



## Galwan: Postscript to a tragedy

### Context:

- Twenty Indian personnel, including a Colonel, were killed in violent clashes with Chinese troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.
- It had been assumed all along that there would be a de-escalation of the confrontation between Indian and Chinese troops in the area after the Corps Commander-level talks between the two sides.
- The incident represents a watershed in India's relations with China and marks the end of a 45-year chapter which saw no armed confrontation involving loss of lives on the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- The period of bilateral relations that was inaugurated with former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in December 1988 also drew to a close in the darkness of that fateful night.
- Resuming business as usual with China after this seems unlikely given the manner in which the whole calculus of relations has been disturbed by the incident.



### India- China relationship from 1959 to 2020:

- Nothing on this scale was witnessed even in the run-up to the conflict between the two countries in 1962.
- In October 1959, there was a face-off between Indian and Chinese troops at Kongka La.
- Nine Indian soldiers were killed and three soldiers were detained then.
- It was after Kongka La that the national mood turned against the Chinese in full measure in an atmosphere already complicated by the revolt in Tibet and the granting of asylum to the Dalai Lama in March 1959. There was very little room for a reasoned, negotiated settlement being reached on the boundary question between the two countries after that juncture.

20.06.2020

Saturday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

- The conflict in 1962 inflicted gaping wounds on the national soul and prestige from which India took time to recover.

### Is India at a similar juncture today?

- India and China are in a very different place in their history as nations in 2020 as compared to 1959.
- They have grown immensely in strength and stature on the world stage.
- Their relations have substance and a diversity of content in a manner absent in the 1950s.
- To assume that India is on a steep descent from here towards a full-blown conflict with China may therefore be an oversimplification.
- Both countries must keep in check the statements that are mutually accusatory, with each country disclaiming responsibility for the tragic turn of events.

### What's next?

- Bilateral relations in other areas will be under considerable strain. Soft landings cannot be expected.
- No leadership-level contact between the top leaders of the two countries can be anticipated in the near term.
- Indian businesses in China and Chinese business operations in India can expect the going to be tougher than before. The scenario on trade and investments could encounter similar obstacles.
- In areas that impinge on national security, as in the cyber field and in telecommunications, and in technologies that enable spying and surveillance (5G, for instance), stringent controls, exclusions and clampdowns can be expected in the treatment and the entry of Chinese companies in India.

### What is the way forward?

#### Assessing choices carefully:

- Cool-headed thinking is the need of the hour.
- All this comes at a time when:
  - The COVID-19 crisis demands the full attention of the government.

20.06.2020

Saturday



<http://www.sriramsias.com>

- The economy needs to recover from the stagnancy of the last few months.
  - The tensions with Pakistan persist.
  - A dispute over territory with Nepal in the Lipulekh/Kalapani area has been headlined.
- There is considerable turbulence generated by all this. A reincarnated battlefield with China cannot be blindly embraced. The implications of such a choice must be carefully assessed.

### **Effective strategic communication:**

- Strong political direction, mature deliberation and coherence are keys to handling the situation.
- A comprehensive China strategy and its determination should devolve on those tasked with national security policy in the highest echelons of the Government of India under the direction of the Prime Minister. The responsibility of effective strategic communication too rests there.
- A clearer enunciation of the circumstances surrounding Chinese transgressions in Sikkim and Ladakh in the last few months would have been helpful in guiding the scattershot public debate. India must draw the right conclusions that can help the country in the future.
- Diplomatic channels must continue to be open and should not be fettered in any way because their smooth operability is vital in the current situation.

### **Clarification of the LAC:**

- India should take the initiative to insist on a timely and early clarification of the LAC.
- Pockets of difference of alignment as perceived by each side have to be clearly identified and these areas demilitarised by both sides through joint agreement pending a settlement of the boundary.
- At the same time, India must stand resolute and firm in the defence of territory in all four sectors of the border.
- Contacts between the two militaries — joint exercises and exchanges of visits of senior Commanders — should be scaled down for the foreseeable future.



## Taking the long view:

- India's leverage and balancing power within the Indo-Pacific and the world beyond stems from its strong democratic credentials, the dynamism of its economy, its leading role in multilateral institutions, and the strategic advantage of its maritime geography — an asset possessed by few other nations, and which must be deployed much more effectively to counterbalance the Chinese ingress into this oceanic space that surrounds us.
- The events in Galwan Valley should be a wake-up call to many of India's Asian friends and partners enabling a high-resolution envisioning of Chinese aggressiveness.

## Realign strategic partnerships:

- This is also an opportunity for India to align its interests much more strongly and unequivocally with the U.S. as a principal strategic partner.
- India should also infuse more energy into its relations with Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN.
- The time has also come for India to reconsider its stand on joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

## Conclusion:

- Good neighbourhood relations are crucial for national stability and well-being.
- If India is to disengage from economic involvement with China, and build the capacities and capabilities it needs in manufacturing, and in supply chains networks closer home, it cannot be a prisoner of the short term.
- It is time for India to boldly take the long view in this area as also on its South Asia policy.