



**Islamabad
Policy Institute**
Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

The Galwan Valley Fight

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Context of India - China standoff

For over a month, Indian and Chinese troops have been in a renewed confrontation along their disputed border in the Ladakh region.

The Ladakh is part of disputed Jammu & Kashmir territory, currently administered by India as a union territory. Geographically, to its east lies the Chinese Tibet Autonomous Region, Himachal Pradesh (an Indian state) to the south, both the disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir and Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan towards the west and the southwest corner of Xinjiang over the Karakoram Pass in the far north.

Analysts and policymakers have different opinions about the origins of the on-going crisis. For some, 'illegal construction of roads by Indian on LAC with China' led to the face-off, while for others it was because of Indian expansionism.

Since the clash in 1967, the largest loss of life has been reported from the skirmish between China and India on June 15. This loss of life highlights the intensity of the on-going tensions between the two countries since early May. If left unchecked, the situation can deteriorate rapidly, leading to a wider conflagration with unintended consequences.

The latest tensions come at a time when Asia's two largest countries are being led by determined, nationalist leaders who are willing to go to any extent for their respective countries.

The clash in Galwan Valley

For more than 45 years, India and China did not have any armed military confrontation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) except for some occasional heat-ups. Both countries took pride in the fact that there had been peace and tranquility at their contested borders. This changed on June 15, 2020, when during

the de-escalation process, soldiers from both sides engaged in a violent clash near the Galwan river valley area. India has acknowledged losing 20 soldiers including a senior officer of the rank of a colonel. China has admitted casualties but hasn't made public the numbers.

Subsequently, on June 20, Mr. Zhao Lijian, spokesperson of Chinese foreign ministry gave a detailed chronology of the Galwan Valley episode.

Key highlights of the account are below:

Since April, the Indian border forces were building roads, bridges, and constructing other facilities at the LAC around the Galwan Valley. Despite several protests by Chinese authorities, Indian troops continued with their unilateral construction until they provocatively crossed LAC.

On May 6, Indian troops crossed LAC for fortification and erecting barricades. In doing so they encroached into Chinese territory. It is suspected that the provocative action was undertaken intentionally for unilaterally changing the status of control and management.

The Chinese troops were compelled to take necessary measures for responding to the situation on the ground and strengthening management and control in the border areas. Later, China and India attempted to defuse the situation through military and diplomatic channels.

Given the assertive position of the Chinese side, India agreed to pull back the workforce that had crossed the LAC and demolish the newly constructed facilities, which they also did.

On June 6, it was agreed at a commanders' level meeting at the LAC that the tense situation would be eased. Indian troops committed not to cross the estuary of Galwan River to patrol and build facilities. Phased Withdrawal of troops was to be discussed and decided on the ground.

On the evening of June 15, though the situation was easing and returning to normal, Indian troops surprisingly, in violation of the agreement reached at the

commanders' level meeting, crossed the LAC again, suspectedly as a deliberate provocation.

Chinese troops, who had taken part in the negotiations, were attacked violently by India's soldiers, as per the Chinese account. This reportedly led to brutal physical clashes resulting in casualties.

The recent clash at the Galwan River Valley is being seen as a game-changer in India's national security and foreign policy strategy. Underlying dynamics of India-China relations are, therefore, undergoing a far-reaching structural change.

Efforts to defuse the situation

Both India and China have been trying, for the past four decades, to reach a negotiated settlement of the dispute. Talks have, however, not made any substantive progress. This stalemate in negotiations has often led to tense standoffs, much like the recent most one.

In the domains of worldwide force projection, countries should, without any exception, remain within the restrictions of their latent capacity. Stretching that would ultimately hurt those engaging in this adventure. This is a characteristic phenomenon. India has been dreaming of big power status because of an over-estimation of its strengths. Such fantasies get exposed in time and the fall is then painful and comes with unexpected outcomes.

After this Galwan clash, the Indian government and army would need a lot of face-saving. Therefore, political actions, diplomatic activities, and even a military confrontation with some other neighbor can be rightly expected. Concerning China, India is unlikely to escalate further and prefer taking the line of 'smiling Buddha radiating peace'. There could still be some military posturing through troop deployment, and some other similar actions, but nothing more.

China has, meanwhile, tried to ease the situation at the LAC and said that two sides were in constant communication through both their military and the embassies to resolve the issue. The Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has in his statement on the current development and prospects of dialogue said

that the atmosphere was cordial and positive. He said in a statement that "Both sides agreed to peacefully resolve the situation in the border areas in accordance with various bilateral agreements and keeping in view the agreement between the leaders that peace and tranquility in the India-China border regions is essential for the overall development of bilateral relations".

Russia emerged as a key player in this face-off. The defense minister of India Mr. Rajnath Singh visited Moscow soon after the violent clash. The foreign ministers of Russia, China, and India later held a special trilateral video conference on June 23 to deliberate on the situation.

Russia had been closely following the development in the China-India stand-off as it posed a challenge for Russia's Asia policy. Moscow has, however, been very cautious about the issue and Foreign Minister Lavrov ruled out the possibility of his country acting as a mediator between the two.

The upshot of this confrontation is that time has come for India to negotiate a more permanent and long-term solution of Kashmir dispute in a triangular way. The other option is to deal with it militarily, which would not be feasible for any of the stakeholders. The best way forward, therefore, lies in a negotiated settlement.

Modi's domestic political rhetoric

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi seriously miscalculated the current situation and committed a strategic blunder. After the annulment of Article 370 by the Modi government last year, which provided autonomy to the occupied territories, India has complicated the dispute and can no more shun third-party mediation. This has become truer after the Ladakh face-off.

Meanwhile, this has turned into a big issue for India internally as well.

Yogendra Yadav, an Indian politician, believes that the Indian government needs to tone down its rhetoric, rethink strategic, economic, and diplomatic options for recovering from the embarrassment suffered in Galwan.

Till the onset of the latest crisis, India had always tried to present itself to the world as the rightful counter-weight to China being a regional power. But its limitations have been exposed now.

Indian armed forces with their antiquated weaponry and the narrow vision of their commanders and country's political leaders could get further exposed, should they choose to escalate the situation further.

Moreover, the current scenario will strengthen Pakistan's position in Kashmir and also on the CPEC issue. Internal resistance within Occupied Kashmir too is likely to get a morale boost after Nepalese forces challenging Indian troops in what is being seen as a sign of India's diminishing power and conciliatory hubris.

Indian writer Mr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, while questioning the government policies, observes that his country was facing a leadership crisis.

In any case the military environment is turning unpleasant for India. China has exposed India's resolve and muscle. Delhi's prime focus would now be to avoid domestic public embarrassment.

Implications/Future trajectory of the crisis

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has put the country state back at the focal point of geopolitics. China's diplomatic and military countermoves to the anti-China actions across the world and India's assertive dealing with its neighbors, unilateral boundaries, and reestablished regional debates are results of rising patriotism in interstate relations.

India, following the Galwan clash, may not further escalate with China and could seek a conciliatory path, but at the same time, it's also unlikely for it to surrender timidly to China and not oppose any military infrastructural advancements in the contested domains. This is at least improbable after the killing of 20 Indian soldiers.

What rather appears to be more probable is that India won't agree on anything less than Chinese soldiers' withdrawal, while China is unlikely to consent to anything

short of Indian troops giving up anti-China military containment techniques. A recipe for a stalemate even though both India and China are, on the face of things, desirous of de-escalating the current situation.

As a long-term strategy, India could adopt a policy similar to the France-China understanding, and reach an agreement with Beijing on guidelines-based order in the Indo-Pacific. It could pressurize China when it disregards the commitment.

Pakistan's key concern in this situation is that India could go on a regional offensive, and can escalate tensions with Pakistan. Abrupt decision to scale down strength of diplomatic missions in New Delhi and Islamabad reflects India's attempt to divert domestic opinion towards Pakistan from China. Meanwhile, Kashmir situation will become more complicated. Here Pakistan will come under domestic pressure to respond to Indian provocation leading to regional instability.

Nonetheless, Pakistan and China should enhance strategic communication and coordination in the wake of present regional tensions. This will infuse a degree of stability in the fraught regional environment.

For the time being, the eventual fate of the key triangle looks progressively precarious with rivalries aggravating rapidly in the region.

Conclusion

The current India-China stand-off will significantly impact regional security and that of Pakistan, more specifically. Pakistan's chief priority would be sustaining Beijing's economic and military assistance.

The clash in 1962 and the resulting widening of gap between India and China set the foundation of Pak-China 'iron' brotherhood. The then-president of Pakistan Gen Ayub Khan had rightly predicted that the border war may not be permanent, it could be temporary and limited, but its consequences would be a long-lasting.

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