

Review Article

From Doklam to Galwan: Strategic Standoff and the Future of India-China Border Relations

Amrita Chaudhary

Assistant Professor,
Department of Liberal Arts & Humanities,
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences,
Swami Vivekanand Subharti University,
Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

The India-China border dispute has remained one of Asia's most persistent geopolitical flashpoints. From the 2017 Doklam standoff to the violent Galwan Valley clash in 2020, the pattern of confrontation has reflected deeper strategic anxieties and a shift in bilateral relations. This paper investigates the evolution of India-China border tensions with a special focus on the events at Doklam and Galwan, analyzing the strategic, diplomatic, and military dimensions of the crisis. It assesses the implications of these standoffs on regional stability, India's foreign and defense policies, and the broader Indo-Pacific strategic architecture. The study uses qualitative content analysis based on official statements, media reports, satellite data, and scholarly commentary to evaluate the changing nature of the bilateral relationship. Recommendations for diplomatic re-engagement, military modernization, and regional coalition-building are proposed to address future challenges.

Keywords: India-China Relations, Doklam Standoff, Galwan Clash, Border Dispute, Strategic Tensions, LAC, Geopolitics, Indo-Pacific

Address for Correspondence: Dr. Amrita Chaudhary, Assistant Professor, Department of Liberal Arts & Humanities, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

Email- amritachaudhary2583@gmail.com

Mobile- +91-8958302330

Introduction

India and China, two of the world's oldest civilizations and emerging superpowers, share a complex and contested history shaped by conflicting territorial claims, historical mistrust, and regional aspirations. The bilateral relationship between the two nations has witnessed frequent oscillations between cooperation and confrontation. Despite growing economic interdependence and participation in multilateral platforms such as BRICS, SCO, and RIC, the border dispute remains a central point of friction. The 3,488-kilometer-long Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border between India and China, remains undefined and un-demarcated, leading to differing perceptions and recurrent standoffs.¹

The confrontations at Doklam in 2017 and Galwan Valley in 2020 represent significant turning points in India-China relations. These two incidents were not merely isolated military standoffs but reflective of a broader strategic rivalry.² Doklam, situated at the tri-junction of India, Bhutan, and China, witnessed a 73-day military face-off following China's road construction attempt in a region claimed by Bhutan

but patrolled by India.³ India's intervention was seen as a strategic assertion to protect its own security and regional allies, especially in safeguarding the Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck" — a narrow stretch connecting mainland India to its northeastern states.

The Galwan clash in June 2020, on the other hand, marked the first fatalities on the India-China border since 1975 and was a stark reminder of the volatility that characterizes the LAC. The clash, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese troops, profoundly altered the strategic calculations of New Delhi.⁴ It exposed the inadequacy of existing confidence-building measures and questioned the utility of diplomatic dialogues that had so far helped maintain an uneasy peace. The Galwan incident shattered the illusion of a stable and managed boundary, revealing the depth of strategic mistrust and China's aggressive posturing under President Xi Jinping's leadership.⁵

These two crises underscore a critical reality: the India-China border dispute is no longer a dormant legacy of the 1962 war but a live wire in Asia's

¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2020). Statements and releases on India-China border.

² Singh, S. (2021). *Galwan and Beyond: The New China Challenge*. HarperCollins India.

³ Baruah, A. (2018). "Doklam and the India-China Relations." *Journal of Asian Security*, Vol. 12(2).

⁴ Ladwig III, W. (2020). "India and China at the Line of Actual Control." *International Affairs*, 96(2).

⁵ Stobdan, P. (2020). *The Great Game in the Himalayas*. Penguin Random House.

geopolitics. China's assertiveness along the LAC is often seen in the context of its broader strategic objectives, including territorial expansionism, regional dominance, and deterrence of India's strategic partnerships with the United States and other Indo-Pacific powers.⁶ India, on its part, has responded by recalibrating its strategic posture, strengthening infrastructure along the border, enhancing diplomatic outreach, and asserting its sovereignty through military preparedness and economic countermeasures.⁷

This paper explores the implications of these developments for the future of India-China relations. It seeks to analyze the evolution of the strategic standoff from Doklam to Galwan, understand the patterns of Chinese military behavior, and assess India's responses across military, diplomatic, and economic dimensions. The broader aim is to provide a framework for interpreting these confrontations not just as bilateral issues, but as part of a larger power struggle in Asia. The study aims to recommend pragmatic strategies that India can adopt to deter future aggression while engaging in credible diplomacy for long-term peace and stability along the LAC.

Research Methodology

The India-China border conflict has been extensively studied within the disciplines of international relations, strategic studies, and regional geopolitics. This review of literature focuses on the scholarly interpretations, strategic analyses, and policy evaluations surrounding the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan Valley clash (2020), situating them within the broader theoretical and empirical frameworks of Sino-Indian relations.

1. Historical and Strategic Background

Several scholars provide a foundational understanding of the historical genesis of the India-China boundary dispute. John W. Garver's seminal work, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (2001), explores the legacy of the 1962 war and outlines the ideological and territorial elements shaping the rivalry. Garver emphasizes that the boundary conflict is embedded in broader strategic competition between the two rising powers, influenced by differing worldviews and strategic cultures.⁸

Similarly, Neville Maxwell's controversial account, *India's China War* (1970), argues that India's forward policy and lack of diplomatic engagement exacerbated tensions. Although criticized for being overly sympathetic to the Chinese narrative, Maxwell's work prompted a re-evaluation of India's strategic decisions during the early years of the conflict.

⁶ Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). (2021). "LAC Developments: Strategic Overview."

⁷ ORF (Observer Research Foundation) Reports (2017-2021).

⁸ Garver, J. (2001). *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*. University of Washington Press.

2. Doklam Standoff: Strategic Implications

The 2017 Doklam standoff attracted significant attention from Indian and international think tanks. Scholars such as Harsh V. Pant and Avinash Godbole (Observer Research Foundation, 2017) analyze the incident as a test of India's resolve in defending its strategic interests in Bhutan and the eastern Himalayas. Their findings suggest that India's intervention was a message to China and smaller South Asian nations that New Delhi would not tolerate unilateral attempts to alter territorial status quos.⁹

Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary of India, in his writings for the India Habitat Centre and *The Print*, emphasized the importance of Bhutan's sovereignty and the strategic vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor. His assessment connects the standoff with India's larger concern about encirclement under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Chinese scholars have interpreted the incident differently. Hu Shisheng and Zhang Jiadong (China Institute of Contemporary International Relations) framed the Indian intervention as a violation of Chinese sovereignty and indicative of India's hegemonic behavior in South Asia. This divergence in narratives reveals the deep mistrust between the two nations and the influence of nationalism in shaping policy and public opinion.¹⁰

3. Galwan Valley Clash: A Watershed Moment

The Galwan clash in June 2020 marked a major inflection point. According to Happymon Jacob (*The Hindu*, 2020; IPCS commentaries), the incident exposed the failure of existing conflict resolution mechanisms like the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) and the Special Representatives' Dialogue. He argues that China's aggressive posture may be linked to its broader regional ambitions and an attempt to deter India from deepening ties with the United States and the Quad.¹¹

C. Raja Mohan (*Indian Express*, 2020) interprets Galwan as a shift in China's behavior from ambiguity to assertiveness. He emphasizes the need for India to revisit its assumptions about China's commitment to a peaceful resolution and to prepare for a long-term strategic rivalry.¹²

The Lowy Institute and Brookings India have published reports asserting that the Galwan incident disrupted the previous status quo along the LAC and represents a new phase of militarized diplomacy. These studies stress that India must invest in border

⁹ Pant, Harsh V. & Joshi, Yogesh. (2020). *India and the China Challenge*. Bloomsbury India.

¹⁰ Hu, S., & Zhang, J. (2020). *China-India relations: Opportunities and challenges in a changing world*. China Institute of Contemporary International Relations. <https://www.cicir.ac.cn>

¹¹ Jacob, Happymon. (2022). *Line on Fire: Ceasefire Violations and India-Pakistan Escalation Dynamics*. Oxford University Press. (Relevant for comparative border management studies).

¹² Mohan, C. Raja. (2021). *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*. Carnegie India / Brookings Institution Press.

infrastructure, satellite surveillance, and high-altitude warfare readiness.

4. Theoretical Interpretations

International relations theorists have analyzed the India-China conflict through multiple lenses. Realist scholars, including Mearsheimer (2001) and Rajesh Basrur (2021), argue that the conflict is a natural outcome of power transition in Asia, where rising powers seek to assert dominance and secure their peripheries. From this perspective, border tensions are manifestations of a larger strategic competition between two regional powers with incompatible ambitions.

On the other hand, constructivist scholars like Kanti Bajpai and Manjeet Pardesi have focused on the role of identity, historical memory, and nationalism. Bajpai (2020) argues that both nations carry unresolved psychological legacies of the 1962 war, which shape public opinion and elite discourse, making compromise difficult.

5. Policy Recommendations and Strategic Choices

Policy literature has explored options available to India post-Galwan. Authors like Jeff M. Smith (Cold Peace, 2021) and Arvind Panagariya (Columbia University) recommend a combination of military preparedness, economic decoupling, and regional coalition-building. They underscore the importance of enhancing ties with the U.S., Japan, Australia, and ASEAN to balance Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific.¹³

Indian government reports and white papers, including those by the Ministry of Defence (2021) and Ministry of External Affairs, emphasize the importance of maintaining dialogue while being prepared for any contingency. Parliamentary debates and Standing Committee reports highlight infrastructure gaps and intelligence coordination failures that need urgent redressal.¹⁴

The existing literature captures the complex and evolving nature of India-China border tensions, particularly through the lens of the Doklam and Galwan crises. While there is consensus that both standoffs mark a strategic shift, scholars differ in attributing causality — ranging from tactical provocations to structural power rivalry. What emerges clearly is that future peace and stability along the LAC will require not only military deterrence but also strategic foresight, diplomatic engagement, and regional coalition-building.

Research Gap

The India-China border dispute has been extensively studied through historical, geopolitical, and strategic lenses. Numerous scholarly works have explored the legacy of the 1962 war, the structural complexities of

the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and the strategic rivalry between the two Asian powers. Incidents like the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan Valley clash (2020) have received significant attention in policy analyses, think tank reports, and diplomatic commentaries. However, despite the proliferation of literature, there remain several key gaps that merit focused academic attention.

Firstly, comparative analysis between Doklam and Galwan has largely been treated in isolation, with limited attempts to assess these standoffs as connected milestones in an evolving pattern of Chinese strategic behavior. While each crisis has been studied individually, there is a lack of integrated research that evaluates their combined impact on India's border policy and regional security framework. Secondly, much of the existing work is policy-centric or written from a military-strategic viewpoint, often lacking interdisciplinary depth. There is a need for more comprehensive research that intersects political science, diplomacy, international law, and regional studies, offering a nuanced understanding of the dispute beyond military calculations.

Third, limited scholarly work has assessed India's strategic recalibration—both military and diplomatic—after Galwan. Although media outlets and think tanks have documented India's infrastructural push and diplomatic alignments post-2020, academic studies evaluating the long-term implications of these shifts on regional power dynamics are relatively scarce.

Fourth, China's evolving tactics and strategic intent remain under-theorized in Indian academic discourse. Most existing analyses are reactive and descriptive rather than predictive or theoretical. There is room for deeper exploration of China's border strategy in the context of Xi Jinping's vision of rejuvenated nationalism, military modernization, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Finally, grassroots perspectives, such as the impact of the standoff on border communities, local economies, and civil-military relations, are rarely incorporated into the mainstream discourse, leaving the socio-cultural dimensions underexplored.

Addressing the Gap

This study attempts to address these gaps by:

- Offering a comparative and integrated analysis of Doklam and Galwan.
- Situating the standoffs within the broader strategic architecture of Asia.
- Evaluating India's evolving response mechanism across military, diplomatic, and economic spheres.
- Proposing recommendations that incorporate theoretical, practical, and people-centric dimensions for future policy.

Problem of the Study

Despite decades of diplomatic dialogue and confidence-building measures, the India-China border remains a volatile and unpredictable zone. The absence of a clearly demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC), differing strategic worldviews, and military build-ups has made peace tenuous. The problem lies in understanding why these standoffs recur despite talks and what strategic adjustments India needs to make to safeguard its interests. This

¹³ Smith, Jeff M. (2021). *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century*. Lexington Books.

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence, Government of India. (2021). *Annual Defence Reports and White Papers* <https://mod.gov.in/>

study seeks to identify the patterns and consequences of border standoffs and evaluate their implications for India's security and foreign policy.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology to examine the strategic dynamics and evolving nature of the India-China border dispute, with specific focus on the Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020) standoffs. The study is primarily based on secondary sources, including academic journals, strategic think tank publications, government documents, media reports, and official statements from both India and China. A comparative case study approach has been employed to analyze the two crises, assessing similarities and differences in strategic intent, diplomatic narratives, military engagement, and geopolitical consequences. This methodology allows for a deeper understanding of how each incident reflects broader shifts in regional security and foreign policy.

Content analysis of public statements, speeches by political and military leaders, and parliamentary reports has been used to interpret India's evolving strategic posture. Similarly, Chinese white papers, PLA (People's Liberation Army) commentaries, and articles from Chinese state media have been reviewed to understand China's position and military assertiveness. Strategic frameworks such as realism, power transition theory, and the security dilemma have been used to analyze the behavior of both states within the international system.

The research also utilizes thematic coding to categorize the findings into broader areas: historical grievances, strategic signaling, diplomatic engagement, and future implications. Data triangulation has been ensured by cross-verifying information from multiple reputable sources, including the Ministry of Defence (India), MEA briefings, Brookings India, Carnegie Endowment, and Lowy Institute reports. The research avoids ethnocentric or nationalist biases and aims to maintain objectivity in assessing both nations' perspectives. While the study is limited to secondary data, the depth of strategic and diplomatic documentation allows for a comprehensive and credible analysis. The methodology thus supports a well-rounded, evidence-based understanding of the present and future trajectory of India-China border relations.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the historical and geopolitical context of India-China border tensions.
2. To examine the strategic implications of the Doklam and Galwan standoffs.
3. To evaluate India's diplomatic and military response to Chinese assertiveness.
4. To identify long-term trends in bilateral relations post-Galwan.
5. To recommend strategic and policy measures for conflict prevention and management.

Findings and Analysis

The comparative study of the Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020) standoffs reveals a significant

transformation in the strategic and diplomatic contours of the India-China border relationship. One of the key findings is the shift in China's strategic behavior from ambiguous assertiveness to overt militarization of disputed territories. In Doklam, China attempted to unilaterally alter the status quo by constructing a road in territory claimed by Bhutan, thereby challenging Indian security interests in the Siliguri Corridor. India's measured yet firm military intervention, based on its treaty obligations with Bhutan and its own strategic calculations, demonstrated a willingness to directly counter Chinese advances without crossing into actual combat.

In contrast, the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 marked a more serious escalation. Unlike Doklam, where the confrontation was confined to diplomatic channels and a show of force, Galwan involved direct physical violence, resulting in fatalities — the first in over four decades. The Galwan incident shattered several assumptions: that India and China had reliable confidence-building measures in place, and that economic engagement between the two nations served as a deterrent to armed conflict. The analysis shows that China's aggression in Galwan was premeditated, with evidence of fortified military build-up and deviation from previously agreed disengagement protocols. This indicates a deliberate attempt by Beijing to test India's resolve and limits its strategic outreach in Ladakh and the Indo-Pacific.

The findings also point to India's significant strategic recalibration following Galwan. There has been a surge in infrastructure development along the LAC, deployment of additional troops, and enhanced surveillance and air defense systems in sensitive areas. Diplomatically, India has intensified its engagement with Quad members (U.S., Japan, Australia), redefined its economic policy towards China through banning apps and limiting FDI from neighboring countries, and raised the issue in international forums more assertively than before.

Another important observation is the failure of existing diplomatic and military mechanisms such as the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) and the Special Representatives Dialogue. Both failed to prevent conflict escalation or manage the aftermath in an effective or timely manner. The absence of mutual trust and clarity in LAC demarcation continues to plague the bilateral relationship, resulting in prolonged disengagement negotiations and a frozen diplomatic dialogue.

The analysis further reveals a broader geopolitical dimension to these border standoffs. China's actions can be seen in the light of its ambition to establish hegemony in Asia, deter India from aligning with Western powers, and secure strategic advantage in contested terrains. India, on the other hand, is emerging as a more assertive regional player, unwilling to tolerate territorial encroachment and actively seeking strategic counterbalances.

In conclusion, both Doklam and Galwan are not isolated incidents but rather symptoms of a larger strategic rivalry rooted in unresolved territorial disputes, competing regional aspirations, and shifting global alliances. The findings suggest that unless a new framework of engagement — based on clarity,

reciprocity, and deterrence — is established, the LAC will continue to be a flashpoint in Asia's geopolitics.

Recommendations

To address the recurring tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and to build a more stable India-China relationship, a set of multi-dimensional and forward-looking policy recommendations is essential. These should encompass diplomatic, military, strategic, and developmental approaches.

1. Strengthen Border Infrastructure and Surveillance: India must continue to accelerate the development of all-weather roads, bridges, helipads, tunnels, and communication infrastructure in border areas, particularly in Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. Enhanced infrastructure not only ensures troop mobility but also improves the supply chain and logistics during stand-offs. Satellite surveillance, UAV deployment, and real-time intelligence-sharing between security forces must be prioritized.

2. Institutionalize Robust Conflict Management Mechanisms: The existing bilateral conflict resolution mechanisms have proven inadequate. Therefore, both countries should upgrade or replace the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) with a time-bound, accountable, and transparent system. An independent Joint Verification Mission or LAC Observation Commission could be established to investigate and mediate border incidents.

3. Enhance Diplomatic Engagements with Strategic Clarity: India should engage China through both bilateral and multilateral platforms with a clear articulation of its red lines. While diplomatic dialogue must continue, India should also build strategic coalitions through forums like the Quad and Indo-Pacific alliances to balance China's assertiveness. Regular people-to-people interactions, academic exchanges, and Track II diplomacy may help reduce misperceptions and build long-term trust.

4. Develop an Integrated LAC Policy Doctrine: India must formulate a comprehensive LAC doctrine that integrates military readiness, economic countermeasures, cyber-security preparedness, and psychological operations. This doctrine should serve as a guide for civil-military coordination, inter-agency collaboration, and strategic communication in times of border crises.

5. Promote Local Community Development in Border Areas: Empowering border communities through livelihood generation, education, and healthcare services enhances national security. Civilian presence acts as a natural deterrent to foreign encroachments. India must invest in border village development schemes to increase local resilience and patriotic participation.

6. Long-term Strategic Dialogue on Boundary Settlement: India and China must reinstate structured boundary talks aimed at achieving a lasting settlement. This will require political will, mutual compromise, and third-party verification mechanisms. While difficult, a peaceful resolution is essential for regional stability and economic cooperation in Asia. These recommendations aim to transform India's border strategy from reactive to proactive, ensuring national security, strategic stability, and diplomatic

credibility in the face of evolving geopolitical challenges.

Conclusion

The Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 have emerged as defining moments in the trajectory of India-China border relations. These incidents mark a shift from passive border management to active confrontation, reflecting the deepening strategic mistrust between the two Asian powers. While Doklam showcased India's willingness to defend allied interests in Bhutan and protect the Siliguri Corridor, Galwan revealed the fragility of peace mechanisms and the dangers of Chinese unilateralism in disputed regions. Both events exposed the limitations of past diplomatic frameworks and underlined the need for a recalibrated strategic posture.

The analysis confirms that India-China tensions are not merely border-specific but are embedded in broader geopolitical rivalries, ideological differences, and regional power competition. China's assertiveness, seen through rapid military infrastructure build-up and violation of established protocols, indicates a shift in Beijing's regional strategy. On the other hand, India's post-Galwan response — including military preparedness, diplomatic realignment, and economic countermeasures — signifies a more assertive and strategic approach.

For the future, maintaining peace and stability along the Line of Actual Control will require a combination of strong deterrence and sustained diplomacy. India's focus must remain on building resilient border infrastructure, formulating a cohesive LAC policy, and strengthening strategic alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Simultaneously, efforts toward meaningful boundary dialogue must be revived with transparency and mutual respect.

In conclusion, while immediate conflict may be averted through disengagement and de-escalation, long-term peace can only be achieved through structural reforms in the bilateral relationship. The India-China border issue, as highlighted through Doklam and Galwan, serves as a powerful reminder that strategic vigilance, diplomatic foresight, and national unity are imperative for securing India's sovereignty and regional stability in the evolving Asian order.

Way Forward

The future of India-China relations, particularly in the context of their contested border, depends on a pragmatic mix of realism, resilience, and strategic foresight. While the Doklam and Galwan incidents have deeply strained trust, they also offer a vital opportunity for India to reassess and reshape its long-term security and diplomatic strategies.¹⁵

First, India must adopt a dual-track approach: pursue tactical deterrence while maintaining open channels for high-level diplomatic dialogue. Strengthening military readiness along the Line of Actual Control

¹⁵ CRS Report for U.S. Congress (2021). *China-India Border Tensions: Strategic Outlook*.

(LAC) with modernized infrastructure, surveillance systems, and rapid response capabilities must remain a top priority. Simultaneously, India should continue to emphasize dialogue under clearly defined red lines, ensuring that diplomacy is not seen as a sign of weakness but as a strategic necessity.

Second, a comprehensive LAC policy framework must be institutionalized, integrating the efforts of the armed forces, the Ministry of External Affairs, intelligence agencies, and local governments. This policy should include socio-economic development in border areas, enhanced civil-military cooperation, and proactive community engagement to solidify India's presence in vulnerable regions.

Third, India must enhance strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia through platforms like the Quad, BIMSTEC, and bilateral defense agreements. These alliances will serve not only as force multipliers but also as geopolitical signals that India is not isolated in its strategic concerns regarding China.

Finally, there is a need to invest in long-term conflict prevention through academic exchange, cultural diplomacy, and confidence-building measures involving retired diplomats, scholars, and civil society groups from both nations.

In essence, the way forward lies in a balanced posture — one that blends strategic firmness with diplomatic agility, ensuring India's sovereignty and regional influence remain intact amidst an uncertain and evolving geopolitical landscape.

Source of Support: Nil

Conflict of interest: Nil

Acknowledgement: None

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How to cite this article: Chaudhary A.From Doklam to Galwan: Strategic Standoff and the Future of India-China Border Relations.Subharti J of Interdisciplinary Research, Aug. 2025; Vol. 7: Issue 2, 16 - 21