

India-China Border Disputes: Political, Strategic, and Economic Implications

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Abstract

The India-China border dispute, rooted in colonial-era agreements and undefined reflections on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has profound political, strategic, and economic implications for both nations. This paper examines the historical context of the dispute, beginning with the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and traces its evolution through key events like the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. Politically, the dispute fuels mutual distrust, complicating bilateral relations. Strategically, it reflects China's assertive regional ambitions and India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, with both nations militarizing the border, raising risks of escalation. Economically, the dispute disrupts trade, with India imposing restrictions on Chinese investments post-Galwan, yet maintaining significant economic ties due to dependency on Chinese imports. The paper analyzes the policies of Indian governments (Congress, UPA-1, UPA-2, NDA-1) and their approaches to managing the dispute, alongside the Panchsheel Agreement's historical significance. The 2020 Galwan clash underscored the fragility of existing confidence-building measures, highlighting nationalist rhetoric and geopolitical rivalries. The study concludes that while recent agreements, like the 2024 disengagement pact, offer temporary relief, a lasting resolution requires addressing core territorial claims and managing domestic and international pressures. Recommendations include enhancing military preparedness, diversifying supply chains, and fostering diplomatic engagement to mitigate risks of conflict. This research underscores the dispute's broader implications for regional stability and global geopolitics, given the nuclear capabilities and economic heft of both nations. Expansion Tip: To reach 3,000 words, include detailed historical context, specific incidents (e.g., Doklam, Tawang), and their impact on bilateral relations. Discuss the role of third parties (e.g., U.S., Russia) and analyze the implications of militarization in depth, citing multiple sources.

Keywords

- India-China border dispute,
- Line of Actual Control,
- Sino-Indian War,
- Galwan Valley,
- Strategic rivalry,
- Economic dependency,

- Geopolitical implications.

Preface

The India-China border dispute is one of the most enduring and complex territorial conflicts in modern geopolitics, with roots in colonial legacies and divergent national aspirations. This preface sets the stage for understanding the multifaceted nature of the dispute, which spans the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayan region, covering Aksai Chin in the west and Arunachal Pradesh in the east. The dispute's significance lies not only in its territorial dimensions but also in its political, strategic, and economic ramifications, shaping the trajectory of Asia's two rising powers. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dispute's historical evolution, key events, and policy responses from Indian governments, culminating in the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. It explores how the dispute reflects broader geopolitical rivalries, with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's alignment with the U.S. and Quad nations amplifying tensions. Economically, the dispute has led to India's push for self-reliance while grappling with dependence on Chinese imports. The preface outlines the methodology, drawing on historical records, policy documents, and recent analyses to evaluate the dispute's implications and propose actionable Recommendations.

Expansion Tip: Elaborate on the historical context, including British colonial policies, the Simla Convention (1914), and China's rejection of the McMahon Line. Discuss the global context, including U.S.-China rivalry, and provide a theoretical framework (e.g., realism, security dilemma) to analyze the dispute. Include stakeholder perspectives (e.g., military, diplomats, economists) and preview the paper's structure.

Treaty Between India and China

The most significant treaty shaping India-China relations is the Panchsheel Agreement (1954), formally the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India. Signed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Premier Zhou Enlai, it outlined five principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful dispute resolution. The agreement aimed to foster friendly relations post-China's annexation of Tibet but failed to address the boundary issue explicitly, leading to ambiguity. Subsequent agreements, such as the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC and the 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles, sought to manage tensions but lacked mechanisms to resolve core territorial claims. The 2012 Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination further facilitated dialogue but proved inadequate during crises like Galwan 2020. These treaties reflect a pattern of prioritizing stability over resolution, often undermined by China's strategic assertiveness and India's reactive policies. **Expansion Tip:** Detail the negotiation processes, key provisions, and limitations of each agreement. Analyze how China's rejection of colonial-era boundaries (e.g., McMahon Line) complicates treaty enforcement. Include quotes from primary sources and discuss the impact of these treaties on bilateral trust.

First India-China War

The Sino-Indian War of 1962 was a pivotal event, resulting from unresolved border disputes and strategic miscalculations. Triggered by China's construction of a road

through Aksai Chin and India's forward policy, the war began on October 20, 1962, with China launching offensives in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. India's military was unprepared, leading to a decisive Chinese victory. China occupied strategic points in Aksai Chin before declaring a unilateral ceasefire on November 21, 1962, withdrawing from some areas but retaining control over Aksai Chin. The war exposed India's military and diplomatic weaknesses, humiliated Nehru, and shaped India's strategic psyche, fostering distrust that persists today. The defeat prompted India to bolster its defense capabilities and rethink its China policy, emphasizing self-reliance. Expansion Tip: Provide a detailed timeline of the war, analyze military strategies, and discuss its psychological impact on India. Include perspectives from Indian and Chinese sources and assess the war's long-term impact on bilateral relations and India's defense posture.

Mistakes of PM Jawaharlal Motilal Nehru

Nehru's handling of the India-China border issue is widely criticized for strategic and diplomatic errors. His unilateral recognition of China's sovereignty over Tibet in 1954, without securing a boundary agreement, emboldened China's claims. Nehru's "forward policy" of establishing outposts in disputed areas provoked China without adequate military preparedness. His failure to engage the international community or anticipate China's willingness to use force in 1962 contributed to India's defeat. Nehru's idealistic belief in peaceful coexistence, rooted in Panchsheel, underestimated Chinese nationalism and strategic ambitions, setting the stage for prolonged tensions. Expansion Tip: Analyze Nehru's worldview, drawing on his speeches and writings. Discuss the domestic political context and critique his policies using historical accounts and contemporary analyses. Compare his approach with later Indian leaders to highlight lessons learned.

Panchsheel Policy

The Panchsheel Policy, formalized in 1954, was Nehru's vision for peaceful coexistence with China, based on five principles: mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful dispute resolution. Intended to stabilize relations post-Tibet annexation, it failed to address the boundary dispute, leading to China's rejection of the McMahon Line and subsequent aggression. While Panchsheel facilitated trade and cultural ties, its lack of enforcement mechanisms and China's revisionist stance limited its effectiveness. The policy remains a cornerstone of India's foreign policy rhetoric but is criticized for its naivety in the face of China's strategic goals. Expansion Tip: Explore the ideological roots of Panchsheel, its application in India-China relations, and its global influence (e.g., Non-Aligned Movement). Analyze why it failed to prevent conflict and its relevance today, citing diplomatic correspondence and scholarly critiques.

Policy of Congress Government on China

The Congress government (post-independence to 1989, excluding Emergency) under leaders like Nehru, Shastri, and Indira Gandhi prioritized engagement with China while addressing security concerns post-1962. Nehru's initial idealism gave way to pragmatic defense enhancements. Shastri's brief tenure saw limited engagement due to the 1965 Indo-Pak War, but Indira Gandhi's government pursued détente, culminating in Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to China. This period saw agreements like the 1988 joint communiqué, emphasizing peaceful resolution and economic cooperation. However,

progress was stymied by persistent mistrust and China's support for Pakistan. Expansion Tip: Detail specific policies, diplomatic initiatives, and their outcomes. Analyze the interplay of domestic politics and external pressures (e.g., Cold War dynamics). Use archival sources to highlight shifts in Congress's China strategy.

Policy of UPA-1 Government (2004–2009)

The UPA-1 government, led by Manmohan Singh, sought to balance economic engagement with China while managing border tensions. The 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters aimed to guide boundary negotiations, but no resolution was achieved. Economic ties grew, with China becoming a major trading partner, though concerns over trade imbalances emerged. Strategic partnerships with the U.S. and Japan were strengthened, partly to counter China's regional influence. The government emphasized dialogue through mechanisms like the Special Representatives talks, but border incidents (e.g., 2006 Tawang) highlighted ongoing challenges. Expansion Tip: Discuss key economic policies (e.g., trade agreements), strategic alignments (e.g., U.S.-India nuclear deal), and their impact on China relations. Include data on trade growth and analyze diplomatic efforts using official statements.

Policy of UPA-2 Government

UPA-2 continued economic engagement with China, with trade surpassing \$65 billion by 2013, but faced increased border tensions (e.g., 2013 Depsang standoff). The government pursued confidence-building measures, like the 2012 Working Mechanism, but China's assertiveness and India's growing U.S. ties strained relations. The UPA-2 emphasized infrastructure development along the LAC but faced criticism for inadequate military modernization. Public opinion grew wary of China's intentions, influencing policy shifts toward caution. Expansion Tip: Analyze specific border incidents, trade policies, and strategic decisions. Include data on military spending and infrastructure projects. Discuss domestic political pressures and their impact on China policy.

Policy of NDA-1 Government (2014–2019)

The NDA-1 government, under Narendra Modi, adopted a more assertive stance toward China, emphasizing border infrastructure and military modernization. The 2017 Doklam standoff highlighted India's resolve to counter Chinese incursions, particularly in strategic areas. Economic ties continued, but India pushed for self-reliance (Atmanirbhar Bharat) to reduce dependence on Chinese imports. Strategic partnerships with the U.S., Japan, and Australia (Quad) were deepened, signaling a shift toward balancing China's regional dominance. However, trade imbalances persisted, complicating economic decoupling. Expansion Tip: Detail Modi's diplomatic engagements with Xi Jinping, infrastructure projects (e.g., border roads), and Quad initiatives. Analyze the Doklam standoff's impact and include economic data to highlight trade dynamics.

Galwan Valley Struggle: Role of India and China

The Galwan Valley clash (June 15, 2020) marked a low point in India-China relations, with 20 Indian and at least four Chinese soldiers killed in a brutal melee along the LAC. Triggered by Chinese attempts to alter the status quo, the clash exposed the fragility of existing agreements. India's response included military reinforcements, economic sanctions (e.g., banning Chinese apps like TikTok), and diplomatic pressure. China

downplayed casualties but faced international scrutiny. The clash fueled nationalist sentiments in both countries, undermining years of confidence-building measures. Subsequent disengagement talks (21 rounds by 2024) led to a tentative agreement, but mistrust persists, with both sides maintaining significant troop deployments. Expansion Tip: Provide a detailed account of the clash, including timelines, military tactics, and diplomatic fallout. Analyze media narratives, public reactions, and the role of third parties (e.g., U.S. support). Use primary sources (e.g., MEA statements) and data on troop deployments to enrich the analysis.

Political and Strategic Strategies of Both Countries

China's strategy involves "salami-slicing" tactics to incrementally alter the LAC status quo, leveraging military modernization and regional alliances (e.g., Pakistan via CPEC). India counters with enhanced border infrastructure, strategic partnerships (e.g., Quad), and a multi-aligned foreign policy to balance China's influence. Both nations view the dispute through a lens of sovereignty and status, with China reluctant to recognize India as a peer. The militarization of the LAC and nuclear capabilities raise escalation risks, while diplomatic channels (e.g., Special Representatives) aim to prevent conflict. Expansion Tip: Analyze China's BRI and India's Indo-Pacific strategy in detail. Discuss military doctrines, defense budgets, and geopolitical alignments. Use strategic studies to frame the rivalry.

Economic Implications of India-China Relations

China is India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching \$118 billion in 2024, but a significant trade deficit favors China. Post-Galwan, India imposed restrictions on Chinese investments (e.g., BYD's \$1 billion EV plant rejection) and banned apps, reflecting security concerns. However, dependence on Chinese imports (e.g., electronics, pharmaceuticals) complicates decoupling efforts. India's Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative seeks to reduce this reliance, but economic interdependence persists, impacting both nations' growth strategies. The dispute disrupts supply chains, raising costs and affecting regional stability. Expansion Tip: Include trade data, case studies of restricted investments, and analyses of supply chain vulnerabilities. Discuss India's diversification efforts (e.g., partnerships with Japan, U.S.) and their economic impact. Use economic reports and policy papers for depth.

Conclusion

The India-China border dispute remains a critical challenge to regional and global stability, driven by historical grievances, strategic rivalries, and economic interdependence. While agreements like the 2024 disengagement pact offer temporary relief, the lack of a final boundary settlement perpetuates mistrust. The dispute's implications extend beyond the LAC, influencing Asia's geopolitical balance and global supply chains. Both nations must navigate nationalist pressures, military buildups, and external alliances to prevent escalation. A lasting resolution requires addressing core territorial claims, enhancing transparency, and shielding economic ties from security crises. Expansion Tip: Summarize key findings, discuss long-term risks (e.g., nuclear escalation), and highlight the need for diplomatic innovation. Include theoretical perspectives (e.g., security dilemma, power transition theory) and global implications.

Recommendations

▪ **Revise Border Infrastructure in Sensitive Zones**

Enhancing border infrastructure in areas like Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh is critical to counter China's advanced road and communication networks along the LAC. Improved roads, bridges, and airfields ensure rapid troop deployment and logistical support, addressing India's historical disadvantage, as seen in the 1962 war. Since 2014, India's Border Roads Organisation has accelerated projects like the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldi road, but gaps remain in remote sectors. Upgrading infrastructure deters Chinese incursions by signaling preparedness, while also benefiting local economies through better connectivity. However, environmental challenges and funding constraints require innovative engineering and public-private partnerships to sustain progress. (Word count: 105)

▪ **Strengthen Military Presence along**

LACA robust military presence along the LAC, including additional troops and forward bases, is essential to deter China's "salami-slicing" tactics. Post-Galwan 2020, India deployed over 50,000 troops, matching China's buildup, but sustaining this requires advanced weaponry and logistics. Modernizing artillery, drones, and air defense systems counters China's technological edge, as seen in its use of high-altitude surveillance. This presence reassures local communities and signals strategic resolve, though it risks escalation if not paired with diplomacy. Budget allocations must prioritize long-term readiness over short-term posturing to avoid straining resources. (Word count: 92)

▪ **Expand Diplomatic Dialogue Mechanisms**

Expanding platforms like the Special Representatives talks and Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination can reduce miscommunication and prevent escalations like Galwan 2020. Regular, structured dialogues at ministerial and military levels build trust and clarify intentions, addressing the opacity of China's actions. Including Track 1.5 dialogues with think tanks enhances mutual understanding of red lines—"mutual respect" from Panchsheel remains relevant. However, China's reluctance to resolve the boundary issue demands India push for time-bound outcomes. Effective diplomacy requires skilled negotiators and leveraging multilateral forums like BRICS for pressure. (Word count: 91)

▪ **Establish Independent Border Monitoring**

Agencies Independent agencies, comprising military, civilian, and technical experts, can monitor LAC activities, reducing reliance on subjective military reports. These bodies would use satellite imagery and ground data to verify compliance with agreements, like the 2024 disengagement pact, fostering transparency. Such agencies could operate under bilateral oversight, minimizing mistrust from unilateral claims, as seen in Depsang 2013. Challenges include China's resistance to external scrutiny and the need for technological investment. If successful, this could set a precedent for cooperative border management, enhancing stability. (Word count: 85)

- **Invest in Local Communities near Conflict Zones**

Investing in border communities in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh through schools, healthcare, and jobs strengthens their resilience and loyalty to India. These areas, often ethnically distinct, face neglect, which China exploits through propaganda. Development projects, like solar energy initiatives in Ladakh, improve living standards and reduce migration, ensuring a human intelligence network. However, projects must be sustainable to avoid environmental damage, as seen in some hydropower initiatives. Community empowerment counters China's infrastructure-driven influence, fostering long-term stability along the LAC.

- **Promote Bilateral Trade with Safeguards**

Encouraging trade with China, which reached \$118 billion in 2024, supports economic growth but requires safeguards to address security concerns. Post-Galwan, India banned Chinese apps and restricted investments (e.g., BYD's EV plant), reflecting the need for scrutiny. Sector-specific trade agreements can protect sensitive industries like telecommunications while maintaining economic ties. India must enforce stricter cyber security and investment review mechanisms to prevent espionage risks. Balanced trade policies can reduce tensions by fostering interdependence, provided national security is prioritized.

- **Reduce Import Dependency on China**

India's reliance on Chinese imports (e.g., 30% of electronics, 60% of APIs for pharmaceuticals) creates vulnerabilities, as seen during Galwan's economic retaliations. The Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative promotes domestic manufacturing, but scaling up requires incentives for MSMEs and technology transfers. Diversifying supply chains to Japan, Taiwan, or ASEAN reduces strategic risks while maintaining economic stability. High initial costs and global supply chain complexities are challenges, but long-term self-reliance strengthens India's bargaining power. This shift also signals economic resilience, deterring Chinese coercion.

- **Strengthen Alliances with Quad and ASEAN**

Deepening ties with the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia) and ASEAN counters China's regional dominance, as seen in India's participation in Malabar exercises. These alliances provide military interoperability, intelligence-sharing, and economic partnerships, reducing India's isolation in border disputes. ASEAN's neutral stance on LAC issues can be leveraged for diplomatic support, though some members' economic ties with China pose challenges. Strengthening these alliances requires India to balance multi-alignment with strategic autonomy. This approach enhances India's geopolitical leverage and deters Chinese assertiveness.

- **Leverage International Legal Forums**

- Engaging forums like the UN or International Court of Justice to highlight China's LAC violations can internationalize the dispute, as India did post-1962. Legal avenues expose China's rejection of colonial-era boundaries (e.g., McMahon Line), pressuring adherence to international norms. However, China's resistance to multilateral rulings, as in the South China Sea, limits efficacy. India must build

coalitions with affected nations to strengthen its case. This approach enhances global awareness but requires diplomatic finesse to avoid escalation.

- **Educate Public on Strategic Issues**

Public awareness campaigns on the LAC dispute can moderate nationalist sentiments that fueled tensions post-Galwan. Media and educational programs should clarify the dispute's complexity, countering misinformation and promoting informed discourse. This reduces pressure on policymakers to adopt aggressive stances, as seen during Doklam 2017. Civil society and academia can facilitate balanced narratives, though managing social media is challenging. Informed public opinion supports nuanced policies, fostering domestic unity and diplomatic flexibility.

- **Encourage Track II Diplomacy**

Track II diplomacy, involving non-governmental experts, can explore solutions outside formal constraints, as seen in India-China think tank dialogues. These platforms foster trust by discussing sensitive issues like LAC delineation informally. Retired diplomats and academics can propose creative frameworks, though their impact depends on government receptivity. China's centralized decision-making limits Track II's influence, but sustained efforts can build goodwill. This approach complements official talks, reducing mistrust incrementally.

- **Enhance Satellite and Surveillance Capabilities**

Investing in advanced satellites and drones, like India's RISAT series, improves real-time LAC monitoring, countering China's technological edge. Enhanced surveillance deters incursions by ensuring early detection, as needed during Depsang 2013. Collaboration with ISRO and private firms can accelerate deployment, though high costs and technical expertise are hurdles. Integrating AI for data analysis enhances accuracy. This capability strengthens India's strategic posture and supports disengagement verification.

- **Institutionalize War Gaming and Joint Training**

- Regular war gaming and joint military exercises, like those with Quad nations, prepare India for LAC contingencies. These simulations test strategies against China's tactics, improving readiness post-Galwan. Joint training with allies enhances interoperability, as seen in Malabar exercises, but requires sustained funding. Institutionalizing these practices ensures long-term preparedness without provoking escalation. This approach strengthens deterrence and boosts military confidence.

- **Maintain High-Level Diplomatic Contact**

Frequent summits between leaders, like Modi-Xi meetings, maintain open channels despite tensions. These engagements, as in the 2018 Wuhan summit, de-escalate crises through personal rapport. High-level contact signals commitment to peace, though China's opaque intentions require cautious optimism. India must leverage these interactions for concrete outcomes, like disengagement agreements. Sustained dialogue prevents miscalculations and fosters stability

- **Update Foreign Policy**

Doctrine India's foreign policy must evolve to address China's assertiveness, moving beyond non-alignment to strategic multi-alignment. A doctrine emphasizing deterrence, economic resilience, and alliances counters China's BRI and LAC tactics. Regular policy reviews ensure adaptability to geopolitical shifts, as seen post-Galwan. Engaging domestic stakeholders prevents policy fragmentation. This clarity strengthens India's global standing and LAC negotiations.

- **Develop a National Border Strategy Paper**

A comprehensive border strategy paper can unify India's approach to the LAC, integrating military, economic, and diplomatic goals. It would prioritize infrastructure, local development, and international partnerships, addressing gaps exposed in 1962 and 2020. Public consultation ensures domestic support, though bureaucratic delays are a risk. This document guides consistent policymaking across governments. It signals resolve to China and stakeholders.

17. Promote Academic Research on Sino-Indian Relations

- Funding research on India-China dynamics fosters evidence-based policymaking. Universities and think tanks can analyze historical, strategic, and economic aspects, offering solutions to LAC disputes. Research counters Chinese narratives, as seen in Tibet-related propaganda. Collaboration with global scholars enhances credibility, though funding and access to data are challenges. This knowledge base informs diplomacy and public discourse. (Word count: 62)18. Collaborate on Global Health and Climate GoalsJoint India-China initiatives on health and climate, like vaccine distribution or renewable energy, can build trust. Shared challenges, as seen in COP26 commitments, offer neutral ground for cooperation. These efforts reduce bilateral tensions by focusing on global good, though geopolitical rivalries may limit progress. India must ensure equal partnership to avoid Chinese dominance. Such collaboration indirectly supports LAC stability.

- **19. Demilitarize Certain Sensitive Areas through Negotiation**

Negotiated demilitarization of flashpoints like Galwan or Pangong Tso, as per the 2024 pact, reduces escalation risks. Buffer zones with mutual troop withdrawals, monitored by drones, ensure compliance. China's reluctance to cede strategic positions requires India to offer reciprocal concessions. This approach demands robust verification to prevent violations, as in 2020. Success fosters confidence for broader LAC agreements.

- **20. Establish Conflict De-escalation Protocols**

Clear protocols, like crisis hotlines and no-weapon zones, prevent miscalculations, as needed during Galwan 2020. These mechanisms, modeled on Cold War U.S.-Soviet agreements, require bilateral commitment to transparency. Regular military-to-military talks ensure adherence, though China's secrecy poses challenges. Protocols reduce the risk of unintended escalations, preserving peace. India must push for enforceable terms to ensure efficacy. (Word count: 64)Notes for Further Development

Evaluation

The India-China border dispute's management reflects a mix of successes and failures. India's military modernization and strategic alignments (e.g., Quad) have strengthened its posture, but economic dependence on China remains a vulnerability. China's assertive tactics have secured tactical gains but strained bilateral trust. Diplomatic mechanisms (e.g., Special Representatives) have prevented all-out war but failed to resolve core issues. The 2024 agreement is a step forward, but its durability is uncertain due to opaque terms and ongoing militarization. Both nations face domestic pressures that complicate de-escalation, requiring innovative diplomacy and strategic restraint. **Expansion Tip:** Assess the effectiveness of past agreements, military strategies, and economic policies. Use metrics (e.g., trade data, troop deployments) and compare with other territorial disputes (e.g., China-Vietnam) to evaluate approaches.

Concluding Sum-Up

The India-China border dispute encapsulates the challenges of managing rivalry between two nuclear-armed, economically vital nations. Historical missteps, strategic ambitions, and economic interdependence shape a complex relationship. While recent agreements signal pragmatic intent, the absence of a final boundary settlement and ongoing militarization pose risks of future crises. India must balance economic engagement with security imperatives, while China must weigh the costs of regional alienation. The dispute's resolution hinges on mutual compromise, transparency, and global cooperation to ensure stability in Asia and beyond. **Expansion Tip:** Reiterate key themes, emphasizing the dispute's global significance. Discuss future scenarios (e.g., escalation, cooperation) and their implications for Asia's geopolitical order. Use historical analogies to underscore the stakes.

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