



Policy Brief

Beyond Doklam: Mapping Strategic Mistrust between India and China

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“Beyond Doklam: Mapping Strategic Mistrust between India and China”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

India and China have long-held border disputes arising out of flawed border demarcations in the British colonial era. These border demarcations, where either China was excluded from border negotiations or British colonial rulers enforced simultaneous border agreements, led to severe border tensions across all the three sectors of India-China border, eventually leading to the 1962 Sino-Indian War, followed by a few small clashes in the upcoming years. The dispute at the India-China border remained dormant for almost four decades. However, since the inception of the Modi-led BJP government in India, its clashes and disputes with neighboring countries augmented owing to the Hindutva-driven BJP's regional hegemonic aspirations. The bellicose ideology of Hindutva, spearheaded by the orchestrator of the Gujarat Massacre, PM Narendra Modi, resulted in India opting for a hostile and militaristic approach to its border disputes rather than their amicable settlement. India and China have long-standing border disputes across the Western, Middle and the Eastern Sectors. They remained dormant for a long time but in the last decade, India's border clashes with China significantly increased. The most notable stand-offs/clashes include the Doklam Stand-off in 2017 in the middle sector, the Pangong Tso Skirmishes and the Galwan Valley Clash in 2020 in the western sector and the Tawang clash in 2022 in the eastern sector. The border disputes have reignited in the Modi regime due to assertive strategic orientation of the BJP government. The Modi-led BJP government have appeared as an aggressor since its unlawful attack on Chinese engineers, workers and soldiers in the Doklam region in 2017. This aggression and belligerency have been evident in the following clashes between India and China in the western sector in 2020 and the Eastern sector in 2022. The Indian government carries the agenda that it can subdue its neighbor on the north by the use of force and aggressive posture. This approach, however, has only resulted in further debilitation of relations and aggravation of border dispute between the two nations. These border clashes with China reflect a similar belligerent approach to border issues as demonstrated towards Pakistan, including continual violations of the ceasefire agreement, with escalations rising to armed confrontations in February 2019 and May 2025. The persistent border issue between India and China, precipitated by India,

presents a similar challenge for Pakistan, thus requiring concentrated planning on the part of Pakistan's policymakers. Pakistan's strategic thinkers, academics and policymakers need to align their efforts in correlating the two border disputes and formulate strategies to counter the aggressive posture of the Indian government towards border issues with its neighbors. For addressing Pakistan's concerns, the following recommendations are proposed.

Policy Recommendations

- India took advantage of the de-escalation approach by China in 2017. Both China and Pakistan should deal with Indian aggression with the policy of quid pro quo.
- Pakistan and China, facing a similar challenge, should further enhance their strategic partnership.
- Pakistan and China should pursue closer coordination in border management and develop a joint border management body for improved border security.
- Intelligence sharing and closer coordination are essential to counter Indian proxies against CPEC.
- Pakistan and China should jointly expose Indian belligerence through regional diplomacy.

“Beyond Doklam: Mapping Strategic Mistrust between India and China”

Overview

India and China have longstanding border disputes on all the three sectors including the western sector, the middle sector and the eastern sector. These border disputes range back to the pre-partition colonial era. The multitude of border demarcation arrangements either excluded the Chinese government or were riddled with confusion. Furthermore, the existence of simultaneous arrangements in some cases also led to border disputes, for example McCartney-MacDonald Line and Johnson Line were two arrangements made by the British in the western sector, whereby the former is acknowledged by China while the latter being accepted by India. As a result of this disagreement, Aksai Chin has remained a matter of dispute between India and China. The exclusion of China from the McMahon Line negotiations (as they were signed between Tibet and British India) also marred the arrangement with ambiguity and vagueness, resulting in China claiming the entire Arunachal Pradesh region (called Zangnan by the Chinese authorities). These colonial era paradoxes of border demarcation were carried up by the two nations after their independence in the late 1940s and were flared up into full-scale conflict in 1962, followed by a few small-scale border confrontations. However, after the rise of Modi to power, the border disputes again transformed into confrontations, owing to the bellicose and aggressive strategic posturing of the Modi-led BJP government. In 2017, Indian forces forcibly prevented Chinese road construction in the Galwan region, hampering the sovereignty of Chinese territory in the middle Sector of the border. In 2020, the Indian military buildup and aggressive posturing in Pangong Tso Lake and Galwan resulted in a border standoff in the western sector. In 2022, the Indian military's aggressive buildup in the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh led to border confrontation in the eastern sector. Due to Modi's hostile strategic orientation and border policy, the long-dormant disputes have again flared up, threatening the overall peace and stability of the region.

Issue

To analyze the persistent border issues between India and China, political and strategic factors contributing to the escalation of border issues into confrontations, their impacts on the security apparatus of the region and strategic perceptions of Pakistan, and relevant lessons for Pakistan to address this challenge effectively.

Analysis

Historical Overview of India-China Border

The border between China and India is known as the Line of Actual Control. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai is credited with coining the phrase "Line of Actual Control" in a 1959 letter to Indian Premier Jawaharlal Nehru. The Line of Actual Control is categorized into three sectors: the eastern sector, the middle sector and the western sector. The eastern sector is between Arunachal Pradesh/Zangnan on the Indian side and the Tibet region on the Chinese side, and is also called the McMahon Line. The middle sector exists between Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh on the Indian side and the Tibetan region on the Chinese side. The western sector is between Ladakh on the Indian side and the Tibet and Xinjiang region on the Chinese side, and was the site of the 2020 China-India conflict. These different sectors have a long history of varied demarcations, claims and conflicts.



Figure 1 Sectors of India-China Border (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/13/india-says-china-trying-to-change-status-quo-on-disputed-border>)

McMahon Line – The Eastern Sector

The British colonial authority started developing its policy toward the Himalayan region in the early to mid-19th century, particularly after the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–1842). The “Great Game,” a geopolitical competition between the Russian and British

empires, was ignited during this time owing to the increased anxiety over Russian geographical proliferation in Central Asia. In this regard, the Shimla Convention of 1914 became the most famous of several treaties and accords that British authorities codified at that time in an attempt to safeguard India's northern boundary.

In accordance with the maps and notes that the respective officials exchanged in Delhi on March 24 and 25, 1914, the McMahon Line was demarcated as the border between Tibet and British India within the framework of the 1914 Simla Convention.¹ The line commemorates the name of Henry McMahon, who served as British India's foreign secretary and as the main British negotiator during the Simla conference. On behalf of the British government, McMahon signed the bilateral document between Tibet and Britain.

Previously indeterminate, the line marked the different areas of influence of the two nations in the eastern Himalayan region spanning northeast India and northern Burma (Myanmar). This boundary, which stretches from Bhutan's easternmost point to the Talu Pass in the eastern Himalayas, marks the eastern portion of the India-China border. The line, which the British presented as the official border between Tibet and British India, was intended to bolster colonial authority and act as a protective barrier. This boundary illustrates the confounding intricacies of border delineations during the colonial era and was drawn with British strategic interests in mind.

The North-East Frontier Tracts that were created by the British Indian government in 1912–1913 were made part of British India. Tawang and other parts were also included in the McMahon Line.² China opposed both the Simla Convention and the McMahon Line, arguing that Tibet lacked the authority to make treaties because it did not qualify as a sovereign state.

Britain set up administrations in the region in 1944, extending from Walong in the east to Dirang Dzong in the west. After J.P. Mills established an Assam Rifles garrison at Dirang Dzong and banished the Tibetan tax collectors, administrative control was extended to the Tawang tract located south of the Sela Pass. Tibetan objections were dismissed. Following the partition of India in 1947, all of the lands that had been a part

¹ Biswanath Singh, "LEGALITY OF THE McMAHON LINE," *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1967) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41854220>

² Karunakar Gupta. "The McMahon Line 1911-45: The British Legacy," *The China Quarterly*, No. 47 (1971) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/652324>

of British India were given to the two new nations, India and Pakistan. British India's current borders were inherited. The McMahon Line was depicted on maps of the time as the northeastern border of India.

The Tibetan government demanded that India return the areas that the British were said to have taken from Tibet. The claims were dismissed by the Indian government. The Communist Party announced its goal of freeing Tibet, concluding its aim in 1950.³ Following the signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement by the Tibetan government, which the 14th Dalai Lama endorsed on October 24, 1951, Tibet was placed under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China (PRC). India, after a short time, conceded to Chinese claims and acknowledged China's authority over Tibet.

With the signing of the treaty in April 1954, India recognized Tibet as a part of China.⁴ The McMahon Line, however, was the sole border that India had drawn prior to the summit. Nehru released maps of India a few months after the summit, displaying broad Indian territorial assertions as distinct borders, particularly in the Western Section (Aksai Chin). Despite being somewhat north of the McMahon Line in certain locations, the hill crest was designated as the boundary of the NEFA area on the revised maps. India changed the name of the disputed region to the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1954. The North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) acquired the name Arunachal Pradesh and became a union territory in 1972 under Indira Gandhi's government.⁵ Later, under Rajiv Gandhi's administration, Arunachal Pradesh was made a state in 1987.

After the 1959 Tibetan insurrection failed and the 14th Dalai Lama landed in India in March, Indian lawmakers criticized Nehru for failing to get China to promise to observe the McMahon Line. Furthermore, the Indian press began to publicly support Tibetan independence, and as support for the Tibetans grew, anti-Chinese sentiment in Indian society also gradually increased. In an attempt to respond swiftly, Nehru set up several military outposts along the border. Chinese leaders suspected Nehru of having plans for the area after finding out about these posts. The new Indian military station at

³ Rajiv Sikri, "THE TIBET FACTOR IN INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2, (2011) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24385534>

⁴ Dawa Norbu, "Tibet in Sino-Indian Relations: The Centrality of Marginality," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 11 (1997) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645742>

⁵ V. Venkata Rao, "REORGANIZATION OF NORTH EAST INDIA," *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1972) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41854497>

Longju on the Tsari Chu (north of the McMahon Line) was seized by Chinese forces in August 1959.

Nehru openly embraced the “Forward Policy”⁶ of establishing military outposts in contested regions in November 1961. In the Namka Chu valley, seven kilometers north of the McMahon Line and south of the Thag La Ridge, an Indian position at Dhola was attacked by a Chinese force on September 8, 1962. China launched two large attacks on October 20th, one further north and one over the McMahon Line.⁷ China swiftly advanced 90 km from the McMahon Line to Rupa and subsequently Chaku (65 km southeast of Tawang) in the extreme western sector of the NEFA, and 30 km to Walong in the extreme eastern portion, making the Sino-Indian War a grand humiliation for India.⁸ After that, China pulled back to the McMahon Line and released the Indian POWs to India.

The Middle Sector

The Tibet autonomous area on the Chinese side and Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh on the Indian side make up the middle sector of the China-India border. The Donglang (Doklam) Plateau is part of the Sino-Indian Border's Middle Sector. The plateau lies where China, Bhutan, and India converge. Situated between India's Sikkim state to the west, Bhutan's Haa District to the east, and China's Yadong County to the north, Doklam is a region in Chumbi Valley that consists of a high plateau and a valley. China and Bhutan have been disputing ownership over the Doklam region since the 1960s. Despite multiple rounds of boundary talks between China and Bhutan, the conflict remains unresolved. For all three nations, the region is strategically significant.⁹ China's position on the Donglang plateau is that the region is a part of China according to the China-Britain Treaty of 1890.

The Anglo-Chinese Treaty of 1890, which was negotiated between the Chinese residents of Tibet and the British Empire in India, serves as the basis for China's claim

⁶ Neville Maxwell, “JAWAHARLAL NEHRU AND THE FORWARD POLICY,” *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1999) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45083377>

⁷ H SRIKANTH, “The Sino-Indian Border Dispute Overcoming Nationalist Myopia,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 39 (2012) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41720189>

⁸ Kallie Szczepanski, “The Sino-Indian War, 1962,” *ThoughtCo*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-sino-indian-war-1962-195804>

⁹ Maira Qaddos, “Sino-Indian Border Conflict and Implications for Bilateral Relations,” *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2018) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/polipers.15.2.0057>

to the Doklam region.¹⁰ Bhutan was barely mentioned in passing, and its goal was to draw the border between Sikkim and Tibet. According to Article I of the treaty, the crest of the mountain range that divides the waters entering the Sikkim Teesta and its tributaries from those entering the Tibetan Mochu and flowing northward into other rivers of Tibet would serve as the border between Sikkim and Tibet. Starting from Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutanese border, the line proceeds along the aforementioned waterway until it intersects Nipal territory.

In 1988, the Donglang (Doklam) plateau was successfully taken over by the Chinese People's Liberation Army. India is greatly skeptical of China's control of the Doklam Plateau. Donglang is significant to India since Sikkim joined the country in April 1975. In Sikkim, the Doklam Plateau is located just east of Indian defenses. In addition to offering an unparalleled view of the Chumbi Valley, this strategic location also provides a glimpse of the Silguri Corridor, which lies more to the east. The Silguri Corridor is a slender road that links the northeastern Indian states with the rest of the country; some commentators have referred to it as a "Chicken's Neck."¹¹ Should conflicts break out, Chinese dominance over the Doklam plateau would effectively deny millions of Indians in its northeastern territories access to the mainland.

The Western Sector

The Aksai Chin (the Himalayan part of Ladakh) and the Himachal Pradesh border areas make up the Western Sector of the Border. Ladakh is in India, while Aksai Chin is in China, separated by the Line of Actual Control (LAC). 38,000 square kilometers of Aksai Chin are claimed by India. Since it has the road connecting Xinjiang province and Tibet's capital, Lhasa, Aksai Chin is essential from China's point of view.

Historically, the "Johnson Line" was proposed in 1865 by William Johnson, a Survey of India official, placing Aksai Chin in Kashmir. Since most of Xinjiang was not under Chinese authority during the period of the Dungan uprising, the Chinese were not

¹⁰ "China says India violates 1890 agreement in border stand-off," *Reuters*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-says-india-violates-1890-agreement-in-border-stand-off-idUSKBN19O108/>

¹¹ Jayanth Jacob, "Why Chicken's Neck is a perennial security challenge," *The Indian Express*, May 25, 2025, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/explainers/2025/May/25/why-chickens-neck-is-a-perennial-security-challenge>

shown this line and were handed over to the Maharaja of Kashmir by Johnson.¹² The Chinese had retaken Xinjiang in 1878. A British military officer named Sir John Ardagh suggested drawing a border north of the Yarkand River in 1897, following the top of the Kun Lun Mountains. The Ardagh line – also referred to as the “Johnson-Ardagh Line” – was essentially a variation of the Johnson line.¹³

By the year 1892, the British had decided that the “Indus watershed” – the water-parting through which waters stream into the Tarim basin on one side and the Indus River system on the other – was their ideal border for Kashmir. This water-parting occurred along the Karakoram mountains in the north. It was more difficult in the east since the Karakash River empties into the Tarim basin. The Viceroy Lord Elgin established a boundary layout along this water-parting and informed London of it. Through its envoy, Sir Claude MacDonald, the British government eventually suggested it to China in 1899. The Trans-Karakoram Tract in the north and the Aksai Chin lowlands in the northeast were given to China by this border, which became known as the Macartney–MacDonald Line.¹⁴ The British demanded that China give up its dubious suzerainty over Hunza in exchange.

This revised boundary, first proposed by Macartney and then refined by Lord Elgin, the Governor General of India, was put out by Britain in 1899. This border positioned the Aksai Chin, located north of the Lakhsang range, in China, and the Lingzi Tang lowlands, located south of the Lakhsang range, in India. British officials advocated and supported this boundary, which runs across the Karakoram Mountains, for several reasons. Chinese control over the Tarim River basin would provide an additional barrier to Russian progress in Central Asia, while the Karakoram Mountains provided a natural frontier that would place the British up to the Indus River watershed. This line, called the Macartney–MacDonald Line, was introduced to the Chinese by the British in 1899.

The Johnson Line served as the foundation for the Indian government's official western boundary, which comprised Aksai Chin, following Jammu and Kashmir's occupation by the newly established India in October 1947. Following India's independence, the

¹² Subhashis Sen, “SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 75 (2014) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158523>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

British abandoned the Indian government in a state of great uncertainty regarding the country's established northern border.¹⁵ After 1947, the Indian government decided to assert its claim over Aksai Chin. Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, made the Indian position clear in 1954 when he asserted that the Johnson Line, which delineated the border, was unassailable and that Aksai Chin existed as a part of Indian Ladakh for millennia.

The Macartney-MacDonald Line, that kept the Aksai Chin inside Chinese borders, was the only line ever put forward to the Chinese government.¹⁶ As a strategic link between Tibet and Xinjiang, Aksai Chin continues to be significant for China. The People's Republic of China constructed the 1,200-kilometer China National Highway 219 in the 1950s to connect Xinjiang and western Tibet; 179km of the route passed through the Indian-claimed Aksai Chin territory south of the Johnson Line. The Indians on the opposite part of the Karakoram found it more difficult to gain access to Aksai Chin, but the Chinese had little trouble getting there. The road's existence was not known to the Indians until 1957, and this was verified when Chinese maps of the area were released in 1958. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 was sparked in part by the building of this highway.

1962 Sino-Indian War - Conflict in the Eastern and Western Sectors

The 1962 conflict centered on the sovereignty of the vastly divided border areas of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin. Disputed border positions in the Eastern sector and Nehru's Forward Policy resulted in conflict in the Eastern sector of the China-India border. Simultaneously, a vital road connecting the Chinese provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang, and Aksai Chin, which China claims is part of Xinjiang and India claims is part of Ladakh, was constructed by the Chinese in Aksai Chin.¹⁷ One of the factors that led to the conflict in the Western Sector was China's building of this highway.

In 1949, the new Chinese government continued to hold the view that the McMahon Line was invalid. China began imposing its will in Aksai Chin after attaining

¹⁵ Bishaldeep Kakati & Bagmita Borthakur, "From Johnson Line to Macdonald Line," *Frontier Vol 55, No. 30* (2023) <https://www.frontierweekly.com/articles/vol-55/55-30/55-30-From%20Johnson%20Line%20to%20Macdonald%20Line.html>

¹⁶ Maroof Raza, "Looking for common ground on the borderline," *The Tribune*, January 16, 2025, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/looking-for-common-ground-on-the-borderline-156910/>

¹⁷ Sen, "SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE"

independence, erecting border posts and constructing a road in Aksai Chin.¹⁸ China believed in the McCartney-MacDonald Line and that Aksai Chin had already come under Chinese control. Zhou subsequently contended that the Indian government had no right to arbitrarily determine Aksai Chin's borders because the border was unmarked and had never been established by a treaty between either the Chinese or Indian governments.¹⁹ India objected to these claims as India considered the McMahon Line to be its formal boundary.

Following a failed Tibetan revolt against Chinese control, the 14th Dalai Lama, the then-religious head of Tibet, escaped Lhasa and was taken in by Nehru in 1959. Tensions between China and India increased as a result. China started patrolling the McMahon Line in the summer of 1961 in the wake of Nehru's assertive border posturing. They made their way into areas under Indian administration. But the Chinese did not perceive they were encroaching on Indian land. To cut off the Chinese troops' supplies and compel them to return to China, the Indians responded by establishing outposts behind the Chinese troops. It is commonly known as the "forward policy".²⁰ In the end, there were sixty of these outposts, forty-three of which were along Aksai Chin. Indian military strategists started recommending probing actions against the Chinese in June and July of 1962. As a result, they advanced mountain troops to choke off Chinese supply routes.

The PLA launched two attacks on October 20, 1962, separated by 1,000 kilometers.²¹ The PLA aimed to take control of both banks of the Namka Chu river in the eastern theater and drive Indian forces out of Aksai Chin's Chip Chap valley in the western theater. In the Western sector, the majority of the disputed area on the Aksai Chin border was already under Chinese control. Any surviving Indian troops were swiftly driven out of the area by Chinese forces. Chinese troops attacked various targets in the western theater late on October 19. All posts north of Chushul were cleared by October 22. The Chip Chap Valley and Pangong Lake were captured by the Chinese

¹⁸ Sen, "SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE"

¹⁹ Virendra Sahai Verma, "SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE AT AKSAI CHIN A MIDDLE PATH FOR RESOLUTION," *CIBD*, 2010, <https://chinaindiaborderdispute.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/virendravermamapaperborderdispute.pdf>

²⁰ David R. Devereux, "The Sino-Indian War of 1962 in Anglo-American Relations," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2009) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40543074>

²¹ Joseph R. Stauffer, "SINO-INDIAN BORDER DISPUTE--1962," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 19, No. 9 (1967) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44640979>

with ease on October 20. Along the Western Front, numerous garrisons and outposts were unable to repel the encircling Chinese forces. Despite putting up a fight, the majority of the Indian soldiers stationed at these positions were gunned down or captured.

On October 20, Chinese troops in the Eastern theater attacked the Namka Chu River's southern banks. In a series of encircling maneuvers south of the McMahon Line, the Chinese overpowered the Indian troops, forcing them to evacuate Namka Chu. Indian forces withdrew into Bhutan out of fear of suffering further casualties. Chinese troops did not enter the territory of Bhutan. Chinese forces continued to push into the rest of NEFA. They now controlled all of the land that was disputed at the moment of the Thagla Ridge confrontation. Chinese armies attacked Tawang, and the Indians were unable to stave them off. By October 24, the PLA had infiltrated Indian-administered territory, granting the PRC a powerful position over India. Chinese forces had moved 16 kilometers south of the control line.²² After four days of combat, there was a three-week pause, while Zhou tried to negotiate with Nehru; he ordered the troops to cease their advance. The PLA did not move any further after China reached its claim lines, and on November 19, it unilaterally called a cease-fire after perceptibly defeating India.²³

1967 Nathu La and Cho La clashes - Conflict in the Middle Sector

China and India clashed along the border of the Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim, which was then a protectorate of India, during the Nathu La and Cho La conflicts. The skirmishes at Nathu La began on September 11, 1967, when the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) attacked Indian troops. They continued until September 15, 1967. Chinese troops began excavating trenches in Nathu La in August 1967; part of these trenches were located on the Sikkimese side of the boundary. India responded by extending cables along the border, which the Chinese forces despised and ultimately escalated into an armed conflict. Another one-day conflict between China

²² Szczepanski, "The Sino-Indian War, 1962,"

²³ Zhiqun Zhu, "China-India Relations in the 21 st Century: A Critical Inquiry," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 1/2 (2011) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41950508>

and India occurred on October 1, 1967, at Cho La, a frontier pass, a few kilometers north of Nathu La. This second military conflict was concluded on the same day.²⁴

Modi's Rise to Power and Reignition of India-China Border Disputes

The return of Narendra Modi-led BJP to power in 2014 marked a significant shift in India's strategic foresight as it opted for a more assertive foreign policy and strategic outlook.²⁵ Driven by the agenda of regional hegemonic domination, it sought to act high-handedly and bully its neighbors by utilizing force in the border disputes. On its norther border with China, the border issues that had not flared into physical confrontations for years started escalating into border conflicts across the western, middle and the eastern sectors.

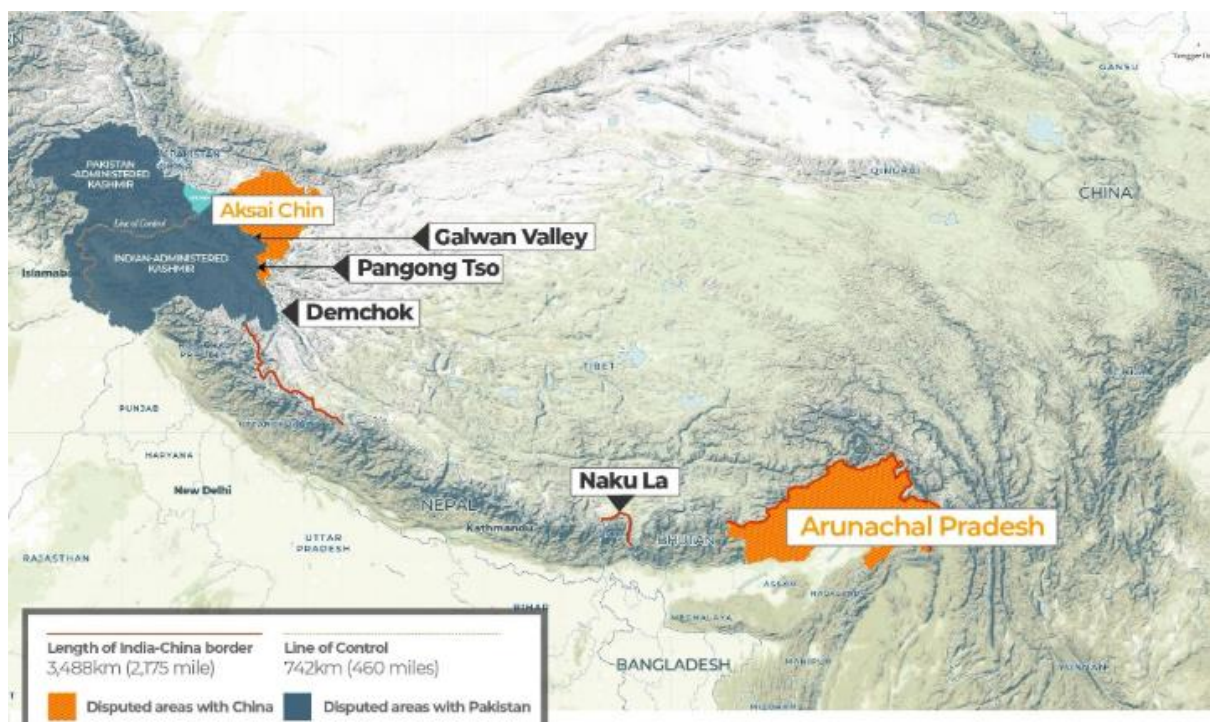


Figure 2 India's contentious border regions with China and Pakistan (https://www.aljazeera.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/649e038b4290440390ca27043651c52d_7.jpeg?quality=80)

²⁴ "SINO INDIAN WAR OF 1967," NUNAWADING MILITARY HISTORY GROUP MINI NEWSLETTER No. 21, <https://u3anunawading.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MilitaryHistoryNews-21.pdf>

²⁵ Anshu Meghe, "Strategic Pragmatism and Hindutva," *FOREIGN ANALYSIS MAGAZINE*, December 02, 2024, <https://foreignanalysis.com/strategic-pragmatism-and-hindutva-decoding-a-decade-of-modis-foreign-policy/>

2017 Doklam Standoff – Clash at the Middle Sector of India-China Border

Geographically, the region of Dong Lang (or Doklam), is near the tri-junction between China, Bhutan and India, belongs to Chinese territory.²⁶ The Doklam region has always been under Chinese jurisdiction and effectively controlled by the Chinese authorities. Strategically it carries immense importance as it is located between Tibet's Chumbi valley to the North, Bhutan's Ha valley to the East and India's Sikkim state to the West.

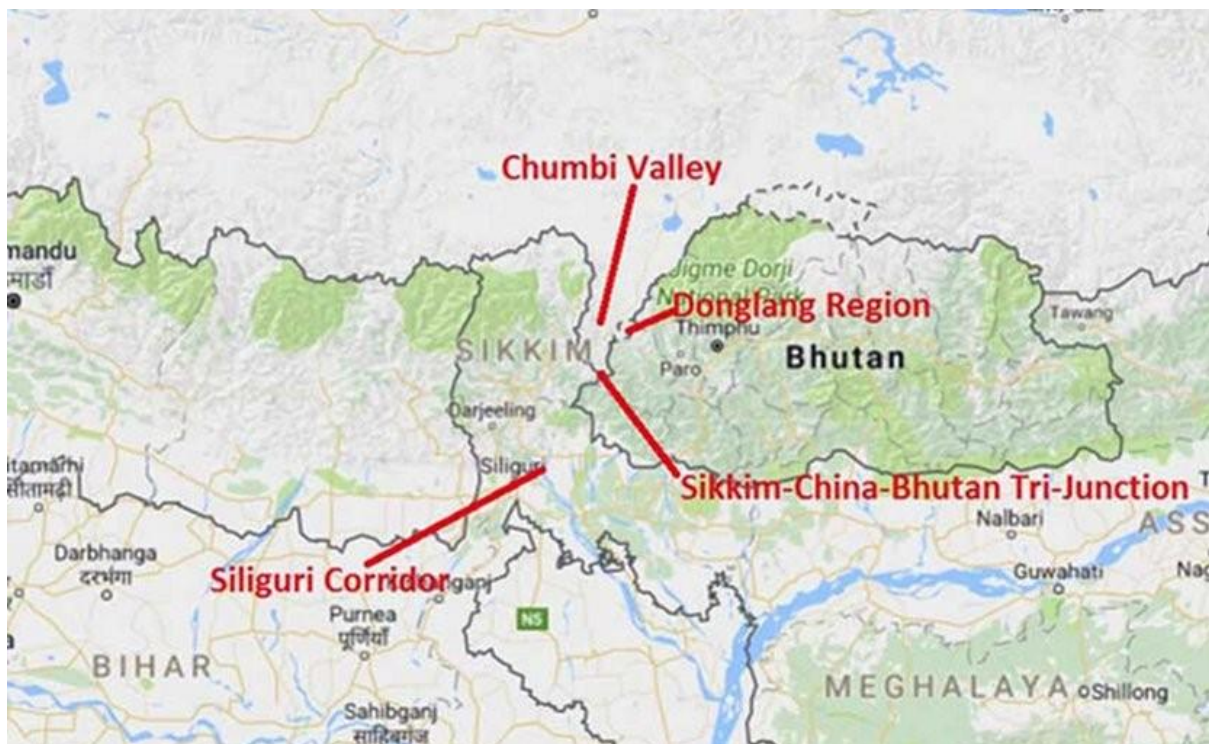


Figure 3 - Doklam Plateau Geography (<https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/the-doklam-standoff-a-template-for-countering-chinese-belligerence-and-expansionism/>)

This area is vital to India because a Chinese construction at Doklam, especially a transportation network with strategic importance, that could support deeper incursions, would jeopardize the Siliguri Corridor, a 17-mile-wide stretch of land that connects seven states in Northeastern India to the rest of the nation. New Delhi would never allow Beijing to take control of the corridor, which is commonly referred to as India's "Chicken Neck." According to the 2007 pact with Bhutan, neither government will permit the use of their territory for purposes detrimental to the other's national security

²⁶ Samir Saran and Wang Dong, "There's a standoff between China and India in the Himalayas. Both sides explain," *World Economic Forum*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2017/08/there-s-a-standoff-between-china-and-india-in-the-himalayas-both-sides-explain/>

or interests. India probably would not have been willing to step aside, even if Bhutan had agreed to allow China to construct infrastructure in Doklam.

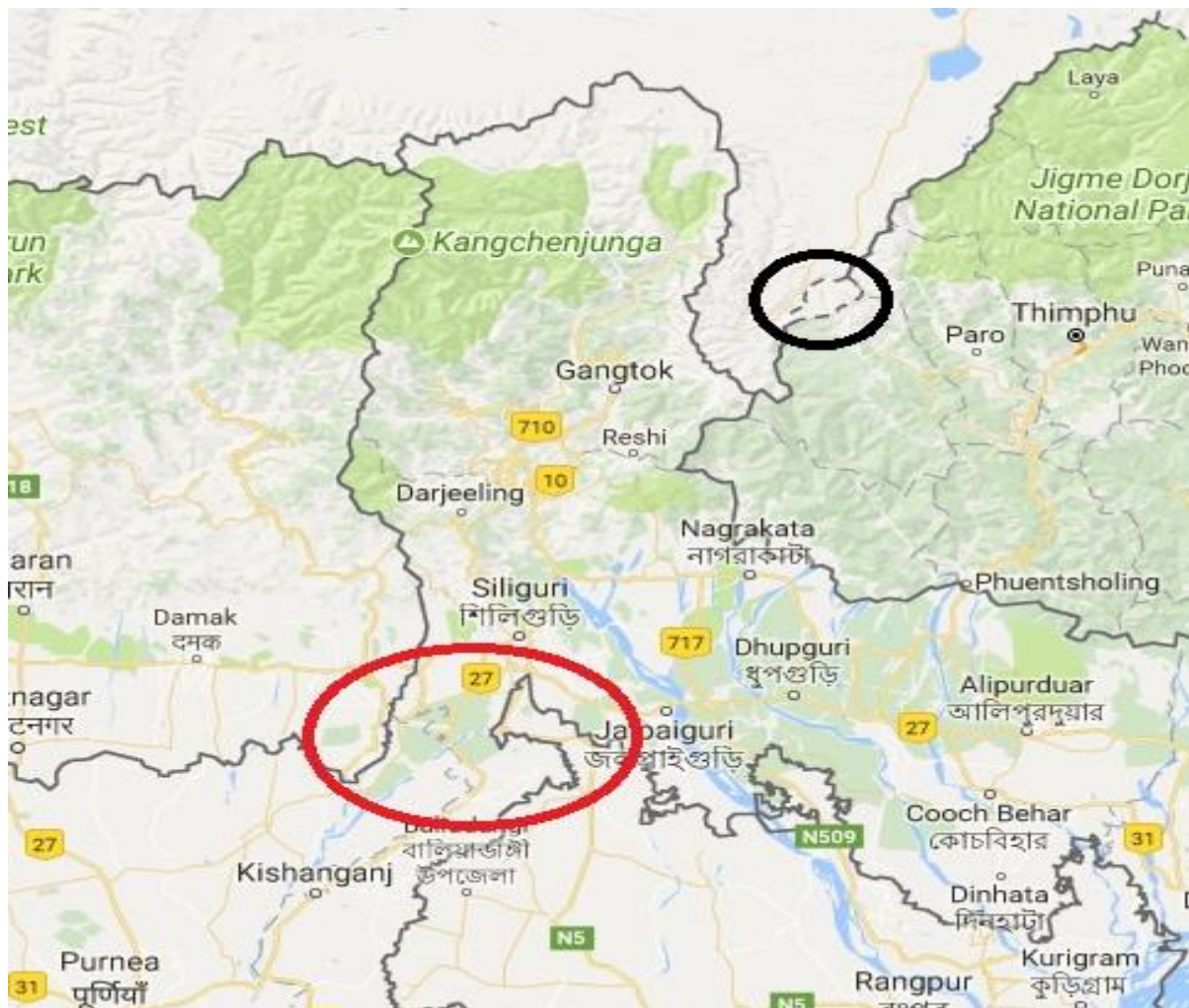


Figure 4 Siliguri Corridor (<https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/where-doklam-why-important-india-china-bhutan-1198730-2018-03-27>)

The major incident of the Doklam Stand-off in 2017 revealed the severity of strategic mistrust between India and China as strategic misperceptions resulted in a border stand-off in the Doklam region that is contested between China and Bhutan. Chinese troops armed with construction machinery and road-building equipment started expanding an existing road on the Doklam plateau southward on June 16, 2017. According to India, China tried to expand a road (that previously ended at Doka La) via Sinchela further southward on the Doklam plateau.

In order to prevent the Chinese troops from building the road, about 270 Indian troops armed with firearms and bulldozers entered Doklam on June 18, 2017. India, being the self-proclaimed guardian of Bhutan, invaded the Doklam region and physically

forced Chinese engineers from the construction of a road in the Chinese territory.²⁷ Indian forces, reflecting a self-entitled and self-proclaimed savior paradox, trespassed into the Chinese territory. This action of the Indian forces demonstrated an act of war as they deliberately violated the territorial sovereignty of China. China, however, acted rationally and pursued the de-escalation of the situation by favoring negotiation.²⁸



Figure 5 Location of Chinese Road and Indian Incursion into Chinese territory - Source: Google Maps

Beijing's Foreign Ministry charged that India was interfering and impeding the boundary negotiations between China and Bhutan by leveraging Bhutan as a pretext. India's incursion into Doklam was described as a challenge to Bhutan's independence and sovereignty as well as a breach of China's territorial sovereignty.²⁹ Regarding the contentious tri-junction, the spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry added that,

²⁷ Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye, and Nilanthi Samaranayake, "Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas," *War On The Rocks*, June 7, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/doklam-one-year-later-chinas-long-game-in-the-himalayas/>

²⁸ Jeffrey Gettleman and Javier C. Hernández, "China and India Agree to Ease Tensions in Border Dispute," *The New York Times*, Aug. 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/world/asia/china-india-standoff-withdrawal.html>

²⁹ K.J.M. Varma, "Sikkim standoff: China tells India to pull back troops from Doklam, 'no strings attached'," *livemint*, August 02 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170802123626/http://www.livemint.com/Politics/ofIdIQ8Dp93jC5EfUdUKJ/C hina-demands-unconditional-withdrawal-by-India-in-a-15page.html>

as the name implies, it is a point. It's hardly even a region, let alone a line. For nefarious reasons, India misinterprets the trijunction point as an area. According to the 1890 Treaty, the Indian army's trespassing point this time is on the Sikkim-China border, 2000 meters from Mount Gipmochi, the trijunction point.³⁰

The approach of strategic compellence demonstrated in the Doklam stand-off was deliberately prompted by the Hindutva-driven Modi regime. The stand-off was a depiction of strategic mistrust that led to a serious crisis between nuclear-armed neighbors. However, it was, in its true essence, strategic bullying and strategic compellence by India, precipitated by the perception of strategic and ideological superiority, leading to the aspiration of regional hegemonic domination.

2020 Pangong Lake and Galwan Conflict in the Western Sector

Continuing the pattern of strategic assertiveness, India perpetuated the policy of igniting border issues. The next series of skirmishes took place in 2020 in the Western sector of the India-China border. In May 2020, the Indian and Chinese forces clashed in the Pangong Lake region in Ladakh, followed by clashes in the Galwan region. These clashes were prompted by rampant Indian construction of military infrastructure, including roads, bridges and airstrips, along with other military infrastructure in the disputed regions,³¹ triggering China's security dilemma. The confrontations in the Pangong Lake region were followed by the Galwan Valley clashes in June 2020. These clashes were again triggered by a belligerent Indian approach as it attempted to pursue forward border patrolling in a highly disputed geography.

³⁰ "Full text of facts and China's position concerning Indian border troops' crossing of China-India boundary," *THE STATE COUNCIL - THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA*, Aug 3, 2017, https://english.www.gov.cn/state_council/ministries/2017/08/03/content_281475768664370.htm

³¹ Saheb Singh Chadha, "Negotiating the India-China Standoff: 2020–2024," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 3, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/negotiating-the-india-china-standoff-2020-2024?lang=en>



Figure 6 Flashpoints of China-India Confrontation in the Western Sector (https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Tellis_Himalayan-Border-Standoffs.pdf)

China and India view the LAC's passage through the Pangong Lake region differently. India had insisted that Finger 8, where China's last military outpost was located, was traversed by the LAC. India had been policing the region up to Finger 8, primarily on foot due to the terrain. Beyond Finger 4, however, Indian forces had not maintained active control. China, however, claimed that Finger 2 was where the LAC terminated. Light vehicles had been used for most of the patrol up to Finger 4, and occasionally up to Finger 2. The altercation occurred in May 2020 at Finger 5.³²

³² Prabhaskar K Dutta, "India-China border dispute: Importance of Pangong Tso and why its fingers are much sought after," *India Today*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/india-china-border-dispute-pangong-tso-fingers-1685382-2020-06-04?>

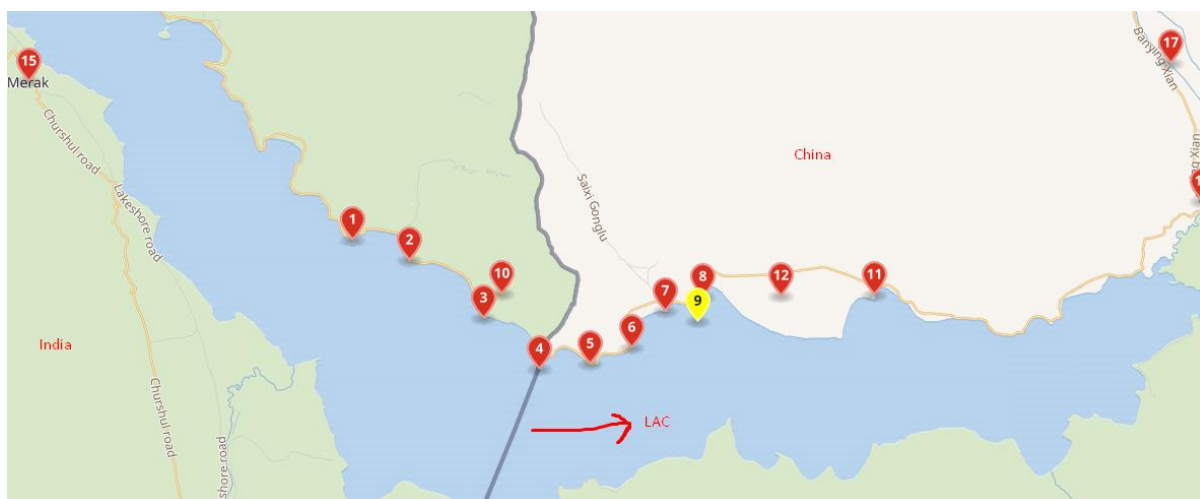


Figure 7 Shores (Fingers of Pangong Lake) - Source: Google Maps

Additionally, according to the Ministry of Defense's 2018–19 annual report, the government planned to build roads along the India–China border. This project completed its first phase. India was to construct 32 roads along the border as part of Phase 2 of the project.³³ China had been against the building because it was opposed to India using the route to its full potential. Despite the border tensions, India had accelerated the road's development.

The Indian military's presence in the Galwan border region grew as a result of the development of these roadways. In response to this, the Chinese military observation in the region grew as well. When an Indian patrol spotted two tents and observation towers that India claimed were constructed on its side of the de facto border, its troops set them on fire, sparking the altercation. A sizable contingent of Chinese forces arrived and engaged the Indian troops, albeit with limited weaponry.³⁴

It was the first time since 1975 that casualties were observed on both sides during and armed confrontation.³⁵ What differentiated the initiation of these clashes from the 2017 Doklam Stand-off was that China was constructing the road in its own territory, which was not disputed nor claimed by India; however, India violated the territorial sovereignty of China. In the case of the 2020 clashes, India attempted to construct military infrastructure in disputed regions, which augmented the security dilemma of

³³ Arfa Javaid, "5 key reasons behind India-China standoff at the Galwan Valley," *JAGRANJOSH*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/reason-behind-india-galwan-valley-clash-1592483528-1>

³⁴ "What was the India-China military clash in 2020 about?," *Reuters*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-was-india-china-military-clash-2020-about-2024-10-25/>

³⁵ "India-China dispute: The border row explained in 400 words," *BBC*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53062484>

China and escalated the tensions, resulting in the death of personnel and deterioration of regional security.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said that the Indian army had crossed into Chinese territory in several places in recent days – violating the agreement reached on June 6 – and that they should withdraw. Calling it a deliberate provocation on New Delhi's part, Zhao said that responsibility rested entirely with the Indian side. In response, India's foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava cautioned China against making exaggerated and untenable claims on the sovereignty of the Galwan Valley area.³⁶

2022 Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh) Faceoff – Conflict in the Eastern Sector

Merely two years after the conflict in the Western sector, Indian and Chinese forces clashed in the Eastern Sector. India's construction of roads and forward deployment in the Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh led to another border clash in 2022, which resulted in several soldiers being injured on both sides.³⁷ In Arunachal Pradesh, which borders the Tibet Region, Indian and Chinese troops engaged in combat along the contentious border close to the Yangtse area of Tawang.

³⁶ "Five things to know about the India-China border standoff," *Al Jazeera*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/22/five-things-to-know-about-the-india-china-border-standoff>

³⁷ Ivan Lidarev, "The True Significance of the China-India Yangtse Clash," *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/the-true-significance-of-the-china-india-yangtse-clash/>



Figure 8 Tawang Region in India - Flashpoint of 2022 Border Confrontation (<https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/aksai-chin-china-india-tawang-dai-bingquo-963639-2017-03-02>)

In Arunachal Pradesh, Indian and Chinese troops engaged in combat along the disputed border close to the Yangtze region, which borders the Tibet Autonomous Region. The Dongzhang region (Chumi Gyatse Falls or Domtsang Falls), according to Chinese media, was the precise site of the confrontation between China and India. The border between China and India is marked by Bangshankou Pass, which was also the site of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) offensive to seize Tawang during the 1962 conflict. As per the Chinese accounts detailing the most recent confrontation, the Bangshankou Pass continues to serve as the boundary between the two sides' actual control in the direction of Cuona-Tawang. In the struggle against Indian expansion in South Tibet, or Zangnan as Arunachal Pradesh is known in China, Dongzhang is a crucial frontline region. The virgin woodland valley region south of Langpo Township, also known as Langpo Xiang in Chinese (also Lampu Township),

in Cuona County is known as the Dongzhang area. In Cuona County, the Cuona River, also known as the Langbo or Dongzhang River, flows from north to south.³⁸



Figure 9 Dongzhang (Chumi Gyatse) - Point of India-China Confrontation in 2022 - Source: Google Maps

The Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh is designated as a disputed area; however, India continued to pursue the militarization of the region. This greatly exacerbated the security concerns of China, which had witnessed border infiltration by Indian forces in 2017 in the Doklam region. The Dongzhang is a crucial frontline region in the struggle against Indian incursions into South Tibet, or Zangnan, as Arunachal Pradesh is known in China. On December 9, 2022, the PLA and Indian Army clashed in the Dongzhang area when a PLA squad of roughly 250–300 soldiers headed to the Dogoer grasslands mountain pass area to dismantle unauthorized constructions. A sizable Indian patrol force of 400 soldiers confronted the PLA. A fight broke out between the two sides, injuring multiple people.³⁹

The strategic shortsightedness by India embroiled the region in a border confrontation that raised the fears of further escalation between the two nuclear-armed states. India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh said that the encounter started when Chinese

³⁸ Hemant Adlakha, "The Tawang Clash: The View From China," *The Diplomat*, December 17, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/the-tawang-clash-the-view-from-china/>

³⁹ Ibid

troops encroached into Indian territory and unilaterally tried to change the status quo along the disputed border near the Yangtse area.⁴⁰

Recommendations:

- India took advantage of the de-escalation approach by China in 2017. Both China and Pakistan should deal with Indian aggression with the policy of quid pro quo.
- Pakistan and China, facing a similar challenge, should further enhance their strategic partnership.
- Pakistan and China should pursue closer coordination in border management and develop a joint border management body for improved border security.
- Intelligence sharing and closer coordination are essential to counter Indian proxies against CPEC.
- Pakistan and China should jointly expose Indian belligerence through regional diplomacy.

⁴⁰ "India and China troops clash on Arunachal Pradesh mountain border," *BBC*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63953400>