

MANAGING THE BORDER WITH CHINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

May 23, 2020-Saturday

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Soldiers engaged in hostilities on three border points would be ominous in almost any context except where India and China are concerned. Along the Line of Actual Control, it could mean an escalating confrontation that could spread into diplomatic and economic spheres. Or it could mean that another border incident has got a bit out of control. The reasons for escalation could be the ever-changing border infrastructure or a rush of blood by an individual soldier. If the latter, one can expect the status quo to be restored, but after much muscle-flexing.

The problem in Sino-Indian relations is that whether such incidents are motivated by the geological or the geopolitical is often unclear to either side. Much of the discussion at officer-level flag meetings or between diplomats in the twin capitals is about trying to determine at which level the wheels are turning. That, in turn, goes to a much deeper issue of distrust between India and China and opacity on the part of both governments, but with Beijing being the blacker box. The two countries now have four border management agreements, with a fifth in the works. But with new roads being built, better vehicles being deployed, and the strategic landscape forever changing along the border, each agreement starts becoming outdated as soon as the ink dries.

India and Chinese troops are face-to-face in Galwan Valley, Finger 4 and Naku La. China's "all weather friend", Pakistan, has turned up the temperature along the Kashmir border. But, at the same time, the People's Bank of China's licence to invest in India has just been renewed. Beijing has ensured emergency medical supplies are being sent, albeit with some quality control issues. In contrast to the rhetorical aggression that Beijing has shown to the West or Southeast Asia, the noises from China regarding India have been benign. This is all part of a long-standing dichotomy in the Sino-Indian relations, much competitiveness with many elements of cooperation. However, with the international strategic environment changing, this rough-and-ready way of handling bilateral relations needs to be replaced. The goal should be a framework where lines of communication, strategic red lines and dotted lines along maps are all better delineated. This is a task of a generation, but one that is essential if India and China are to ensure border flare-ups do not become something much larger and more dangerous.

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