

THE INDIA-CHINA CONFLICT IS NOT ALL ABOUT POWER PLAY

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The face-off between India and China in Ladakh, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers, has put the spotlight on their war machines. On paper, China may look superior, but India has more experience in the high-terrain battlefield. Mint takes a deep dive.

What's the history of India-China conflict?

There is no mutually agreed Line of Actual Control (LAC) along certain stretches of the 3,488-km long India-China border and both sides claim parts of it as their own. Representatives from China and Tibet gathered in Simla in 1914 to negotiate a treaty that would determine the status of Tibet and effectively settle the border. After initially accepting the agreement, the Chinese went back on their word. This status lingered on till 1962 when China attacked India and occupied the region of Aksai Chin. China still occupies that part of Ladakh. It also claims that Arunachal Pradesh is part of its territory.

How do the two armies compare?

China spent close to \$261 billion compared to India's \$71.1 billion on defence in 2019. While China outdoes India on most numbers, in the case of ground troops, there is parity. There are an estimated 225,000 Indian ground forces in the conflict region, compared to 200,000-230,000 Chinese soldiers. According to a study by Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Centre for Science & International Affairs, the Indian Air Force with its Mirage 2000 and Sukhoi Su-30 jets has a qualitative edge over China's J-10, J-11 and Su-27 aircraft. India's fleet comprises all-weather, multi-role aircraft while only the J-10 in China has those capabilities.

Does it all boil down to superiority in numbers?

India's is the more experienced and battle-hardened side, thanks to its low-intensity conflicts with Pakistan over decades. China's People's Liberation Army has not experienced this kind of combat since the Vietnam war in 1979. India has an edge at high altitudes. It also maintains a string of air bases near China's border from where it can launch aircraft, the Belfer study says.

How are the militaries placed in the region?

The high altitude of Chinese air bases in Tibet and Xinjiang, along with the difficult geographical and weather conditions, force Chinese fighter aircraft to operate with half payload and fuel. India has built its bases near the border, placing emphasis on infra, base resiliency, better command, communications systems, and air defence. The Chinese air force uses eight bases in the region but most of them are civilian airfields at troubled elevations. Refueling could give Chinese planes more payload but they don't have enough tankers.

What makes this conflict tricky?

China is stronger when it comes to technology and new weapons even though both are nuclear nations. Its economy is five times India's. But India participates in joint military drills with the US, Japan, France and Australia. In the event of a large-scale conflict, US intelligence could help India get a clearer picture of the battlefields. China has been taking on many nations including

US, Australia, Vietnam. Its role in the spread of covid-19 has only dented its image.

Major Mohammed Ali Shah (retd) is a defence & strategy expert.

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