

India-China Border Clash - UPSC Notes

Twenty Indian soldiers lost their lives in the recent border skirmishes with China, in the Galwan Valley. This was the fiercest border conflict with China to have occurred after the 1962 war. This is an important topic for the **UPSC** International Relations segment. In this article, you can read all about the India-China conflict, its repercussions, what it means for India in terms of relations with China, and also the way forward.

Context:

- Violence in the Galwan Valley on the India-China border has claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers.

Where is Galwan Valley?



- The valley refers to the land that sits between steep mountains that buffet the Galwan River.
- The River has its source in Aksai Chin, on China's side of the LAC, and it flows from the east to Ladakh, where it meets the Shyok River on India's side of the LAC.
- The valley is strategically located between Ladakh in the west and Aksai Chin in the east, which is currently controlled by China as part of its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.
- At its western end are the Shyok River and the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulet Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road. Its eastern mouth lies not far from China's vital Xinjiang Tibet road, now called the G219 highway.

Where does the Line of Actual Control lie?

- The LAC lies east of the confluence of the Galwan and Shyok rivers in the valley, up to which both India and China have been patrolling in recent years.
- After the June 15 clash, however, China has claimed that the entire valley lies on its side of the LAC.

Territorial claims and LAC claims

- They are not the same. The distinction between territorial claims and LAC claims is sometimes blurred.
- The LAC refers to territory under the effective control of each side, not to their entire territorial claim. For instance, India's territorial claims extend 38,000 sq km on the other side of the LAC across all of Aksai Chin, but the LAC India observes runs through the valley.

It is true that the LAC has never been demarcated and there are differences in perception of where it lies in more than a dozen spots, but there have not been previous incidents in the valley.

Why the Indian Army did not use firearms?

Background

- Indian troops were armed. All troops on border duty always carry arms, especially when leaving the post.
- Those at Galwan too did carry arms. But, long-standing practice (as per 1996 & 2005 agreements) did not allow the use of firearms during faceoffs.

1996 Agreement

- The 1996 agreement is on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas.
- **Article VI (1) of the 1996 agreement** says "With a view to preventing dangerous military activities along the line of actual control in the India-China border areas... Neither side shall open fire, cause bio-degradation, use hazardous

chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosives within **two kilometres from the line of actual control**. This prohibition shall not apply to routine firing activities in small arms firing ranges.”

- However, it is **Article VI (4) that is more applicable in the current instance**: “If the border personnel of the two sides come in a face-to-face situation due to differences on the alignment of the line of actual control or any other reason, they shall exercise self-restraint and take all necessary steps to avoid an escalation of the situation. Both sides shall also enter into immediate consultations through diplomatic and/or other available channels to review the situation and prevent any escalation of tension.”

2005 Agreement

- **In Article 1**: “the two sides will resolve the boundary question through peaceful and friendly consultations. Neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means”.
- The **2013 Agreement on Border Defence Cooperation** also stated that neither side shall use its military capability against the other.

Since no round has been fired on the Sino-India border in Ladakh after 1962 and with a view to preventing any escalation, these routines of not firing have been drilled into the soldiers.

Possible factors for Chinese aggression:

India's border infrastructure:

- India has been strengthening its border infrastructure along the LAC.
- The strengthening of the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi road may have angered the Chinese. The Chinese demand in the ongoing negotiations is also premised on India stopping its infrastructure development.

Change in the status of J&K:

- One popular argument is that China's move is driven by local factors such as India's decision to change the status of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Read more on this in the article, [Article 370](#).

Bilateral tensions:

- The relations between the two countries have been steadily deteriorating.
- India has been against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#). China further views India's assertions regarding Gilgit-Baltistan as an implicit attack on the CPEC.
- India has put curbs and restrictions on Chinese foreign direct investment.

China's internal dynamics:

- The internal pressures that have been generated within China — in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are also influencing Chinese behaviour.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is the most serious health crisis that China has faced since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Chinese economy has been on the downslide which is also contributing to increasing political pressure on the country's leadership.
- The coupling of political and economic tensions has greatly aggravated pressures on Chinese leadership and the rising tide of anti-China sentiment the world over has further worsened matters.
- Chinese aggression has been observed not only along the LAC but also in the South China Sea. This might indicate a deliberate planning on the part of the Chinese leadership to divert attention from domestic issues.

India's alignment with the U.S.:

- While India professes to be non-aligned, it is increasingly perceived as having aligned with the U.S.
- India's United States tilt is perhaps most pronounced in the domain of U.S.-China relations. Recent instances are often highlighted to confirm the perception that India tends to side with the U.S. and against China whenever there is a conflict of interest between the two.
 - An evident degree of geopolitical convergence also exists between the U.S. and India in the Indo-Pacific, again directed against China.
 - India is a member of the Quad (the U.S., Japan, Australia and India) which has a definite anti-China connotation.

- The U.S. President's proposal of redesigning the [G-7](#), including countries such as India (India has conveyed its acceptance), but excluding China, provides China yet another instance of India and China being in opposite camps.
- India is being increasingly projected as an alternative model to China, and being co-opted into a wider anti-China alliance which China clearly perceives as a provocation.

India's traditional clout in its neighbourhood was slipping:

- For India, tensions with Pakistan have been high keeping the troops occupied in the border areas.
- Nepal raised boundary issues with India.
- Sri Lanka is diversifying its foreign policy and China is making deep inroads into that region.
- Bangladesh was deeply miffed with the [Citizenship Amendment Act](#).
- Even in Afghanistan, where Pakistan, China, Russia and the U.S. are involved in the transition process, India is out.

A confluence of all these factors, which point to a decline in the country's smart power, allowed China to make aggressive moves on the LAC.

Concerns:

- Though the LAC has never been demarcated there had not been previous incidents in the valley. By now staking a claim to the entire Galwan Valley and up to the confluence of the rivers, China is, in India's view, unilaterally altering the LAC.
- This goes against the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA), under which India and China agreed to strictly respect and observe the LAC between the two sides.

Undemarcated borders:

- The alignment of the LAC has never been agreed upon, and it has neither been delineated nor demarcated.
- There is no official map in the public domain that depicts the LAC. The current understanding of the LAC reflects the territories that are, at present, under the control of each side, pending a resolution of the boundary dispute.

Difference in claims:

- For the most part, in the western sector, the LAC broadly corresponds with the border as China sees it. However, India and China do not agree on the alignment of the LAC everywhere.
- Differences in perception, particularly in 13 spots in the western, middle and eastern sectors of the border, often lead to what are called "face-offs", when patrols encounter each other in these grey zones that lie in between the different alignments. Some of these areas are Chumar, Demchok and the north bank of the Pangong Lake in the western sector, Barahoti in the middle sector, and Sumdorong Chu in the east.

Chinese tactics:

- China has in several territorial disputes, intentionally left its claims ambiguous.
- The Chinese haven't stuck to their previously agreed positions. China's alignments of the LAC have kept changing.
- The border skirmishes along the Line of Actual Control seem to be indicative of the Chinese approach to use the border problem to pressurize India on other issues.

Where did we go wrong?

- **Refusal to respond** once the issue was discovered.
- Loss of nerve in backing the **ground troops**.
- Sharing the harsh **ground reality** with the nation.
 - The general public was not informed about Chinese aggression.
 - Though it is true that sharing every detail in the public domain is not possible when it comes to negotiating sensitive issues of national security.
 - Indeed, the solution to the current crisis, and the disengagement that is needed urgently at various points along the LAC, can make progress only through diplomacy. At the same time, a blanket of silence hardly serves the government's interests.

- The absence of timely and credible information will only fuel speculation and alarm.
- The statement from the highest administrative office has to be clear without any ambiguity.
- There has been an obsession concerning the threat from Pakistan, ignoring the Chinese hostility and timely moves.

Intelligence Failure

- The principal responsibility for intelligence assessment and analysis concerning China rests with the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), and to a lesser extent, the Defence Intelligence Agency.
- R&AW's lack of domain expertise and inadequacy of China specialists might also have been a contributory factor.
- Lack of long-term **foreign policy foresight** combined with intelligence failure to anticipate the Chinese incursion is a factor.

Summit diplomacy

- "Summit conferences apply to the meeting of heads of government of the leading powers in an effort to reach broad measures of agreement".

Why are there more summits?

- The rise of summitry is a consequence of the paucity of resources of smaller nations who are less able to finance and sustain a vast diplomatic service and thus rely on summits for representation and negotiation.
- It will speed up the process as heads of countries are directly negotiating.

Concerns

- The preference given recently to summit diplomacy over **traditional foreign policy-making structures** proved to be a severe handicap.
- Summit diplomacy cannot be a substitute for carefully structured foreign office policymaking.
- Summits put professional diplomats briefly into the shade.
 - India believed the tensions between India and China were diffused after the Doklam crisis as we had meetings at the highest level in Wuhan and Mamallapuram.
 - Personal bonhomie with leaders will not result in friendly ties with countries.
 - Prime Minister Nehru had a good equation with Premier Zhou En-lai.

What's next?

- Bilateral relations in other areas will be under considerable strain. Soft landings cannot be expected.
- No leadership-level contact between the top leaders of the two countries can be anticipated in the near term.
- Indian businesses in China and Chinese business operations in India can expect the going to be tougher than before. The scenario of trade and investments could encounter similar obstacles.
- In areas that impinge on national security, as in the cyber field and in telecommunications, and in technologies that enable spying and surveillance (5G, for instance), stringent controls, exclusions and clampdowns can be expected in the treatment and the entry of Chinese companies in India.

Should India remain Non-Aligned?

Yes

- The circumstances that led to the India-China war of 1962 offers an analysis of the Chinese approach.
- Faced with the disaster of the Great Leap Forward and increasing isolation globally, the Chinese chose to strike at India rather than confront Russia or the West.
- This is not the time for India to be seen as the front end of a belligerent coalition of forces seeking to put China in its place.
- India has consistently followed a different policy in the past, and it is advisable that it remains truly non-aligned and not become part of any coalition that would not be in India's long-term interest.

No

- It will be in India's economic and strategic interests to align with the US and the Western world which will remain together despite the fissures under Trump. **India needs investments, technology, and a manufacturing ecosystem to employ millions of its young population** and improve its living standards.
 - It requires advanced weapons and technologies for its military.
 - India is ambitious and wants to be a great power and the US and the Western world recognise this and are willing to partner India.
- The US is in talks with India to restructure Global Supply Chains. The US is encouraging its companies to look at India as an alternative to China.
 - This presents a big opportunity for India whose continental size, large market, young and skilled labour, and shared values with the West makes it an attractive destination. In fact, an alliance of democracies could crystallise with economic cooperation at its core.
- Defence ties between the two have been cemented with increasing weapons sales and important defence agreements.
 - There are regular bilateral and multilateral military exercises and dialogues on economic and strategic cooperation.
- On the other hand, Beijing wants to keep India boxed into South Asia, and tries to keep it off balance using Pakistan to which it supplies arms and supports. It has made inroads into the region using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
 - It continues to block India's membership in the [Nuclear Suppliers Group \(NSG\)](#) and continues to needle New Delhi in the UNSC over Kashmir.

Much of India's diplomacy in the last few years has been to counter China and its influence. India faces China as a competitor in Africa, West Asia, Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Indo-US ties are complementary, and a formal alliance will help realise the full potential of these relations.

Conclusion

- Non-alignment or being a swing state makes sense if the gains to be derived from either side are equal. China will not be to India, what the Soviet Union was.
- In the post-COVID-19 world, India will have to make a disruptive choice — of alignment.

Way forward:

Given the current circumstances, India should strategize an action plan aimed towards protecting its sovereign interests.

Prepare militarily:

- India needs to be prepared, continue to build roads and improve the infrastructure along the border, to keep itself ready to deal with any contingency.
- India must improve the military capacity of the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command given its immense geostrategic value, as it overlooks Asia's maritime strategic lifeline and the world's most important global sea lane.

Pressure points:

- India could choose to leverage the sensitivity of the Chinese to the one-China policy and other vulnerabilities like the Tibet issue and Hong Kong protests, to force a change in China's attitude.
- This would allow India to signal to China that it has options, and that China would be wise not to escalate these situations too far.

Shifting focus:

- To counter China India must look for options beyond LAC.
- The South China Sea/Indian Ocean Region maritime domain presents India with the best options where the regional geopolitical context is favourable.
 - India should demonstrate that it is willing and capable of influencing the maritime balance in East Asia, where China faces off a combination of the United States, Vietnam, Australia, Indonesia and sometimes Malaysia and the Philippines as well.
 - China perceives a vulnerability in the Malacca strait given its marked dependence on the sea lines of communication for its vast trade and energy imports.

Going global:

- India should go global to defend against China. India's counter to Chinese power in the Himalayas should be to assume a more global role of its own.
- In Asia and Africa, debt-traps induced by the BRI are gradually stoking discontent. If India focuses on leveraging its advantages as a development partner, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era, it can use its newfound influence as a bargaining chip against Chinese interests in these countries.

Building alliances:

- India must build power-balancing alliances.
- Many countries are seeking leadership from other quarters to counter-balance Chinese influence. In Southeast Asia, countries are pushing back against Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.
 - This provides an opportunity to build partnerships with such countries to balance China's growing influence.
- India can give itself leverage against China by improving its bilateral relationships with other countries that are similarly worried about China's growing influence — such as Australia, Vietnam, Japan, and even the U.K.
- Several foreign policy experts argue that India's strategic dealing with China has to begin with South Asia. In this regard, it is important to reinvigorate SAARC.
 - One way to reinvigorate SAARC is to revive the process of South Asian economic integration.

Aligning with the United States:

- This is also an opportunity for India to align its interests much more strongly and unequivocally with the U.S. as a principal strategic partner.
- A closer alignment with the U.S. represents India's opportunity to counter China, while efforts to foster regional partnerships and cultivate domestic military capabilities, although insufficient by themselves, could play a complementary role.
- Moving into a closer partnership with the US would allow India an opportunity to rebalance the Indo-Pacific region.
- India should also infuse more energy into its relations with Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN.

Taking the long view:

- India's leverage and balancing power within the Indo-Pacific and the world beyond stems from its strong democratic credentials, the dynamism of its economy, its leading role in multilateral institutions, and the strategic advantage of its maritime geography — an asset possessed by few other nations, and which must be deployed much more effectively to counterbalance the Chinese ingress into this oceanic space that surrounds us.
- The events in Galwan Valley should be a wake-up call to many of India's Asian friends and partners enabling a high-resolution envisioning of Chinese aggressiveness.

Conclusion:

- Good neighbourhood relations are crucial for national stability and well-being.
- If India is to disengage from economic involvement with China and build the capacities and capabilities it needs in manufacturing, and in supply chain networks closer home, it cannot be a prisoner of the short term.
- It is time for India to boldly take the long view in this area as also on its South Asia policy.
- India cannot continue to remain in a "reactive mode" to Chinese provocations and it is time to take an active stand. Since India's choices vis-à-vis China are circumscribed by the asymmetry in military power, resort must be sought in realpolitik.
- This would force China to reconsider its tactics and force it towards negotiations with India.

