

Military Stand-Off between China and India

Tensions rise on India-China border

By [Deepal Jayasekera](#)

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The military stand-off between India and China along their border—the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC), separating Tibet from the Ladakh area of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir—is continuing into its third week. Several rounds of bilateral negotiations have failed to end the stand-off.

India alleges that a Chinese army platoon intruded 19 km into India’s territory across the LAC, setting up tents in Daulat Beg Oldi. China denies the charges, maintaining that its troops remained within its own territory.

The third flag meeting between military officers from both sides, held Tuesday, did not resolve the issue. While Chinese officials insisted on their demands that India dismantle infrastructure it has built in eastern Ladakh, including bunkers and roads close to LAC, India demanded the unconditional withdrawal of Chinese troops, which it claims have intruded into Indian territory.

The Chinese demands tend to support reports that its military activity in the region is a response to India’s build-up of military infrastructure along the border.

India is increasingly discussing possible retaliatory measures. The Indian political and military establishment sees the current stand-off as a test of India’s readiness to forcefully pursue its geo-political interests.

In an emergency meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security, Indian Army Chief General Bikram Singh has reportedly suggested various options, including aggressive use of the Indian military.

The opposition Hindu-supremacist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) has demanded the cancellation of a scheduled May 9 visit by Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid to China, unless Chinese troops withdraw from Ladakh.

While New Delhi maintains that Khurshid’s visit will go ahead, it has hinted at a possible cancellation of the trip as a retaliatory measure. On Tuesday, Khurshid told reporters: “Can I cancel my visit? [The] government has to decide. There is no such decision and there is no reason we should do that, but you know one week is a long time in politics.”

Khurshid’s visit is considered part of preparation for Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s first official visit to India later this month. New Delhi is concerned that cancelling Khurshid’s trip could trigger some form of Chinese retaliation. At the same time, the Congress-led Indian government thinks that giving in to Beijing amid the current stand-off will jeopardise its

strategic interests. It is also under pressure from the military and the Hindu right, including the BJP, for an aggressive response against China.

Both New Delhi and Beijing officially maintain that the current dispute can be resolved peacefully through bilateral negotiations. On April 27, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh characterised the issue as “a localised problem”, which “can be solved.”

In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement the next day, taking note of Singh’s statement. It said, “The two sides have been in communication through the working mechanism for consultation and coordination on boundary affairs, border meetings and diplomatic channels for a solution to the incident in part of the western section of the China-India border.”

India is stoking the stand-off with China, with the media highlighting the issue and continuous remarks by government and opposition leaders. While China has tried to play down the dispute, the Chinese media are increasingly discussing the possibility of confrontation with India.

China’s state-run *Global Times* carried an editorial titled “New Delhi bears brunt of border hysteria” Thursday. Criticising the Indian media for “continuously creating trouble for Sino-Indian relationship”, it blamed the Indian government for failing to “clarify the so-called ‘intrusion’ in a timely way and to assume the responsibility of maintaining a good atmosphere.”

While calling for a “friendly policy towards India”, the *Global Times* warned, “this doesn’t mean that China will ignore provocations.”

This is a warning to New Delhi that it should publicly deny reports of a “Chinese intrusion”, contain the Indian media campaign against China, and cease building infrastructure along the LAC.

The current Sino-Indian stand-off emerged amid the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”, aimed at containing China, during which the US has encouraged its allies such as Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, to take aggressive stances in territorial disputes with China. Thus, China has been engrossed in a series of border tensions stoked by the US. Under these circumstances, the Sino-Indian border dispute takes on an even more explosive character.

Washington has been developing a strategic partnership with India, aiming to use it as a counterweight to China, whom Washington treats as its main rival in Asia. According to a US State Department statement issued Wednesday, India, the US and Japan held their fourth trilateral dialogue in Washington, discussing “the prospect of greater Indo-Pacific commercial connectivity and regional and maritime security, and cooperation in multilateral fora.”

The US is trying to expand this integration of India into its strategic agenda in Asia into a quadrilateral alliance also including Australia.

While the US encourages India to assert a more aggressive stance against China, India itself has concerns about the growing Chinese influence in South Asia, including building of port facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. New Delhi sees China’s clout as a factor undermining its own ambitions to emerge as a major power with US backing.

The Sino-Indian border dispute is a historical issue left over from British colonial rule in India. In their comments on the current border crisis, both sides have admitted the officially disputed nature of LAC. India and China went to war in 1962 along the same border.

Other major sources of friction between India and China include China's decades-long alliance with Pakistan, India's main rival, and the issue of Tibet. Although India has recognised Tibet as a part of China, it keeps the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan Government in Exile headed by him in the Indian city of Dharmasala, to irritate Beijing.

Under such conditions, whatever intentions of both India and China for "peaceful resolution" of the current dispute, it has the potential to spin out of the control of either New Delhi or Beijing.

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Articles by: [Deepal Jayasekera](#)

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