

# DIPLOMACY AFTER GALWAN

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There is a general consensus in Delhi that the Galwan encounter has produced a discontinuity in India's [China](#) policy. Sceptics might say such generalisations made in the aftermath of a bloody encounter tend to overstate the prospects of change. They would add that structural constraints would limit dramatic changes in policy once the heat of the moment dissipates.

This emphasis on inertia must be set against reality that the Galwan clash comes amidst the deepening crisis in bilateral relations over the last decade. Stalled boundary talks, a widening trade deficit, the clash of national interests in the region, and Chinese opposition to India's global aspirations have together strained Sino-Indian relations. Galwan is the last straw, the argument goes, that broke the camel's back.

Although both propositions are rooted in reality, the potential direction of the Sino-Indian relationship is likely to depend on how the current military confrontation in Ladakh is resolved. If it ends with a quick return to the status quo that prevailed in April, inertia is likely to limit radical policy departures. If the Ladakh crisis ends in a setback for India, the pressure on Delhi to radically reorient its China policy will mount.

Meanwhile, if the military standoff continues, as it looks likely, Delhi will have to fully prepare itself. Strengthening India's military and political hand against China in that confrontation is the immediate objective of Delhi's post-Galwan diplomacy.

Many analysts point to India's massive power asymmetry with China and the need to bridge it. The steps suggested include the construction of a military alliance with the US and other Western partners as well as economic decoupling and diversification. Most of these steps are for the long-term.

The focus of the government is rightly on the short-term. And it is about being able to stare down the Chinese in the current military confrontation and hold its ground. Delhi is unlikely to forget those who stand by India at this juncture.

While most analysts were talking about the prospects for India's military embrace of America, Defence Minister [Rajnath Singh](#) dashed to Moscow last week. This was about ensuring that Russia will supply the spare parts and additional weapons like fighter aircraft that India needs.

Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, India's dependence on Russian arms remains substantive. Rajnath's visit to Moscow amidst the crisis with China underlines the weight of the past in India's security policy. Delhi is also apparently pressing other major defence suppliers of India, including France and Israel, to accelerate deliveries on contracted defence equipment.

Meanwhile, the US has emerged as a major defence partner of India. The US aircraft flying on the Ladakh frontier these days include the C-130 transport aircraft as well as the Chinook and Apache helicopters. To be sure, American salience in Indian defence will continue to grow in the coming years. But let's not go too far from the near-term.

There have been reports from Russia, that China is pressing Moscow not to sell the new fighter aircraft to India. Russia and China are strong strategic partners today. While the past suggests India has a special claim to Russian affections, there is a Sino-Russian strategic cohabitation

today in opposition to America.

Both Russia and China have been grumbling about India's growing warmth towards the US in the last few years. How Russia responds to India's request for support in this confrontation with China will, of course, have a major bearing on the future evolution of Delhi's ties with Moscow.

Unlike Russia's public stance of neutrality between India and China, Washington has come out in favour of Delhi. If US President Donald Trump's remarks on mediation between India and China were irritating, Delhi also notes the vocal public support of the US defence and foreign policy establishment against Chinese aggression.

Far more important than the statements is the material support that the US is prepared to give and India is ready to accept during the crisis. Media reports from Delhi say the US is already supplying valuable real-time military intelligence of value to the Indian armed forces. Washington is apparently willing to do more but is letting Delhi decide the pace and intensity of that cooperation.

But to talk of a military alliance with America is getting way ahead of the story. Such chatter underestimates the uncertain political moment in the US amidst the general election scheduled for early November. The electoral fortunes of Joe Biden are rising as the Trump Administration struggles to manage the COVID crisis. A change of guard in Washington may not necessarily change attitudes towards India, but will certainly slow things down as the new administration settles down and reviews its priorities.

In any event, alliance arrangements are not there just for the asking in Washington, whether it is dominated by Republicans or Democrats. Even more important, America's stakes in China are far higher than Russia's. While there is growing strategic friction between Washington and Beijing, their profound economic interdependence is a significant political constraint on the US's options.

For now, though, Delhi appreciates the level of support it has got from the US. America and other Western friends of India had helped Delhi fend off efforts of Beijing and Islamabad to involve the UN Security Council in Kashmir's affairs after India changed the constitutional status of the region last August.

On deeper military cooperation with Washington, Delhi would want to move with care rather than rush into it in the manner that [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) did during the 1962 war. While Delhi is in a better position today than it was in 1962, China's capabilities and standing have grown manifold since then.

China today is the world's second-most important power and a valued political and economic partner for most countries in the world. Very few capitals would want to insert themselves into the conflict between India and China. And Delhi should not waste its diplomatic capital in seeking public expressions of support from around the world.

If Delhi comes out of this crisis wounded, its troubles at home and the world will mount significantly. A weakened India will find recasting its China policy even harder. But an India that comes out of this confrontation with its head held high, will find its international political stock rising and its options on China expanding.

At a time when most of the world is finding it hard to stand up against relentless political, economic and military pressures from Beijing, successful Indian resistance to China's expansionism would be a definitive moment in the geopolitical evolution of Asia. The stakes for

India and the world, then, are far higher today than in 1962.

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