



Conflict at the China-India Frontier

June 17, 2020

Recent Developments at the China-India Frontier

Deadly conflict broke out on June 15 on the China-India border following weeks of **minor military confrontations** along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that separates the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) and the Indian regions of Ladakh and Sikkim. The lethal conflict occurred in the Galwan Valley—one of the sites of tension in recent weeks—as the two sides were in the process of negotiating a mutual “disengagement” of forces (see **Figure 1**). PRC and Indian sources offered conflicting accounts of events, but officials on both sides confirmed casualties, including **at least 20** Indian military personnel. The last time the border conflict escalated to the point of casualties was in **1975**.

The events leading up to the lethal clashes included fistfights between Chinese and Indian soldiers stationed near Pangong Lake in India’s Ladakh state, territorial advances by Chinese forces in Hot Springs and the Galwan Valley (also in Ladakh), and clashes between Chinese and Indian soldiers on the border near India’s Sikkim state. Authoritative information is limited, but various **accounts** claim PRC troops made territorial gains of 40-60 square kilometers. On May 27, President Trump **tweeted** that “the United States is ready, willing and able to mediate or arbitrate [China and India’s] now raging border dispute.”

Tensions had seemed to abate in early June as **military officers** and **diplomats** from both sides held talks to try to manage the situation. **According** to India’s Army Chief, these talks led to an agreement to “disengage[e] in a phased manner.” Following the June 15 clash, both sides pledged to continue to seek to resolve the situation through dialogue and consultation; the status of these efforts is unclear.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11425

Figure I. Western Sector of the China-India Frontier

Source: Adapted by CRS.

China-India Rivalry: Background

China-India relations have been fraught for decades, with signs of increasing acrimony in recent years. A brief but bloody 1962 India-China War left in place one of the world's longest disputed international borders. At more than 2,500 miles, this border, known as the LAC, is poorly demarcated in places. China has long been a major benefactor to India's rival, Pakistan, and China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region could further constrain India's regional influence. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—itself a major facet of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—entails tens of billions of dollars' worth of Chinese financing of Pakistan's energy and transportation infrastructure. India objects to CPEC in part because some projects run across territory claimed by India. Combined with ongoing Chinese outreach to other South Asian littoral states, CPEC and BRI have New Delhi watchful for further signs that Beijing seeks to "contain" India. Beijing also takes issue with the presence of the Dalai Lama, the "Central Tibetan Administration," and the "Tibetan Parliament in Exile" on Indian soil.

Despite these sources of bilateral friction, China has emerged among India's largest trade partners in recent years. In 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in Wuhan, China, for an "informal summit" and signaled their intention to pursue more amicable bilateral relations, but the ensuing "Wuhan spirit" has since frayed.

The China-India Border Dispute

The China-India frontier is comprised of two major "sectors": the western sector includes the vast but mostly uninhabited Himalayan territory of Aksai Chin (part of the larger Kashmir dispute that also

includes Pakistan); the eastern sector runs along the British-proposed McMahon Line that separated Tibet and northeastern India in 1914. In a smaller middle sector, the Indian state of Sikkim abuts China between Nepal and Bhutan. India and China both claim the entirety of [Aksai Chin](#), and Beijing [formally claims](#) all of India's Arunachal Pradesh state, calling it "South Tibet." (U.S. policy has long [recognized](#) the McMahon Line and Arunachal Pradesh's status as an Indian state.) In the 1990s, India and China signed agreements to [maintain peace and tranquility](#) along the frontier (1993) while pursuing [confidence-building measures](#) (1996), yet [22 rounds](#) of subsequent Special Representative-level talks failed to settle outstanding territorial claims. Prior to the latest clash, the last major confrontation was in 2017, when military conflict nearly erupted over Chinese infrastructure projects near [Doklam](#), Bhutan—projects that New Delhi considers a security threat. A mutual troop withdrawal [agreement](#) ended the 73-day standoff, but [did not resolve](#) larger tensions.

A Broader Pattern of PRC Territorial Assertiveness?

Prior to the events of June 15, PRC statements on recent developments had been restrained and offered few clues as to the intentions behind Chinese troops' recent movements. Some observers view PRC activities along the LAC in May as part of a [broader pattern](#) of PRC territorial assertiveness, while others suggest that at least some of the flare-ups were [spontaneous](#), as the vast majority of border skirmishes typically have been. Others [posit](#) that China's latest moves may have been part of a response to previous perceived Indian transgressions, namely, India's 2019 decision to alter Ladakh's administrative status. (In October 2019, New Delhi redesignated Ladakh as a "Union Territory" after revoking the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir state. A PRC official [said](#) at the time that the move "undermine[d] China's territorial sovereignty.") Still others [suggest](#) China had been responding to India's construction of roads and other infrastructure along its side of the LAC in Ladakh.

During earlier stages of the confrontation, some U.S. officials and Members of Congress expressed concerns about China's actions. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo referred to China's actions along the border as a "[threat](#)"; then-lead U.S. diplomat for South and Central Asia Ambassador Alice Wells [called](#) them "provocations and disturbing behavior by China that [raise] questions about how China seeks to use its growing power." In early June, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Representative Eliot Engel [expressed](#) being "extremely concerned by the ongoing Chinese aggression" along the LAC.

Author Information

Caitlin Campbell
Analyst in Asian Affairs

K. Alan Kronstadt
Specialist in South Asian Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role.

CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.