

The Shadow of Aksai Chin: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Challenges in India-China relations

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ABSTRACT

The India-China border conflict, especially around the Aksai Chin region, has been a major challenge in the relationship between the two Asian powers. This research paper explores the historical background of the dispute, focusing on colonial-era borders, the 1962 war, and China's control over Aksai Chin. It highlights how the lack of a clearly defined border, along with different national interests, has continued to cause tension. The paper also studies recent military standoffs such as the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, and how both countries have responded to these events.

In addition, the paper looks into China's broader foreign policy strategies that affect its behavior on the border, including the Five Finger Policy, Salami Slicing, Cabbage Strategy, and Wolf Warrior Diplomacy. These approaches show how China mixes military, political, and economic tools to expand its influence. India's response, including military readiness and stronger diplomatic ties with other countries, is also discussed.

By examining both historical and current events, the paper aims to understand the roots of the conflict and suggest ways to reduce tensions. The research stresses the importance of peaceful dialogue, mutual understanding, and long-term strategies to maintain regional stability and avoid future conflicts.

Keywords-- Aksai Chin, Geopolitical Strategy, Five Finger Policy, Salami Slicing, Sovereignty, Galwan Clash, Strategic Doctrine, Territorial Integrity

I. INTRODUCTION

India and China, two of the world's most populous and powerful nations, share a long and complex history shaped by geography, culture, and conflict. Among the most pressing and unresolved issues between the two countries is the territorial dispute over the Aksai Chin region. This barren, high-altitude land lies at the western end of the India-China border and is currently controlled by China but claimed by India as part of its union territory of Ladakh. The conflict over Aksai Chin is not just about land—it represents deeper historical grievances, strategic interests, and competing regional ambitions.

The roots of the dispute can be traced back to colonial-era border definitions, especially the ambiguous and unagreed-upon lines drawn by the British in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These unclear boundaries have led to differing perceptions of the border, which ultimately resulted in the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Despite various rounds of dialogue and agreements since then, the border remains disputed, and tensions have flared repeatedly in the form of military standoffs and skirmishes.

In recent years, the rise of China's assertive foreign policy and India's strategic realignments have further complicated the relationship.

1.0. Historical Background of the Aksai Chin Dispute

The Aksai Chin dispute between India and China is rooted in colonial history, strategic calculations, and contrasting interpretations of border agreements. Aksai Chin, a high-altitude desert covering about 38,000 square kilometers, lies at the juncture of Ladakh (India) and Xinjiang (China). Despite its remote and inhospitable terrain, the region has become a key flashpoint in India-China relations.

1.1 Colonial Origins and the Ambiguity of Borders

The roots of the dispute date back to the British colonial era. In the 19th century, British India sought to define and secure its northern frontiers to safeguard against Russian expansion into Central Asia. Several proposed boundary lines were introduced, most notably:

The Johnson Line (1865): This line placed Aksai Chin within the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, under British India. It became the basis for India's territorial claim.

The Macartney-MacDonald Line (1899): Proposed by the British to China during negotiations, this line left Aksai Chin under Chinese control. China did not formally respond to the proposal, leading to continued ambiguity.

Because none of these lines were jointly agreed upon or clearly demarcated on the ground, both India and China inherited different maps and understandings of the border when they became independent in the mid-20th century. India regarded the Johnson Line as the legitimate boundary, while China later adopted a position closer to the Macartney-MacDonald Line.

1.2 China's Strategic Interests in Aksai Chin

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese leadership prioritized integration and control over its western frontiers, particularly Tibet and Xinjiang. In the early 1950s, China secretly began constructing a strategic highway (now known as the G219) linking Xinjiang and Tibet through Aksai Chin. This road was completed in 1957 and became crucial for Chinese military and administrative access to Tibet.

India remained unaware of this road until it was revealed publicly in 1958. The discovery was a serious shock to Indian policymakers, as it indicated China's de facto control over territory India claimed. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru rejected the Chinese presence in Aksai Chin, asserting that the territory was an integral part of India. However, China viewed the region as vital for its territorial unity and internal connectivity.

1.3 From Tensions to War: The 1962 Conflict

Diplomatic efforts failed to resolve the dispute. While India pressed for Chinese withdrawal, China refused to concede any territory it viewed as historically or strategically important. In the meantime, both countries began strengthening their positions along the border.

India adopted a "Forward Policy" in 1961–62, establishing military outposts close to Chinese-held areas, including in Aksai Chin. China interpreted this as a threat to its control over the region. Tensions escalated rapidly, and in October 1962, China launched a full-scale military offensive across both the eastern and western sectors of the border.

In the western sector, China swiftly defeated Indian forces and consolidated its hold over Aksai Chin. After declaring a unilateral ceasefire, China withdrew from the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh) but retained its gains in Aksai Chin, which it continues to control today.

1.4 Post-War Developments and Continued Dispute

Following the 1962 war, diplomatic relations between India and China were severely strained. Although relations were normalized in the late 1980s, the border dispute, particularly over Aksai Chin, remains unresolved. A series of talks, confidence-building measures, and agreements have been made, including the 1993 and 1996 agreements on peace and tranquility, but no final settlement has been achieved.

China maintains that Aksai Chin is part of its Xinjiang and Tibet regions, and it continues to control and develop infrastructure in the area. India, on the other hand, claims Aksai Chin as part of the union territory of Ladakh and has consistently refused to recognize Chinese sovereignty over the region.

II. STRATEGIC AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF AKSAI CHIN

Aksai Chin, a high-altitude plateau in the western Himalayas, holds considerable strategic and geopolitical importance for both India and China. Located at the tri-junction of India, China, and Pakistan, the region spans over 38,000 square kilometers and lies at an average elevation of 5,000 meters. Though it appears barren and inhospitable, Aksai Chin plays a crucial role in the military and strategic calculus of the region due to its location and connectivity.

For China, Aksai Chin is a vital corridor connecting its politically sensitive region of Tibet with the resource-rich region of Xinjiang. The construction of the strategic G219 highway through Aksai Chin in the 1950s significantly boosted China's administrative and military connectivity. This road allows China to swiftly deploy military assets and maintain logistical support between its western provinces. Given the long-standing unrest in both Xinjiang and Tibet, the ability to project control over the territory linking the two is of strategic necessity for Beijing (Garver, 2001).

From India's perspective, Aksai Chin is a part of the larger Ladakh region in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and holds importance due to its proximity to key Indian military installations and supply routes. Indian control over Aksai Chin would offer strategic depth against Chinese advances and a buffer zone protecting the Karakoram Pass and the vital Siachen Glacier area. Moreover, Aksai Chin's location makes it crucial for monitoring Chinese activities in the western sector of the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The geopolitical significance of Aksai Chin has further intensified due to China's increasing assertiveness in the region. The area is now part of China's broader strategic objective to consolidate its position along its peripheries through infrastructure development, military modernization, and border defense systems. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash highlighted the importance both countries place on controlling access to high ground and ridgelines in and around Aksai Chin.

Additionally, Aksai Chin is geopolitically linked to China's collaboration with Pakistan. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), lies to the south of Aksai Chin, making the region vital for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Any Indian control over Aksai Chin could potentially threaten the security of CPEC, thereby affecting China's regional connectivity goals.

In essence, Aksai Chin is not merely a barren wasteland but a geostrategic bridge, a military buffer, and a geopolitical flashpoint that continues to influence India-China relations and the broader Asian security landscape.

III. CONTEMPORARY DETENTIONS AND BORDER STAND-OFFS; CHINA'S STRATEGIC DOCTRINES AND BORDER BEHAVIOUR

India and China, two of Asia's major powers, continue to face challenges in managing their long and disputed border, particularly in the western sector that includes the Aksai Chin region. While the 1962 Sino-Indian War was the most violent military confrontation between the two, tensions have persisted in various forms in the 21st century, with contemporary border stand-offs marked by detentions, military build-up, and aggressive posturing.

These incidents are not random but rooted in China's evolving strategic doctrines and its assertive border behaviour.

3.1 Galwan Valley Clash (2020) and Aftermath

The most serious recent clash occurred in June 2020 in the Galwan Valley, near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh. The skirmish resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese soldiers. Notably, this was the first time in over four decades that troops from both sides died in a border incident. This violent episode followed weeks of tension and troop build-up along the LAC, beginning in May 2020 when Chinese troops transgressed into areas like Pangong Tso, Hot Springs, and the Galwan Valley.



India accused China of attempting to alter the status quo unilaterally, while China claimed it was acting within its own territory. These incursions were not isolated. They reflected a broader Chinese pattern of behaviour—testing red lines without triggering full-scale war—using a mix of military and non-military tools.

3.2 Detentions and Military Build-up

During the 2020 standoff, multiple instances of temporary detentions of Indian patrols by Chinese troops were reported. Although both sides agreed not to use firearms under a 1996 bilateral agreement, physical confrontations using batons, sticks, and even makeshift weapons became frequent. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) also mobilized thousands of troops, artillery units, and armoured vehicles along the LAC. India responded with matching deployments, leading to a high-altitude standoff that lasted through several rounds of military and diplomatic talks.

Despite disengagement at certain points like Pangong Tso and Gogra Post, friction points still remain in Depsang Plains and Demchok. Both sides have constructed permanent infrastructure, including roads and airstrips, in

disputed areas. This reflects a long-term strategy to assert claims and ensure rapid mobilization in the event of future conflicts.

3.3 China's Strategic Doctrines and Border Behaviour

China's actions along the LAC are shaped by several strategic doctrines and tactical approaches. These reflect a combination of military assertiveness and hybrid warfare:

Five-Finger Policy: Attributed to Mao Zedong, this doctrine views Tibet as the “palm” and the surrounding regions—including Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh—as the five “fingers.” The policy implies long-term strategic interest in asserting influence or control over these regions, particularly when it comes to perceived territorial integrity.

Salami Slicing Strategy: This involves gradual encroachment into disputed territories through small, incremental moves that go unnoticed or unchallenged. Over time, such actions can change facts on the ground. China's repeated transgressions along the LAC—especially in areas like Depsang and Pangong Tso—reflect this approach.

Cabbage Strategy: Often used in the South China Sea, this involves surrounding a contested area with multiple layers of security—military, paramilitary, and civilian infrastructure—making it difficult for opponents to access or claim it. A similar tactic has been employed in Ladakh, where military and road infrastructure are rapidly expanding.

Three Warfares Strategy: China employs public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare to influence international and domestic perceptions. For example, it uses state media and diplomatic statements to claim sovereignty, portrays India as the aggressor, and attempts to internationalize support for its position.

Gray Zone Tactics: These are actions that remain below the threshold of conventional war but are aggressive enough to achieve political or territorial objectives. PLA's deployment without crossing into full-scale conflict exemplifies gray zone manoeuvres, aiming to wear down Indian resolve.

Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: Named after a popular Chinese action film, this style of diplomacy is marked by aggressive and nationalistic rhetoric. During the border crisis, Chinese diplomats adopted a confrontational tone, denying responsibility for tensions and blaming India for escalation.

Debt Trap and String of Pearls: While not directly tied to the LAC, these strategies reflect China's broader regional ambitions. By investing in infrastructure around India (like ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar), China encircles India geopolitically, which amplifies India's concerns about Chinese activities in sensitive border zones.

3.4 India's Response and Strategic Challenges

The Eight Fingers in the Aksai Chin Region (within Pangong Tso Sector)

Within the western sector of the India-China boundary dispute, the Pangong Tso Lake has become a significant flashpoint, especially since the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes. Along the northern bank of Pangong Tso, the terrain is marked by eight prominent spurs, jutting into the lake, referred to as "Fingers 1 to 8."



India claims the Line of Actual Control (LAC) extends up to Finger 8, while China asserts that the LAC lies at Finger 4. This overlapping claim has led to repeated military face-offs and infrastructure development by both sides. India traditionally patrolled up to Finger 8, but post-2020, Chinese troops have restricted Indian movement beyond Finger 4, altering the status quo.

The “fingers” are not just geographical features but represent tactical military control points. They are crucial for surveillance, patrolling, and maintaining strategic dominance over the lake and surrounding areas. The construction of roads, observation posts, and the deployment of fast patrol boats by both nations underscore the strategic sensitivity of the region.

While the Fingers 1–8 lie outside the traditional Aksai Chin plateau (which is farther northeast), they fall under the greater Aksai Chin–Ladakh theater of military

tension. Their increasing relevance is emblematic of China's aggressive forward policy, and they continue to be a test of India's territorial resolve and military preparedness.

India has responded with both military and diplomatic countermeasures. The deployment of additional troops, construction of roads (like the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road), acquisition of Rafale jets, and strengthening of QUAD partnerships are part of India's broader strategic response. However, India faces the challenge of managing a high-altitude, logistically complex border, often reacting rather than preempting Chinese moves.

India also strives to counter China's narrative warfare through global diplomacy and international outreach, but there is a pressing need for a clear long-term strategy. The India-China border dispute is unlikely to be resolved in the near future; instead, it will likely remain a

space of periodic tension, driven by overlapping claims, historical legacies, and strategic rivalries.

IV. DOMESTIC POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF THE AKSAI CHIN DISPUTE

The Aksai Chin dispute between India and China is deeply influenced by domestic political and economic factors in both countries. These internal dimensions shape each nation's posture, diplomatic decisions, and public discourse regarding the border conflict.

4.1 India's Domestic Political Context

In India, the Aksai Chin issue is a matter of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Successive Indian governments have faced public pressure to take a firm stand on territorial issues, particularly after the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which left a lasting scar on the national psyche. For instance, after the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, there was a surge in nationalist sentiment, with calls for boycotting Chinese goods and strengthening border infrastructure.

The Indian Parliament has consistently maintained that Aksai Chin is an integral part of India's territory, currently under illegal occupation by China. Thus, any perception of compromise is politically sensitive and could lead to significant political backlash. Governments are compelled to show strength and commitment to national security, limiting diplomatic flexibility.

4.2 China's Domestic Political Context

In China, the Communist Party's legitimacy is closely tied to nationalism and the narrative of restoring China's territorial sovereignty and historical pride. Beijing sees control over Aksai Chin as part of securing its western frontier, particularly to maintain control over Xinjiang and Tibet—two regions with histories of separatist tendencies. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are crucial to China's regional economic strategy, and securing routes that pass through or near disputed areas adds to Beijing's resolve to hold onto Aksai Chin. Additionally, Chinese state media and education systems promote a strong nationalist identity, which includes firm stances on territorial disputes, including those with India.

V. LEGAL AND NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE AKSAI CHIN DISPUTE

The Aksai Chin dispute between India and China is rooted in differing interpretations of historical treaties, maps, and colonial legacies, making the legal and normative dimensions particularly complex.

5.1 India's Legal Position

India claims Aksai Chin as part of the union territory of Ladakh based on historical usage and the Johnson Line, drawn in the 1860s by the British. This line placed Aksai Chin within the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, under British suzerainty. India inherited this boundary upon independence in 1947 and has consistently maintained that Aksai Chin is an integral part of its sovereign territory.

India's stance is also supported by the **principle of *uti possidetis juris***, a customary international law doctrine that upholds pre-existing administrative boundaries at the time of decolonization. India argues that its historical administration and maps prior to Chinese occupation demonstrate long-standing control, thus making China's presence an act of illegal occupation.

VI. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND FUTURE STRONG STANCE OF THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT ON AKSAI CHIN

The Aksai Chin dispute remains one of the most complex and enduring issues in India–China relations. India has employed various conflict management strategies over the decades, balancing diplomacy with military preparedness. Going forward, India's stance is likely to become more assertive, combining strategic, diplomatic, and legal tools to safeguard its territorial claims and deter Chinese aggression.

6.1 Conflict Management Strategies by India

India has consistently pursued a dual-track approach: dialogue and deterrence. Since the 1962 war, multiple rounds of diplomatic negotiations have taken place, including Joint Working Groups (1980s–1990s), Special Representatives' meetings, and border talks. The 1993 and 1996 agreements on peace and tranquility along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) were landmark steps in establishing basic norms, including military disengagement and confidence-building measures.

However, these agreements have often failed to prevent border standoffs, such as in Depsang (2013), Doklam (2017), and Galwan (2020). In response to the Galwan clash, India demonstrated a calibrated but firm approach—military reinforcement, infrastructure acceleration in border areas, and economic retaliation through bans on Chinese apps and restrictions on investments.

India has also internationalized the issue more subtly by strengthening ties with like-minded powers, notably through platforms like the Quad (with the US, Japan, and Australia) and deeper defense cooperation with France and Russia. These alignments serve as a strategic counterweight to Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific and the Himalayan region.

6.2 Strong Stance of the Indian Government

In recent years, India's position on Aksai Chin has evolved from passive assertion to proactive measures. The abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, and the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, sent a strong message. By including Aksai Chin in official maps as part of the union territory of Ladakh, the Indian government reaffirmed its claim in both domestic and international discourse.

VII. GOING FORWARD, INDIA IS EXPECTED TO PURSUE A MULTI-PRONGED STRATEGY

Enhanced Border Infrastructure: India is rapidly expanding its road and air connectivity along the LAC. Projects like the DBO road and advanced landing grounds (ALGs) enhance mobility and logistics in Ladakh.

Military Modernization and Deployment: India has increased deployment of troops and modernized equipment along the western sector of the LAC. Integrated battle groups (IBGs), high-altitude warfare training, and closer coordination between army and air force are central to its deterrence posture.

Diplomatic Balancing: India will continue to engage China diplomatically but without compromising on core interests. The firm response to the Galwan incident indicated that violations of the status quo will not be tolerated. India is also working with ASEAN, European Union, and African nations to reduce China's diplomatic leverage.

Legal and Normative Measures: India may increasingly rely on international law and forums to highlight its claims. Referencing principles like *uti possidetis juris* and territorial integrity, India can strengthen its normative position globally.

Economic Leverage and Technological Decoupling: India is diversifying its trade and investment networks. Initiatives like "Make in India" and restrictions on Chinese telecom and digital firms reflect a shift towards economic self-reliance and strategic autonomy.

VIII. CONCLUSION

India's approach to the Aksai Chin dispute reflects a mix of strategic caution, national sovereignty, and pragmatic diplomacy. The Indian government's consistent stance of non-recognition of China's control over Aksai Chin stems from its firm commitment to preserving historical borders and legal claims. While China has employed assertive and at times aggressive tactics—including infrastructure development, salami slicing, and gray-zone strategies—India has responded with calculated restraint, increased border deployments, and critical

diplomatic engagements, all aimed at preserving peace while defending national interests.

The post-Galwan era has seen India take significant steps to recalibrate its China strategy. Infrastructure build-up in border regions, defense modernization, stronger coordination with Quad partners, and assertive posturing in multilateral platforms have demonstrated India's resolve. These actions reflect a shift from purely reactive diplomacy to proactive deterrence, highlighting India's willingness to safeguard its territorial integrity even at economic or diplomatic costs.

India's refusal to accept the Chinese status quo in Aksai Chin aligns with its broader commitment to a rules-based international order. By building alliances, leveraging legal claims under international law, and strengthening domestic political consensus, India is sending a clear message: sovereignty is non-negotiable (Garver, 2001). Moreover, India's balancing act—defending its interests without triggering full-scale conflict—has earned it greater credibility on the global stage as a responsible regional power.

Critics may argue that India's responses have been slow or overly cautious; however, in a complex geopolitical environment with a powerful neighbor like China, prudence and preparedness are key. The Indian government's long-term vision includes building strategic autonomy, enhancing military readiness, and reducing dependency on China across critical sectors. These efforts not only address the current Aksai Chin challenge but also strengthen India's long-term security posture in the Himalayas.

In conclusion, India's actions in the Aksai Chin dispute are justified, measured, and rooted in a desire for peace with preparedness. The government's multidimensional strategy—spanning military, diplomatic, legal, and economic fronts—reaffirms its commitment to protecting India's sovereignty while avoiding escalation. As the regional and global dynamics evolve, India's principled stance on Aksai Chin will continue to serve as a foundation for its broader China policy.

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