

## China- India Border Crisis: Causes and Implications 1962-2023

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G.s.m: 08067141842

Received: 12 / 03 / 2024

Accepted: 07 / 05 / 2023

Published: 15 / 07 / 2024

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### Abstract

For more than seventy years, the Sino-Indo border crisis has become an endless imbroglio with no settlement in sight. Relations between the two Asian giants have soured over the last decade, particularly following a 2020 boundary skirmish between Indian and Chinese soldiers in the Galwan area. The issue of a disputed border emerged in the early 1950s when the People’s Republic of China affected her capture of Tibet. This act created for China and India one of the lengthiest undefined boundaries in the globe. The China-India border stretches for approximately 3,488 kilometers (2,167 miles) across the Himalayan mountain range, separating the two countries. The main areas of contention are the western sector (Aksai Chin region administered by China but claimed by India) and the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh region administered by India but claimed by China). This dispute has led to several military standoffs and border skirmishes between the two countries over the years. The intricate and protractedness of this border conflict made this work try to find out the causes and implications of this crisis to the Asian region and the world generally. To do this effectively, we employ secondary sources where data was collected from textbooks, diplomatic records, academic literature, newspapers, journals, magazines, and internet materials. The data collected was analyzed through documentary evidence while the contested border and territorial nationalism theory were used as the analytical tool. The work discovered that factors like unresolved border issues, historical crises, strategic concerns, ideological biases, failed diplomatic negotiations, military considerations, the Tibetan refugees crisis, Cold War dynamics, and limited communications were some of the issues that led to the border crisis between the two Asian giants. Furthermore, the work found out that the implications engendered by the China-India border crisis are severe and expansive like heavy militarization of the China-Indian border, strategic instability in Asia, India’s more assertive foreign policy, China’s global image damage, policy implications, and arms race between the two Asian giants. The work concluded that China and India should strive for a harmonious and sustainable joint boundary commission that will map and mark their boundaries as this option if meticulously and strictly followed will tremendously benefit both and all.

*Keywords:* Causes, China-India Borders, crisis, dispute, implications

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## **Introduction**

The China-India border crisis or the Sino-India border crisis is one of the most prolonged and most disputed international boundaries in the world. It is a long border of 3,488 kilometers (2,167 miles) across the Himalayan Mountain range, separating the two countries (Rahaji, 2021). The main areas of contention along the China-Indian border are the Western sector administered by China but claimed by India and the Eastern sector administered by India but claimed by China. This China-India dispute has led to several military standoffs and border skirmishes between them over the years. This China-India border crisis has also brought the relationship between the two countries to a historic low. The Chinese claimed the line of actual control (That is where the Chinese soldiers stopped in the 1962 border war with India) as the border while the Indians maintained the colonial McMahon line as the actual border.

This Sino-Indian border dispute has made the two Asian giants fortify their side of the border with heavy and sophisticated military weapons. Though this situation has not led to full-scale war except the short one in 1962, it creates a tense situation like, a rumbling volcano ready to explode. If no sustainable solution is implemented the impending volcano will explode with incalculable destructive consequences for Asia and the rest of the world. To stop this imminent doom which may unleash any time from now this work tries to investigate the causes and implications of this crisis believing that it may bring a permanent solution to the crisis between the two Asian giants (Rahaji, 2021).

India and China will greatly benefit from each other and help the world if they relate in peace rather than in war. Both are a formidable and expansive market, technological powerhouse, and political juggernaut in the world. Any crisis between these two Asian giants will destabilize the Asian region and have ugly consequences for the rest of the world, considering their population, land mass, and technological prowess. This research believes that such political, economic, and social power embedded in the two countries will benefit them more if there is peace between the two Asian giants than crisis. The border crisis between the two countries must be resolved to avoid its destructive implications for the world.

For clarity and easy comprehension, this work was divided into seven sections: - introduction, method and materials, theoretical framework, historical background of the crisis, causes, implications, and conclusion.

## **Method and Materials**

This work is a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative study. The data for the work came through secondary sources like books, journals, theses, magazines, newspapers, and internet materials. The data collected was analyzed through documentary evidence; the contested border and territorial nationalism theory was used as a tool of analysis. The data collection process follows specific criteria to maintain relevance, reliability, and credibility.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This work used contested border and territorial nationalism theory (Anderson, 1980). The theory emerged as an interdisciplinary analytical tool for understanding the complexities of territorial disputes and their connection to nationalism. It draws from geopolitics, international studies, nationalism studies, historical analysis, and conflicts over contested territories. The theory gained prominence during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when scholars sought to explore the dynamics behind border conflicts and territorial claims, particularly in the aftermath of decolonization and the dissolution of empires. This theory was coined by Benedict Anderson,

John Agnew, and Gerald Hughes. These scholars have provided valuable insights into the complex relationship between contested borders like China and India and territorial nationalism (Anderson, 1980).

The theory postulated that nationalism and territoriality are closely intertwined, and contested borders often ignite and intensify nationalist sentiments. Nations and states consider their territorial boundaries as essential markers of their identity, sovereignty, and historical continuity. Nationalism plays a significant role in shaping state behavior when dealing with territorial disputes. Governments and leaders may use nationalist rhetoric to rally their populations, reinforcing that the contested territory is integral to the nation's heritage and deserving of protection. This is what the China-Indian border crisis was used for in China and India after the 2020 fatal Galwan border crisis. Such nationalist rhetoric can lead to heightened emotions, making it challenging to find peaceful resolutions to territorial conflicts.

Contested border and territorial nationalism can take various forms, including irredentism, separatism, and expansionism. Irredentism involves claims over territories inhabited by ethnic or cultural kin outside the current borders of a nation-state. Separatism refers to the desire of a distinct group within a state to secede and establish its independent nation-state. Expansionism involves pursuing territorial acquisition beyond existing borders to unite populations sharing a common identity (John, 1970).

The theory was criticized for oversimplification concerning geopolitical issues by focusing on the link between territorial claims and nationalism while neglecting factors such as economic interests, regional security dynamics, and political power struggles, which can equally affect border contestation. The theory was also criticised for identity complexity. The theory may not fully account for the intricacies of identity and nationalism, especially in regions with diverse ethnic or religious groups. Multiple identities might coexist within a nation, and territorial claims might not always align with the aspirations of every group. Critics say that the theory's emphasis on territorial nationalism might not adequately address cases where nations prioritize economic integration and international cooperation over territorial expansion. Opponents say that the theory may not fully account for variations in nationalist ideologies and behaviors in different regions or historical contexts. Nationalism manifests differently across diverse societies, and its relationship with territorial disputes can vary accordingly.

Some contend that the theory does not adequately consider historical grievances or colonial legacies that might influence contemporary border conflicts. Past events and power imbalances can continue to shape territorial claims and nationalist sentiments in the present. Another weakness is that the theory may not fully address cases where territorial conflicts stem from ethnic nationalism, where the focus is on preserving the rights and interests of a specific ethnic group rather than the broader notion of a nation-state. The theory's applicability may be challenged in the context of increasing globalization, as it might not fully account for the growing interconnectedness of societies and the impact of supranational organizations on territorial disputes.

Despite the theory's numerous criticisms, the contested border and territorial nationalism theory remains highly relevant in understanding many contemporary geopolitical conflicts and territorial disputes across the globe. The theory can help analyze ongoing tensions between nations over historical borders, where contested territories hold deep historical significance and cultural links like that between China and India.

## Historical Background of the Crisis

The conflict started in 1914, when representatives from Britain, the Republic of China and Tibet gathered in Shimla in what is now India, to agree on a pact that would decide the position of Tibet and settle the boundary between China and then colonial India (Blackson, 1970). The Chinese refused the proposed agreement that would have allowed Tibet to be partially independent and remain under Chinese sovereignty and did not sign the deal. But Britain and Tibet signed a pact introducing what would be called the McMahon line, named after an English colonial official, Henry McMahon, who suggested the border agreement. India agreed that the McMahon line, a 550-mile border that stretches through the Himalayas, is the official legal boundary between China and India (Shavita, 1968).

In 1947, India declared its independence from Britain. Two years later, the Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong proclaimed an end to his country's communist revolution and founded the People's Republic of China. Almost immediately, the two countries—now the world's most populous—found themselves at odds over the boundary. Agitations rose all through the 1950s. The Chinese asserted that Tibet was never sovereign and could not have signed a pact producing an international border. There were many failed initiatives at peaceful meetings. China seeks to control critical roads near its western boundary in Xinjiang, in contrast, India and its Western friends saw any attempts at Chinese occupation as part of a broader plot to extend Maoist-style communism across the area (Bolaishan, 2000).

The proximity of the Chinese army presence so close to the undefined boundary caused big annoyance in New Delhi. On Beijing's side, she was not interested in the status of the common border as the new socialist administration was engaged in strengthening her power at home, repressing rebellions, fighting poverty, agrarian issues, and the threat of invasion by the United States and Taiwan nationalist government of the Republic of China, then pursued to Taiwan (Camalia, 2020). In the same vein, the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) saw it fit to put the border issue aside until they were ready to address it (Chaowu, 2017).

The boundary crisis came to the open again in 1958, when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, answering to Nehru's agitations against the Aksai Chin road—179 kilometers which pass through the Aksai Chin area claimed by India as well as greedy Chinese maps, derived from the first time the presence of any formalized border between China and India. Core to the boundary crisis were two parts of territories lying at the two ends of the vast border, the Aksai Chin area, on the western side and the Arunachal Pradesh, on the eastern side (Damian, 2022).

New Delhi maintained its claims on the grounds of maps obtained from the British. Beijing asserted that these lands were originally part of Tibet. Since the next few years, the territorial agitations between the two countries have widened as the Tibet crisis of Dalai Lama's refuge in India, and New Delhi's forward policy intensified the mutual crisis and finally led to the 1962 war (Shamkar, 2018).

The British initiatives to restrict the Himalayan frontier were guided primarily by her strategic competition with Russia. The need to protect British-India's northern boundary was lost by removing the danger of invasion because of the fall of Tsarist Russia in 1917. However, as the British left in 1947, there was no defined direction of where the northern borders were (Eric, 2022).

After India's independence two main factors assisted in the endurance of the border dispute. Number one was the lack of interest of both India and China to talk of the subject in

the initial phase from 1950-1957 when Sino-Indian links were peaceful and amicable, when the two nations had many high-level negotiation exchanges, which equipped the leaders with great chances to settle the confusion left over from the colonial period.

Tibet is the second feature that added to the crisis of the boundary conflict. Since its inception, Tibet has become a focus of dispute between India and China. China's military occupation of Tibet in 1950 was perceived as a security threat in New Delhi and led to significant public agitation against China. Likewise, India's closeness with the Dalai Lama and Nehru's effort to negotiate between Lhasa and Beijing was perceived by the communist government as an intrusion into China's domestic affairs (Rose, 2023).

### **Causes**

The primary cause of the war was the unresolved border disputes between China and India. These disputes centered on conflicting territorial claims and differing perceptions of the border alignment, particularly in the western and eastern sectors of the border. Disagreements over the status of regions like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh fueled tensions and led to military confrontations (Matthew, 2023). Historical factors also played a role in the border war. The legacy of British colonial rule and the subsequent partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 led to a fragmented understanding of the border, with different regions under British India, princely states, and colonial spheres of influence. The lack of clear demarcation lines and historical grievances added entirely to the border disputes (Singh, 2022).

Strategic considerations were significant factors in the conflict. The western sector, including Aksai Chin, was strategically important to China as it facilitated the connection between its restive region of Xinjiang and Tibet. China's construction of the Xinjiang-Tibet Highway through Aksai Chin, which India saw as a threat to its security, further escalated tensions. India's strategic concerns in the eastern sector were driven by its perception of China's territorial ambitions in the strategically important state of Arunachal Pradesh (Abimbola, 2020). During the 1950s and early 1960s, China and India followed different ideological paths. China, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, embraced communism while India followed a democratic system. These ideological disparities added a layer of complexity to the border disputes and influenced the dynamics of the conflict (Igwe, 2021).

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the border disputes had been ongoing for several years before the war broke out. However, these negotiations did not yield a satisfactory resolution, and both sides held entrenched positions. The failure of diplomatic initiatives to find a mutually acceptable solution contributed to the escalation of tensions and eventually led to the outbreak of hostilities (Ibrahim, 2019). Military factors also played a role in the war. China had a more organized and equipped military, with better infrastructure and logistics support in the border areas. India, on the other hand, faced challenges in terms of the rugged terrain and inadequate infrastructure. These military asymmetries influenced the course and outcome of the conflict (Donald, 2021).

Another issue in the conflict is the Tibetan problem. The Tibetan refugee crisis following the 1959 Tibetan uprising and the subsequent flight of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to India further strained relations between China and India. India provided refuge to the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetan refugees, which China perceived as interference in its internal affairs (Lewis, 2023). This factor added a layer of tension to the fragile relationship between the two countries.

The political leadership and domestic factors in both China and India equally played a role in the outbreak of the border conflict. In China, Mao Zedong sought to consolidate his leadership and reinforce the communist party's authority domestically. The border conflict with India served as a means to divert attention from domestic issues and rally nationalist sentiments. In India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's forward policy, aimed at asserting Indian control in disputed areas, increased military deployments and tensions along the border (Lewis, 2023). Perceptions of threats and insecurity on both sides contributed to the conflict. China perceived India's forward policy and military build-up in the border regions as a threat to its territorial integrity and strategic interests. India, on the other hand, felt threatened by China's infrastructure development, military presence, and growing influence in Tibet. These perceived threats heightened suspicions and contributed to hostility (Gambo, 2022).

The broader Cold War dynamics and strategic alliances of the time influenced the China-India border conflict. China had close ties with the Soviet Union, while India pursued a policy of non-alignment. The Sino-Soviet split and tensions between the two communist powers had impacted the China-India relationship. China's perception of India's alignment with the United States and other Western powers added another layer of complexity to the conflict (Benard, 2020). Limited communication channels and misunderstandings between China and India's military forces on the ground were also contributing factors. The lack of direct communication and mechanisms for resolving disputes in real time increased the risk of unintended clashes and miscalculations (Benard, 2020). This lack of effective communication exacerbated the tensions and escalated the conflict.

## **Implications**

As the contentions between these nuclear authorities flare up, enduring China-India boundary tensions risk a dangerous escalation and implications. There has been border militarization between China and India. The December 2022 crisis between Chinese and Indian soldiers along the two nations' 2,100-mile-long quarrelsome border called the Line of Actual Control (LAC) shows an annoying "one step forward, two steps back" movement (Joel, 2023). This dispute was the worst since 2020 when the crisis in the Galwan Valley caused the death of 20 Indian and at least four Chinese soldiers (Joel, 2023). Although these disputes were soon followed by talks and other measures to ease tensions, both sides have strongly fortified their boundary plan of action and shown no desire to withdraw. And the condition on the border stands tense as Beijing and New Delhi are fortifying their positions on either side of the LAC, with the intention of escalation between the two nuclear-armed powers.

Another implication of the dispute is India's pursuit of assertive foreign policy. In all, New Delhi's external policy in recent years has been aimed at opposing Beijing rather than negotiating with her. Moreover, both India's Prime Minister and foreign minister have said that peace at the boundary is a must for a good relationship. After the Cold War, Sino-India relations became cordial and there was regular high-level dialogue between the two. Both nations collaborated on many matters, plus the interest for change in the affairs of the global arena, and mutual trade boomed (Zakari, 2021). As a result, a mere belief in India's external policy arena was that the border crisis could be kept different from the political and economic relations, subsequently making space to welcome each other's interests and solidify their mutual relations.

But after the 2020 Galwan dispute these hopes of a good relationship were challenged. In the economic sphere, New Delhi replied to Beijing's border aggressions with increased strict

and boycotts of Chinese businesses and companies. India also stopped dozens of Chinese apps following the 2020 brawl, including TikTok and WeChat (Chaprada, 2022). From then on, more boycotts have been implemented, affecting hundreds of Chinese apps being banned from the large Indian market because they are “prejudicial to the sovereignty, integrity, defense, and security of India” (Egbu, 2023). At the same time, it has pursued economic linkages with other countries to decrease its reliance on China, like the recent free trade dialogue with the European Union and the United Kingdom, as well as the enduring supply Chain move with Japan and Australia (Egbu, 2023).

These reforms to its economic linkage with China have also been pursued by India’s profound pivotal relationship with Western countries. For instance, the US-India defense trade has leap-frogged from near zero in 2008 to over 20 billion USD in 2020 (Ogwu, 2022). Currently, Washington and New Delhi started the move on vital and new technologies to enlarge their pivotal technology relationship and industrial defense engagement. The two countries have also standardised many joint military trainings, like Tiger Triumph, Yudh Abhyas, and exercise Malabar, which now incorporate the naval forces of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, jointly known as the Quad (Ogwu, 2022). Undoubtedly, New Delhi’s new external policy initiative will be against Chinese interests and could likely lead to new problems for conducting the boundary crisis henceforth.

There is also strategic instability in Asia because of the China-India border crisis. Amid tensions between China and India, the Pakistan-India Kashmir crisis, South China Sea issues, Pakistan’s domestic political and economic challenges, and the resurfacing of a great power struggle, vital harmony in Asia is becoming difficult to control (Gloria, 2023). The area is witnessing a steep security uncertainty where nuclear-armed countries of China, India, and Pakistan are heating the region. These tensions increase the danger that a boundary crisis could overshoot the nuclear brink. At the 20<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that his state needed a robust “strategic deterrence system” (Peter, 2023). Xi’s remarks point to Beijing’s menacing view of the global environment. This new challenge view, paired with Beijing’s enlarging nuclear weapon and sophistication in advanced delivery systems, may engineer New Delhi’s atomic increase. At least, it will increase the already high levels of mutual mistrust.

China’s global image has been reduced by the China-India border crisis. Analysts have noted that the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s first moves at the China-India line of Actual Control (LAC) in May 2020, which Delhi viewed as China’s moves to alter the original position, are still debatable. Researchers have put forth many initiatives: a Chinese attempt to slowly acquire additional land and present India with a position of no choice, a desire to put India in its position, worries about Indian infrastructure constructions, Delhi revolutionizing the position of Ladakh (dividing it from Jammu and Kashmir, and wholly ruling it); or as a threat against India further deepening its linkages with the US and its allies (Peter, 2023).

Analysts have acknowledged that the PLA activities at the LAC did not occur of its own and have pointed to a comprehensive pattern of Chinese shows of power over the last few months. Along with moving forward with the National Security law in Hong Kong, Beijing has also targeted imports of barley, beef, and wine from Australia. Canberra has also shown major computer-based attacks on various institutions, with some officials maintaining that China is the culprit. Japan, in turn, has daily warned Chinese coast guard activity near the Senkaku Islands and threatening aircraft heading to Japan’s airspace more often as subjects of worry.

Taipei has frowned on increased Chinese vessel's military activity in its vicinity. Hanoi, on its part, has objected to Chinese vessels ramming and in one case sinking Vietnamese fishing boats in the South China Sea (SCS) (Grace, 2022).

There was also news of sea embarrassment against other SCS neighbors (Malaysia and the Philippines). Additionally, Chinese coast guard and fishing vessels operating off the Natuna islands clash with Indonesian vessels. Beijing accused two Canadians of espionage and linked their 18 months imprisonment to the Canadian detention of the chief financial officer of Huawei. Nevertheless, European nations and the United Kingdom have been subjected to harsh accusations from China's aggressive warrior diplomats (Grace, 2022).

Finally, there have already been policy consequences or implications due to the China-India border crisis. These have caused serious worries to India like (a) economic over-reliance on and disclosure to China, (b) incursions that Chinese companies- particularly those that are close with the state made into some Indian economic divisions that are fragile, and (c) ways of Chinese power in the nation (Lawson, 2023). This has led to a series of measures that will reduce or investigate Chinese activities in the economic, technology, telecommunications, public diplomacy, and education branches of India.

## **Conclusion**

The China-India border crisis is historical, colonial, and multifaceted. It is historical because the first attempt at border fixing between the two sides was in 1865. It is colonial because the boundary line drawn by the British (McMahon line) has been the bone of contention in the border crisis between China, and India. It is multifaceted because the internal dynamics within both countries (China and India), the regional issues and the power competition between the US and Russia have all contributed to the crisis. Let the two countries involved take care of the causes and implications as discussed in the work and also pursue a sustainable solution by jointly forming a demarcation boundary commission that will map and mark the boundary between them.

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## Cite as

Agubamah, E. (2024). China- India Border Crisis: Causes and Implications 1962-2023. *ATRAS Journal*, 05 (02), 16-24