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SINO-INDIA BORDER DISPUTES: AN APPRAISAL

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As China and India continue to gain economic and military prowess, analysts express concern that a miscalculation along the disputed Sino-India border could escalate to a full-scale war. Geographically, the ill-defined 3,440 km long border is located in the treacherous terrains of the Himalayas, where almost the entire length of it is contested. Being the de facto border, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has often been the cause of major confrontations between the two countries. The table below summarises the disputes that have occurred till now.

Ser	Year	Region	Event
1	1962	Aksai Chin	Sino-India War
2	1967	Northeast Sikkim State	Nathu La and Cho La Clashes
3	1975	Arunachal Pradesh	Tulung La Ambush
4	1987	Thag La Ridge, Arunachal Pradesh	Sumdorong Chu Valley clashes
5	2013	Northern Ladakh	Daulat Beg Oldi Incursion
6	2014	Leh, Ladakh	Demchok Construction
7	2015	Ladakh	Burtse Region Incident
8	2017	Doklam	Doklam Standoff
9	2020	Ladakh	Galwan River Valley Brawls

The core border dispute between the two countries can be categorised into three regions: Aksai Chin, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. In the Western part of the border is the Aksai Chin territory, which is claimed by India but is under the occupation of Chinese. While the dispute over the Sikkim region is mostly settled, the surrounding states of Bhutan and Nepal have often been termed as potential flashpoints. Moving eastwards, the territory of Arunachal Pradesh is claimed by China but controlled by India. The disagreement stems from Indians unilaterally making the region a part of their territory. The Chinese stand firm on the stance that the area has historically been part of Southern Tibet and that Beijing never partook in any agreement signed during the India-Tibet



negotiations in 1912, thus wholly rejecting the British-drawn McMahon line. It is worth mentioning that due to its size and population, the state of Arunachal Pradesh holds the utmost significance in the Sino-India border dispute.

In view of changing international dynamics, the US has designated India as its strategic partner to counter growing Chinese influence in the region. Because of this, it has been made an integral member of QUAD. In addition, India's admission to the NSG and the US renaming its security architecture from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific indicate a larger Indian role in the region.¹ India's embodiment of a counterweight to China has made it a major recipient of US arms, with sales reaching almost USD 20 billion.² It is bound to inculcate a bloated sense of superiority in New Delhi, thus posing a risk of war between the two. Current statistics suggest that China is overwhelmingly superior to India in conventional and nuclear capabilities; therefore, the world's second most populous country is in no position to counter China's force for force.

Geopolitically, in recent months, there has been a favourable diplomatic tilt in Moscow's relations with China in which the Russia-Ukraine war has played the role of a catalyst. It became evident after the imposition of severe sanctions on Russia when Kremlin began exploring stronger ties with China. Therefore, in the long term, Moscow's growing

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reliance on Beijing for diplomatic, strategic and economic reasons can cause India to worry, especially when Asian giants (China and India) are competing for Russian crude to sell in the refined form to the European Union. Reports indicate that both countries were the biggest importers of Urals, and that too at a price slightly above the Western cap of USD 60 per barrel.³ Therefore, given the triangle of conflicting interests, China, at any stage, may use its growing influence over Moscow to forestall the export of Russian crude to India, which will impact its emerging oil market. China can, therefore, use this relation to compel India to pursue a softer approach in the disputed border region and gain major concessions.

As the probability of a limited conflict and minor skirmishes will remain high, the possibility of a full-scale war between the two ascending powers is debatable. Both nations share deep trade ties, worth USD 136.26 billion annually.⁴ These deep economic linkages are projected to grow and can open doors of commonalities that may help in averting a full-scale war. Due to deep economic linkages and emerging domestic challenges at home, it is, therefore, possible that in the medium term, the likelihood of a conflict between the two countries remains low.

From 2009 onwards, India formally fortified its two-front war strategy.⁵ Even though experts have questioned its sustainability and whether its sole target is Pakistan, its mere existence indicates that the policymakers in New Delhi are fully aware of the possibility of a large-scale conflict with China. Moreover, India's deepening strategic collaboration with the US in the realm of defence, technology and development can provide it with an exaggerated sense of superiority, which, along with the growing Hindu nationalism, can prompt it to make a pre-emptive move to appease the audience at home.

Recent reports suggest that Indian oil refiners have started purchasing Russian oil in Chinese Yuan, with Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited also expected to join.⁶ Despite sharing strategic ties with the US, the move suggests that New Delhi's diplomatic moves are precisely planned to guard its interests fiercely. One can, therefore, predict that

in case of a US-China conflict, it is unlikely that India will bandwagon the US and ignite the border dispute with China unless the benefits outweigh the costs.

Whichever scenario unfolds, the Sino-India border dispute will continue to expose Indian vulnerabilities to the Chinese. The cultural and territorial integration of the Tibetan region into the Chinese territory is central to the dispute. Therefore, the eastern boundary, the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh, poses serious concerns for New Delhi due to its proximity to the strategic Siliguri corridor and because Beijing enjoys infrastructural, logistical and military advantages. It is worth mentioning that the Tibetan region is significant for its vast glacial reserves and abundant freshwater resources. Being upstream, China exerts control over the waters flowing into the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Yangtze and Mekong rivers.⁷ According to Aquastat (FAO, UN), 718 billion cubic meters of water is estimated to flow out of the Tibetan plateau annually, out of which 48.33% flows directly into India.⁸ It gives Beijing an unparalleled advantage to "weaponise" water in its favour by blocking the hydrological flow to India through dams and diversions, making water downstream unfit for consumption and flooding the region through water fluctuations.⁹

The burgeoning US-China competition and India's strategic partnership with the US has allowed New Delhi to leverage its position internationally. One can, therefore, conclude that regardless of how the situation at the border unfolds, Sino-India border tensions are bound to hold greater geopolitical and economic ramifications for New Delhi. The coming years will test India's resolve in the matter and pose a formidable challenge when making tough diplomatic and economic decisions. The Sino-India border dispute presents numerous challenges and opportunities for Pakistan in the geopolitical, diplomatic and security domains. Therefore, Pakistan must keep a close eye on the latest international developments to take advantage of the environment to further its national interest.

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