

# BEIJING'S LADAKH BRINKMANSHIP

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

The Pangong Tso lake in Ladakh. File | Photo Credit: [The Hindu](#)

The current intensification of [tension between China and India](#) following the escalation of Chinese troop build-up in Ladakh is but one sign that Beijing is increasingly feeling beleaguered. In response, it has embarked on a strategy of brinkmanship with several goals in mind. External adventurism, when cloaked in the garb of ultra-nationalism, can shore up a regime's legitimacy at home. This is particularly the case when an authoritarian regime whose legitimacy rests primarily on its economic performance is faced with a situation where growth is expected to plummet.

Simultaneously, it can act as a diversionary measure to escape international opprobrium, similar to what China is facing currently because of Beijing's attempt to cover up the spread of the coronavirus during the crucial early weeks when it could have been more easily contained. Many countries hold China responsible for the huge cost in human lives and suffering as well as the unprecedented economic distress. In the face of such criticism, the Chinese regime is increasingly using jingoistic jargon to build up domestic support. President Xi Jinping's recent speech to the PLA is an outstanding example of this strategy. He [exhorted the Chinese armed forces](#) to "prepare for war" in order to "resolutely safeguard national sovereignty" and "the overall strategic stability of the country".

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This is a sign that the Communist Party of China (CPC) feels increasingly threatened both domestically and externally. China's relations with the U.S. have been going downhill almost since the beginning of the Donald Trump presidency. Washington has periodically imposed economic sanctions on China and Beijing has retaliated in kind. Trade talks have faltered because of growing protectionist sentiments in the U.S. and Chinese inability to adequately respond to them.

Tensions between the U.S. and China have also increased for other reasons. The chipping away at Hong Kong's autonomous status by Beijing and the suppression of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong has led to severe criticism by the U.S. administration and in the Congress. Differences over the issue of Taiwan have added to tensions, with China viewing the U.S. as the primary impediment preventing Taiwan's integration. The Trump administration has significantly increased support to Taiwan with arms sales that have added to China's concern.

Above all, the U.S.-China rivalry in the South China Sea acts as the potential flashpoint that may well lead to a shooting war. In the past decade, China has vigorously advanced its territorial claims in the South China Sea by militarising islands it controls, vociferously contesting claims by other regional states and impeding their attempts to access territories they claim. So far, it has been careful that these moves do not trigger a serious confrontation with the U.S.

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However, it is quite possible that a Chinese leadership that feels besieged could adopt a more provocative strategy, thus increasing the risk of a military confrontation with the U.S. Washington has a strong interest in preventing China from asserting control over the South China Sea as maintaining free access to this waterway is important to it for economic reasons. It also has

defence treaty obligations to the Philippines, which has vigorously contested Chinese territorial claims. Further, China's control of the South China Sea would be a major step toward replacing the U.S. as the foremost power in the Indo-Pacific region.

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Increased Chinese adventurism could result in an escalation of U.S.-China confrontation in the South China Sea. If that happens, the India-China face-off in Ladakh could become part of a much larger "great game", with the U.S. trying to preserve the status quo and China attempting to change it to further its objective of regional dominance at the U.S.'s expense. The current India-China crisis should, therefore, be seen in its proper context and not as an isolated event.

*Mohammed Ayooob is University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations, Michigan State University*

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