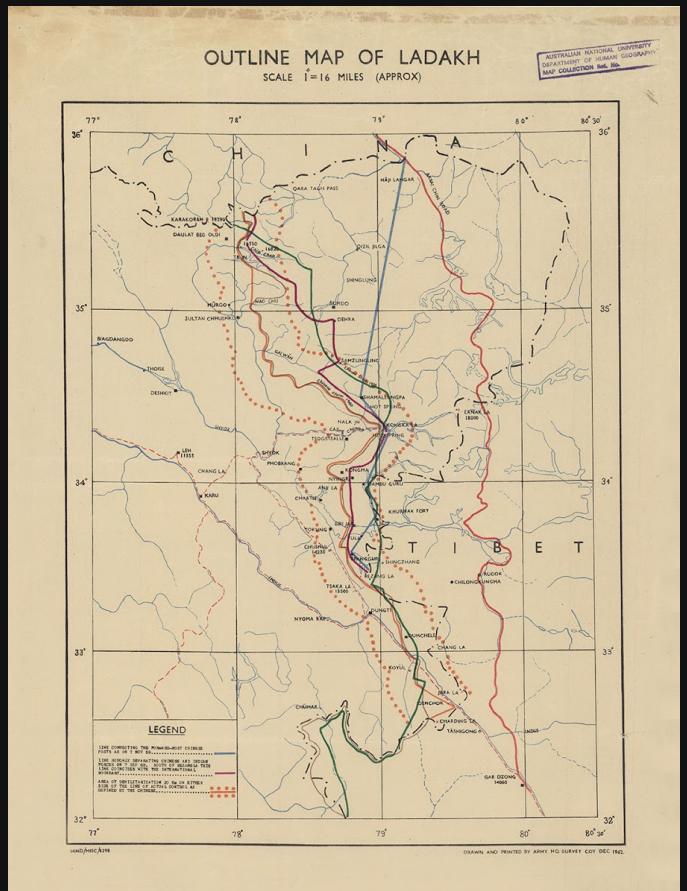


# Out of Control

How China outmanoeuvred the Modi government and seized control of territory along the LAC

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A map of the India-China border in Ladakh, depicting the 1956 and 1960 claim lines of China, as well as lines of actual control before and after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

**FOR THE FIRST TIME** in forty-five years, on 15 June 2020, India and China recorded the death of Indian soldiers on the Line of Actual Control—the contested border between the two countries, which stretches from the Karakoram Pass in the west to Myanmar in the east. The deaths occurred in the Galwan Valley, in Ladakh, and these were the first military casualties in the territory since the 1962 Sino-India War. The full details of the incident are shrouded in ambiguity, but it involved Chinese soldiers pitching tents around the Galwan Valley and their forceful eviction by the Indian Army—there is little clarity on whether China’s People’s Liberation Army had agreed to abandon these positions. This led to a clash which claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers and at least four PLA soldiers. More than seventy Indian soldiers were injured while nearly a hundred more, including some officers, were taken captive by the Chinese. No Chinese soldier was in Indian captivity. “We were taken by surprise by how well prepared they were for the clash,” a top officer at the army headquarters in Delhi, who was part of the decision-making in the Ladakh crisis, told me.

The LAC has neither been delineated on the map nor demarcated on the ground by either side. The last attempt to do so failed nearly two decades ago. The difference in the two sides' understanding of it is so vast that New Delhi claims the border between the two countries is 3,488 kilometres long while China says it is only around two thousand. It is the world's longest disputed border. As the two countries do not agree on where the "actual control" exercised by either side ends, both are engaged in an uncompromising contest of asserting control over small parcels of land in a desolate Himalayan wasteland. The demonstration of territorial claims can take several forms, including soldiers patrolling up to certain points, building infrastructure along the border and controlling the limits to which people in border villages are allowed to graze their animals. The unforgiving terrain and harsh weather have not dissuaded India and China from deploying around fifty thousand additional soldiers each on the 832-kilometre LAC in Ladakh since the summer of 2020.

The deadly Galwan clash occurred at patrolling point PP14—an area that was not until then disputed, and which the Indian Army patrolled regularly. Days after it, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared in Delhi that the Chinese had not "intruded into our border, nor has any post been taken over by them"—an attempt at saving face that China gleefully seized upon as proof that it had not encroached upon Indian territory. The clamour around the deaths and the release of captive Indian soldiers, however, had blown the lid off the government's attempts to play down the crisis in Ladakh. The situation had already come to public notice in India a month earlier because of massive physical clashes on the north bank of Pangong Lake, also in Ladakh. There were severe injuries on both sides, but no deaths. These major episodes marked the border crisis of the summer of 2020, even though tension had been building for months before that.

Two and a half years later, the state of ties between the two neighbours can be aptly described as "No War, No Peace." This was an expression used by military officers more than two decades ago to describe the situation on the border in the restive Kashmir region between India

and Pakistan—the Line of Control. The two situations are materially different, but the terminology makes a connection that was pointed out to me by a senior Indian military commander who was involved in handling the Ladakh crisis. When I asked him about the thinking that impelled military actions leading into the crisis in the summer of 2020, he said, “Do not treat China on the LAC like Pakistan on the LoC.”

While India has dominated Pakistan militarily on the LoC with aggressive actions for nearly three decades, similar attempts against China have led to adverse outcomes. Since 2020, the PLA has denied India control over at least a thousand square kilometres of territory, according to most media reports. Others, such as Manoj Joshi in his new book *Understanding the India–China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya*, estimate it to be two thousand square kilometres. Control has been denied by not allowing the Indian military to patrol several areas it regularly accessed before. The PLA has constructed massive infrastructure in the contested regions, including airfields, heliports, habitats, roads and bridges, which have been documented by satellite imagery.



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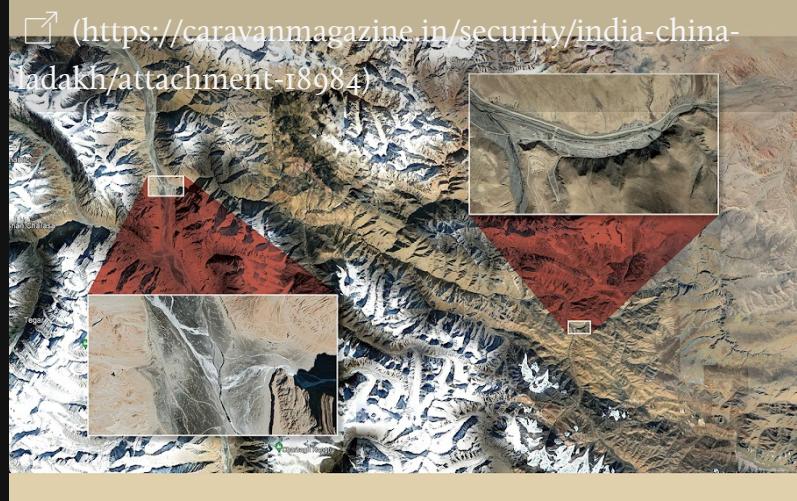
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India is struggling to find a way to reverse the Chinese incursions. New Delhi has deployed a mass of soldiers to prevent any further loss to the Chinese but no longer insists on the restoration of the situation as it existed in Ladakh in April 2020. This is the most open acknowledgement yet that the Chinese have altered the status quo permanently, essentially presenting India with a fait accompli. No

longer describing it as a border dispute, Beijing now calls it a “sovereignty issue,” which makes any compromise on India’s terms difficult. The two countries have agreed to step back by a few kilometres each in the Galwan Valley; the north bank of Pangong from Finger 3 to Finger 8—military terms for mountain ridges extending into the lake; the mountain passes Rezang La and Rechin La in the Kailash range; at the patrolling point PP17A at Gogra; and, as of September this year, at PP15 at Kurang Nala. There is a moratorium on patrolling in these buffer zones. By agreeing to them, India has, in effect, ceded control over its own claimed territories. The Indian Army can no longer patrol areas it had access to earlier. Nor are residents of these areas satisfied as the new limitations also deny them grazing areas and affect their livelihoods. Recent media reports state that people living in border villages see the latest disengagement as India “surrendering control” of its territory.

After the September disengagement at PP15, a spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry ruled out any return to the April 2020 situation, asserting that Beijing does not accept “the so-called status quo created by India’s illegal crossing of the Line of Actual Control.” In the 16 rounds of talks between senior commanders of the two armies, the Chinese have refused to discuss the militarily important areas of Depsang and Demchok—where earlier standoffs took place in 2013 and 2015, respectively. “While we have made progress,” General Manoj Pande, the chief of army staff, recently said at a public event, “we still have two friction points where we need to move forward. We are hopeful that by talking both at the diplomatic and the military level, we will be able to find a resolution. That is our main aim before we look at de-escalation.”



Satellite image of the Ladakh landscape with close up of infrastructure built in the area. Control has been denied by not allowing the Indian military to patrol several areas it regularly accessed before. COURTESY - GOOGLE EARTH

Bereft of alternatives, since the crisis began, New Delhi has been constrained to shifting its forces away from the border with its traditional adversary, Pakistan, and to the China border instead. To avoid the nightmare of a two-front war, the Modi government, in 2020, asked the United Arab Emirates to intervene in talks with Pakistan, reversing a longstanding Indian policy of no third-party mediation. In February 2021, this led to the reiteration of the 2003 ceasefire along the LoC and the opening of back-channel communications with the Pakistani establishment.

These perceived signs of weakness vis-à-vis Pakistan and China are anathema to Modi's strongman image. His hyper-nationalist government has chosen an undemocratic domestic strategy of keeping the Indian public in the dark by not formally providing any authentic information about the ground situation along the border, denying access to journalists and blocking questions and discussions in parliament. According to Kenneth Juster, the US ambassador to India between 2017 and 2021, the Modi government asked Washington DC to not mention China's border aggression in its statements. This opacity can be a short-term fix but contains the seeds of a bigger crisis that cannot be kept concealed for long.

Meanwhile, even on the eastern side of the LAC, senior military commanders have confirmed reports of China building significant new

infrastructure, including bridges, roads and accommodation for troops. Arunachal Pradesh shares a 1,126-kilometre border with China, while Sikkim shares a 220-kilometre border. In 2019, Tapir Gao, a Bharatiya Janata Party MP from Arunachal Pradesh, told the Lok Sabha that China had occupied “fifty to sixty kilometres” of Indian territory. “If there will be a Doklam-like standoff in the future, it will be in Arunachal Pradesh,” he said, referring to a major 2017 standoff between the two countries. In January 2021, the media reported a minor faceoff at Naku La, in north Sikkim. Pande spoke about the existing gaps that needed to be filled on this side of the LAC. “In the context of our eastern region, where there is a lot to be done, we are focussing on creating infrastructure, road connectivity right up to the border,” he said.

Despite these continuing tensions along the LAC, the Modi government’s political or economic pressure against China—through the ban on apps, stringent rules for investment and raids on Chinese companies—to gain leverage has been weak at most. In diplomatic talks, Indian representatives are no longer demanding a reset to the status quo of April 2020. At the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, held in Uzbekistan this September, Modi and the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, shared a stage for the first time since the Ladakh crisis but held no bilateral talks. They did not even greet each other after posing for a group photo. This belied the bonhomie the two men supposedly shared over many years, about which much has been written in the Indian media.

Modi himself has a long association with China. When he was denied a visa by the United States after the 2002 Gujarat pogroms, he became a frequent traveller to India’s northern neighbour. On each occasion, he supposedly returned with commitments of greater Chinese investment in Gujarat. While campaigning before the 2014 general election, Modi expressed admiration for the Chinese model and said India should replicate it. “The arithmetic and chemistry of our relations convinced me that together we can script history and create a better tomorrow for all of mankind,” he said after his first meeting with Xi, at the 2014

BRICS summit in Brazil. Eight years later, that assessment lies in tatters.

Thanks to the Modi government's hyper-nationalist propaganda, such is the distance of public perception from reality that a recent survey of seven thousand Indians by the Stimson Center found that 69.3 percent of respondents said India would "definitely" or "probably" defeat both China and Pakistan in a war, with the figure climbing to nearly ninety percent for defeating only Pakistan. These deluded views further add to the existing risk of conflict in Ladakh due to the augmented deployment of soldiers by both armies within close proximity in disputed areas. A public that mistakenly thinks a military victory is a foregone conclusion for India presses the government to go further in its optics to keep that expectation alive, creating conditions for bigger blunders. The Indian government uses the euphemism of "friction points" to describe areas of PLA ingress. It is exactly this "friction" that has the capacity to light a bigger fire.



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IN AUGUST 2019, months after the Modi government was voted into power for a second time, it scotched the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir. It simultaneously bifurcated the state of Jammu and Kashmir into the two union territories of Ladakh, and Jammu and Kashmir. The home minister, Amit Shah, vowed in parliament to give his life for the integrity of Jammu and Kashmir. He added that the territory included Aksai Chin, which is controlled by China but

claimed by India in its maps. Beijing reacted strongly, urging New Delhi “to be cautious in its words and deeds on the border issue, strictly abide by the relevant agreements reached between the two sides, and avoid taking actions that further complicate the border issue.”

Modi rushed his foreign minister, S Jaishankar, to Beijing to placate the Chinese, but to little avail. A few days later, in an informal closed-door session of the United Nations Security Council, the Chinese representative lodged a protest, saying India’s actions had “challenged the Chinese sovereign interests and violated bilateral agreements on maintaining peace and stability in the border area.” The statements continued from Beijing, and satellite imagery analysed by Chris Biggers, the director of the geospatial analytics company HawkEye360, “suggested that China broke ground on much of the military-related infrastructure near the border in August 2019 (or shortly thereafter).” These signs of trouble were missed as New Delhi was smitten by the prospect of Xi’s visit to Mamallapuram, near Chennai, in October that year, for an informal summit with Modi.

Chennai was the second informal summit between the two leaders. The year before, both men had promised to provide “strategic guidance” to their respective militaries at the first such meeting, in Wuhan, held at Modi’s request. These summits were seen as signalling a reset of bilateral ties after the 2017 Doklam crisis by building on a personal equation between Xi and Modi. An editorial in *China Daily*, Beijing’s flagship English newspaper, stated that the Chennai summit demonstrated that the two governments “cherish the opportunity to improve bilateral ties through the personal chemistry between their top leaders.” In his opening remarks at the summit, Modi coined the catchphrase “Chennai Connect” to mark the “start of a new era of cooperation between the two countries.” A senior editor at *Firstpost* wrote that “we are slowly moving into an era of personal diplomacy where ties between nations are better managed through relation between top leadership instead of structured systems.” Considering that this was the seventeenth meeting between Xi and Modi since both

assumed office, things seemed rosy as the two leaders posed for photos in Tamil Nadu.

What the Indian public did not know was that tensions had been brewing since at least a month earlier at Pangong Tso, a scenic 135-kilometre-long saltwater lake of which two-thirds is controlled by China. The Indian commander in the area had been trying to improve his positions on the north bank, to the resentment of the PLA. The lake, and its north bank, is a disputed area, and often the site of tensions—including shoving and jostling on occasion—between soldiers of both sides. In the wake of Shah’s statement on Aksai Chin, the actions of the local Indian commander were perhaps interpreted differently, leading to events escalating quickly into a big clash between the two sides. After the clash, in September, the injured Indian soldiers had to be flown to Leh. The push for better tactical positions continued after the winter, building up to a major clash on 5 May 2020.

In early 2020, in the Depsang plains, close to Karakoram Pass and part of the militarily vital Daulat Beg Oldie sector, the PLA violated an informal understanding allowing mutual patrolling up to a certain distance beyond a place called Bottleneck, or Y-junction. A Chinese patrol breached that understanding and came up to China’s claim-line near Burtse. As a retaliatory measure, the Indian Army decided to block PLA patrols at Bottleneck. The PLA responded by parking some vehicles at the same place and blocking India’s access to five patrolling points—PP10, PP11, PP11A, PP12 and PP13—along the Raki and Jeevan streams. This had been the site of a previous standoff, in 2013, which was resolved in two weeks with a reciprocal Indian action in Chumar, in south-eastern Ladakh. At the time, both sides agreed to withdraw their troops from the disputed area. “Early warning facilitated by strategic surveillance should enable us to deploy at our perceived LAC to check ingress, while we simultaneously resort to a quid pro quo, as we did during the Depsang intrusion in 2013,” Lieutenant General KT Parnaik, a former chief of the Northern Command, told the *Indian Express* in July 2020. “Early response creates leverage and that matters.”

But no such early response was forthcoming from the Indian side in 2020.

Unrelated to all this, the Indian Army had decided to improve its access to PP14 by constructing a 60-metre Bailey bridge on a rivulet beyond the Shyok River, so that its patrolling parties could also travel in vehicles, as was the case with the PLA. This was to cut the time taken to reach the patrolling point by several hours. After the Galwan clash, that June, the Chinese state-owned broadcaster CCTV showed footage from the early summer of Indian Army reconnaissance teams trying to find the best alignment in the area. This effort was contested by the Chinese and became a major flashpoint between the two sides. Tensions quickly erupted, and an Indian helicopter carrying a local military commander was reportedly chased down and harassed mid-air by the PLA. The senior military commander involved in the Ladakh crisis told me that these were all discrete tactical incidents, but the Chinese chose to connect the dots and saw them as part of a larger Indian plan. The commander, who has served in the area many times in various ranks over the past 15 years, accepted that the Indian military leadership in Ladakh should have been able to foresee China's assessment and its likely response.

Even Indian surveillance and intelligence facilities failed to provide warning as the PLA moved two divisions from nearby exercise areas to the LAC in Ladakh and took control of areas claimed and patrolled by India. It painted a huge map of China, its national flag and a slogan in Mandarin near Finger 4 and 5 on the north bank of Pangong, which were distinctly visible in satellite imagery. By this time, the Indian Army was unable to patrol in Depsang, Pangong, Gogra, Hot Spring and Demchok, while a no-patrol zone had been created in Galwan Valley after the clash. India also built up its forces and had nearly fifty thousand additional soldiers in the area by the autumn.

□ (https://caravanmagazine.in/security/india-china-ladakh/attachment-18985)



The PLA painted a huge map of China, its national flag and a slogan in Mandarin near Finger 4 and 5 on the north bank of Pangong, distinctly visible in satellite imagery. It agreed to remove these in a barter deal with India later. COURTESY - GOOGLE EARTH

In India, decision-making power on China lies with the China Study Group, an informal group of top officials that was earlier headed by the foreign secretary but, for the past few years, has been convened and run by the national security advisor, Ajit Doval. Since 2003, the NSA has also been the special representative for border talks with China. Officials quoted in media reports have said that the CSG “has got all the people required to take decisions on China affairs” and is “an integral part of that structure” to manage the LAC. As it is not a formal body, its deliberations and decisions are neither discussed in parliament nor in any parliamentary committees. A bureaucrat who has attended CSG meetings under Doval told me that the nature of the group changed, with Jaishankar and, at times, the defence minister, Rajnath Singh, as well as the chief of defence staff, General Bipin Rawat, being part of deliberations at the peak of the Ladakh crisis.

The CSG was keeping a close watch on the Ladakh crisis, and close control of the agenda and points to be raised during talks between senior military commanders. According to the bureaucrat, apprehensions of a military escalation were often expressed during these meetings, and the broad consensus was for a peaceful resolution of the crisis by avoiding any major provocation. There have been no press releases or official reports to suggest that the Ladakh crisis was discussed in either the cabinet committee on security or the full union cabinet. The two most powerful leaders in the government, Modi and Shah, have maintained total silence on the subject, and

communication between the armed forces and the political leadership—including Doval—changed with Rawat’s untimely demise in December 2021.

**THE COMMUNICATION LINES BETWEEN** the two armies and governments fortunately remained open. Formal talks were held between senior military commanders and diplomats, but there was no concrete progress. Telephone calls between foreign ministers and special representatives did not yield any breakthrough. Bereft of options, the Indian government went back to plans approved since the mid 1980s: a quid pro quo operation. This was also formally stated in a document titled “Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century,” which was produced in 2012 by the Centre for Policy Research, with the support of the Manmohan Singh government. “There are several areas where the local tactical and operational advantage rests with us,” it noted. “These areas should be identified and earmarked for limited offensive operations on our part.”

The Kailash range, to the south of Pangong, was identified for a QPQ operation in August 2020, after reserves for troops, ammunition, spares, stores and supplies had been stocked for any eventuality. “A sudden powerful transition to the offensive—the flashing sword of vengeance—is the greatest moment for the defence,” the nineteenth-century Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz wrote in his seminal text *On War*. The transition in Ladakh was indeed sudden and, at one point, with firing from both sides, the situation threatened to escalate. Besides rifles and machine guns, rockets were also fired. Fortunately, there were no known casualties. The Indian Army had, however, chosen to limit itself to occupying the peaks on the Kailash range that it believed were on its side of the LAC. The PLA responded by occupying the most dominating peak in the area, while moving on to the gaps in the range, as it asked the Indians to stop firing. From satellite imagery, Biggers noted that “when India took to the ridges at Rezang La, which in some respects helped shift the centre of gravity to Chushul, we saw self-propelled howitzers and other elements redeploy from the Galwan Valley and Kongka La areas.”

The two armies were now face to face, with even tanks deployed by both sides barely a few metres apart. The threat of escalation was real and persistent, and apprehensions of an accidental conflagration gave local commanders sleepless nights. “As I rewarded soldiers who had taken an aggressive stance against the PLA by opening fire, I was losing my hair worrying if this thing would go out of hand,” the senior commander who handled the Ladakh crisis told me. After all, the threat of an escalation spiral between the two most populous countries in the world was no small matter. Indians now had the upper hand in at least one place on the Kailash range, which led the PLA to start serious negotiations about disengagement. Meetings between the foreign ministers and defence ministers of the two countries were held in Moscow that September but did not provide a breakthrough. The impasse continued through the winter, without any further clashes or tactical moves.



Indian and Chinese troops and tanks disengage in the Kailash range in February 2021, where they had been deployed opposite each other for about six months. PTI PHOTO

It thus came as a surprise when, in February 2021, the two armies agreed to a barter deal of disengagement. Both sides would withdraw from the Kailash range (which India had moved into) and the north bank of the Pangong Lake (where the PLA had entered). A no-patrol zone would be created on the north bank of Pangong in the contested area, and the PLA would dismantle all the infrastructure it created there. It would also erase the Chinese map, flag and the slogan painted there earlier. There was great disappointment among observers that India had agreed to barter away its trump card in Kailash for only the north bank of Pangong, instead of seeking disengagement throughout Ladakh. The pressure created by moving into the Kailash range meant

that India could not patrol up to Finger 8 at Pangong, a distance of ten kilometres, but it had also removed the Chinese presence from the area.

At a public seminar this June at Delhi's India International Centre—where I was part of the panel—Rakesh Sharma, a lieutenant general and former commander of the Ladakh Corps, argued vehemently that the PLA's occupation of the most dominant height in the area gave it a direct view and domination of a major Indian access route, leaving the Indian Army with no choice but to disengage in exchange for the north bank of Pangong. Two top officers directly involved with the QPQ operation and disengagement told me that criticism of the disengagement plan was unfair. "It is unrealistic to expect all the areas to be resolved in one go," the first officer—the military commander involved in handling the Ladakh crisis—told me. "There was a great danger of escalation, and we had to prevent that."

The second officer, the one posted at army headquarters and who was present at the highest level of deliberations, invoked the basic principle of physics that "every lever can move only an item of a certain weight, and this lever at Kailash only had this much leverage. You can even ask me why I didn't get the problems in Arunachal Pradesh resolved with Kailash, but is that realistic?" His second reason was even more striking. "The north bank was a priority for us because of its impact on the national morale, as the PLA had painted the China map and flag," he said. "We wanted to get that removed."

On 12 February 2021, the defence ministry announced that the outstanding issues would be "taken up within 48 hours of the completion of the Pangong Tso disengagement." By August, however, further disengagement had only been completed at PP17A in Gogra. This left PP15, Depsang and Demchok unresolved. The senior commander involved in the Ladakh crisis, who was present in multiple rounds of negotiations with the PLA, confessed to me that Depsang and Demchok are currently "tough to resolve." He said that, at times,

when a resolution seemed close, the PLA—especially the political commissar present at talks—would stall the discussion rather quickly.



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The senior military officer from army headquarters argued that it was a positive sign that the PLA had not undertaken any permanent construction at Depsang. But he had no hopeful news about Demchok, also known as Charding La-Nilung Nalla Junction, other than claiming that the Chinese stance of denying locals access to a local spring for religious purposes was unreasonable and unacceptable. Demchok is one of the few areas in Ladakh that is claimed by China but is controlled and inhabited by India. However, the PLA has already created some infrastructure in Demchok and, this summer, moved deeper to block Indian graziers. Moreover, the Chinese have created an unpaved, steep road from the south to Charding La—a 5,828-metre-high pass on the LAC. This pass has been patrolled by the Indian Army, and standoffs have been a regular feature in the area. According to Sharma, at “the heart of the matter is denial of patrolling to Charding La by Indian patrols,” and to “arrive at a consensus for buffer zone is not going to be easy” in the area.



A video frame of footage recorded in mid-June 2020 and released by China Central Television showing Chinese (foreground) and Indian soldiers (background) during a clash in the Galwan Valley. CHINA CENTRAL TELEVISION (CCTV) / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

Since the crisis began, the massive upgradation of military infrastructure by China in Ladakh has created a massive headache for India. “With the current infrastructure and ongoing improvements in the region, China has ensured that it can move forces quickly to respond to any perceived threat posed by India,” Biggers noted, pointing out “the visible asymmetry between the respective sides’ forces and the relative speeds in which they appeared on the border.” Even in the areas of disengagement, he said, “the regional infrastructure in place also means the PLA Ground Force could quickly return to areas that it previously occupied.”

When I asked the senior commander dealing with Ladakh about this, he replied that “our infrastructure has improved. If we had a foot track earlier, now we have a jeep-able track. Of course, I am not disputing that the PLA may now have a six-lane highway on the other side, but we are better off than we were earlier.” Pande said that, since May 2020, “a significant amount of enhancement in our infrastructure has taken place, especially in the context of eastern Ladakh.” He said that 350 company modules had been created in the area, capable of housing almost thirty-five thousand troops. The focus, he added, has been on creating infrastructure, road connectivity and bridges, and on constructing underground storage infrastructure for ammunition.

The massive accretion in Chinese infrastructure and military deployment in Ladakh has meant that New Delhi knows there is little chance of returning to the situation that existed before May 2020.

When the journalist Suhasini Haidar asked Jaishankar, in March this year, if he had raised restoration of the status quo ante as a demand with the visiting Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, he smiled and evaded the question. When an official of the National Security Council Secretariat was questioned by a scholar at a private event, he said that disengagement and de-escalation should be seen as a restoration of the April 2020 status. But this logic implies a partial acceptance of *faits accomplis* enacted by China.

“If we define status quo ante as that the PLA must pull back its soldiers from areas where they had come in, in 2020, across our perception of the LAC, that is the more sort of practical understanding of what status quo ante is,” Lieutenant General DS Hooda, a former chief of the Northern Command, told *The Hindu*. “Why we need to insist on the status quo ante is because, for me, that is the only way you will get peace and calm back on the LAC. Otherwise, we’re not going to get it.”

Research by Dan Altman, an assistant professor of political science at Georgia State University, has shown that if a *fait accompli* is not quickly resisted or reversed, it becomes more difficult to do so over time, as the aggressor consolidates and fortifies their position, establishing a new normal. Of 59 land grabs around the world where the aggressor held territory at the end of a militarised international dispute, Altman finds 47 where the aggressor held that territory uninterrupted for the next decade. The odds are stacked against India.

**THERE HAS BEEN** A gradual decline in bilateral ties between India and China over the last fifteen years. The decline was interspersed with warning signs in the form of border standoffs in Depsang in 2013, Chumar in 2014 and Doklam in 2017. Under the Manmohan Singh government, a period of high economic growth and assured foreign policy resulted in New Delhi deciding to reverse its longstanding policy of treating its border areas with China as belonging to the periphery or serving as “buffer zones,” preventing ingress into the Indian heartland. It was a drastic shift from the “outpost” mentality

bequeathed by the British and firmed up after the humiliating defeat to China in 1962.

In 2006, the foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, recommended the construction of several strategic roads in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. He also proposed the revival of many advanced landing grounds that had been lying unused since 1962. After he retired, in September that year, he was tasked to undertake a survey of infrastructure along the Chinese border, which led to a plan for an extensive network of roads, bridges and railway lines in Ladakh, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh. The government approved the construction of 862 kilometres of strategic roads in the border areas. In 2008, the army started raising two new mountain divisions as well as armoured, artillery and infantry brigades for the Chinese border. Modern military equipment, such as C-130J and C-17 transport aircraft, was bought from the United States.

This coincided with the global economic crisis of 2008, which had long-term political effects on the international order. While the United States failed to provide global leadership and was bogged down by its own domestic travails, China's economic success encouraged Beijing to be more assertive. It rapidly expanded its overseas investments and became more confrontational over territorial claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. The change in China's hard power was accompanied by a greater willingness to demonstrate its use. This shift did not go unnoticed by New Delhi, which also noted the panicky Chinese response to the Tibetan uprising of 2008. It was around then that Xi took over as vice president, delivering speeches about a more assertive China.

This led to a top-level review in the prime minister's office, involving only the cabinet committee on security, which identified the short window available to India to generate the hard power needed to deter China, as Beijing was eventually bound to turn its attention to the border dispute with India. That thinking was, in good measure, reflected in the "Nonalignment 2.0" report, of which Saran was a co-

author. “There is the possibility that China might resort to territorial grabs,” the report stated. “In either case—whether China resorts to a limited probe or to a larger offensive—our aim should be the restoration of status quo ante.”

In 2013, the two countries signed a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement, the first to define every step to be taken by the two sides in case of any faceoff on the LAC. The agreement was aimed at preventing incidents involving tailing of patrols and also generally streamlining channels of communication. It included a five-layer mechanism for communication between the two sides: flag meetings between border personnel on the LAC, meetings between senior officers, periodic meetings at the ministry level, meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs and the India-China Annual Defence Dialogue. The agreement also provided for hotlines between the two countries’ military headquarters, which have not been established till date. In practical terms, this meant that soldiers from both sides got used to the idea that firing weapons on the LAC was taboo, leading to the unfortunate outcome that various other means of inflicting violence came to be devised and used.

That year, the Manmohan Singh government sanctioned the raising of a new mountain strike corps for the Chinese border—but that process was truncated by the Modi government in 2018. Citing paucity of funds and greater focus on “optimisation” of existing arrangements, the Modi government raised only one of the two proposed divisions. This corps has now been assigned responsibilities in the eastern sector, with an offensive role looking into Tibet.

Several serving and retired military officers told me that India’s accretion of troops and improved infrastructure on the Chinese border meant that, by the end of the first decade of this century, the Indian Army was able to send out patrols to the LAC in greater strength and with higher frequency. These patrols started regularly visiting areas that Indian forces were not going to earlier, bringing them into contact

with PLA patrols more often. The number of border transgressions and faceoffs between the two armies shot up, but the existing protocols and agreements were able to resolve these minor wrangles. At bilateral meetings, the PLA began complaining about the Indian border infrastructure and proposed a freeze on new construction by either side. This was rejected by New Delhi, as the Chinese had already constructed massive border infrastructure in Tibet and India was only playing catch-up.

India's renewed attempt after 2009 to exercise control up to its claim line was resented by the PLA. Lieutenant General Praveen Bakshi, a former chief of the Eastern Command, said at a 2018 event on the Doklam crisis that senior PLA officers had complained about this to their Indian counterparts. The commander who handled the Ladakh crisis told me that, during the recent senior-commander talks, the PLA leadership again complained that the Indian Army never used to patrol the areas that it has been regularly trying to access for the past twelve years. This was independently confirmed to me by a renowned US-based academic who had spent a few days with the senior PLA leadership in Beijing in 2019. The PLA top brass complained about Indian aggression and attempts to cross the LAC, the academic said, and even offered to show footage recorded by drones.



The much-hyped informal summit at Wuhan between Xi and Modi, only months after the Doklam crisis, lulled New Delhi into believing that a modus vivendi had been found to reset ties with China. COURTESY - TWITTER

The academic added that the PLA was keen to “teach India a lesson” and “put it in its place,” particularly after the Doklam standoff in 2017. At Doklam, Indian troops stopped a Chinese road-construction party

from entering Bhutanese territory that China claimed. The standoff lasted 73 days and was resolved after political intervention at the highest level. Indian media outlets and analysts claimed a win for New Delhi, but it was clear within a year that the PLA had never left the area. Instead, it had deployed in great strength and constructed impressive infrastructure to house troops and military equipment. More importantly, the PLA seemed to have learnt its lessons from Doklam, which it applied in Ladakh. It deployed in larger numbers rather quickly, taking the Indian Army by surprise, and has maintained an assertive stance throughout. It also learnt of the Indian leadership's desire to claim a domestic propaganda victory, even at the cost of a real victory—a weakness Beijing has exploited fully in Ladakh.

The much-hyped informal summit at Wuhan between Xi and Modi, only months after the Doklam crisis, lulled New Delhi into believing that a modus vivendi had been found to reset ties with China. Both leaders promised to provide “strategic guidance” to their militaries in order to prevent any further border crises.

As the Indian Army devised new procedures and drills after Wuhan to prevent clashes with the PLA, including joint patrols and staggered patrols, a senior military officer leading the process at the time told me that major differences existed in Ladakh, where the prospect of such measures succeeding was dim. His words were indeed prophetic, demonstrating that the much-vaunted Wuhan spirit had almost immediately turned to ether.

**INDIA’S OPTIONS TO REVERSE** Chinese gains in Ladakh are shrinking. With nearly fifty thousand additional troops deployed, the Indian Army has done well to prevent any further PLA ingress in Ladakh after 2020. This has been done by redeploying and reorienting the equivalent of six divisions from the Pakistan border. According to the senior officer at army headquarters, the crisis has forced the PLA to deploy its troops closer to the LAC, bringing them out of their comfort zone. He was confident about matching the Chinese at both the tactical and operational levels in a conflict but was uncertain about the

PLA's prowess in cyber and electromagnetic-spectrum warfare. There were also concerns about major gaps in military deployment in certain border areas of Arunachal Pradesh. In conversations about Ladakh with many senior military officers, I encountered a curious mix of diffidence and bluster when it came to the Chinese military. Officers would be dismissive of the PLA soldier but flinch at the prospect of a military escalation with China.

New Delhi seems content holding the line and is not displaying any intent to reverse the Chinese ingress on the LAC. "We will make sure any misadventure by the adversary does not take place again," Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi, the chief of the Northern Command, told journalists. "We also have strategic patience and we are also ready to wait," he added. "We are ready for a negotiation. If it is prolonged, we are going to wait." This comes from worries about an inadvertent escalation in case New Delhi attempts another QPQ operation across the LAC. A successful QPQ operation would allow India to get back to the negotiating table with a stronger hand and better chance of striking a favourable deal.

There has been a declining frequency of talks between senior commanders of the two armies. The last two rounds were held in March and July this year, after several requests by India. Talks at lower levels, held more frequently, can reduce risks locally but are incapable of making progress on the broader agenda.

India pinned all its hopes on military and diplomatic talks leading to disengagement in all areas, which means increased separation of soldiers, away from an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation and instead kept to a few kilometres apart, by creating no-patrol zones. But this process of disengagement has largely been limited to the Indian side of the LAC, which denies India the control it had exercised over this territory.

As per the Indian scheme of things, disengagement is to be followed by de-escalation, in which the two sides will take heavy military

equipment and troops a few hours away from the frontline. The PLA has, however, flatly refused to consider de-escalation. While the Indian side talks about an equivalence in the number of hours taken to deploy, the Chinese have insisted on stepping back by an equal distance. This is militarily disadvantageous to India, as China's superior border infrastructure would allow it to deploy troops faster over similar distances. That leaves the third and final step of de-induction, which would mean moving all additional troops out of Ladakh entirely. Having moved a division-sized Rashtriya Rifles force from Udhampur to southern Ladakh, the Indian Army is in no mood or position to remove from the theatre all forces that were relocated there after April 2020.

Even if the PLA were to agree to India's three-step process, the questions posed by newly constructed Chinese infrastructure—allowing faster operational deployment—and its induction of modern technologies remain unaddressed. Because trust has completely broken down, disengagement will provide, at best, a tactical pause in what is clearly emerging as a complex strategic challenge from China.

The challenge emerges from the yawning power gap between the two neighbours. China's economy is five times the size of India's, and its defence spending is almost four times as high. Technologically, China has made massive inroads in all spheres, leaving India far behind. Geopolitically, it pitches and sees itself as a rising peer to a declining United States, and Xi's stated aim is to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049. This is the point at which Beijing hopes to assume a leading position in the international order. The way the balance of power has shifted towards China in the eight years of the Modi government raises even more serious questions about the future of bilateral ties.

**SIXTY YEARS AFTER THE 1962** Sino-India War sent the message to Asia that China was a superior power to India, the Ladakh crisis has unequivocally conveyed to South Asia that New Delhi is not a match for Beijing. Sri Lanka's response to the docking of the Chinese

satellite-monitoring vessel *Yuan Wang 5* at one of its ports in August this year, despite loud public protests by New Delhi, was a confirmation of that reality. The situation is no better in Nepal, especially after the controversy over the recruitment of Gurkhas into the Indian Army under the short-term contractual Agnipath scheme.



Indian troops man a makeshift fort facing their Chinese opposition in the disputed Ladakh border region in 1962. HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION / CORBIS / GETTY

Despite the current government's stated "neighbourhood first" policy, the last eight years have seen more troughs than crests in India's engagement with its South Asian neighbours. In 2016, Modi pulled out of the annual meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation—the only forum for South Asian cooperation—over the Uri attack, in an effort to isolate Pakistan in the region. Despite attempts to promote the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation and the Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal initiative, Delhi has been unable to replace SAARC with a substantive alternative. This inability to match China's deep pockets or major infrastructure projects, combined with resentment against an India perceived as a regional bully, has meant that New Delhi's "sphere of dominance" has shrunk to a much-diminished "sphere of influence" in South Asia.

The problem becomes more vexed because of the Modi government's Hindutva-driven policy towards Pakistan. Before the Ladakh crisis, leaders of the ruling BJP were vocal in invoking and attacking Pakistan

during political speeches and election campaigns. The risk of activating a two-front collusive military threat from China and Pakistan, which India is incapable of handling, has coerced them into silence on Pakistan since the Ladakh crisis began. Back-channel talks with Pakistan, by using the UAE, have delivered the reiteration of the ceasefire along the LoC, but the ongoing economic and political volatility in Pakistan, with a new army chief scheduled to take over in November, could disrupt the quietude so far, in which Pakistan has not taken overt advantage of India's weakening hand vis-à-vis China.

The way ahead for India is simple. Instead of leaving Pakistan to be dealt with only by security and intelligence czars, New Delhi needs to bring diplomacy, politics and economics into play. The Indian establishment should build, rather than burn, bridges with Pakistan. A substantive peace-building process with Pakistan would leave New Delhi free to focus on the strategic challenge posed by China, rather than always looking over its shoulder towards Pakistan to prevent another crisis. SAARC ought to be a chosen vehicle for this engagement because it would draw in other regional countries into the debate, making them all stakeholders in the process of regional peace, stability and development.

The Modi government cannot avoid SAARC because of the apprehension that the group's other members will combine to have China enter as a full member. With Asia and the Indo-Pacific now the centre of gravity of emerging global geopolitics, India will have to be prepared to deal with a lot of plays for power in its neighbourhood, and learn to play the game deftly. As the former national security advisor Shiv Shankar Menon has argued, "The more the overall uncertainty in the global system, the higher the priority that India should accord to stabilising and managing its immediate periphery, particularly the subcontinent."

Besides internal rebalancing of its military away from the Pakistan border and towards China, New Delhi has also attempted external rebalancing in the region, particularly by engaging with the

reinvigorated Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which also includes Australia, Japan and the United States. Quad summits, as well as ministerial and other official meetings, have devised a non-security agenda with a lot of statements, but none of the proposals ameliorate India's precarious condition on its border with China. India remains the only Quad member that shares a land border with China and is not a treaty ally of the United States. The Modi government seems hesitant to embrace a hard line towards China as it fears provoking Beijing into a military escalation on the land border. New Delhi also runs the risk of creating an impression where China starts looking at India as only a subset of its US challenge. However, it has done enough on the Ukraine–Russia issue that goes against the West's directions and mirrors China's actions to keep Beijing puzzled about India's real partners and patrons. In a podcast I recorded with Zhou Bo, a retired senior colonel of the PLA, he was insistent that India has a record of following strategic sovereignty and is pursuing that path on the Ukraine issue as well.

India's longstanding ties with Russia, including its extensive dependency on Russia for defence goods and replacements, have made it impossible for New Delhi to sign up to the West's angry policies towards Moscow. A former Indian ambassador to Russia said that, since nearly seventy percent of Indian military equipment is of Russian origin and will be in service for decades, Moscow's support is necessary for New Delhi. Even as Moscow becomes a junior partner of Beijing, the Modi government is left with no option but to hope that Russia will not succumb to Chinese pressure and will maintain its independent ties with India. Even though meetings between the defence and foreign ministers of India and China took place on the side lines of the 2020 SCO meeting at Moscow, Indian officials claimed that they did not allow any Russian presence at those meetings. A junior diplomat at the Indian embassy in Moscow told me that Russia's attempts in 2021 to act as a broker between Beijing and New Delhi on the border crisis were politely turned down. By participating in the SCO and BRICS summits, and attending the VOSTOK 2022 military exercises with China in Russia, India has signalled an independent

engagement that does not bracket Moscow with Beijing. If things go south between India and China, Modi's assumptions over the relative strength of New Delhi's and Beijing's ties with Moscow would be put to a severe test.

Having succeeded under the old international order, both India and China are navigating their way through this turbulent new phase between two global orders. A bigger and more powerful China, which disputes its land borders with India, is a reality New Delhi will have to contend with. However loudly Modi may claim that, under him, India has become a *vishwaguru*, a euphemism for a superpower, Beijing is not going to accept that New Delhi is its geopolitical peer. It is a game of hard power—of economies, militaries, technology, and geopolitics—in which India trails China. The National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which will rubber-stamp Xi's third term at China's helm, is unlikely to bring a major change in that dynamic for India.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping swinging together in Ahmedabad in December 2014. The Ladakh crisis belied the bonhomie the two men supposedly shared over many years. PTI

New Delhi is caught in a tough spot and, if it wishes to secure its interests, the current policy of being fearful of China, ignoring the panda in the room and hoping that this too shall pass will not work. As

John F Kennedy said during the Berlin crisis of 1961, “We cannot negotiate with people who say ‘what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is negotiable.’” The short-term, clever fixes from the Modi government, which try to anaesthetise the domestic fallout in India for reasons of political optics by creating an ambiguity about the crisis, will hurt India sooner rather than later. Ambiguity, ambivalence and confusion always serve the interests of a bigger power—in this case, China’s. Modi should have learnt that lesson when PLA soldiers rolled into Chumar in Ladakh even as he entertained Xi on a swing on the Sabarmati riverfront in Ahmedabad in September 2014. Instead, Modi extolled Xi, saying he was the second most important Chinese person to visit India after the seventh-century Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang. He has met Xi 17 times since but could not secure much for India.

If there is one thing the Ladakh crisis has taught us, it is that Modi’s personalised diplomacy with Xi has been an abysmal failure. That failure casts a long and dark shadow over India’s China challenge.

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