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Another Clash on the India-China Border Underscores Risks of Militarization

While fighting in the politically sensitive Tawang region didn't escalate, mutual trust is approaching a historic low.

Tuesday, December 20, 2022 /

By: Sameer P. Lalwani, Ph.D.; Daniel Markey, Ph.D.; Vikram J. Singh

On December 9, hundreds of Indian and Chinese forces [clashed](#) along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the roughly 2,100 miles contested boundary that separates northern India from China. Neither side used firearms, and no deaths were reported, but both Indian and Chinese forces sustained injuries. The skirmish was the worst since the summer of 2020, when [deadly fighting in the Galwan Valley](#) led to the most significant border escalation in over four decades. In the wake of those 2020 clashes, India and China held [17 rounds](#) of military talks — but have been unable to reach terms for disengagement across key areas of the disputed border.



An Indian military base in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, India. June 9, 2009. (Shiho Fukada/The New York Times)

After this latest incident, Chinese and Indian military commanders met again to defuse any risk of further escalation. In a parliamentary briefing, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh [claimed](#) the incident began when Chinese troops crossed the LAC in the Tawang sector to “unilaterally change the status quo.” Chinese sources disputed that characterization of events, but [claimed](#) the situation on the border was “under control.”

USIP's Sameer Lalwani, Daniel Markey and Vikram Singh look at the significance of this latest clash in Tawang, what this means for broader trends in China-India relations, whether there's a risk of further escalation, and a possible role for the international community in calming tensions.

Can you explain the significance of the location of this latest violence — in Tawang — and the distinction from where clashes took place in 2020?

Markey: The LAC runs slightly longer than the U.S.-Mexico border, including stretches of extraordinarily remote, mountainous terrain. Tawang is in the LAC's "eastern sector," at the edge of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. The main clashes of 2020 took place nearly 1,000 miles to the northwest in the Galwan Valley, while another important India-China standoff, at Doklam in 2017, played out in between the two at the "tri-junction" where western Bhutan meets India and China.

The relatively flat Tibetan plateau buttresses the Chinese side of the LAC, and China has constructed a modern transit network to rapidly ferry troops across different border sectors. Defending the LAC thus presents extremely difficult and wide-ranging military challenges for India.

Of the various points along the LAC, Tawang holds unusual significance for both China and India. It is the site of an important Tibetan Buddhist monastery, believed to be where the sixth Dalai Lama was born in 1683. Beijing's extreme sensitivities over Tibetan politics — including the question of the identity of the next Dalai Lama — play into their special attention to Tawang.

Beyond merely disputing India's specific demarcation of the LAC in the area, China [claims](#) the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as "Southern Tibet" or "Zangnan." Beijing has raised diplomatic objections to even infrequent visits there by the Dalai Lama and other leaders and has [refused](#) to grant residents of the state regular visas for travel to China.

India rejects all such claims. New Delhi sees Arunachal Pradesh as integral to India's territory and strategically vital for defending the rest of Northeast India. Whereas other remote, scarcely populated patches of territory along the LAC [could shift](#) between the effective military control of India and China without major consequence, Tawang is politically non-negotiable.

How does this episode fit within the evolving context of India-China relations?

Markey: In many ways, this skirmish comes as a surprise at this point in time. On the sidelines of the Bali G-20 meetings in November, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi finally spoke, albeit briefly, for the first time since 2020.

After the meeting, it appeared that India would now look ahead to 2023, when it will host two major international gatherings that include China: the G-20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

For its part, Beijing has repeatedly [pressed](#) New Delhi to move past the 2020 skirmish, [normalize](#) the relationship and focus on areas of mutual interest — including booming bilateral trade and regional governance. Given this context, Modi and Xi would appear to have ample reasons to shelve their border dispute, at least temporarily, and attend to other pressing matters.

Yet in other ways, the Tawang incident was all too predictable. Steady and significant investments in enhanced border defense infrastructure by the Chinese and Indian armies have brought their forces into more [frequent contact](#) and created incentives for each side to jockey for tactical advantage. Indian leaders also [reportedly feared](#) that although they had managed to reinforce LAC positions in the west, Arunachal Pradesh remained an area of vulnerability.

Although Tawang may not prompt a dramatic new downturn in India-China relations, it is certain to reinforce India's underlying mistrust of China, which will make it harder for Modi and Xi to build on whatever bonhomie they shared in Bali.

What is the potential for serious military escalation?

Singh: Leaders in India and China view the potential for uncontrolled escalation along the Line of Control to be low, despite regular clashes like those in Doklam, Galwan and now Tawang. This relative comfort — even with their forces stationed face-to-face on high alert — stems from two factors.

First, the two sides have a series of [agreements](#) going back to 1993 to manage their disputed border. In 2005, the two sides agreed on a [protocol](#) for implementing their border management commitments, reiterating that "the two sides will resolve the boundary question through peaceful and friendly consultations, including a bilateral commitment to resolve border issues by peaceful means."

Second, India and China are confident that as nuclear powers, they have sufficient mutual deterrence to ensure the other party will seek to de-escalate flare-ups rather than risk a war.

The fatalities at Galwan in 2020 came as a shock, however, and serve as a good reminder that even fisticuffs between large, nuclear-armed neighbors carry risk. Though the rules set out in bilateral agreements included a ban on the use of firearms — a commitment both sides have kept — the brutality of the hand-to-hand combat seen along the LAC can be destabilizing in its own way. Having soldiers bludgeoned with makeshift clubs and spears and thrown to their deaths off cliffs into icy rivers had a deep impact on both the public and political leaders on either side. In both China and India, the fallen and wounded of Galwan were heralded as martyrs.

So, while the two sides used their mechanisms to de-escalate and reaffirm agreements, Sino-India relations reached a new low after Galwan and have yet to recover. And even with tactical de-escalation, the strategic escalation of tensions between India and China continues with substantial upgrades of military infrastructure and the permanent deployments of additional troops to the area.

Meanwhile, India restricted Chinese investment into its technology and infrastructure sectors and outright banned Chinese apps like TikTok. And across the Indo-Pacific, common views about Chinese assertiveness have led to closer military and technology cooperation between India and other countries in the region — such as the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the United States) — who seek to compete with China for influence and deter Chinese aggression in the region.

For decades, China and India believed they would not see border clashes result in the loss of life. That changed unexpectedly in Galwan. With the border more militarized than ever and trust at a historic low, risks of escalation cannot be dismissed.

Is there anything the United States or the international community can do to help calm tensions?

Lalwani: As a major power with a highly capable military, India is accustomed to periodic tensions on its border with China and desires political support from its friends — but without that support tying its hands. U.S. support for India, while welcomed, must tread carefully so as to not conflate the recently intensified U.S.-China rivalry with the long-standing India-China border dispute. As a strategic partner to India, the United States can back India's position by opposing unilateral, militarized efforts to change status quo borders while deferring to India's efforts to cool temperatures.

The United States has already taken these prudent positions. The Pentagon [stated](#) it “fully support[s] India's ongoing efforts to de-escalate this situation” while characterizing the recent clash in Tawang as part of a pattern of provocative behavior by China. The U.S. State Department also [opposed](#) “any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions, military or civilian.”

As an added step, U.S. leaders can privately rally support for India among U.S. allies and partners, just as they have done for Ukraine over the past year. Public admonitions of territorial incursions and support for de-escalation from European and East Asian capitals might help to shape some of China's decision-making.

Beyond expressions of support for India and de-escalation of tensions, over the medium term, the United States could support its strategic partner's preparations to deter and defend against such incursions so that they don't escalate into confrontations and crises. The United States could support India's military modernization through the development and acquisition of advanced military platforms designed for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. Such a network of advanced sensors with persistent coverage of the border would allow for early warning of potential incursions and would bolster “[deterrence by detection](#).” The United States could also complement these efforts with more routinized intelligence-sharing, joint training, multi-domain military exercises and wargaming.

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