

6月

7月

8月

9月

10月

11月

12月

2020年1月

2月

3月

4月

5月

6月

7月

8月

9月

10月

8

THE SINO-INDIAN BORDER CRISIS:

**CHINESE PERCEPTIONS OF INDIAN
NATIONALISM**

Andrew Chubb

| Source: Presidential Press and Information Office



ON THE AFTERNOON OF 15 JUNE 2020, several dozen Chinese and Indian soldiers stared each other down on a desolate Himalayan mountainside, more than 4,000 metres above sea level. Over the past four decades, such standoffs have been common along the 'Line of Actual Control' in the disputed Sino-Indian borderlands, particularly during spring and early summer. This is when both sides resume patrolling and consolidating their positions after the winter freeze. Sometimes standoffs have resulted in fistfights or stone throwing, but no personnel of either side had died on the border since 1975, when four Indian soldiers were shot and killed on a patrol at Tulung La, a pass in Arunachal Pradesh at the far eastern end of the disputed border. What happened next on that day in June remains shrouded in mystery and recrimination.

Not surprisingly, the two sides' official versions of events diverged sharply. According to Foreign Ministry spokesperson for the People's Republic of China (PRC) Zhao Lijian 赵立坚, Indian troops 'violently attacked Chinese officers and soldiers who were there for negotiation'. India's External Affairs Ministry spokesperson called it a 'premeditated and planned action' by the Chinese side. What is not in dispute is that an enormous brawl erupted that night, in which hundreds of soldiers wielded an array of crude weapons against each other, including rocks, clubs studded with nails and batons wrapped in barbed wire. By morning, twenty Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers had died, and war between Asia's two rising superpowers was more likely than it had been since the 1970s.

The disputed area is so remote and unpopulated that the two governments have previously been able to defuse tensions there quietly. The mêlée of 15 June changed all that, making the Sino-Indian border crisis a matter of intense and ongoing public focus in both countries and beyond. Yet in contrast to China's territorial disputes in the East and South China seas, where Beijing has positioned itself as the aggrieved historical victim, here India carried the emotional burden — and wielded the power — of national humiliation.

This incident sparked one of China's most dangerous foreign policy crises in 2020. What happened in the Himalayas? How did the confrontation begin, and why did it escalate? And what role has Indian nationalist outrage played in its handling?

Control and Crisis

The remote mountain-desert geography in which the crisis unfolded has virtually no civilian settlements. In the areas between the two sides' military encampments, territorial control is exercised not by occupation

but by administrative behaviours such as patrolling and surveillance. It is in these grey areas of overlapping presence, where perceptions differ as to where the 'Line of Actual Control' (LAC) lies, that the crisis unfolded.

The stage was set for the crisis in May, when thousands of PRC soldiers, together with trucks, tanks, and artillery, moved into territory at several points along the LAC that India believed it controlled, mostly in Ladakh, at the western end of the disputed border. According to defence journalist and retired Indian Army colonel Ajai Shukla, the Indian Army had observed a build-up of People's Liberation Army (PLA) units throughout April, but its analysts interpreted this as preparations for routine drills held in the area each spring.¹

The PLA advanced several kilometres down the Galwan Valley, setting up a new encampment and blocking an Indian road under construction. Almost simultaneously, about 100 kilometres to the south, Chinese soldiers seized an eight-kilometre-wide stretch of territory along the northern shore



Overview of the China-India border. Crisis erupted in 2020 along the 'Line of Actual Control,' at the western end of the disputed border

Source: Andrew Chubb

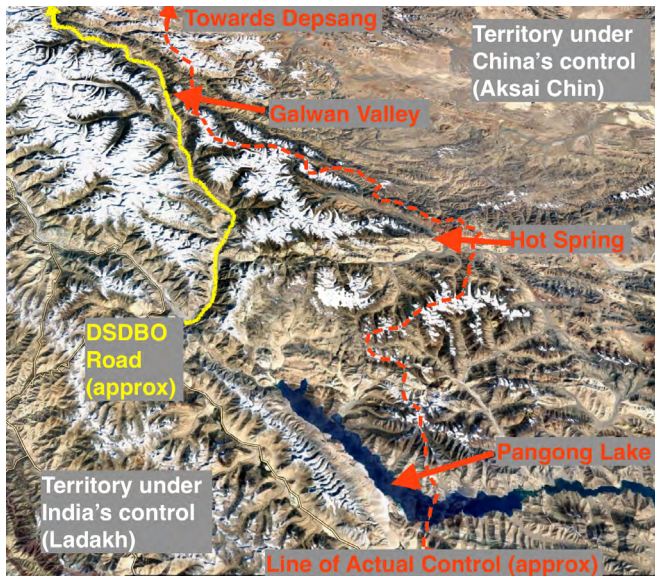
of Pangong Lake. This denied India access to an area it had previously patrolled, leading to minor scuffles when the PLA refused access to Indian troops. The PLA also occupied territory previously subject to overlapping control at several other points along the LAC, including Hot Springs and Depsang Plains, as well as North Sikkim, several hundred kilometres away.

PLA occupation of the Galwan Valley would have not just blocked India's road construction, but also afforded the PLA sweeping views over a strategic Indian highway in undisputed Indian territory, the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldi Road. Known as the DSDBO Road, this recently upgraded artery links the Indian military's furthest-flung border outposts, enabling the movement of weaponry, equipment, and supplies to the frontier. The prospect of PLA emplacements overlooking this lifeline was not a comfortable one for the Indian Army. According to China's Foreign Ministry, on 15 June, Indian troops 'demolished the tents built by the Chinese side' and then violently attacked 'Chinese army officers and soldiers [who] came to negotiate'.²

The brutality of the weapons used in the brawl at Galwan paradoxically reflected the two sides' adherence to a mutual agreement to refrain from gunfire along the border. Two months later, that norm too fell by the wayside. On 7 September, warning shots were fired — each side said it was by the other — as Chinese soldiers approached an Indian position on the south bank of Pangong Lake. The Indian Army had recently occupied several mountain peaks in the area to survey the PLA's new positions on the northern shore of the lake. This was the first time shots had been fired on the border since the 1975 incident in Arunachal Pradesh.

Explanations for Escalation

In the past, at least some Sino-Indian border incidents have probably been the consequence of decisions made by local commanders. The seventy-two-day standoff at Doklam in 2017, for example, may have been triggered



Key flashpoints along the Line of Actual Control (dotted orange line) in 2020. Arrows indicate approximate direction of PLA troop movements
Source: Andrew Chubb

by a local PLA unit's ill-considered idea of building a road on territory overlooking India's vulnerable Siliguri Corridor.³ Since India was not previously a claimant to the area, which was contested by the PRC and Bhutan, it is possible India's tough response took the PLA by surprise. The crisis in 2020 was different. The scale and co-ordination of the PLA's movements implied approval from the Central Military Commission headed by President Xi Jinping 习近平 himself.

Observers have proposed three main explanations for China's actions. One is opportunism: seeking to take advantage of the distractions of the COVID-19 pandemic to make territorial gains at India's expense. A second line of argument is geo-strategic signalling: demonstrating to India the potential costs of its warming security ties with the United States. A third explanation is insecurity: a pre-emptive show of strength at a time of economic slowdown and deteriorating relations with the United States.

Without access to the black box of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decision-making, it is difficult to prove motivation, and all three factors could simultaneously be at play. History offers some support for the third explanation. It is not the first time the PRC has behaved aggressively on the Sino-Indian border during domestic troubles. Allen Whiting's classic study *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence* shows how, in 1962, facing severe economic, social, and political stresses in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, PRC leaders perceived a '180-degree' arc of threat in which enemies from Taiwan to the US, and from India to the Soviet Union, were conspiring to take advantage of China's internal turmoil.⁴ A traditional Chinese political idiom holds that internal chaos often brings external trouble 内乱外患.

Yet the PRC was facing relatively few external security threats in 2020 compared with 1962. Its relations with Russia are blooming, and the ruling party on Taiwan could not be less interested in retaking the Mainland. The CCP had effectively quashed the threat of COVID-19 through social mobilisation and public health measures backed by a massive propaganda campaign — and the arrests of dozens of citizen journalists and others who dared tell a different story about it. While the PRC also faced its first quarterly economic contraction since 1978, even its economic worries were noticeably easing by the time troops began moving on the Indian border in May. It is difficult, moreover, to identify any Indian moves along the border in early 2020 that could be construed as threatening. A more convincing explanation is that the PRC was responding to two actions India had taken the previous year.

One was the completion of the strategic DSDBO Road in 2019, which greatly enhanced communications and logistics for India's outposts along the LAC. The PLA's move down the Galwan Valley appears to have been aimed at establishing an overlook on to this road. The second was India's dissolution of the state of Jammu and Kashmir on 31 October 2019. This administrative act proclaimed Ladakh, together with the Chinese-held territory of Aksai Chin, as a new Union Territory directly administered

by the government in New Delhi. At the time, the PRC denounced this as placing Chinese territory under Indian administration, accused India of challenging China's sovereign rights and interests, and described the act as illegal, null, and void. China's moves along the LAC the following year may have been what the University of Macau's You Ji 由冀 has called 'one-plus retaliation', meaning that China responds to perceived provocations by advancing its own position one step further than its adversary has.⁵

Due to its peculiar geography, activity in the disputed areas is seasonal: these high-altitude deserts are largely inaccessible until spring. In many areas, soldiers can only be deployed in large numbers and progress made on infrastructural projects after the winter ice has melted. The timing of China's military build-up in April and its movements in early May was in line with this seasonal cycle.

This is significant because it means Beijing's decision to advance might have been taken many months earlier, though it could only be implemented with the arrival of spring. This supports the two key developments discussed above as the main motivations for the PRC's move.

Nationalism and 1962

Chinese popular nationalism has featured prominently in the unfolding of international crises in recent years. Commentators, including within China itself, have expressed concern about the potential for an agitated Chinese public to constrain the state from seeking diplomatic solutions to sensitive problems, or for rampant nationalism to drive the escalation of crises involving Taiwan, the South China Sea or China–Japan disputes. In this case, however, Indian nationalists are the ones who are claiming the higher moral ground as historical victims.

From India's perspective, China has unlawfully occupied some 40,000 square kilometres of its land in Ladakh since the 1950s. It was then that the PRC occupied Tibet (or, according to Beijing, 'peacefully

liberated Tibet') and solidified control of its western expanses by building a highway linking Tibet with Xinjiang via Aksai Chin, the PRC-administered portion of the disputed territory. In those pre-satellite days, New Delhi only realised this when construction was already complete. The ensuing cycle of escalation culminated in the 1962 Sino-Indian border war in which Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 troops overran almost the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern sector before unilaterally withdrawing, as if to underline the insult; most of the war's several thousand casualties were Indian.

The PLA's decisive victories in the 1962 war not only humiliated the Indian Army, they also entrenched a status quo in Ladakh that was highly unfavourable for India, in which China controls almost all of the disputed territory. A nationalistic press and commentariat have kept 1962 vivid in India's popular consciousness. The democratic political system, meanwhile, rewards tough posturing on border issues.

The Galwan Valley violence of 15 June immediately triggered impassioned anti-Chinese street protests across India.⁶ Crowds smashed their Chinese products, torched the PRC's national flag, burned effigies and portraits of Xi Jinping, and demanded boycotts of Chinese



Rifle-toting Indian soldiers on patrol during the brief, bloody 1962 Sino-Indian border war

Source: Photographer unknown, 1 January 1962

companies. The media provided wall-to-wall coverage of the incident and aftermath, and opinion leaders lined up to demand retribution for the deaths of the twenty Indian soldiers.

Until 15 June, and the popular reaction that followed, the Indian Government had downplayed the seriousness of the confrontations. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and government-friendly media had repeatedly asserted that there had been no Chinese incursions into India's claimed territory. This questionable claim got little traction in traditional and online media, with the liberal-leaning Congress Party opposition lambasting the denials. The pressure mounted for Modi to at least appear to be doing something.

The main catchcry of this outpouring of nationalism — 'Boycott China!' — reflects widespread scepticism in India about the benefits of trade with China. In the Pew Research Center's most recent global poll, conducted in 2019, India was the only Asian country in which a majority of respondents considered China's economic growth to be a bad thing for their country.⁷ In this context, it was not surprising that India chose to retaliate economically. By the start of July, New Delhi had announced a raft of symbolic yet costly economic sanctions on the PRC, from bans on fifty-nine popular apps like TikTok through to the re-tendering of railway and highway projects involving Chinese companies. Indian Railways cancelled an US\$129 million contract for signalling and telecommunications work, and the Ministry of Highway and Road Transport scrapped winning bids from PRC firms for two stretches of the 1,300 kilometre, US\$150 million Delhi–Mumbai expressway.⁸ India's road transport minister declared: '[W]e won't entertain any Chinese player directly or indirectly' in future highway projects.⁹

The Indian Government's language was at times strikingly familiar to that frequently employed by Beijing in diplomatic altercations. In a speech to a national meeting of India's political parties on 19 June, Prime Minister Modi declared: '[T]he entire country is hurt and angry

at the steps taken by China at the LAC', according to a government summary posted on the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) website. 'No one can even dare look towards an inch of our land.'¹⁰ In diplomatic exchanges, Indian foreign policy officials also tried to impress on their Chinese counterparts the 'sensitivities' of the issue.¹¹ In November, after Twitter showed a map depicting Ladakh as part of China, the national spokesperson for Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party announced that the company had 'apologised for hurting Indian sentiments and have sworn to correct the error'.¹²

Modi's allusion to the hurt and anger of the 'entire country' acknowledged the genuine prevailing outrage in India. But the publication of the remark on the MEA website also suggests an intention to communicate to Beijing the popular pressure on the government to escalate the conflict in the hope that it might lead China's leaders to take steps to cool the situation. But did that work, or did the nationalist protests and the rhetoric from New Delhi simply convince the Chinese leadership to prepare even more thoroughly for confrontation?

PRC Perceptions of Indian Public Opinion

The waves of nationalism in India attracted significant attention in China, where they were addressed in statements by leaders of the Party-State, on state media and through scholarly analyses. In a 6 July telephone conversation with India's National Security Adviser, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi 王毅 called on India to

move in the same direction as the Chinese side, correctly guide public opinion and the people's sentiments, safeguard and advance the two sides' normal contact and co-operation, and avoid taking measures that enlarge or complicate the dispute, jointly safeguarding the overall situation of Sino-Indian relations.

In an 11 July speech, the PRC's ambassador in Delhi similarly noted with concern 'emerging opinions in recent days which repudiate the essence of China-India friendship'.¹³

PRC leaders and media had used near-identical language following outbursts of anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam in 2011 and 2014. As a call for the other side to placate or control anti-China public opinion, it implies that Beijing understands nationalist sentiments to be stronger in India than in China. It is, in effect, an admission that the other country possesses what strategists call 'escalation dominance' — the ability to maintain overwhelming advantages in a given domain at any level of conflict — in the field of public opinion. The PRC's call for India to 'correctly guide public opinion and the people's sentiments' was a sign of Beijing's recognition of the danger and political significance of the rising domestic nationalist sentiments in India regarding the crisis.

In the immediate aftermath of the deadly 15 June clash, *Global Times* chief editor Hu Xijin 胡锡进, a key opinion leader in PRC popular discourse on foreign affairs, argued that withholding the number of PLA casualties from the Galwan Valley brawl was an act of 'goodwill' by Beijing. In an English-language Twitter post, he wrote: 'My understanding is the Chinese side doesn't want the people of the two countries to compare the casualties number so to avoid stoking public mood.'¹⁴ In other crises, including the 2017 standoff at the Doklam Plateau (see the *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*, Forum, 'Peripheral Trouble: The Sino-Indian Standoff', pp.99–103), Hu's state-run tabloid led the way in 'stoking the public mood' within China.

Editorials and commentaries in the *Global Times*, Hu's state-run, semi-commercial newspaper and web portal that voices state-approved popular nationalist sentiment on international affairs, put forward an array of interpretations of Indian public opinion during the crisis. In late May, even before the outbreak of hostilities, Hu had already begun warning about the Indian media's 'fanning' of nationalist sentiments,

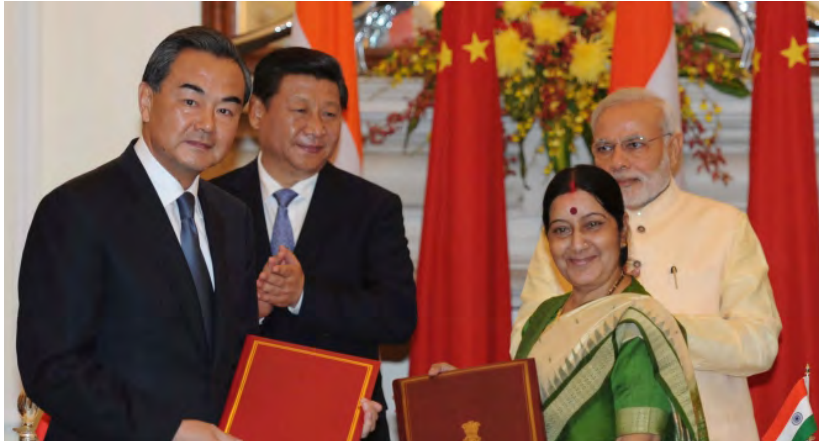
which he contrasted with the Chinese side's restraint.¹⁵ This was followed with a commentary cautioning against 'extreme anti-China sentiment' promoted by 'radical media outlets and organizations in India'.¹⁶

Following the wave of nationalist mobilisation in India in mid-June, the newspaper directly addressed Indian citizens with the message that boycotting China would harm India's own interests.¹⁷ Other state publications hammered home the message about Indian public opinion as a dangerous escalatory force that the Indian Government needed to control. A 1 July article from the State Council-affiliated *China News Service*, for example, reported that 'half a month after [the incident,] the Himalayan border conflict is still stimulating irrational outpourings of Indian domestic nationalist sentiments'.¹⁸

Following Prime Minister Modi's conspicuous 3 July visit to rally troops in Ladakh, and India's ban on fifty-nine PRC apps announced four days earlier, CCTV-4 devoted its *Today in Focus* 今日关注 program to the spiralling tensions. It did not take long for Indian public opinion to feature in the discussion. Ministry of Foreign Affairs-affiliated academic Ruan Zongze 阮宗泽 argued that Modi's military posturing was a response to sentiments whipped up by the Indian media and opposition. Ruan's colleague Su Xiaohui 苏晓晖 warned that banning Chinese apps would 'agitate' Indian nationalism, creating additional barriers to de-escalation.¹⁹

Other PRC observers recognised Modi as a nationalist leader under pressure to live up to his reputation. A 17 July article on *Guancha.cn*, an international affairs site popular with intellectuals co-founded by venture capitalist Eric X. Li 李世默, observed:

Since the Sino-Indian confrontation, Indian domestic nationalist sentiments have risen rapidly. From some Indian people boycotting 'Made in China' to India's government ban on WeChat and other Chinese apps, the great nationalist flagbearer Modi is facing increasingly massive domestic pressures.²⁰



Wang Yi, Xi Jinping, Sushama Swaraj, and Narendra Modi at an MoU signing in 2014

Source: Wikimedia

In one of the first scholarly analyses of the crisis, published on 19 August, one of China's leading India experts, Yang Siling 杨思灵 of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, argued that Indian popular nationalism had contributed to an 'increased risk of large-scale confrontation or even war'. Yang wrote:

Indian officials, media, and scholars' discussion of China's 'invasion' and distorted reports and propaganda inevitably results in a surge of domestic anti-China sentiments, which in turn force the Indian government and military to maintain a hard-line stance and even take things to the brink ... anti-Chinese sentiments provoked by these kinds of words could force the Indian Government into a dead end of military confrontation with China.²¹

Besides pinning the blame on India, such an assessment also carries an important, though unstated, policy implication for China: Beijing needs to act cautiously if it wishes to avoid an accidental war with India.

As the Indian economic sanctions piled up in late August, the *Global Times*'s editorials blamed them on a combination of domestic pressure and strategic avarice. 'Indian domestic anti-China public opinion has been clamorous', an editorial observed in late August, leading India to 'overestimate its strength, imposing economic sanctions on China and increasing its links with America in an attempt to pressure China into backing down'.²²

The same editorial also characterised India's management of the crisis as a diversionary ploy:

India is presently beset by domestic problems, especially the seriously out of control coronavirus pandemic ... By provoking Sino-Indian border tensions New Delhi intends to divert domestic attention. It's international hooliganism, and a domestic political fraud.

Indian public opinion, in this view, was pressuring the country's leaders into hard-line anti-Chinese actions, while those same leaders were benefiting politically from driving attention towards the issue.

As the crisis escalated again in late August, the PRC's propaganda organs began to emphasise that nationalist sentiments were now growing among the Chinese public. On 31 August, the *Global Times* reported that a poll of just under 2,000 PRC citizens had found 89 percent support for China to make an 'armed self-defence counter-attack' 武力自卫反击 should further clashes occur on the Sino-Indian border. The report also said that nearly 70 percent of respondents had agreed that India's anti-China sentiments were 'excessive'.

With the news of warning shots fired on 7 September, the real-world dangers increased further. The *Global Times*'s editorial that day called for an end to this vicious cycle, but offered no suggestion as to how it might be done, besides exhorting India to take control of public opinion:

Indian public opinion's participation in the border issues is too deep and too broad, the Indian Army is clearly captive to domestic nationalism, and their ostentatious displays in the border area, it must be said, are influenced by the intense interactions of the military and the media. Thus, besides China and India jointly controlling the border disputes, India domestically should control the above-mentioned interactions of public opinion and the military nationalism, the beneficial choice for itself and its people.²³

Nowhere did the *Global Times* admit any possibility that Beijing's actions might have contributed to the situation.

For the time being, surging Indian nationalist sentiments and actions are making Beijing uncomfortable, but also cautious. As chair of the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping is the PLA's commander-in-chief. If he were to conclude that Indian nationalist sentiments are so strong that sooner or later a clash on the border will escalate into a war, he might be inclined to strike first. If such a scenario should come to pass, Indian nationalism would have flipped overnight from a fragile deterrent to a driver of conflict.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Crisis*, edited by Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin with Sharon Strange, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2021.08