

**CHINA-INDIA BORDER CONFLICTS:
GEOPOLITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL
DRIVERS AND NEW PARTNERSHIP
MODALITIES**

Ryan CLARKE

EAI Background Brief No. 1554

Date of Publication: 27 August 2020

Executive Summary

1. Chinese and Indian interests along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the disputed border are substantially higher today, taking in tow the same geopolitical forces that sparked the conflict in 1962. What drives today's tensions are likely much broader strategic and environmental considerations, and not short-term tactical considerations or ephemeral factors, such as nationalism.
2. Given India's own domestic security challenges, its ground/combined ground-air combat and other relevant operational experience is more significant than that of its People's Liberation Army (PLA) rival.
3. China's control of Tibet is driven by core strategic considerations. It is 'Asia's Water Tower' and the origin of 12 major river systems (including the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Mekong Rivers), and the lifeline for roughly three billion people in China, South Asia and Southeast Asia.
4. Most of China's northern river systems are heavily polluted and could not provide the necessary agricultural irrigation for food production in China's more arid northern and central regions. Redirecting freshwater from multiple river systems in Tibet/southern China hence becomes a top national security issue, even when China has unchallenged control of these river systems.
5. While India's infrastructure disparities on the Sino-Indian border (i.e. the lack of dams and/or other water management infrastructure) and the less-than-ideal strategic/diplomatic environment within South Asia itself have taken years to manifest, they would also take multiple years to modify.
6. Given the possibly escalatory nature of the conflict on the Sino-Indian border, New Delhi has pursued a defence-centric strategic partnership with the United States.
7. This partnership is propelled not by any particular ideological and/or historical affinity with the United States but rather by hard pragmatic strategic considerations.

8. Even without a formal mutual defence treaty, the Trump administration has shown its willingness to provide targeted and proportional military support to India, especially intelligence cooperation, to allow India to maintain medium-term deterrence/escalation control for Indian forces along the entire LAC.
9. The Trump administration will likely continue to provide intelligence-focused support to India while also selling New Delhi relevant but selective weapons systems. The key focus is to maintain a clear balance of forces while raising the costs of any major military action to an unacceptably high level for Beijing.
10. Faced with US-interoperable forces in the Korean Peninsula, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia and possibly India, China's People's Liberation Army may not be able to determine the risks involved *a priori* in case of an escalation of tensions. Notably, a substantial portion of the US Navy's 7th Fleet is stationed in Singapore.