean Cheng and Lisa Curtis, “The China Challenge: A Strategic Vision for U.S.–India Relations,” *Heritage Foundation*, July 18, 2011. <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-china-challenge-strategic-vision-us-india-relations>.

Sino-Indian Border Clashes since 1962

- **2020 Sino-Indian Skirmishes (western and middle sectors):** Began after an altercation in early May 2020 near Pangong Tso Lake in the border's western sector. The apparent cause of the initial altercation was Beijing's opposition to New Delhi's efforts to bolster border-area infrastructure.⁹ Chinese and Indian border patrols subsequently engaged in a series of altercations at several points along the western and middle sectors of the LAC.¹⁰ On June 15, an Indian patrol encountered Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh in the western sector of the LAC. The Chinese troops were supposed to have retreated from the area following a June 6 disengagement agreement.¹¹ The Indian government claims Chinese soldiers then ambushed Indian troops, which led to hand-to-hand fighting and culminated with the Indian commanding officer being pushed off a narrow ridge and falling to his death.¹² Following the arrival of Indian reinforcements, about 600 soldiers were reportedly fighting with stones, iron rods, and other makeshift weapons, according to Indian government sources.¹³

The skirmish resulted in at least 20 Indian deaths.¹⁴ China has not confirmed how many PLA soldiers died in the recent clash, but India's *Asian News International* has reported 43 Chinese soldiers lost their lives.¹⁵ Satellite images depict a significant Chinese buildup in the Galwan Valley, including potentially 1,000 PLA soldiers, the week before the deadly skirmish.¹⁶ Moreover, China held ten Indian soldiers captive for three days after the clash before releasing them.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the violence, Beijing reacted by asserting sovereignty over the entire Galwan Valley, representing a significant change to the status quo.¹⁸ On June 24, Beijing and New Delhi announced they would implement disengagement and de-escalation on the border based on the June 6 agreement, although satellite images from June 22 show new Chinese bunkers, tents, and military storage units in the area.¹⁹

- **2017 Doklam Standoff (middle sector):** Multimonth standoff in the Bhutan-China-India triborder area beginning in June 2017 after Beijing began extending an existing road southward into territory administered by Bhutan.* After Bhutanese border forces failed to convince the Chinese construction crew to retreat, the Indian Army preemptively crossed the boundary to halt the road expansion, fearing it would be extended into Indian-controlled territory.²⁰ New Delhi feared the road would have threatened the "Chicken's Neck" in the Siliguri Corridor, a narrow stretch of land around Bangladesh connecting India's northeastern states to the rest of India, giving Beijing a commanding military position in the area.²¹ Several hundred Chinese and Indian border forces remained there in a tense standoff until late August 2017, when China and India agreed to disengage and retreat to their respective pre-June positions.²²
- **2015 Burtse Incident (western sector):** Occurred in September 2015 when Indian troops destroyed a watchtower China was building close to a mutually agreed-upon patrolling line.²³ The incident was defused after a series of meetings between Chinese and Indian commanders.²⁴
- **2014 Demchok Standoff (western sector):** Occurred in September 2014 and coincided with a meeting in New Delhi between General Secretary Xi and Prime Minister Modi.²⁵ The Indian government claims the PLA was constructing a road inside Indian territory, while the Chinese government objected to India constructing a canal in Demchok, which China claims as part of Tibet.²⁶ Both sides dispatched approximately 1,000 troops and a standoff ensued.²⁷ After approximately 20 days, PLA troops withdrew from the area.²⁸

* India and Bhutan are allies. Under the 2007 India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, the two sides have agreed to "cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests. Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other." In practice, the Indian military is responsible for protecting Bhutan from external threats. *Hindu*, "Why Bhutan Is Special to India," July 2, 2017. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/why-bhutan-is-special-to-india/article19195034.ece>.

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- **2013 Daulat Beg Oldi and Chumar Standoffs (western sector):** Lasted for three weeks from April to May 2013. New Delhi claims that about 40 PLA troops intruded 19 kilometers (12 miles) into Indian territory in Daulat Beg Oldi and set up tents, which led India to dispatch troops and set up encampments of its own.²⁹ After higher-level diplomatic talks and a series of meetings between local commanders, Chinese and Indian troops dismantled their tents and both sides withdrew their forces. However, approximately 300 PLA soldiers then moved to Chumar in Ladakh and demanded that New Delhi dismantle structures Beijing claimed were bunkers. After more diplomacy, the Indian government agreed to dismantle the structures, which Indian media reports described as “tin sheds,” and the PLA dismantled its tents in Chumar.³⁰
 - **1987 Sumdorong Chu Valley Standoff (eastern sector):** In 1984, India established an observation post in the strategic Sumdorong Chu valley in Arunachal Pradesh, while China also worked to build permanent structures in the area.³¹ In retaliation, the Indian government moved large numbers of troops to the valley and granted statehood to Arunachal Pradesh, angering the Chinese government, which claims the region as “South Tibet.”³² In mid-1987, thousands of PLA troops were estimated to have begun massing in the area.³³ The standoff ended without casualties after Beijing and New Delhi engaged in diplomacy to deescalate the situation, culminating with a visit to Beijing by then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.³⁴
 - **1975 Tulung La Incident (eastern sector):** The last time shots were reported to have been fired and the last instance that involved loss of life prior to the 2020 skirmish. India claimed PLA soldiers ambushed an Indian patrol in October 1975 along the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh, which was not yet an Indian state, leading to the deaths of four Indian soldiers. No Chinese deaths were reported.³⁵ New Delhi blamed Chinese troops for crossing into Indian territory, whereas Beijing claims it acted in self-defense and that Indian soldiers attacked Chinese positions.³⁶
 - **1967 Nathu La and Cho La Skirmishes (middle sector):** Skirmishes occurred from September to October 1967 near Sikkim. After arguments over New Delhi’s attempts to construct an iron fence to put an end to what it saw as repeated Chinese incursions into its territory, Indian authorities claim PLA troops launched an attack and fighting ensued, including the exchange of artillery fire.³⁷ After various skirmishes, the Indian Army repelled the PLA.³⁸ New Delhi claims 80 Indian soldiers lost their lives and reported roughly 400 Chinese deaths.³⁹
 - **1962 Sino-Indian Border War (multiple sectors):** A major but limited conventional conflict between China and India lasting from October to November 1962.⁴⁰ Diplomatic efforts to settle disputes over the location of the border led to war.⁴¹ After a series of clashes, PLA troops penetrated deep into Indian territory in the eastern sector and wiped out a series of Indian fortifications in the western sector.⁴² According to PLA records, India suffered over 8,000 deaths and China sustained roughly 2,000 deaths.⁴³ Afterward, Beijing and New Delhi agreed to a ceasefire and created a de facto 20-kilometer-wide (12-mile-wide) demilitarized zone along the border.⁴⁴ The war is generally regarded as a Chinese victory and profoundly shapes India’s relationship with China to this day.

* Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh have grown over the decades. In the mid-1980s, Beijing only claimed a region called Tawang, but in the 2000s it started claiming all of Arunachal Pradesh as “South Tibet.” Aakriti Bachhawat, “India Builds Up Its Northeast in the Face of China’s Claims on ‘South Tibet,’” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, February 22, 2019. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/india-builds-up-its-northeast-in-the-face-of-chinas-claims-on-south-tibet/>.

Figure 2: Disputed Areas in the Ladakh Region, Site of the 2020 Deadly Skirmish



Source: Amy Kazmin, “Twenty Indian Soldiers Killed in Clash with Chinese Troops in Himalayas,” *Financial Times*, June 16, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/15a1cc68-4ab8-4acf-b230-7fe331adca33>.

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Endnotes

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