

National Interest in the 2020 India China Border Tensions: National Security vs. National Pride

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Introduction

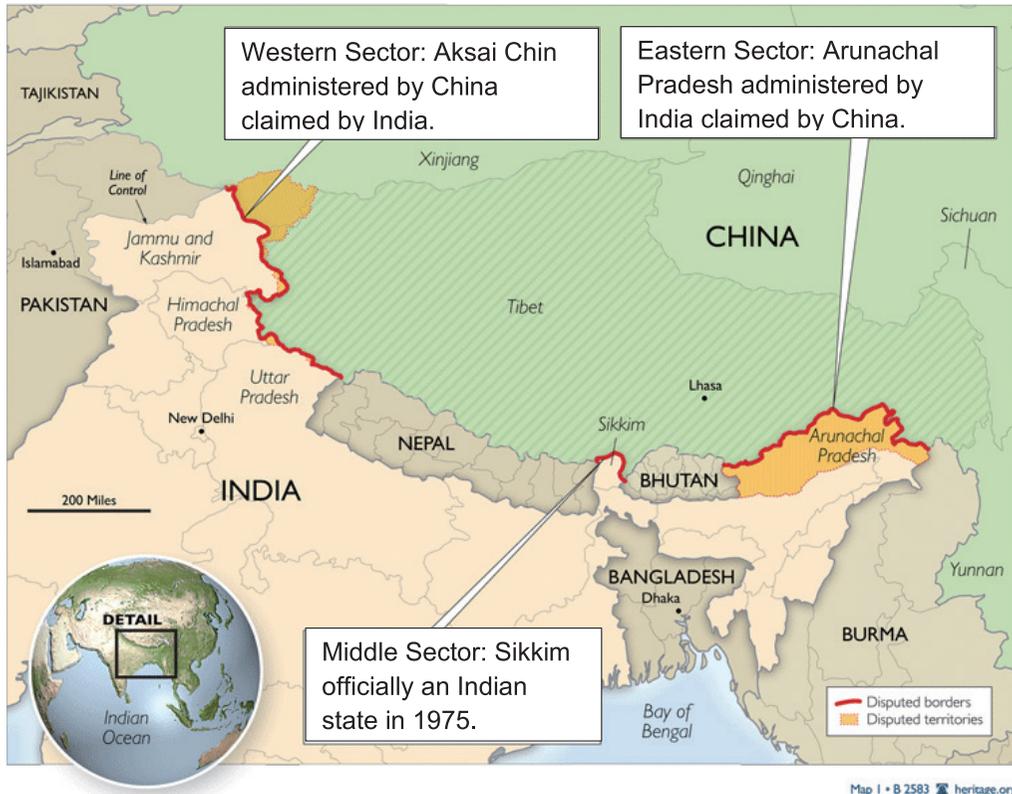
The India China rivalry has been ongoing since the border war in 1962. It has been characterized by border disputes and competition for influence in surrounding countries. Most recently, in 2020 there was a clash which left 20 Indian soldiers dead, the first deadly clash on the border since 1975. What is driving this rivalry? What national interests are at stake? Realists define national interests in terms of security, autonomy, and wealth. In this view security is the most important, and looking after the other national interests like prosperity and ensuring autonomy, in fact serve national security interests as well. A wealthy nation is a strong nation and by extension a secure nation. In short, nations are primarily driven by the need for self-preservation, due to the nature of the anarchic system in which they find themselves¹.

Constructivists would argue that there is a fourth national interest: self esteem². Nations, like people, have self-esteem needs which must be looked after. National identities are shaped by history, and their identities influence conceptions of national interest, especially relating to national self-esteem and national pride. Most countries would have their self-esteem needs gratified in part if they became stronger and wealthier, but this is not the whole story, as self-esteem needs are not entirely satisfied by security and prosperity alone³.

In 2020 China challenged the status quo at the Indian border. Were China's actions driven by a realist worldview and the cold calculations of power politics? Or were they driven more by the

national pride of the Chinese leaders and citizens? In this article I argue that recent Chinese actions in this theater are driven more by national pride than realism. In the first section, I will examine the history of the rivalry and border dispute, along with the events of the 2020 tensions. From there I will examine the costs and benefits of China's actions toward India from the perspective of power politics. Finally, I will examine Chinese nationalism and why pride and need for self-esteem are more likely drivers of China's actions.

India, China Disputed Borders



Source: Dean Cheng and Lisa Curtis, "The China Challenge: A Strategic vision for U.S.-Indian Relations," *Heritage Foundation*, July 18, 2011.

The Border

The Sino-Indian border is disputed in three major regions: the eastern, western and middle sectors. In the Eastern sector China disputes the border in India's northeast. It claims sovereignty over an area known as Arunachal Pradesh. The dispute goes back to an agreement made between British-controlled India and Tibet at the Shimla convention in 1914. Tibet agreed to what is now known as the McMahon line, which puts the border in this region at the crest of the Himalayas. The

Chinese ambassador initialled the agreement, although the Chinese government itself did not ratify the agreement and disputes its legitimacy⁴. India currently controls Arunachal Pradesh and views it as important to its security. The crest of the Himalayas forms a natural defensive boundary, and, if China controlled the region, India would be much more vulnerable to attack in its north east.

In the Western Sector India claims the region of Aksai Chin, which China controls. The region is sparsely populated and has no natural boundaries to use for determining borders. The borders of the region were previously determined by the Macartney-Macdonald line, which gives China partial control of Aksai Chin, including areas India disputes. China never officially responded to the proposal for this line, but the Macartney-Macdonald line was implemented in several maps published by China prior to the 1962 border war⁵. During the 1962 border war China improved its position in this sector, capturing a larger section of Aksai Chin. In terms of Strategic significance Aksai Chin is very important to China and less so to India⁶. Aksai Chin contains the strategically important Tibet Xinjiang highway connecting Tibet to the rest of China, but it is a largely uninhabited desert which contains little else. In addition, India controls a small amount of territory in Ladakh, which is also claimed by China and was the site of the 2020 border skirmish. Ladakh has few people and relies economically on subsistence agriculture⁷.

In the middle sector there are some minor disputes about the border between China and the region of India called Sikkim. Sikkim was an independent kingdom but was incorporated into India in 1975, likely because of its strategic importance. Sikkim sits very close to the Siliguri corridor or “chickens neck” which is a very narrow strip of land connecting the Indian mainland to the northeast part of India. Keeping this area secure is very important to India, because, if the corridor was closed, the Northeast of India would be cut off.

History of the India China Rivalry

The India China rivalry really began in 1962 when Chinese forces launched an attack on Indian positions in disputed territory in Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin. Chinese forces advanced rapidly, dealing a swift defeat to the unprepared Indian defenders. After achieving victory, Chinese forces withdrew to the original boundary lines of control in Arunachal Pradesh before the conflict and began a unilateral ceasefire, bringing the conflict to a close. Chinese troops remained at their new positions in Aksai Chin, slightly expanding their control of the region. Border disputes are often cited as the reason for this conflict. However, a more likely reason was that China believed India was complicit in the 1959 Tibetan uprising⁸. Zhou Enlai said that Nehru “Had inherited England’s old policy of saying Tibet is an independent country”⁹. Their suspicions were confirmed when India allowed the Dalai Lama to take refuge within its borders. The Chinese action against India in 1962 was likely a way to teach India a lesson for perceived meddling in their affairs. There

is, however, little historical evidence that India had a hand in the uprising.

There was a sense of betrayal in India after this short war. Before the conflict, “the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” had been enunciated as part of the Panchsheel Agreement between India and China in 1954, and Nehru had little inkling that relations could escalate to war. Nehru’s forward policy sent troops to patrol disputed areas, but they were not backed up with much military muscle, as no fight was anticipated. By the end of the conflict 722 Chinese troops had died, and between 1383 and 4897 Indian troops had died¹⁰. India became disillusioned with its policy of non-alignment and sought United States military aid in response to Chinese aggression. As a result of this conflict, China and India are engaged in a rivalry which continues to this day.

As a result of their rivalry, China and India have been engaging in a competition for influence in neighboring border areas. Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Myanmar are all subject to this competition. Bhutan remains in India’s camp, whereas Nepal has moved more toward China. Indian-Nepalese relations were soured when India briefly blockaded Nepal in 1989 in response to its growing trade ties with China¹¹. The blockade had the reverse of its intended effect, pushing Nepal even further towards China. Myanmar is another area of competition. China maintains strong relations with groups in the country, and India accuses China of backing rebels in India’s Northeast¹² which have been a thorn in India’s side.

Border standoffs and clashes have been another main feature of the India China rivalry. A number of standoffs and fights have occurred along the border since the war in 1962.

In 1967 Indian and Chinese forces clashed at Nathu La in Sikkim leaving 88 Indian soldiers and 340 Chinese soldiers dead, according to Indian sources. In 1975 in Tulung La, four Indian soldiers were killed, marking the last time shots were fired and blood was spilled at the border until 2020¹³. There have been a number of recent standoffs including at Depsang in northern Ladakh in 2013 and at Chumar in eastern Ladakh in 2014. The most serious recent standoff was at Doklam in 2017 where India deployed 40,000 troops to prevent China from building a road in territory it disputes with Bhutan. In the standoff, nationalistic rhetoric from both countries called for tough punishment against each other¹⁴, but the conflict was deescalated without bloodshed.

The Most Recent Border Tensions: 2020

In May of 2020 Chinese forces in the western sector shifted from merely patrolling disputed areas to physically occupying them. Physical structures like barracks and roads were set up in areas where there had previously been no permanent Chinese presence. This was accompanied by a major increase of the strength of forces deployed in the area¹⁵. These incursions into what India viewed as its own territory happened in several places at once including, notably, Galawan Valley and Pangong Lake¹⁶. Indian troops clashed with Chinese troops on May 5 near Pangong lake and May

9th in Naku La. The penetrations into Indian territory were relatively shallow with China likely settling within the borderline it claims for itself. China, however, has not revealed its own exact version of how it views the border, likely to give it flexibility in future negotiations¹⁷.

On June 15-16 Chinese and Indian forces clashed in Galawan valley. The two sides fought without guns owing to the prohibition on border forces from carrying firearms and used fists, stones, and clubs instead. Twenty Indian soldiers died as a result of the clash. Initially China did not disclose any casualties but later admitted four soldiers had died. Unconfirmed Indian sources put Chinese casualties closer to 43¹⁸.

Several potential triggers have been cited for the increase in pressure from China. China was angered by the change in status of Jammu and Kashmir from semi-autonomous regions to official union territory of India¹⁹. India was also constructing infrastructure in an attempt to match China's already modernized border, which upset China. In addition, India had recently placed restrictions on Chinese investment²⁰ and criticized China's early handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

After many rounds of border talks and additional confrontations in Pangong Lake and Naku La, the border situation was successfully deescalated. On February 22, 2021 Chinese and Indian forces withdrew their forces from their positions in Pangong Lake completing the larger efforts to calm the border confrontation.

Border Standoff Through the Lens of Realism

How well do China's actions fit with a realist's interpretation of the world? Realist theory suggests that nations are motivated to seek power relative to other nations by the imperatives of the anarchic system in which they exist²¹. It supposes that security is the prime motivator of nations because continued existence is the basis on which all other secondary needs are pursued. To examine how well this theory explains China's actions, there must be evidence that China's actions will bring about an improvement in its relative power vis-a-vis its rivals. To do so we must look at what China stands to gain or lose from its actions from a relative power perspective. A number of possibilities can be offered as to why China would believe it to be in its strategic interest to challenge the status quo on the border.

One possible reason is that China is trying to secure the strategically important China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This corridor offers China a way to move goods and energy resources through the Indian Ocean, bypassing its potentially hostile neighbors in the South China Sea²². Nearly three quarters of China's oil imports run through the strait of Malacca, which makes China vulnerable to blockade of narrow sea lanes²³. By securing CPEC through control of the surrounding regions, China could potentially improve the reliability of its energy imports. However, challenging the status quo could in fact antagonize India in a way which could make it more of a threat to the

security of CPEC. The corridor runs through an area of Pakistan called Balochistan which is home to separatist militants, notably the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). Pakistan has accused India of supplying arms to the BLA, a claim which India denies. However, some ties between India and the BLA have been documented²⁴. If the rivalry intensifies, Indian support of these rebels could threaten CPEC.

Another possible reason for why China is applying pressure is that it wants to distract India and take its attention away from developing its navy. India will be deploying more troops on the China India border following the clash²⁵, which could take limited resources away from naval development. China would prefer that India has a weak navy, because the Indian Ocean is vital for China's trade lanes, especially in the area of energy. However, India has recently undertaken a strong naval reorganizational effort, indicating a desire to maintain a robust presence in the Indian Ocean²⁶.

A third reason for border provocations is that China may wish to improve its bargaining position with India by applying pressure and gaining de facto control over disputed areas. If India sees their sovereignty being slowly eroded, they might make a deal favorable to Beijing rather than face increased pressure in the future. Securing acknowledgement of control over Aksai Chin is important to China because it contains important roads that connect Tibet to the rest of China. However, deaths at the border may sour Indian public sentiment toward China²⁷ and weaken the ability of the Indian government's elected leaders to make concessions in the future, as nationalist sentiment may make it politically impossible to do so.

A final reason is that China may want to send a message to India warning it about establishing stronger connections with the United States. The U.S. has become India's second biggest arms supplier²⁸, and India and the U.S. have been strengthening ties under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, nicknamed the Quad. China does not want to see India involved in what it sees as a regional anti-China alliance structure. Recent pressure at the border may aim to send India a message, though it might have the reverse of its intended effect, as the insecurity the pressure creates might push India further into America's camp²⁹.

Challenging the status quo at the border created a number of risks for China. First it created a risk of escalation to war, which could have had disastrous consequences for China. Territorial disputes have a higher chance of causing wars than other dispute types and account for a majority of wars from 1816-1992³⁰. Although it would appear that neither side wanted open conflict there was always the risk that miscalculation could have led to escalating violence. Although there have been limited wars between nuclear armed powers and non-nuclear armed powers, we have not seen limited wars between the uniformed regular armies of mutually nuclear armed powers. The dynamics of limited war between nuclear armed powers are not well understood, because we lack examples from which to learn. It is possible to imagine that a miscalculation could lead to escalation to conventional

armed conflict and from there even to a nuclear conflict which no side originally intended³¹.

Most observers would note that the odds of this border dispute escalating into full blown war were very low. Troops on both sides were not even carrying loaded guns, and the conflicts that occurred involved hand to hand combat³². Both sides had a high incentive to keep things under control. However, even if the risks of a wider escalation to full war were as low as 1 in 1000, it is still a significant risk, because of the scope of the potential damage. The dynamics of escalation in this kind of case are not well understood. Taking this small risk of a potentially massively negative outcome was therefore a downside for China.

The second major issue for China is that pushing border disputes with India makes them seem more dangerous to their neighbors. China is fond of asserting that, because of its unique cultural legacy, it will never seek hegemony³³. However, China's border disputes include, but are not limited to, conflicts with North Korea over the Yalu mountains, the Indian border, the border with Bhutan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands with Japan, and parts of the South China Sea with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. In many of these disputes China is actively pushing its claims through expanded military presence. It is hard to convince other nations you are a status quo power when you are actively engaged in militarized border disputes with so many of your neighbors. Many International Relations theorists believe that what is important is not only the relative balance of power between countries but also the balance of threats³⁴. This explains why Canada does not need to build up its military to deter the United States. China's neighbors, however, are likely to react to indicators of China's aggressiveness by building up their own militaries to deter China³⁵.

Nations tend to find the lessons they learned from the last major war they fought to be the most salient³⁶. One of the lessons many in the United States and other countries learned from WW2 is that territorial accommodation of a revisionist power, in this case Germany, doesn't work and only encourages aggression. Whether or not the comparison is justified, and whether or not China would be satisfied if they possessed the territory they dispute, the disputes themselves play into the historical memory in the West, of German aggression in WW2.

The perceived threat from China could lead its neighbors to form a balancing coalition and even military alliance to deter and contain it. In recent years the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between America, Japan, India, and Australia has experienced increasing involvement from its members, and the perception of military threat from China could go far to promoting strong military cooperation between these countries³⁷. Conversely, if China were seen as less of a threat, it would make it far more difficult for the United States to convince countries neighboring China to join a coalition to contain China, because these countries have extensive trade ties with China and don't want to suffer economic consequences. John Mearsheimer, a proponent of offensive realism, suggests that "(China) should pursue a low key foreign policy so as to not raise suspicion among its

neighbors”³⁸. At a moment in international politics which could be pivotal to the formation of a coalition to balance against China, it seems especially foolish to provoke potential members over territorial claims of limited economic and strategic value.

Finally deteriorating political ties and military tensions could spill over into the economic realm and damage China’s economy. India has banned TikTok as well as close to 200 other apps from China³⁹. Indian imports from China were down 20% in 2020⁴⁰, in a year when Chinese exports to the world did not change much overall. Other countries have taken economic actions related to China recently. Japan has begun offering financial incentives for Japanese companies operating in China to return home⁴¹. Many American companies are planning to relocate their operations outside of China⁴². The border conflict itself may not be the cause of these actions, but it contributes to a perception of threat from China, which in turn damages economic cooperation because of security fears. I argue that the evidence would suggest that the negatives of challenging the status quo on the Indian border outweigh the positives from a strategic power perspective.

Role of Nationalism

What could be behind these recent border tensions between China and India beside strategic calculation? I argue that the pursuit of national self-esteem is one of the major causes of these tensions.

The first element of nationalism at play is China’s sensitivity to issues of territorial sovereignty. The most important narrative in Chinese nationalism is the story of the ‘century of humiliation’. Central to this narrative is the idea that China was taken advantage of by outside powers, and its territorial integrity was violated. Various colonial powers fought wars with Qing China and set up zones of influence as well as actually taking control of some parts of China. The Opium Wars, which forced China to open itself to opium trade with Great Britain, are seen as the beginning of this saga. In WW2, when China was devastated by Japan, who they considered to be “a speck of dust”⁴³, their feeling of humiliation was unbearable. Starting from 1991, China reformed its education system to emphasize nationalism. This was what was called the Patriotic Education Campaign, and it emphasized the century of humiliation and Chinese victimization, especially in WW2. The slogan “never forget national humiliation” inveighed its people to “wipe away the stain of national humiliation” through national “rejuvenation”⁴⁴. One recent survey indicated that 40% of Chinese endorsed risking war to defend their countries territorial claims⁴⁵.

The Chinese government at the beginning of the 1990s wanted to promote nationalism to bolster its legitimacy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, communist ideology became a dead end for promoting regime legitimacy, and, as an alternative, the Chinese government turned to nationalism to bolster its reputation. Nationalism had been used side by side with communist ideology in an

earlier era, but this often took a more triumphant tone. The nationalism promoted in the Patriotic Education Campaign in contrast, promoted more of a victimization narrative⁴⁶. From this perspective the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could gain legitimacy by presiding over Chinese economic growth which strengthened the nation militarily. It could also gain legitimacy for defending what Chinese citizens perceived as its rightful borders. The CCP itself makes numerous references to sovereignty in its statements on international issues, and media sources closely connected to the Chinese government often mention the importance of defending sovereignty⁴⁷. Because violation of territorial sovereignty played such a big role in the narrative of the century of humiliation, territorial issues are incredibly important to the government's nationalist narrative and the regime legitimacy of the CCP.

According to one survey of popular sentiment among thirty-five nations, China was ranked the most nationalistic⁴⁸. In addition, another survey found that the generation raised under the Patriotic Education Campaign was more hawkish than older generations⁴⁹. Chinese youth have been known to protest vocally when Chinese honor is at stake. Many students demonstrated and demanded harsh action and "blood for blood" after the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by the United States during the Kosovo war⁵⁰. While the stereotypical "angry youth" or "Fenqing" may represent a minority, they are vocal on issues of foreign affairs and speak loudly when Chinese face is threatened.

If China is an authoritarian country, then why should it worry about what the public thinks? Chinese leaders can use nationalism to bolster their legitimacy when their policies are successful but when they fail to uphold Chinese honor, nationalism acts as a double edged sword which can threaten their power⁵¹. Chinese leaders are acutely aware of their country's history of overthrowing governments when their "mandate of heaven" ran out. In addition, Chinese leaders must jockey for position within their party and failing to meet the needs of popular nationalist sentiment can give rivals ammunition to contest a decision maker's leadership position. Chinese elites themselves are not immune to the pulls of nationalist sentiment and according to one survey, Chinese elites themselves are more nationalistic than the masses⁵². Authoritarian leaders require elite support, so they must cater to the needs of elite nationalism as well as mass nationalism.

Conclusion

In light of the many risks China faces by challenging the status quo and lesser potential upside, it makes more sense that nationalism and need for national self-esteem are the drivers of China's efforts to change the status quo at the border. In the future, this border conflict will be extremely difficult to resolve because of the history behind it and the forces of popular nationalism in both countries. Suffering deaths at the border is likely to inflame popular nationalist sentiment on both sides and make any compromise that much more difficult going forward. Chinese nationalism has

taken a turn towards seeing itself as a victim. Under these circumstances the Chinese public and decision makers are likely to be sensitive to perceived slights and forced to show “resolve” to “resolutely defend” China against any perceived threats to its territorial integrity, even if such “defensive resolve” is in fact perceived as an offence by its neighbors. Perhaps if Chinese national pride took a more positive turn emphasizing achievement rather than victimization there would be a greater chance for compromise and peaceful coexistence.

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