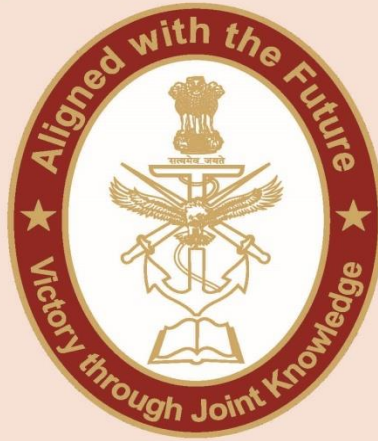


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**IS A GLOBAL
HOT WAR IN
THE OFFING?**



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Historically Many Wars Start Accidentally. While the underlying acrimony, historical baggage and differences gives rise to an adversarial/confrontational/volatile relationship/situation, the actual trigger which starts the shooting war could be a minor incident. The aptly named 'Pig War' in 1859 between the United States and Great Britain in Don Juan island, started over a slaughtered swine. In another bizarre conflict of the 20th century, a dog inadvertently triggered an international crisis. The incident was the culmination of a long period of confrontation between Greece and Bulgaria, which had been at odds since the Second Balkan War in the 1910s. Tensions finally boiled over in October 1925, when a Greek soldier was shot after allegedly crossing the border into Bulgaria while chasing after his runaway dog. The spark that ignited World War I was struck in Sarajevo, Bosnia, where a relatively unknown Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire was fatally shot along with his wife, Sophie, by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914. Princip and other nationalists were struggling to end Austro-Hungarian rule over Bosnia and Herzegovina. Convinced that Austria-Hungary was readying for war, the Serbian government ordered the Serbian army to mobilize and appealed to

Russia for assistance. On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, and the tenuous peace between Europe's great powers quickly collapsed. Within a week, Russia, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Serbia had lined up against Austria-Hungary and Germany, and World War I had begun. It's a **classic case of relentless escalation, inadequate diplomacy, and crude nationalism, along with a disbelief by populations and leaders alike that actual conflict was even possible**, until the "guns of August" grimly proved otherwise. We now live in a globalized interconnected hi-tech world and compared to the conflicts of the 19th and 20th Century the outcome can be apocalyptic. The scope and dimensions of war have increased (multi-discipline, multi-domain, kinetic and non-kinetic), with consistent, accurate, potent, autonomous and long-range weapon systems of mass destruction (even non-kinetic systems like information and cyber wars). Wars are now 24X7, 360degree, 3D with no front, rear or flanks, and are sudden, violent and unpredictable. While history rarely repeats itself in the same precise form, it is imperative for the leaders and nationalists in Beijing, Washington and New Delhi to realize, understand and act based on how high and volatile the stakes have become, specifically in the South and East China Sea (China Seas for convenience) and along the LAC between India and China. Even to maintain a nebulous peace, calls for statesmanship and an attitude of 'give and take' by all adversaries/actors involved. **The focus of this article is viewing the scenario through the unfolding dangerous security prism of US-China relations, which in my opinion is raison d'être for current volatile security situation even along the LAC.**

Declining Hegemon (USA), Rising Challenger (China): Nose diving Relations. The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the global phenomena of rivalry, economic protectionism and (ultra) nationalism, leading to all nations competing, confronting and if necessary engaging in conflict to maintain/regain/enlarge their strategic space and influence in the multi-polar, multi-domain world order. Specifically, the liberal world order led by USA with Western European countries and other partners are increasingly under heavy pressure from illiberal nations (who do not conform to the democratic world order). The tensions/any conflagration along the disputed LAC while not directly related, will become a major factor

in the deteriorating relationship between USA and China, and the initiation of even a minor shooting incident in China Seas or LAC can escalate and engulf the other hotspot, and slowly the region, and the allies of USA and China can get caught up, either willingly or unwillingly.

Escalating Militarism and Brinkmanship by All. Just in the last few months the US-China relations seem to have returned to the early 1950s during and after the Korean War (Communist China entered the war by crossing the Yalu river). Mao Zedong is being glorified in the social media and few government mouth pieces for having boldly gone to war against the Americans in Korea, fighting them to a truce; in the US, articles/statements denouncing Richard Nixon for creating a global Frankenstein by introducing Communist China to the wider world is gaining credence. The in between thaw, unprecedented trade, and warm relations period seems to have vanished! The rousing spate of nationalistic fervor, brinkmanship manoeuvre spost COVID 19 by Beijing in the China Seas, Taiwan, IOR, pressuring global institutions, Wolf Warrior diplomacy, bullying other nations (neighbours, Japan, Australia, and even European nations) and most importantly intrusions and major PLA (army, air force, rocket and missile forces, air defence, mechanized formations, logistics) build up along the India-China LAC (no longer restricted to East Ladakh) is unprecedented in scale, scope, and region. US has become strident, uncompromising, with seemingly unending provocative actions across domains (economic, diplomatic, military, informational, psychological). We seem to be moving from one crisis to another from closure of consulates to calls by U.S. officials for the overthrow of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The speed, intensity, scale and significance of the precipitous fall in US-China relations is stunning and alarming even citizens of USA and China, and all nations specially US allies. What is very concerning is the lack of any mutually agreed understanding/SOP to resolve an incident/crisis specially of the shooting kind. Nobody can hazard a second guess how this will pan out especially given the presidential elections around the corner, giving rise to the once unthinkable probability of actual armed conflict between the United States and China. Similar analogy can be applied to the LAC standoff between China and India, which can easily escalate to larger confrontation not only because of bilateral tensions and brinkmanship, but if President Xi

Jinping and CCP (not China!) decides to showcase to the US and the World, its determination to dominate the region and attain its strategic and national objectives even by using force if required (Xi may well decide to maintain status quo in China Seas and Taiwan but focus on the LAC). The probability of Pakistan providing collusive support is almost certain, while US allies would be compelled to join in or support the US (Asian allies of both sides would have a Hobson's choice but they would inevitably be drawn into the conflict). To put it bluntly, we are looking not just at a regional volatile security situation or cold warⁱ but a hot war which can very easily engulf the world.

The Catalysts for Hot War. The probability of conflict will be especially high over the next few critical months between now and the U.S. presidential election in November (similarly along the LAC till winter sets in), as both US President Donald Trump (and rival Joe Biden who will be compelled to posture) and Chinese President Xi Jinping confront, and exploit, the messy intersection of domestic politics, national security imperatives, heightened nationalism and crisis managementⁱⁱ. Domestic political opinion in all three countries has turned toxic. The list of friction points is long, from cyber-espionage, trade irregularities, weaponization of the dollar to Hong Kong, South China Sea and LAC standoff. Taiwan has always been a major friction point in the US-Chinese relationship. From the CCP's perspective, one grounded in both ideology and nationalism, the "return of Taiwan to the motherland's tender embrace," would complete the revolution of 1949. Recent opinion polls indicate that a record 90 percent of people in Taiwan now self-identify as Taiwanese rather than as Chinese. The channels for high-level political and military consultations are paralysed (India-China military and diplomatic dialogue are so far continuing with negligible movement on ground) when they are needed most. It is a truism that global wars have no winners, however, the current explosive situation could start one, due to the globalized multi-domain interconnectivity.

The Build Up. After 9/11, the US focused on GWOT/sub-conventional wars as also was distracted in numerous global developments like Afghanistan, Middle East, financial crisis, allowing illiberal nations like China and Iran to focus on their rise and build capabilities to address US

vulnerabilities. The asymmetry between US and China closed in the military, economic, diplomatic, influence domains and power projection capabilities, making USA respond with increasing aggression. Ever since Xi came to power in 2013, the CCP has pushed nationalism, and adopted a much more assertive strategy abroad, both regionally and globally. The US has decided to end its four decades of strategic engagement and specially after COVID has unleashed an all-out confrontation. It has attacked China diplomatically for human rights violations in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. It has launched a trade, technology, and talent war, and a finance war as well. It has designated about 40 top Chinese firms as military owned/controlled by PLA for sanctions. Trump (and his opponent Biden) has blamed China for the full range of his domestic political, economic, and public health calamities, making for a uniquely combustible political environment. While Trumps actions appear chaotic, Xi has been focused on the 'China Dream' during his lifetime and is getting increasingly impatient to achieve it, which includes annexation of Taiwan (even forcefully if necessary), regain all its alleged/perceived historical territory and maritime waters and become a superpower. That leaves little room for foreign policy nuance, let alone military compromise, should any crisis arise. On 01 Jul 20, China implemented its Hong Kong national security law, which criminalizes "secessionist," "seditious," and "terrorist" activity, as well as any collaboration in such activities with "foreign powers." In response, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo judged that Hong Kong no longer enjoyed a "high degree of autonomy" as provided under the "one country, two systems" principle. This determination was followed on 14 July 20 by Trump signing the Hong Kong Autonomy Act. This new law will result in "the imposition of sanctions on foreign persons who materially contribute to the undermining of Hong Kong's autonomy by China, and foreign financial institutions who engage in significant transactions with such foreign persons." For individuals, it will involve travel and transaction bans (no visas even to politburo members including Xi !). USA has formally rejected the international legal validity of all Chinese maritime claims and Australia followed suit ten days later, with a formal statement to the United Nations. It implies that US legally endorses individual claims of nations, and not just defends freedom of navigation. China had already rejected the ruling by the

Permanent Court of Arbitration on the territorial waters of Philippines, and the illegality of the nine-dash line.

Military Brinkmanship. Both country's armed forces have been engaged in an increasingly aggressive game of testing red lines on the high seas, in the air, and in cyberspace. USA has stepped up its military cooperation with Taiwan; increased scale and frequency of arms sales, including expanding the island's Patriot missile defense system and offering new offensive capabilities such as 66 F-16V aircraft; referring officially to Tsai as President; released provocative video footage of previously undeclared US-Taiwanese military exercises. The tempo and intensity of US naval and air reconnaissance missions have increased markedly by Washington deployed two aircraft carrier groups to the South China Sea, and they were joined by allied naval units from both Australia and Japan. Beijing has responded strongly stating that US is getting dangerously close to crossing Chinese red lines, and in turn, deployed an additional squadron of fighter-attack aircraft to the Paracel Islands in the northern reaches of the South China Sea. China launched four missiles, including an "aircraft-carrier killer", into the South China Sea on 26 Aug 20 morning as a warning to the US. The move came one day after China said a US U-2 spy plane entered a no-fly zone without permission during a Chinese live-fire naval drill in the Bohai Sea off its north coast. Interestingly, both Chinese and American war-gaming exercises suggest that China would prevail in any major conflict in the Taiwan Straitⁱⁱⁱ, but it is a grave political and strategic gamble for CCP. A recent desktop exercise involving retired Chinese and American policymakers and military officers to consider a crisis situation provided a disturbing scenario. Although the military officers from both sides could agree on a protocol to extract a damaged naval vessel safely, the nonmilitary participants, more attentive to the political interests of their governments, wanted to escalate to a shooting war.

Deterrence could Break Down Owing to Either Strategic or Tactical Miscalculation. Chinese capabilities, leadership overconfidence, Xi's personality and increasing impatience to achieve China Dream within his tenure, could further diminish US and Indian deterrence value, inviting risk-taking, leading to military strategic and tactical adventurism, forcing a

response. The probability of China escalating the LAC sector while maintaining status quo along the China seas is highly probable.

India's Hot War Scenario. Concurrent with the Chinese multi-domain belligerence globally, the Chinese are up to their traditional tricks of 'salami slicing' and 3Ws strategy (*'Three warfares' strategy—media, psychological and legal warfare*), engaging in a physical confrontation along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh, and effectively changing the status quo since Apr 2020. There are credible inputs regarding concentration of PLA troops along the central sector opposite Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal, and some mobilization opposite the Northern borders in Arunachal Pradesh. This concentration of forces includes area and long-range weapon systems (missiles, rockets, artillery, air-defence systems, tanks and mechanized forces, and most importantly the air forces deployed for action), which if employed by either nation will certainly escalate to a larger conflict. Nationalistic hyperbole from both sides is a natural corollary, which could lead to brinkmanship. This conflagration is all the more probable given the fact that troops along the LAC are in eye ball to eye ball contact fully armed and weapons loaded, so to speak. Physical fight leading to fatalities happened for the first time in four decades on 15 Jun in Galwan. India has rightfully declared that when warranted their troops can resort to using their weapons. One cannot rule out the possibility of this conflict spreading sectorally along the LAC, and regionally based on reactions/incident/accident as forces are arrayed opposite each other in the China Seas too. Situation is made more complex due to China-Pakistan collusivity, and USA and allies supporting India. In the seas, close misses and escalation have been avoided more out of restraint exercised by the individual/armed forces involved, rather than agreements/ SOPs established between the confrontationist nations. Satellite imagery highlights that the PLA has made rapid upgrades to multiple Surface to Air Missile sites along the LAC to close any existing air gaps between the two countries; mobilized at least three divisions in East Ladakh, building newer constructions by China on its side of the LAC and also in current areas of intrusion, and is further building infrastructure all along LAC (bridges, camps and roads). Signaling their intent to stay the course, inputs suggest that China is laying fiber optic cables for 5G wireless technology upto the intrusions. India's Chief of

Defence Staff (CDS), Gen Bipin Rawat has stated *“The military options to deal with transgressions by the Chinese army in Ladakh are on, but it will be exercised only if the talks at the military and diplomatic levels fail.*

Recommended De-escalation and Crisis Management Measures.

Mutually agreed red lines in the military dimension, open lines of communication at all levels to avoid accidental escalation and navigating the environment till Dec 2020 with statesmanship and diplomacy. The US too needs to tone down its rhetoric and actions specially in China’s strategic backyard. The majority of the international community which is watching Chinese belligerent actions warily and with apprehension, must unequivocally convey their displeasure, and their intent to oppose it collectively, including any attempt to further escalate the situation along the India-China LAC. India’s strategic partners like USA, Japan, Australia must signal readiness to assist India in more ways than mere diplomacy in the eventuality of a shooting war. Concurrently, inflexible positions by China and India, could result in a shooting war. China recognizes that India is a growing regional power with a combat experienced armed forces (specially in high altitude terrain), and as a rule has always exercised strategic autonomy, but if pushed can align with the USA. India must stay strong, stick to its stance of status quo return as of Apr 2020, and be ready to act militarily if needed. **It is hoped that China would accept ‘that returning to status quo positions of Apr 2020 along the LAC in East Ladakh is the only ‘win-win’ option’.**

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

ⁱ *‘How the Cold War Between China and U.S. Is Intensifying’*, The New York Times, 24 Jul 2020, Link - <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/world/asia/us-china-cold-war.html>

ⁱⁱ *‘US-China Cold War: The two world powers are entering dangerous territory’*, The Economic Times, 20 Jul 2020,

ⁱⁱⁱ *‘Beware the Guns of August—in Asia: How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Tensions From Sparking a War’* by Kevin Rudd; Link - <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/beware-guns-august-asia-how-keep-us-chinese-tensions-sparking-war>