

Border tensions between India and China escalate

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Tensions between India and China along their border—the Line of Actual Control (LAC), in the Ladakh area in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir—are escalating despite bilateral meetings attempting to defuse the situation.

India has alleged that a platoon of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) intruded 10 km into Indian territory across the LAC on April 15 and set up tents at Raki Nala, 30 km south of Daulat Beg Oldi in northern Ladakh. In retaliation, the Indian army deployed some troops to the area, pitching tents around 150 meters from Chinese army tents.

China rejected Indian claims that it had breached the LAC, claiming that the PLA set up camp within Chinese territory. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said, "Our troops are patrolling on the Chinese side of the LAC and have never trespassed the LAC."

China, in return, charged the Indian army with carrying out an "aggressive patrol" along the border, demanding that India stop such patrols. It criticized India's construction of transport infrastructure, particularly roads and bridges, in Ladakh.

The LAC itself remains a disputed border. In several locations, it is not clearly demarcated.

At the Indian army's request, two flag meetings have been held between local military commanders from both sides, most recently on Tuesday. They failed to resolve the dispute, however.

The Indian government and media have discussed and covered this dispute extensively. Indian Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai summoned the Chinese ambassador to make a formal protest.

Indicating the importance New Delhi has given to this issue, Indian army chief General Bikram Singh flew to Kashmir to meet with local commanders and review the

situation personally.

The media have reported that the army has presented the government with a list of options, including "the aggressive use of the military to handle the present situation."

On Monday, Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony said, "India will take every step to protect its interests." In January, when tensions with Pakistan intensified over their border in Kashmir, India took a similar stance.

India has been moving more broadly to strengthen its military position against China. It is building transport and military infrastructure near the LAC, and last year Indian Navy chief Admiral D.K. Joshi announced India's concern for "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, large sections of which are claimed by China. He added that the Indian navy might deploy there: "Are we having exercises of that nature? The short answer is yes." (See also: "South China Sea disputes flare up")

The Indian government also claims it is pursuing "peaceful" means to resolve the dispute, however. External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid said Thursday that he would go ahead with a scheduled visit to China on May 9. He noted that such talks "repeatedly" had solved similar disputes, adding: "We have good reasons to believe that it should be able to do it again."

In public, the Chinese government is trying to downplay the issue. At a regular press briefing, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said: "With the boundary not demarcated yet, it is inevitable for problems to crop up in border areas."

She added, "When there is a problem in border areas, the two sides should resolve it through friendly consultations through existing mechanisms and

channels. We believe this incident can also be properly handled and will not affect peace and stability of border areas as well as normal development of India-China relations.”

This military standoff between India and China comes amid US war preparations against China in the context of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia”. The US has formed a strategic partnership with India, aiming to use it as a counterweight to China, which Washington treats as its main rival in Asia.

The US has encouraged Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines to take aggressive stands in territorial disputes with China and fuelled tensions between its ally, South Korea, and Chinese ally North Korea. The Obama administration has also enhanced US military ties with Australia, attempting to harness India into a quadrilateral defence alliance with America, Australia and Japan directed at China.

As in its border clashes with Pakistan in January, India’s Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government also sees its dispute with China as a means to divert rising social tensions within the country, which is home to one third of the world’s poor, in the run-up to next year’s Indian elections.

The UPA government’s moves to introduce new, socially regressive “big bang” economic reforms last September have led to widespread opposition from workers and rural toilers. Nationwide general strikes took place in September and February.

The Sino-Indian border dispute has been a decades-long issue. The two countries fought a war over it in 1962. While China claims about 90,000 square kilometres of land in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, India accuses China of occupying 38,000 square kilometres in the Aksai Chin plateau. India and China have held 15 rounds of talks over their border dispute since 2005 but failed to reach any agreement, highlighting the deep-going nature of the dispute.

Another major source of friction for India over China is the latter’s role as a longtime ally and weapons supplier to Pakistan, India’s main rival on the Indian subcontinent.

Despite their decades-long disputes, India and China have also developed deep economic ties in the past decade; bilateral trade jumped from \$US5 billion in 2002 to \$75 billion in 2011. However, Indian officials note that China still enjoys a huge trade surplus in its

trade with India.

Whatever their efforts to resolve the current dispute, this development itself highlights the inflammable nature of regional geopolitical tensions amid the US “pivot to Asia.”



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