

# Can India and China Break Free from the Triangle of Conflict at the Border?

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## INTRODUCTION

On 21 October 2024, during a special briefing on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Russia, India's Foreign Secretary, Shri Vikram Misri stated, 'Over the last several weeks, Indian and Chinese diplomatic and military negotiators have been in close contact with each other in various forums. As a result of these discussions, an agreement has been reached on patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India–China border areas, leading to disengagement and a resolution of the issues that arose in these areas in 2020'.<sup>1</sup>

As per the official reports, troop disengagement at two friction points—Demchok and the Depsang Plains—in eastern Ladakh happened.<sup>2</sup> Army sources indicated that India and China would conduct 'coordinated patrolling' in these two regions along the LAC to prevent face-offs.<sup>3</sup> An official source also indicated that it was agreed that Chinese patrols would be permitted in Yangste, Arunachal Pradesh 'as before and not be blocked'.<sup>4</sup>

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Ironically, 62 years ago, on 20 October 1962, the border dispute between India and China took a violent turn. What has made this conflict so protracted, and is disengagement enough to establish lasting peace between India and China?

The recent developments along the LAC can be examined through Johan Galtung's ABC Triangle of Conflict, a framework for understanding complex conflicts by breaking them down into three core components: Attitudes (A), Behaviours (B) and Contradictions (C).<sup>5</sup> These elements are closely intertwined, each offering a lens to understand and possibly resolve the conflict.

The LAC represents more than a territorial divide; it is a symbol of sovereignty and national pride for both India and China. The struggle over territory highlights a clear incompatibility of goals, as each country views territorial integrity as essential to its security and influence. This contradiction fuels hostile attitudes and, in turn, provokes confrontational behaviours.

This commentary uses the ABC Triangle to analyse the disengagement process, briefly addressing the India–China border dispute, recognising that sustainable peace at the LAC requires more than temporary disengagement. It calls for addressing the root contradictions over territory, actively working towards transforming hostile attitudes and reassessing confrontational behaviours that perpetuate the cycle of tension.

### CONTRADICTIONS: A DEEP-SEATED DISPUTE BEYOND TERRITORY

The contradictions between India and China can be traced to the territorial and ideological incompatibilities that have built up over seven decades, originating from the poorly demarcated boundaries inherited from the British colonial era. The seeds of contradiction can be traced back to British colonial rule, particularly to the contentious boundaries proposed during this period. For instance, the McMahon Line, established during the 1914 Simla Conference, was agreed upon by representatives of British India and Tibet, but its legality is disputed by China.<sup>6</sup> Notably, China attended the conference, but later withdrew from it, undermining its credibility to later question the boundary agreed upon by the other parties. However, the issue remains complicated, as the status of Tibet's rule was itself a matter of contention between Britain and China at the time.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Johnson–Ardagh Line, which placed the Aksai Chin region under British India, was one of several proposed boundary lines during British rule. While India upholds this line to assert its claim over Aksai Chin in the western sector

(especially after China's invasion in 1962), China rejects it, asserting that Aksai Chin is historically part of its Xinjiang region.<sup>8</sup> India's adoption of these borders after independence and China's subsequent rejection of them created a foundational conflict. For China, the border issue is not just territorial but also tied to its historical narrative of 'century of humiliation', making territorial concessions unpalatable. Conversely, for India, conceding land is seen as compromising national sovereignty, which is politically and strategically untenable. The differing historical interpretations and claims over these boundaries have thus been a source of protracted conflict between India and China.

In 1962, these unresolved boundary issues erupted into a brief but bloody conflict, leading to a devastating defeat for India. Following the war, incidents such as the 1967 Nathu La and Cho La clashes, the 1975 Tulung La skirmish, and the 1988 Sumdorong Chu stand-off occurred, giving warning signs of rising tensions, as each side intensified infrastructure development and military presence along the border. The contradictions boiled over in June 2020, when Indian and Chinese soldiers engaged in a deadly clash in the Galwan Valley of Ladakh.<sup>9</sup>

The border dispute transcends physical territory and reflects diverging notions of sovereignty. For India, maintaining control over disputed areas is central to upholding its territorial integrity and deterring further aggression. For China, asserting control over regions like Arunachal Pradesh, which it claims as 'South Tibet', reinforces its position as a dominant regional power and ensures strategic depth. These goals are mutually incompatible, as any concession by one side is perceived as a significant loss by the other, creating a zero-sum game dynamic.

At a deeper level, India and China's geopolitical aspirations are fundamentally at odds. India's vision of itself as a leader in South Asia and a counterweight to Chinese influence clashes with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its strategic encirclement of India through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). These structural contradictions extend beyond the border to the global stage, where the two nations often find themselves on opposing sides in multilateral forums.

#### ATTITUDES: ENTRENCHED DISTRUST IN THE SHADOW OF COOPERATION

According to Galtung, attitudes involve the perceptions, prejudices and feelings the actors have towards each other. In the case of India and China,

mutual distrust and suspicion have historically shaped their attitudes and influenced policy decisions, escalating the territorial contradiction. A key aspect of this distrust stems from the different perceptions of the LAC, which remains a source of tension. India adheres to the Johnson Line, which includes Aksai Chin within its territory, while China recognises the Macartney–MacDonald Line, placing Aksai Chin within its borders. This ambiguity surrounding the LAC, coupled with the lack of a mutually agreed-upon map, has reinforced negative perceptions. As one Indian official pointed out, ‘The patrolling points were not sacrosanct locations, and there are also patrolling limits that are followed’.<sup>10</sup> The disagreement over fundamental issues like boundaries and patrol arrangements only intensifies the conflict and deepens negative attitudes on both sides.

The role of media and public opinion is critical in shaping these attitudes. Indian media often portrays China as an aggressor with expansionist ambitions, while Chinese state-controlled outlets frame India as an obstructive power aligned with the United States to contain China’s rise. These narratives reinforce adversarial perceptions, making trust-building efforts more challenging.

However, Galtung’s model also suggests that attitudes are not static. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar highlighted this when he stated that the disengagement represents only the ‘first phase’ of resolving the conflict, acknowledging that normalisation of relations will take time.<sup>11</sup> According to Jaishankar, ‘It is still a bit early for normalization of relations, which will naturally take time to rebuild a degree of trust and willingness to work together’.<sup>12</sup> This sentiment accentuates the difficulty of overcoming entrenched negative attitudes, fears and suspicions between the two countries.

Moreover, attitudes are not solely shaped by security concerns but also by economic interests. China has emerged as India’s largest trading partner in 2023–2024, with bilateral trade exceeding US\$ 115 billion, suggesting that despite the ongoing territorial disputes, economic pragmatism dominates India’s approach.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the desire to maintain economic relations has likely influenced both countries’ willingness to engage in confidence-building measures.

Galtung’s framework emphasises that attitudes can evolve through deliberate engagement and sustained confidence-building measures. For India and China, transforming negative attitudes will require more than disengagement at the LAC.

## BEHAVIOURS: FROM CONFRONTATION TO TACTICAL MANOEUVRING

Finally, in analysing the behaviour of India and China post-2020, it is evident that the relationship between the two countries is caught in a complex cycle of military stand-offs, diplomatic tensions and efforts at disengagement. Following the Galwan clash, India took a series of retaliatory measures to curb China's influence and assert its territorial stance. For India, the violent confrontation was a watershed moment that necessitated a strong response to signal its unwillingness to tolerate further incursions.

India's behavioural response to the Galwan incident extended beyond the military sphere into the economic domain. In a show of economic resilience and sovereignty, India imposed severe restrictions on Chinese visas, as well as banning hundreds of Chinese apps.<sup>14</sup> It also tightened regulations on Chinese investments, particularly in sensitive sectors, such as telecommunications, e-commerce and infrastructure. These measures were not only practical but also symbolic, signalling to the Indian public and the international community that India was willing to counter China's influence beyond the battlefield.

At the same time, both countries continued their respective military preparations along the LAC. China mobilised troops, ramped up infrastructure projects, such as roads and bridges, and constructed strategic airfields.<sup>15</sup> Hostile actions have fuelled mutual distrust and heightened caution between the two countries. For China, India's military posturing, particularly post Galwan clash, was seen as an effort to resist China's growing presence in the region and challenge its territorial ambitions. For India, China's infrastructure development along the LAC and its increased military presence were interpreted as attempts to alter the status quo unilaterally. The intensification of military activities has led to a cycle of action and reaction, creating a precarious balance where neither side is willing to back down entirely but avoids overt escalation into open conflict.

However, the ongoing efforts to disengage at the border represent a shift from confrontation to dialogue. The significance of the Depsang disengagement lies in its proximity to key strategic areas. Depsang is vital due to its proximity to India's critical military assets, such as the Daulat Beg Oldie airfield and the Sub-Sector North, which ensure that the Indian Army maintains access to the key sectors in the event of a Chinese incursion in Galwan, Burtse or at some other friction point.<sup>1617</sup> China's blocking of patrol points in this area had significantly disrupted India's control, and this disengagement not only marks a tactical military shift but also carries strategic

value by allowing India to reclaim patrol routes and secure vital infrastructure in the region.<sup>18</sup>

The disengagement in Demchok, too, reveals the complex and layered nature of the conflict. While temporary Chinese structures were dismantled, several Chinese tents remained at strategic points, signalling the continued contestation of the area.<sup>19</sup> Both sides have thus engaged in a series of tactical withdrawals, but no full-scale de-escalation has yet been achieved. The need for further negotiations on buffer zones and patrolling limits indicates that the disengagement is still a work in progress, and mutual trust is yet to be fully established.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve tensions along the LAC have also been a defining feature of post-2020 behaviours. Both nations have engaged in multiple rounds of Corps Commander-level talks and diplomatic negotiations, often achieving incremental progress in disengagement and confidence-building measures. Jaishankar attributed the breakthrough agreement regarding patrolling to the tireless efforts of the military, which operated under extremely challenging conditions, and to the skilful diplomacy that made it possible.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Galtung's model suggests that disengagement may influence behaviours, which, over time with coordinated patrolling, might beget change in attitude, allowing both countries to address the central contradictions. However, long-term peace efforts will be rendered ineffective if agreements fail to address the deeper contradictions at the heart of the conflict.

According to Michael Kugelman from the Wilson Centre, the current disengagement efforts are a temporary de-escalation rather than a resolution of the underlying border dispute.<sup>21</sup> While the agreement is seen as a positive step towards easing tensions, it is limited to certain areas and does not resolve the broader territorial issues. Moreover, while there are hopes that these engagements will build trust through confidence-building measures such as the exchange of sweets between soldiers, the reality is that the agreement focuses on tactical disengagement rather than strategic resolution. There have been no significant changes in troop strength or infrastructure, which highlights ongoing mistrust.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, lasting peace along the LAC will require both nations to transcend their historical grievances and zero-sum mindsets.

Therefore, while the disengagement agreement marks a significant shift, it should be viewed with caution. Genuine peace between India and China will require a deeper transformation in the attitudes, contradictions and behaviour that have defined their relationship for over seven decades. Unless the core incompatibility is addressed, the cycle of hostility, despite occasional de-escalation, will likely persist.

## NOTES

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