

# THE ROAD FROM GALWAN, A YEAR LATER

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On June 15 last year, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) witnessed its first deaths after 1975 when 20 Indian soldiers and at least four soldiers of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) died in a violent clash in Galwan in Ladakh. [An Indian news report](#) mentioned that around 50 Indian soldiers had been taken captive by the PLA during the clash and released in batches over three days. Although both countries have given gallantry awards to the fallen soldiers, details about the violent incident have not been officially made public so far.

This is in keeping with the broader approach of the Government where no official briefing or press conference about the situation in Ladakh has taken place in the last 13 months. The ministerial statements in Parliament were monologues with no questions allowed from other representatives of the people. The official excuse was operational security, but the actual reason was to avoid political embarrassment for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Four days after the Galwan clash, Mr. Modi addressed an all-party meet where he unequivocally stated, "*Na koi wahan hamari seema mein ghus aaya hai aur nahi koi ghusa hua hai, na hi hamari koi post kisi dusre ke kabze mein hain*" (No one has intruded and nor is anyone intruding, nor has any post been captured by someone)." A huge public outcry led to an official clarification by the Prime Minister's Office which [contained rhetoric that dodged the offending remarks](#).

The Government's political strategy for dealing with the Ladakh border crisis has been based on dodging, denial and digression. An honest appraisal of the situation in Ladakh would be politically costly for a government led by a "strong" Prime Minister, as PLA soldiers remain in control of what was hitherto in Indian control. Despite the largely supportive news channels, the Government has not been able to convince the public about its version of events. In the recent 'State of Nation' poll conducted by C-Voter, 44.8% respondents said the Chinese encroachment in Ladakh was a failure of the Modi government, [while only 37.3% said it was not](#).

The crisis in Ladakh erupted months after Mr. Modi had held his second informal summit with the Chinese President Xi Jinping (at Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu) and weeks after he hosted the then United States President Donald Trump for a political event in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. For someone attributing his foreign policy prowess to the power of his persona and his personal chemistry with other world leaders, there could be no worse rebuttal of his claims than the timing of the Chinese incursions. In a government identified solely with the Prime Minister and dominated by his office — there is no record of the Cabinet Committee on Security being convened to discuss the Ladakh border situation — Mr. Modi is being held responsible in the public imagination for the setback.

The current situation is not militarily precarious in Ladakh. With a continued deployment of 50,000-60,000 soldiers, the Indian Army has been able to hold the line to prevent any further ingress by the PLA. The Chinese presence on the Indian side of the LAC in Gogra, Hot Springs and Demchok gives the PLA some tactical advantage but the area which majorly jolts Indian military plans is the Chinese control of Depsang Plains. With "official sources" trying to palm it off as a legacy issue, despite evidence to the contrary from many retired military officers, the Indian Army has only weakened its negotiating position during the talks with the PLA. In any case, there has been no progress in talks after the disengagement at Pangong lake and Kailash range in February.

Outside of Ladakh, the Indian Army remains in an alert mode all along the LAC to prevent any Chinese misadventure but the bigger change has been its reorientation of certain forces from

Pakistan border towards the China border. The basis of this shift was articulated by the Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat when he recently said that China is a bigger security threat for India than Pakistan. The Ladakh crisis has also exposed India's military weakness to tackle a collusive threat from China and Pakistan: to avoid such an eventuality, the Government opened backchannel talks with Pakistan which led to the reiteration of the ceasefire on the Line of Control.

The Ladakh crisis has also led the Government to relook external partnerships, particularly with the United States. After his meeting with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar late last month, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted that they discussed the "India-China border situation". The Indian side was silent about it but senior U.S. military officials have earlier spoken of the intelligence and logistics support provided to the Indian forces in Ladakh, while the Indian military has sought to learn from the American experience of implementing the Multi Domain Operations (MDO) doctrine to wage a war of the future against a technologically superior PLA.

That China is "a larger neighbour, which has got a better force, better technology", was acknowledged by General Rawat recently, to argue that India will "obviously prepare for a larger neighbour". The military importance of the Quad remains moot, with India reportedly refusing to do joint naval patrolling with the U.S. in the South China Sea; the two treaty allies of the U.S., Japan and Australia, also refused. Moreover, India's focus on its land borders and its limited resources for military modernisation in a period of economic decline impinge on its maritime ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

Even as India has tried to talk tough with Beijing and shown greater interest in the Quad, its attempts to counter the burgeoning Chinese influence in the neighbourhood have faltered, exacerbated by the mishandling of the second wave of the novel coronavirus pandemic. With the widening power gap between New Delhi and Beijing, the challenge is as much economic as it is geopolitical. Despite the border crisis and the Indian restrictions on Chinese technology companies, China displaced the U.S. to be India's biggest trade partner in 2020-21, up to nearly 13% of [India's total trade compared to 10.4% a year ago](#).

For the Modi government, it has been a difficult balancing act between its domestic rhetoric and external reality. Even though India has been dependent on China for medical equipment to fight the pandemic and asked for assured supplies, the Government has been reluctant to publicly acknowledge this dependence: it underplayed Mr. Xi's message to Mr. Modi offering support and assistance. It has asked Beijing to grant visas to Indian students and businesspersons but has refused medical aid or Chinese vaccines. Simultaneously, New Delhi has placed the border issue at the centre of the relationship with China, arguing that there can be no normalcy without restoration of *status quo ante* at the borders.

For the past few decades, Indian planners operated on the premise that their diplomats will be able to manage the Chinese problem without it developing into a full-blown military crisis. That belief has been laid to rest. Militarily, Chinese incursions in Ladakh have shown that the idea of deterrence has failed. A return to the *status quo ante* of April 2020 remains a mirage with the Chinese side refusing to engage meaningfully after February. New Delhi has learnt that it can no longer have simultaneous competition and cooperation with Beijing; the dramatic engagement that started with Rajiv Gandhi's historic visit to China in 1988 is over.

The bouquet of choices before the Modi government is not appetising. A new reset in bilateral ties, à la the early 1990s, is difficult because China is now in a different league, competing with the U.S. India will never be comfortable taking sides in a new Cold War between the U.S. and China, as it has always valued its strategic sovereignty. Beijing seems as keen as New Delhi to avoid a military conflict, though accidents such as Galwan can never be ruled out. That leaves

India with the daunting task of living with this tense and uneasy calm with China for some time, a challenge brought to the fore by the Ladakh crisis.

The events of the past one year have significantly altered India's thinking towards China. The relationship is at the crossroads now. The choices made in New Delhi will have a significant impact on the future of global geopolitics.

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