

India-China ties: The case for a thaw in the Himalayan stand-off

Easing the border tensions will lessen the impact of the new Cold War on Asia

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Restoration of peace on the border disturbed by the clashes between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the summer of 2020 could help arrest the continuing downward slide in Sino-Indian relations and create much needed diplomatic space for resumption of normal relations between Delhi and Beijing.

Disengagement and de-escalation of the military stand-off in the high Himalayas could also reopen possibilities for international cooperation between the two Asian giants amid the great churn in major power relations following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It is a little over two years since China surprised India by a massive military mobilisation in Ladakh and unilaterally changed the territorial disposition along the disputed frontier. That China's

action came in the middle of India's struggle to cope with the massive breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic, shocked the government and triggered a massive anti-China backlash in the political and chattering classes.

As three decades of military confidence-building all along the so-called Line of Actual Control broke down in April 2020, India responded by a counter mobilisation of its army. The military face-off in the Western Himalayas produced a clash between the two armed forces in mid-June 2020 that saw significant loss of life for the first time on this disputed border in nearly four decades.

Military tensions on the Sino-Indian border in Ladakh produced a number of strategic consequences – intended or unintended. For instance, there has been a notable decline in high-level political engagement between Delhi and Beijing, even accounting for the pandemic.

Although bilateral trade continues to grow, India is consciously reducing its long-term economic exposure to China.

The conflict has also pushed the foreign policies of the two Asian giants on divergent paths. India has elevated its strategic cooperation with the United States, both bilaterally and in mini-lateral formats, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that brings together Australia, India, Japan and the US. Meanwhile, China has drawn closer to Russia and is locked in a deepening confrontation with the US.

The Sino-Indian conflict in the Himalayas is increasingly intertwined with the profound shift in great power relations marked by President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine that has united the Western alliance against Russia.

The new focus on European security has not diluted the US and Western strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Quad has been elevated to the summit level, with new mechanisms like the Aukus – a military technological collaboration between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US.

The Himalayan border dynamic has had a great impact on India's great power relations and the conflict among great powers, in turn, continues to influence Sino-Indian relations. Put simply, a reasonable relationship between Delhi and Beijing is critical for reducing the impact of the new Cold War in Asia and its waters.

On the face of it, the prospects for a reconciliation between India and China appear bleak; but a careful assessment of the ground situation suggests there is a narrow path for India and China to move forward.

To be sure, the current approaches between the two sides are indeed very different.

China argues that the border issues should be set aside and the two sides should focus on normalising bilateral relations and jointly develop an Asian approach to stabilising the global political and economic system shaken to the core by the war in Ukraine. That was the burden of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's argument when he visited Delhi last month.

The Indian response, articulated by the External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, was

that the easing of the military tensions was critical for the normalisation of bilateral relations.

India, which has taken an independent approach to the war in Ukraine, has not closed the door for global cooperation with China. But Delhi insists that any political partnership with China cannot be constructed amid the muscular military coercion by the PLA on the disputed border.

Contrary to widespread misperception, India's primary concern currently is not settling the border dispute that dates back to the 1950s. Rather its immediate priority is to defuse border tensions, and that is to be done in two phases – disengagement of the troops from face-to-face confrontation and de-escalation by moving the troops away from the points of military friction.

On the positive side, 15 rounds of talks between military commanders of China and India have led to disengagement at some of the friction points on the border. Disengagement and de-escalation will open up enormous space for bilateral diplomacy.

This is by no means impossible. There are sensible imperatives on both sides to end the military tensions on the border. Continuing the military confrontation and moving towards permanent deployment of troops at heights uninhabitable to human beings is of no military value to India or China.

For China, the limited territorial gains it might have won from its manoeuvre in April 2020 are far

outweighed by the political costs in the relationship with India.

For India, the military conflict with China has been a needless distraction from the threats it faces on its western frontiers from the growing instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, China's challenges on its eastern borders are only growing.

Rebuilding military confidence on the border will also allow Beijing and Delhi to pursue their more natural foreign policy orientation. Chinese military pressure on the border has seen India move steadily closer to the US. In fact, the progress in the US-Indian strategic partnership can be directly correlated to the military conflicts between China and India at the Doklam plateau in Bhutan in 2017 and in Ladakh in 2020.

China, which has strongly denounced the Quad as "Asian Nato", can easily reduce the Indian incentives to support the forum by getting the PLA to restore the status quo on the border that prevailed in 2020. Peace on the border with China will encourage India to return to its basic instincts that emphasise Asian solidarity, strategic autonomy, and the pursuit of a multipolar world.

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